

**Reflections on the**  
**MYSTERY OF DIVINE MERCY**



[For Private Use]

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#### Introduction

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**THE MERCIFUL GOD**

“... For the Lord Yahweh says this: I am going to look after my flock myself and keep all of it in view... I shall pasture them on the mountains of Israel... I shall feed them in good pasturage; the high mountains will be their grazing ground... I myself will show them where to rest... I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong... I shall be a true shepherd to them...” [cf. Ezk 34:11-16]

“... I shall cleanse you from all your defilement and all your idols...” [cf. Ezk 36: 25, ff.]

“... I am the Good Shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep ... I know my own and my own know me...” [cf. Jn 10:7, ff.].

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**PART ONE:**  
**THE MERCY OF GOD**

[cf. Theodore KOEHLER, "Misericorde", in *D-S*, Col 1313-1328]

**Introduction:**

[1] "Be **merciful** as your Heavenly Father is **merciful**!" [cf. Lk 6:36. This is the rendition of the gentle 3rd Gospel of the old **Law of Holiness** [cf. Lv 17-26], presented by Matthew in the traditional form: "Be **perfect** as your Heavenly Father is **perfect**!" [cf. Mt 5:48] - as a conclusion to the Beatitudes. The invitation to imitate the divine mercy has appeared from the very beginning of Christianity as an accomplishment of spiritual growth in that perfection preached by Jesus Christ.

[2] What is on the distant horizon of these appeals is that plan of the renewal of the human race, so lacerated, disfigured by sin. The original disobedience developed [or "degenerated"! ] in a frightful manner: Abel was murdered by his blood-brother, Cain - so, his, the first recorded death in Scripture, is "fratricide" - that awful sense of vindictiveness practiced by Lamech. Jesus preached the New Creation - the re-creation, the restoration of humanity in the image of the Father.

[3] Divine Mercy is such an important revelation that is an absolute requirement for our divinization, participation in the divine nature. Both contexts of the texts cited above [cf. Mt 5: 44, ff.; Lk 6:27, ff.] describe a unique kind of love of neighbor which includes also one's enemies: for the Father makes the sun rise on the wicked as well as on the just [cf. Mt 5:45]. Each one must learn how to pardon, and not to judge - Lk adds a broadly sweeping version of generosity [cf. Lk 6: 36, ff.].

[4] Nonetheless, on reading the biblical texts regarding divine mercy it becomes immediately clear that this is not some kind of "feeling sorry", or "having pity" towards one's neighbors - and "mercy" is not only directed toward the pardon of offenses. The baptized are all called to love anew the Father of Mercies: "... Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle Father and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows, so that we can offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation that we have received from God ourselves..." [cf. 2 Co 1:3, ff.] - "... You will only have to suffer for a little while: the God of all grace who called you to eternal glory in Christ will see that all is well again: He will confirm, strengthen and support you!" [cf. Jas 5:11]

[5] Such an attitude and practice suppose a moral, spiritual and religious conversion which would imply an abandonment to that Covenant which God, as Infinite Love, has wished to establish with humanity, in order to save all from the death of sin. The ancient Covenant with Israel prepared the way for the New

Covenant with all of humanity. In this New Covenant of Mercy the imitation of the Father has been rendered palpable, rendered perfectly human, in Jesus Christ Who had to become like his brothers in all things in their relationship with God, a great and merciful high priest [cf. Heb 2:17]. As Mediator, He preached and accomplished the mercy of the Father, and elevated mercy to the level of the Beatitudes [cf. Mt 5:7].

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1. In Classical Antiquity: the Vulgate used three words to translate their Hebrew and Greek counterparts: *misericordia*, *miseratio*, *misereri*. The richness of all these words - in Hebrew, Greek and Latin - offers its own insights.

a. In Greek, in general, there are three words, or families of words: *eleos*, *oiktirmos*, *splanchna*. Classical Greek used the first two words to indicate “pity, commiseration” towards others.

1.] *Eleos* is the more general word: it designates that emotion experienced in the face of misfortune, affliction of others. As a consequence, it refers to “sympathy”. In one context of a justice to be meted out, it always meant the pity on the part of the judge that needs to be aroused. In other Greek circles, *Eleos* is the divinity of mercy who received worship from believers. Homer and the Greek tragedians of the 5th century gave high human value to mercy. Those without mercy were considered “barbarian.”

2.] *Oiktirmos* had practically the same meaning - *oiktos* means “lamentation”, the exterior manifestation of “pity”. It implied that “sympathy in the face of the grief or the moral suffering of someone else - hence it means “compassion” that comes to the aid of another.”

3.] The plural *splanchna* means the “innards”, and implies those affective reactions that are powerfully, deeply felt. Sometimes the term was used to distinguish it from “heart”, the seat of the most noble affections, such as “courage” and the like. In the meaning of “mercy”, this word did not appear until the late Jewish writings, and among Christian authors.

4.] Among the Greek Philosophers, such as Plato, compassion and mercy were looked upon as a moral suffering and a human weakness. In Aristotle’s works, mercy is not a virtue, but a deficiency, permissible only among the elderly and children. The mature man was expected to dominate by reason any such manifestations of his affectivity. “Compassion” was placed on the same level as jealousy, hatred, and the like. The Stoics spoke of mercy-compassion as an illness of soul that upsets the peace of the sage. However, they would only condemn *eleos* when it came to trouble the spirit - to come to a neighbor’s assistance, was more part



of their morality, than their pity. However that ideal of the nobility of mercy that is found in Homer and in the great Greek poets was stomped out until Christianity.

b. As for the Latin, it came to retain the ideas of Cicero, quoted by St. Augustine and others. However, the Latin writers did retain the Stoic definition as ***aegritudo animi***, but also maintained a sublime idea of those who indeed were “merciful.” This Latin conception considered the Stoic position of mercy as a weakness as absurd - mercy is rather wisdom, a sign of sublime morality: “... [authentically] good men are merciful.

2. In Sacred Scripture: the concept of Christian Mercy is derived primarily from the Bible, far above and beyond any other source. One can trace to some extent its formation, development in salvation History from the old Covenant all the way through to the New Covenant - in Mercy [cf. Jr 31:31, ff.] The ideas and the terminology of the People of God in the OT are the context not only historical- but also spiritual of the apostolic faith in the God of all mercy. The terminology of ***miser cordia***. in the Liturgy of the Hours for example, goes back to two Hebrew themes which direct us toward the mysterious pedagogy of God as He has willed to reveal Himself. The fundamental biblical idea of God is **the God of Infinite Mercy for His People**.

a. The Hebrew Vocabulary: there are three “families of words” that draw one’s attention:

1.] **HEN** [favor, grace] - **HANNAH** [grace, appeal: this was the name of Samuel’s Mother - and also the name of the Prophetess ANNA, at the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem - cf. Lk 2:36] - the verb **HANNAH** means to do mercy.

2.] **HESED** which is usually translated in Greek by **eleos**, in the LXX: it expresses faithfulness to an agreement - a bond between friends, parents, allies. This term became characteristic for that merciful assistance [also in the plural] that comes from God. It means the faithfulness of God to His Covenant with His people, which He initiated. This term eventually came also to mean confidence and abandonment of the faithful believer to God - the human response to the divine HESED. The ideal believers came to be known as the **HASIDIM** [cf. JB Note for Ho 2:21 +].

3.] **RAHAM** means to love, to have pity - **RAHAMIM** is the plural of both **RAHAM** < **REHEM**, the maternal womb -in an applied sense it came to mean a certain emotion, an affection - but, not a suffering, or pain. The sense prevailed in an active manner - thus, **RAHAMIM** became synonymous with **HESED** in the Judaism of the Christian period. The primordial sense of “innards” is noted in Ne 12:10 to

express the total absence of mercy that characterizes the truly wicked: “the innards of the wicked are cruel!”

b. Biblical Development: the NT writings offer a doctrinal, spiritual and moral vocabulary that was “in flux”, dynamically developing. It remained in continuity with the OT, but so intensified it, developed it, for the term was used particularly in describing our mutual bond with Jesus Christ. In analyzing the many texts, it is important to note the endless correlations established between the virtues, the attitudes the oral life inspired by a God Who defines Himself as **Agape**, and Who asks us - pleads with us - to be His children, His imitators.

Mercy is an essential part of this imitating filiation. It characterizes the divine **agape**, but love is the source and the essential structure of mercy, as it is of every single authentically Christian disposition, and attitude. Thus, Christ’s own charity must be seen in an intimate “symbiosis” with many other attitudes and virtues of Jesus Christ, as the Perfect Icon of the Invisible God [cf. Col 1: 15; Heb 1:1, ff.], His “Character”. There has to be a harmonious compenetration of an infinite variety of aspects which clothes the unique Christian charity in all our relations with God and neighbor.

In Col 3, St. Paul - after having exhorted us to a new life in our baptism, into the Risen Christ, calls to mind that attitudes of the “old man” [v. 9] from which state of reality baptism changes us. He offers his own revealed insights into the “new man”, in renewal according to the Image of the Creator [v. 10]. Wherever it truly comes to pass that Jesus Christ is indeed “all in all”, there is no longer any Greek, or Jew, or slave, or freed person - all are the elect of God, His Holy Ones, His beloved. Paul appeals that over all else, we “put on” compassion: the deeply internal mercy of benevolence, humility, sweetness, patience. He appeals to all believers to support one another and to pardon each other from the heart. The Lord has pardoned us all - all are called to respond in this way [cf. Col 3:12, f.]

The entire context make ever more precise and characterizes the Christian, called to the Imitation of Christ, of His Heavenly Father. each needs to put on the entrails of mercy, and not of fear - each is called to be full of benevolence towards each neighbor, as Christ has done. All of this presupposes humility, gentleness and mutual support.

1.] For St. Paul: the mercy of God is a mystery that surpasses all understanding - especially when it is compared to the hardness of heart of Israel, its infidelity to its vocation - along with the subsequent call of non-believers. [cf. Rm 8:10, f.]. It is possible that diligent readers of Scripture could pose real challenging questions: if we say that we are saved by the gratuitous promises of God, our faith

could still prove vain and even contradicted by the fact that the People of God failed as Children of the Promise, the People of the Covenant.

a.] Without doubt, Paul could respond to such objections from his own doctrine: it would be easy enough to distinguish in Paul that Israel which believed in the word, the posterity of Abraham, from those who are merely “carnal” - one can distinguish with Paul between Jacob and Esau - between Moses who totally believed God’s word, and the incredulous Pharaoh [cf. Rm 9:13-17].

b.] These same examples might turn the objections another way - one could almost say that God has not failed His word, and has revealed Himself as the omnipotent Master of the Covenant. He carries out His divine plan by faith - and not only that of the People of Israel, but all the nations. The mercy of God is evident in the salvation that is bestowed - not to the carnal descendancy, but to anyone who sincerely believes, to all who sincerely “do whatever they can”, God does not deny grace. It is faith - and not the flesh - that responds, adheres, to the divine initiative of mercy - for God acts in total freedom.

c.] It is in Rm 5 that the divine plan is described in all its universal amplitude: since by a single man sin entered the world, and by sin, death - if by the fault of one all have died - with all the more reason the grace of God and the gift of grace of a single man, Jesus Christ, have been offered to all [cf. Rm 5:12-15]. This is the divine plan of mercy, totally gratuitous, which explains the Revelation that God made to Moses, in the theophany of Sinai. Following the idolatry of the Golden Calf, when Moses begged for himself a sign of divine pardon, the supreme favor of seeing the glory of God [cf. Ex 33:18].

d.] God then chose Moses, as His “vessel” [instrument] of His mercy, to manifest His glory, His sanctifying Presence, open to all our miseries, especially after our rupture with Him, and all our disobediences: I will show you all my splendor and will pronounce before you the name of Yahweh. I have compassion on whom I will, and pity on whom it seems right for me to do so [cf. Ex 33:19]

e.] God is merciful towards Moses and Israel - not because of Moses’ merits, but because He is merciful by nature. This is the revelation that God makes of Himself. This divine mercy in the final respect, includes all the nations, according to a logic that by far surpasses our limited vision. Paul’s reflection leads him to go beyond the conception of a hardening of Israel, that eventually led to the conversion of the Gentiles [cf. Rm 11:11]. The conversion of the Gentiles finally leads to the salvation of all of Israel [cf. Rm 11:25-26]. Paul’s ultimate view is one of the mercy of God from Adam, right up to Jesus. Thus, he is able to state: “... God has imprisoned all in their own disobedience only to show mercy to all mankind...” [cf. Rm 11:32].

f.] It was Paul's vocation to introduce into salvation History how revelation begins with the OT and is completed with the NT: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He permits in particular the verification of the development of the biblical themes their passage from the ancient to the New Covenant. The ideal of mercy appears in the education offered by God to His own People. It is primarily in themes connected with the **compassion of God** for His People, and His **faithfulness to His Covenant: He** is found in the confluence of these two themes.

g.] It is necessary, too, to keep in mind the other complementary themes, those of magnanimity, of justice, of wisdom - in the Revelation of God as **Agape**. However, there are other OT texts that are quite useful in order to offer the necessary clarification from the better comprehension of the Gospel of Mercy - especially, those which St. Paul points out himself:

2.] Ex 33:19 b: "...I have compassion on whom I will, and I will show pity to whom I please..." - this is an integral part of the solemn declaration by which the God of the Covenant of Sinai identifies Himself. The text is a good example of the variety of terms that the translations offer by the notion of 'Mercy'."

a.] The Vulgate translation offers its own interest: - ... *Miserebor cui voluero et clemens ero in quem mihi placuerit...*" However, both the Hebrew and the Greek texts follow a Semitic procedure of "Emphatic Repetition" of the same words that the Vulgate does not render. Both the TM and the LXX offer a twofold repetition of the basic words meaning "to have mercy". What this does effectively is paraphrase the Divine Name: **I Am who I Am**. This means: **the name of God is Mercy**. God clearly affirms His transcendence, His absolute sovereign liberty, but also His race towards humanity, the sinful people who had adored a Golden Calf.

b.] This text, ex 33: 19 b, is inserted into an ensemble of texts which presents the active presence of Yahweh among His people [cf. Ex 33:1-22]: He pardons and has chosen to simply "be" among His People, and not merely to see them an Angel to lead them. This will peak with the Renewal of the Covenant with the People Whom the Lord called forth from Abraham and Sarah. Thus, from the very beginnings of the Covenant on Sinai, and even despite the People's infidelity. Yahweh has revealed Himself and assured His presence, which is simply His most intimate "being" - which is to be compassionate, and to have pity. He did not wait for Christ to make this fundamental revelation concerning Himself - which will have extraordinary implications for His Plan.

c.] This will find its strongest formulation in the "Exodus Antiphon" - which is then repeated so often: Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in grace and fidelity, maintaining justice, and maintains His mercy to the thousands [cf. Ex 34:6-8; cf. also ex 20: 5, 6; Nb 14:18; Dt

5:9, f.; 7:9; 2 Ch 30:9; Ne 1:5; 9:16-19; Ps 51:1, ff.; 86:5, 15; 100: 4, f.; 103:7; 111: 3, ff.; 112:1, ff.; 116:5; 130:7,, f.; 145: 7-10; Jr 32: 17, ff.; Dn 9: 8, ff.; Jl 2:12, f.; Jon 4:2; Na 1:2, f.; Si 2:10, f. - thus, in the Historical, Prophetic and Wisdom Books!]. More specifically:

- the first part of this “Exodus Antiphon” is frequently found in the OT [cf. `Nb 14:18; Ne 9:17; Jl 2:13; Jon 4:2; Na 1:3; 2 Ch 30:9;]

- Ps 84:15 emends the prayer: turn towards me and have pity on me! [cf. Ps 103:3; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8].

d.] Thus, the presence of Yahweh among His people, revealed according to His dimensions of merciful tenderness, justice and faithfulness, is a fundamental reality of the Covenant. Whenever Israel invoked the God of Mercy, the People called upon God to intervene with His power in the Covenant in behalf of His People. These divine interventions were not seen as some kind of condescendence out of pity, but much more as the merciful closeness, the power of love. This love constantly re-establishes the reality of the Covenant and an intimate relationship between Yahweh and His People. The truth of the inter-personal relationship of this Covenant initiated by Yahweh with His beloved and Chosen People is brought out in the close dialogue between Moses and God, largely an intercession of the desert leader for his struggling people.

3.] The Prophet Hoseah: intensifies this revelation by the symbolism of elevating the Covenant to the level of the Espousals: Yahweh is the Spouse drawn by the appealing weakness of His unfaithful spouse, which is Israel, and He is moved out of compassion to renew His nuptial pact with His People. It is always asked whether Hoseah actually did live the tragedy of the unhappy marriage that he describes. It is clear enough that through the symbolism of an unfaithful marriage, he was able to be the channel of the revelation of the extraordinary mercy of God. It is often said that Hoseah’s story gives us a good idea of the divine **Hesed**.

a.] Ho 2:21: “... I will betroth you to myself for ever, betroth you with **integrity** and **justice**, with **tenderness** and **love**; I will betroth you to myself with **faithfulness**, and you will come to know Yahweh...” This terms indicate the five wedding gifts offered by Yahweh, the divine Spouse, and not to His “father-in-law’ as would be expected in marriages. The **tenderness** here is the divine **hesed** - implying perhaps at the same time the **rahamim**, implying maternal tenderness. These terms more than describe the multi-splendored beauty which mercy is, that is so essential to the climate of a wedding Engagement. By means of this mercy, there can be found united on the same level of reciprocal love of beings that are infinitely distant, and only analogically alike, Yahweh, and His Unfaithful Spouse - which we all are.

b.] This divine Mercy is revealed as lifting a prostitute up out of her squalor. 1P 2:9-10, explains to adult converts from paganism what the grace of baptism is: "...You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people at all; once you were outside the mercy and now you have been given mercy..." to write this text, the author of I P has made use of Ho 1:6-9; 2:3, 25: Hoseah's wife conceived and the first child was called "Unloved" - she conceived again and the second child was called No-Child-of -Mine: You are not my People and I am not your God... I will not love her children...But, I will betroth you to myself ... I will love the Unloved. I will say to No-People-of-Mine: You are My People. and he will answer: You are my God! By these citations and paraphrasing, I P indicates as well that the New Covenant of God with those coming to the faith from non-belief has to be understood in the unique climate of mercy announced and prepared by the old Covenant.

c.] This mercy is given eschatological overtones: "... They who trust in him will understand the truth; those who are faithful will live with him in love; for grace and mercy await those he has chosen..." [cf. Ws 3:9] - "... they only felt amazement when all was done..." [cf. Ws 11:15] - "... The place is to be unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows them his mercy, said Jeremiah... [cf. 2 M 2:7] - "... Do not fear this executioner, but prove yourself worthy of your brothers, and make death welcome, so that in the day of mercy I may receive you back in your brothers' company..." [cf. 2 M 7:29].

4.] The Psalms: remain until the end of time the Prayer of Christians based on faith in the God Who initiated the Covenant of Mercy. They are prayers to His fidelity, His clemency, His compassion. These prayers help every sinful person to enter into a veritable relationship with God.

a.] Ps 51: remains the most important of the seven penitential Psalms in the Liturgy. This magnificent prayer of hope implores the divine **hesed** of the Lord of the Covenant, who has proven Himself time and again to abound in acts of merciful compassion. The Psalmist would like to be delivered and healed from his rupture with his God - would like his infidelity to be removed.

b.] This unilateral rupture against the Covenant stands as a wall between the sinner and God. This wall has become insupportable by the sinner. The Psalmist firmly hopes in a radical purification, which alone God can accomplish. In Christianity, the word "pity" is often exchanged with the word "mercy". There is behind all this the ideal of a truly paternal and gentle love which the Scriptures call the "innards of mercy", better translated as "tender mercy" in the **Benedictus** [cf. Lk 1:78].

5.] The Gospel: that of Lk 1:67-79, the Prayer of Zechariah already noted, calls to mind his son's vocation: he is to be the Prophet of the Most High - the Pre-cursor of the Lord, sent to prepare His ways. The New Covenant will make clearer the salvation that has already been announced and promised - and this will realize that work which only the God of Mercy can accomplish. His Messianic coming will surpass all the previous visitations from on high in a work of sublime and merciful tenderness. Through the manifestation of the extraordinary depths of the Mercy of our God, His People came to understand that the God of Mercy is indeed our God.

a.] The personal relationship between this God and humanity is uniquely manifest in Mary, the Mother of the Messiah. In her *Magnificat*, Luke makes use of the word **eleos** to express God's Mercy which embraces the entire history of salvation with power: "... His mercy reaches from age to age to those who fear Him..." [1:50]. In coming to Mary, God has indeed brought help to Israel, His Chosen Servant. He has remembered His mercy, according to the promises of the ancient Covenant drawn up between Himself and Abraham - and for his descendants forever. The work of this Mercy has been accomplished in Mary. This is the motive for her soul magnifying her Lord, Who has noticed her lowly state. The word **Jesus** simply means: Yahweh saves, the Savior God.

b.] Thus, the divine nuptials achieve a level of a relationship that is person to person, for the Israel of old as well as that which has been renewed. The Lord has cast His eyes upon the lowliness of His servant, Mary. This proclamation is based on the wonders of the Most High already achieved by the Mercy of the God of the Covenant, and this is open ended toward the unforeseeable future. This is the initiation of the Reign of God for the **anawim**, this "mystical line" of the very specially loved "clients of God" who abandon themselves over the His Merciful Covenant [cf. A. Gelin, *The Poor Whom Yahweh loves*].

c.] "... When He saw the crowds, He felt sorry for them..." [cf. Mt 9:36] - the verb here is the word meaning "the deepest entrails", the most profound depths of His interior. The Latin customarily translates this word as **misertus est** [cf. Mt 14:14; 15: 31; Mk 6:34; 8:2]. This is the view of the crowds who came to Him for the healing of their maladies, or when He multiplied the bread for them: Jesus is moved to His innermost depths. The Synoptic texts offer some explanation for this profound pity of the Lord Jesus: He saw the crowds, in their spiritual and religious wretchedness - they seemed to Him to be wandering aimlessly without the guidance of a good shepherd. There was no one leading them toward their heavenly Father. The New Covenant brought to reality that which the old covenant had only alluded to in promise. However, the promise echoed through the centuries: God Himself will be the Good Shepherd, the leader of His People [cf. Jr 23; Ezk 34].

d.] The personal character of the new relationship between God and His people is even more manifest when Jesus is confronted with someone's personal suffering:

- in Mk 1:41, the Lord Jesus is moved to compassion and extends His hand and cures the leper who had appealed to Him for His help;
- similarly, Mt 20:34 presents Him before the two blind men of Jericho - once again, Jesus is profoundly moved by compassion, and He touched their eyes and right away they recovered their sight;
- this is the manifestation of that compassionate mercy to which the distraught father made for his satanically possessed son [cf. Mk 9:22]. The Lord Jesus makes very clear that this demon can only be expelled through prayer;
- Lk 7:22 notes the same challenge for the divine goodness when Jesus encounters the widow of Naim who was about to bury her only child: on seeing this, the Lord is moved profoundly to pity and he tells her not to cry anymore;
- even more remarkable perhaps is the Parable of the Compassionate Father and his prodigal and repentant son. While the latter was still "a long way off", the father takes the initiative and runs to him. He was deeply moved to pity at the sight of his poor son, and through his arms around him and embraced him [cf. Lk 15:20].

e.] The parable was often a vehicle to describe the inner workings of God's mercy for sinners. In the last mentioned above, the sinful son is re-established into his former dignity, given the robe of nobility, and the ring indicating power, in the course of a festival held in honor of His return to the Father. For some, it may not be difficult to understand the hostile reaction of the apparently more faithful older brother. The attitude is much like that described as being attributed to the Pharisees.

f.] The Parable of the Good Samaritan also recalls the depths of divine mercy [cf. Lk 10:33]. After the priest and the Levite had noticed the trouble of the poor man who had fallen amongst the thieves, and coldly passed on by - a Samaritan [from whom no compassion could ever be expected among the Jews] - found the man who had been stripped and wounded by his assailants. He was deeply moved to compassion, went up to him, bound up his wounds, pouring his own healing balm on them. All of this dramatically answers the question: just who is my neighbor? Jesus, in His turn, offers the inspired answer by asking the question: which of these three: the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan - proved to be a good neighbor to the man who had fallen among the thieves? To this question, the answer almost automatically comes to one's heart: "neighbor" is the one who exercises mercy! [cf. 10:37].



### SUMMARY

[1] In seeking to have a better understanding of the mercy of God, we can never overlook the divine *hesed* - nor the father of the prodigal son - nor the good Samaritan. Should these aspects be neglected, the risk would be to betray salvation History in which every human being is invited, repeatedly challenged to live. God does not "exhaust" Himself in imposing penalties and punishments for the sins of Adam, and all of the consequences that have come from that first moral aberration. The entire Old Covenant has been open-ended inexorably leading forward to the Incarnation of Divine Mercy in Jesus Christ. The savior God, born of the Mother of Mercy, re-capitulates in His own Person all that preceded, and brought this revelation to unimagined heights.

[2] In the perspective of the Spiritual Theology of Imitation, putting on the mind of Christ Jesus, following/imitating Him - this is the God who is AGAPE', inviting each to restore His damaged image within us. in the following of Jesus Christ. Compassionate Mercy is at one and the same time one of the privileged divine attributes - if not the most central of all. This is the supreme form of love, the ultimate source of the most extraordinary sense of pardon [cf. Jas 5:11; Rm 9:15; 12:1; 2 Co 1:3]. This is the most sublime Christian challenge. This is the ultimate culmination of all the good dispositions that should be lived [cf. Rm 15:14] This is the revelation of the goodness of God, in all its perfection [cf. Mt 19:17]. This is that creative divine goodness, His ultimate perfection, which re-generates anyone who will strive to live it [cf. Ga 5:22; Ep 5:9] [cf. T. Koehler, *Misericorde*, in: D-S, Col. 1313-1321, passim].

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## PART TWO

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

[Cf. P. Aloysius M. CIAPPI, OP, *De Divina Misericordia ut Prima Causa Operum Dei*.  
Feb. 4, 1935]

#### Introduction:

[1] The Mercy of God would be acknowledged by most believers, as a basic divine attribute. However, other than its existence, many might be a bit more hard-pressed to explain just precisely what it is. While the progress of evil: mental, physical and moral - seems to be some to be totally out of control - there are many other thoughtful believers who are convinced of the presence and efficacy in today's world.

[2] Fundamental texts would be these: God did not spare His only Son, but gave Him up [cf. Rm 8:32] - where sin has abounded, grace super-abounds [cf. Rm 15:20] - God so loved the world that He offered up His only begotten Son [cf. Jn 3:16].

[3] **Mercy is considered to be a perfection in God by means of which He alleviates the wretchedness of humanity , by communicating to human beings a even greater share in His most free riches of His Divine Love** [cf. Rm 9:22, f.]: "...What if God, wishing to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels fit for wrath, ready to be destroyed and in order to make known the riches of his glory toward the vessels which were the objects of mercy and which he prepared for glory..."

[4] There are four conditions that are verified in the communication of divine mercy:

- the universal state of moral misery that has arisen because of rampant sin;
- the universal and absolute inability to overcome such widespread evil;
- the insufficiency of each and every extrinsic source of help;
- the substantial equality of all human beings regarding each and every supernatural help: total indigence!

[5] Two corollaries might flow from these:

- the attribute of divine mercy can be communicated only through **the sharing on the part of God of His own supernatural perfections**, since rampant and original moral evil can only be removed by a special and truly supernatural gift;

- there is in the communication of mercy an exercise of the ever free divine will, shown through such communication of divine helps - precisely where natural repugnance and unworthiness seem to reign supreme.

[6] This is primarily a matter of the **Divine Goodness** which invincibly impels God toward removing evil, wherever it may be found. God wills every human being to be saved and to come to the recognition of the truth [cf. I Tm 1:1-5]. Everyone is being called to the life of grace: "... it is not a question of man's willing, or doing, but of god's mercy ..." [cf. Rm 9: 15, ff. - quoting Ex 33:19].

[7] In the dogma of Divine Providence, there is also ample sway for the **Divine Wisdom and Freedom**: God always acts in accord with His Plan [cf. Ep 1], with His dispositions, His counsel, His Will. Thus, God acts most freely and wisely, according to the global reading of Sacred Scripture. These are the attributes motivating all of God's activity "ad extra", creation, revelation, redemption and sanctification.

[8] The proper role of Divine Mercy in this "Plan" is to unify by a certain superior order, all the activity and rights of God tempering them in harmony, imposing His own proper rule on all. Thus, the exercise of the Divine Goodness, Wisdom, Freedom and Justice are all served and exercised in a more excellent order through His Mercy. As God has freely committed Himself, by His own gratuitous dispensation of gifts, to the alleviation of human misery. The Divine Goodness is particularly manifest in the mystery of sin and in the rejection of God. despite human resistance, God's Goodness disposes all with a firm gentleness.

[9] The influence of all the other divine attributes shows particularly in the work of Divine Mercy and they are dependent on this attribute. St. Paul would encourage the Corinthians: "...Our hope for you is firm because we know that just as you share in the sufferings, so you will share in the consolation...." [cf. 2 Co 2:6-7]. God "endures" with much patience vessels fit for wrath, ready to be destroyed - in order to make known the riches of his glory toward the vessels which were the objects of mercy and which he prepared for glory [cf. Rm 9: 23, ff.]. How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God. How inscrutable his judgments, how unsearchable his ways. For who has known the mind of God? Or who has been his counselor... And now, I beg you through the mercy of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God." [cf. Rm 11:33-Rm 12:1, f.].

[10] Divine Mercy is principally the choice on the part of God of some greater good flowing from permission of some evil: "... what we utter is God's wisdom... not a wisdom of this age... a mysterious hidden wisdom. God planned it before all ages for our glory... None of the rulers of this age knew the mystery; if they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory. Of this wisdom is written: Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has

prepared for those who love him..." [cf. 1 Co 2:6, ff.]. It is God's holy will to wish some greater good that would devolve from the permission of some evil.

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#### A. St. Paul

[The Decree of Divine Mercy]: "... It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor to us. God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth, into one under Christ's headship ["Re-capitulation"].

"In him we were chosen; for in the decree of God, who administers everything according to His will and counsel, we were predestined to praise his glory by being the first to hope in Christ. In him you, too, were chosen; when you heard the glad tidings of salvation, the word of truth, and believed in it, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit who had been promised. He is the pledge of our inheritance, the first payment against the full redemption of a people God d has made his own, to praise.

'....May he enlighten your inmost vision that you may know the great hope which he has called you, the wealth of his glorious heritage to be distributed among the members of the church, and the immeasurable scope of his power in us who believe..." [cf. **Ep 1:3, ff.**]

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#### 1. One might note the Trinitarian dimension in the Letter of St. Paul:

- the initiative and will of **God the Father** for our salvation;
  - the Primacy of the **Divine Son** with regard to the eternal intention of this Will, and with its execution in time;
  - the **Holy Spirit** who is promised as the first pledge of our inheritance.
- a. The Primary Author is God the Father - before the constitution of the world He disposed all from His eternal act of love [cf. Rm 13:28; Ep 1:3; 3:8]. This eternal Divine Goodness is preceded by nothing - this is the absolutely first cause.
  - b. The Secondary, and, as it were, the Instrumental Cause, conjoined with the divinity is Jesus Christ. It is in Him that the Divine father has elected and predestined and liberated from sin, pouring forth every heavenly blessing [cf. Ep 1:1-3; 2:4-19; Rm 8:29, ff.].

c. The Holy Spirit has sealed all in the promise of all this, the pledge of our inheritance.

2. Theologians have reflected on the elements of this eternal Decree of the Mercy of God:

a. The Object of the Decree: this would include the universality of all creatures in heaven and on earth - all those to be, or who have been recapitulated in Jesus Christ, and reconciled to God [cf. Ep 1:10, f.; Col 1:18, ff.; 2 Co 5:19, f.].

b. The Formal Character of the Divine Decree of Mercy: this would be the super-abundance of the spiritual and supernatural gifts, such as: the remission of sins, justification, divine filiation, the inheritance of eternal glory. These are directly to be shared with human beings, who remain faithful to the end - but, through humans open to these, there will be "a new heaven and a new earth" [cf. Ep 1:1, ff.; Col 1:19, ff.; Rm 8:19, ff.].

c. The Final Cause of this Decree:

- Proximate: would be Christ Himself, to Whom all are being directed, and recapitulated in and through Him, as He holds the primacy in all [cf. Col 1:18].

- Ultimate: is God the Father, to Whom all are ultimately reconciled [cf. 2 Co 5:19]. His are the riches of grace and glory that are to be manifested [cf. Ep 2:7]. His is also the Primacy over all and even over Christ, for which Christ came in the first place, to glorify His Father [cf. 1 Co 15:27].

3. The Intimate Nature of this Decree of Mercy:

a. As presented by St. Paul [cf. Ep 1:3, ff.], this extraordinary revelation does center upon the ever greater and freer effusion of the divine goodness, for the alleviation of moral wretchedness. These three qualities may be noted:

- the greater effusion of goodness;
- the greater gratuity of the out-pouring;
- as a remedy for moral decadence.

b. The entire divine will is directed toward the manifestation of the divine goodness, through the medium of Divine Mercy. The entire human history is ordained toward the ultimate purpose of redemption and eternal life. In the fullness of time, sin will be totally extirpated in Paul's view, and the coming of Christ and the Spirit being given as a pledge is already a presage of the perfect renewal of humanity. All will be perfectly reconciled to the Father, through being re-capitulated in Jesus Christ.

4. The Primacy of Jesus Christ is intimately bound to this Decree of Mercy:

a. By the Father's Decree, the divine Son obtained and exercises His Primacy through Mercy. The full "Lordship" of the Incarnate Word is the title received following the catharsis of the Paschal Mystery, even though anticipated in the Christmas narratives: "Christ the Lord is born!" Mary did not understand this, but treasured the word in her heart [cf. Lk 2:19]. The "Lord" designates Jesus as His most proper title as noted in Paul's writings. This title is ultimately applicable to Him in the glorious state of His resurrection. Thus, Jesus is the ICON of the Invisible God [cf. Col 1:15, ff.] - Jesus enjoys the fullness of the divinity, while being the Incarnate Word, and has won all the graces that could confer a participation in the Divine Filiation. Jesus is thus the most perfect similitude of the divine perfection [cf. Col 2:20; Ep 3:19].

b. The Finality of the Primacy of Jesus Christ may be presented in this manner:

- The Primacy of Christ is the end, or purpose of all the present interventions of God, just as it is the scope of His Incarnation and Mission from the Father. The dignity of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church, as Redeemer, as Universal Peace-Maker and Recapitulator is ordained toward His full dominion over all to be obtained [cf. Col 1:15, ff.; I Co 15:25].

- Christ's Primacy, in His turn, is ordained toward the Primacy of God the Father - Whom Jesus has come to serve.

- The ultimate purpose of the Mission and Primacy of Jesus is comparable to that of the Leader of an army - once the victory is obtained, all deference is restored to the King.

5. The titles of Christ's Primacy [cf. Ep 1:3, ff.] might be described as follows: as the Word of God, incarnate in the similitude of the flesh of sin, by means of His **voluntary oblation**: Incarnation, Passion and cruel death, merited His glorious Resurrection and consequent Primacy in all. In His apparent weakness and shame, He has brought it about that Christians would come under His **Decree of Divine Wisdom**, making Him the Universal Redeemer of humanity. Through terrible evils - those of sinfulness and then His own cruel Passion and death - a supreme good has come to humanity, enabling all who would accept Him, to participate in eternal life in the bosom of the Trinity.

a. A Few Texts:

"... That is why Christ died and came to life again, that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living..." [cf. Rm 14:9].

"... [Folly of the Cross]The message of the cross is complete absurdity to those headed for ruin..." [cf. I Co 1:18-25].

"... since one died for all, all died ... He died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sakes died and was raised up..." [2 Co 5:14-15].

"... Christ has delivered us from the power of the law's curse by himself becoming a curse for us, as it is written: 'Accursed is anyone who is hanged on a tree.' This has happened so that through Christ Jesus the blessing bestowed on Abraham might descend on the Gentiles, thus making it possible for us to receive the promised Spirit through faith..." [cf. Ga 3:13-14].

"... follow the way of love, even as Christ loved you. He gave himself for us as an offering to God, a gift of pleasing fragrance..." [cf. Ep 5:2].

"... Put on the mind of Christ Jesus... Who emptied Himself..." [Ph 2:5-11].

"... It was fitting that we should have a High Priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens. Unlike other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people: he did that once and for all when he offered himself. For the law sets up other high priests, men who are weak, but the word of the oath which came after the law appoints as priest the Son, made perfect forever..." [cf. Heb 7:26-28].

"... sacrifice and offering you did not desire... I have come to do your will. By this 'will', we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all..." [cf. Heb 10:4-10 - citing Ps 40].

b. Any reflection on these texts would seem to indicate that principally Jesus' Primacy is one of Mercy, all of which He merited and achieved through exemplarity - He has redeemed humanity from within, by assuming a nature like ours, like us in all things, saved sin. His perfect work that is being completed in us is that of redemption and salvation unto life eternal.

6. The Father's Primacy is made known through this Realization of Infinite Mercy: Jesus is united in some way to every human being [cf. GS 22] - He has reached each and every creature through His role in creation, redemption [by bringing peace and recapitulating all into one] and sanctification, by breathing forth His Holy Spirit in His total Gift of Self at death [cf. Jn 19:30: "... Jesus bowed his head and **delivered over His Spirit.**"].

a. The coming together of disparate humanity into one people under God is the greatest manifestation of the divine goodness for the greater glory of God - after the presence of the divinity in the human nature of Jesus, this has begun. Peace and the order of the universe are deeply perturbed by sin - the work of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit are a pledge of what is to come, and this good work that has begun in us, will be completed [cf. Ph 1:6].

b. What is made known in this unique work of redemption would be the Supreme Wisdom, Goodness and Power of God. The resurrection is the supreme miracle, gift of God for our salvation:

"... For from him and through him and for him all things are. To him be glory forever. Amen. [cf. Rm 11:36].

"... we preach a crucified Christ, - a stumbling block for the Jews, an absurdity to the Gentiles...God has made him our wisdom, and also our justice, our sanctification and our redemption..." [cf. I Co 1:23, 30].

"... God has revealed to us this '**crucified**' **wisdom** to us through the Spirit..." [cf. 1 Co 2:10].

"... in the ages to come he might display he great wealth of his favor, manifested by his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. I repeat: it is owing to his favor that salvation is yours through faith. this is not your doing, it is God's gift; neither is it a reward for anything you have accomplished, so let no one pride himself in it. We are truly his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to lead a life of good deeds which God prepared for us in advance..." [cf. Ep 2:7, ff.].

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## B. St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas considered the question of Divine Mercy in his treatment of the Attributes pertaining to the Divine Will. Together with Divine Justice, Mercy indeed is a perfection of the Divine Will, while at the same time, implying a **certain relationship toward creatures**. Therefore, these are **relative divine attributes**, presupposing a fuller grasp of three other attributes, the Divine **Goodness, Wisdom and Freedom**. It is most necessary for God to be precise, what He is that there be realized in His actions, what in Him is Wisdom, that they be free, and that they manifest His goodness. [cf. I, q. 21, a. 1].



## 1. The Divine Goodness:

a. God is most perfect: this assertion is fundamental for any discussion of mercy - about which it is not possible to speak of as an attribute of God Who is inwardly "moved" toward the alleviation of all need. The formal reality of Mercy is that it is indeed a Perfection of God Himself.

b. Divine Perfections can be shared with creatures only analogically: above Mercy was considered from the part of God - here it is considered from the part of creatures. Misery is always a defect, an imperfection, which really cannot co-exist in the all perfect God - He shares Himself to alleviate imperfection.

c. "Good" is the same as "Perfect": its proper nature is to be **diffusive of self** [cf. I, q. 5, a. 1; a. 4, ad 2<sup>um</sup>]. the divine perfection is considered to be the remote foundation of Mercy. Goodness is a perfection - as both are the object of the appetitive faculty - and primarily "goodness" predominates as all is desired under the aspect of goodness. Goodness is such a perfection that it is born, is endowed, with the inner nature of drawing others to itself, of extending itself to others. Thus, of its very nature, **goodness is diffusive of itself as a final cause**. Creatures have a natural inclination toward the Supreme Good which is supremely communicative of itself. This inclination of goodness is connatural to the affective aspect of Mercy.

d. Goodness comes across as the Final Cause, the First/Last of all Causes [I, q. 5, a. 2, 4]: this is a corollary of the above: goodness of its nature terminates the intention and motion of each reality, as the end of all else. Every agent acts according to its end or purpose - so, there is in each the desire of impressing one's own likeness in reality. Thus, we speak of **Divine Mercy as the First Cause of everything** since it implies the supreme communication of all goodness created by God.

e. All that is created good shares in the Divine Good, which is the First exemplary and Final Principle of all that is Good: this is an application of what has preceded. **Goodness has the aspect of final causality** - it thus becomes the form of the action of the agent and its effect. Therefore, the very first reason for acting is goodness, either apparent or real. Goodness under its supreme aspect is the universal and absolute cause of everything. The sharing of Divine Mercy is the best possible effect that could be shared in the general diffusion of goodness.

f. It is the Love of God that creates and infuses Goodness into creatures: [cf. I, q. 20, a. 10]: this is indicative of the absolute independence of God. Each and every communication of the divine goodness, which is the same as God's Love, is so independent that it would be repugnant to God to act out of any other motive. In the works of Divine Mercy, human misery is the **material object** that draws it - but, the **formal motive** of divine mercy remains **God's Goodness, His love**.

2. **The Wisdom and Knowledge of God:** The Knowledge of God is the Cause of reality in so far as this is dependent on the divine Will. The work of God in the universe is comparable to the work of the artisan of any work of art - the architect, for example, acts out of pre-conceived ideas in his/her mind. God, however, is a most perfect Being and in His mind are the most varied, indefinite modes of being that could be brought about. What does eventually happen is the result of His most wise and most free choice - it is here that Mercy finds its source.

3. **The Divine Will and Freedom:**

a. The Divine will is the Cause of all reality - is the consistent teaching of St. Thomas and the Christian tradition [cf. I, q. 19, a. 4.].

b. There is no cause that moves the Divine Will: the sole motivation for the Divine Will is the Divine and Infinite Goodness. There is no secondary, or independent cause moving God - Divine Mercy flows from the totally free manifestation of His Goodness - even though He is "moved" by human misery. Evil is permitted in order to obtain an ever greater good.

c. The Efficacious Divine Will is always fulfilled: nothing is withdrawn from the causality of the Divine Goodness and Freedom. Reality comes to being only in so far as it is willed, permitted by God.

d. The Divine Will does not create evil: the classical theology saw this as "permitted" so that a greater good would be obtained. The ultimate and sole divine motivation in His own intrinsic and infinite Goodness. [cf. I, q. 19, 1, 9].

4. **The Order within Divine Causality:**

a. God is the Final Cause of All Reality: He directs the ever greater communication of His goodness for the ever greater manifestation of His attributes [cf. I, q. 43, a. 4; q. 4].

b. God provides for creatures in accord with their nature: [cf. I q, 19, a. 8]. Any permission of evil always presupposes the communication of a greater good, not always immediately apparent. God primarily intends His own glory - then the good of rational creatures - and finally, the good of the natural universe. The good of the universe is willed by God in itself, and to this are ordered all parts of the universe.

5. **The Nature of Mercy**

The intimate nature and finality of this attribute is of vital importance to the believer. Always connected to this is the "mystery of iniquity" - only permitted its

limited, but all pervasive sway, for the greater manifestation of the Goodness of God and the greater perfection of creatures.

a. A Search for a Definition: For St. Augustine [cf. *The City of God*, Bk 9, c. 5] mercy is compassion in our hearts for the misery of another, which, if we could, we are compelled to alleviate. In studying this description, St. Thomas notes two elements:

- the affective aspect: on the part of the one bringing succor, which is formal to Mercy: in order for this to be the "**formal**" element of mercy in God there is needed that this compassion for the wretchedness of another be on account of the union in love that is had with this other, and which is assumed as His own.

- effective element: by which the actual miseries of another are alleviated. The proper act of mercy is to alleviate, repel the unhappiness of another. This means that the **formal object** of Mercy is the misery of another that is to be alleviated.

b. Mercy most properly pertains to God:

1.] In the Summa, St. Thomas places the formal nature of Mercy as a **special effect of His Divine Love** [cf. I, q. 21, a. 3; II-II, q. 30, a. 2, ad 1<sup>um</sup>]. Mercy is included among the "active" Divine Virtues, and in fact, is the principal among them, the most proper and the most excellent. To repel the wretchedness of another, supremely pertains to God, and this is why to be merciful is most proper to God [cf. I, q. 21, a. 3; II-II, q. 30, a. 4].

2.] That propensity to expel evil and what is displeasing to nature is the formal and essential nature of mercy. This propensity in no way is attached to any evil or imperfection - and thus, Mercy can be said to be formally in God. As regards this propensity, this is a simple perfection and includes the core of a most perfect activity. A free perfection is all the more perfect in proportion to its freedom - in this sense, **mercy is absolutely free**.

c. The Formal Object of Mercy:

1.] According to St. Thomas, this is simply the Divine Benevolence, that Goodness He wishes to share - this is the reality by which God removes the miseries of human beings, and this is what leads us to do the same [cf. C.G., Bk I, c. 91].

2.] The difference between Divine Mercy and our sharing in it is ultimately traced to the infinite distinction between God and creatures. Divine mercy has two acts that appeal to our way of thinking:

- the first is the very divine reason for extending mercy - which is the infinite, intrinsic divine goodness, amiability;

- secondly, only because of our way of thinking is the wretchedness within creatures.

d. Divine Mercy is the most excellent of all the Virtues of God:

1.] All the divine operations bringing about some mutation "ad extra" have to be free. Perfection must be sought within a reality, and not merely what it does, or its manner of acting.

2.] Even though it is geared toward the alleviating of the sufferings of humanity, it flows directly from the infinite and intrinsic goodness of God. of God.

## 6. Two Principles of Divine Mercy

a. Divine Mercy demands and presupposes the Absolute Perfection of God: the ultimate origin of the removal of evil, misery, is always the goodness of God. The Mercy of God is not geared to just any kind of good whatsoever, but is aimed at the perfection of goodness. Defect is opposed to perfection. The completeness of God, His "happiness", indicates the height of divine goodness, and this would be ordained through this goodness to the removal of moral evil, and the alleviation of all evil.

b. The Mercy of God even more connotes the divine Perfection than would His Goodness, His Freedom, or Justice: absolutely all pertain to the divine Goodness [cf. I, q. 6, a. 4]. But, since the perfections are given by God to reality according to right "proportion", this is Justice - when God communicates His perfections solely for the utility of creatures, this would pertain to His "Liberality" - but when perfections are communicated to God to creatures to **expel all defects**, this pertains to His Mercy [c.f. I, q. 21, 1. 3].

## 7. The Finality of Divine Mercy

a. The Greater Glory of God flows from His Permission for Evil: God acts in creatures according to the old principle that the invisible realities of God are understood by those things which have been created. The ultimate end of all divine works is the manifestation of His goodness. The excellence of this divine goodness is such that it supercedes simply one manner of its manifestation. For this reason, there are many realities - and this affords a multiple manifestation of the divine goodness. Rational creatures provide a most special sphere of the divine activity - and the supreme form is mercy.

b. The Good of the universe has been willed by God in itself, and toward this, is pre-ordained all else in the universe. Defects, evil are permitted for the exercise of Divine Mercy.

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### C. Pope John Paul II

[Encyclical Letter, *Dives in Misericordia*. November 30, 1980]

#### 1. Descriptive Definition:

#4: "... It is significant that in their preaching the prophets link mercy, which they often refer to because of the people's sins, with the incisive image of love on God's part. The Lord loves Israel with the love of a special choosing, **much like the love of a spouse** [cf. Ho 2:21-25; Is 54:6-8], and for this reason He pardons its sins and even its infidelities and betrayals. When He finds repentance and true conversion, He brings His people back to grace [cf. Jr 31:20; Ezk 39:25-29] In the preaching of the prophets, **mercy signifies a special power of love which prevails over the sin and infidelity of the chosen people...**"

#6: "... Mercy - as Christ has presented it in the parable of the prodigal son - has the interior form of the love that in the NT is called *agape*. This love is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin..."

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#### 2. Incarnate in Jesus Christ

#2: "... in Christ, through Christ, God also becomes especially visible in His Mercy i.e., there is emphasized that attribute of the divinity which the OT, using various concepts and terms, already defined as 'mercy'. Christ confers on the whole of the OT tradition about God's mercy a definitive meaning. Not only does He speak of it and explain it by the use of comparisons and parables, but above all He Himself makes it incarnate and personifies it. **He Himself, in a certain sense, is mercy.** To the person who sees it in Him - and finds it in Him - God becomes 'visible' in a particular way as the Father 'who is rich in mercy.' [Ep 2:4]....'

#3: "...the messianic message about mercy preserves a particular divine-human dimension. Christ - the very fulfillment of the messianic prophecy - by becoming the incarnation of the love that is manifested with particular force with regard to the suffering, the unfortunate and sinners, makes present and thus more fully reveals the Father, who is God 'rich in mercy.' At the same time, by becoming for people **a model of merciful love for others**, Christ proclaims by His actions even more than by His words that call to **mercy which is one of the essential elements of the Gospel ethos.**

In this instance it is not just a case of fulfilling a commandment, or an obligation of an ethical nature; it is also a case of satisfying **a condition of major importance** for God to reveal Himself in His mercy to man: 'The merciful... shall obtain mercy.'..."

# 8: "...Here is the Son of God, who in His resurrection experienced in a radical way mercy shown to Himself, i.e., the love of the Father which is *more powerful than death*. And it is also the same Christ, the Son of God, who at the end of His messianic mission - and, in a certain sense, even beyond the end - **reveals Himself as the inexhaustible source of mercy**, of the same love that, in a subsequent perspective of the history of the salvation in the Church, **is to be everlastingly confirmed as more powerful than sin**. The Paschal Christ is the definitive incarnation of mercy, its living sign: in salvation history and in eschatology. In the same spirit, the liturgy of Eastertide places on our lips the words of the Psalm: *Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo* [Ps 89{88}:2].

# 14: "... In this sense, Christ crucified is for us the loftiest model, inspiration and encouragement. When we base ourselves on this *disquieting model*, we are able with all humanity to show mercy to others, knowing that Christ accepts it as if it were shown to Himself [cf. Mt 25:34-40]. On the basis of this model, we must also continually purify all our actions and intentions in which mercy is understood and practiced in a unilateral way, as a good done to others. An act of merciful love is only really such when we are deeply convinced at the moment that we perform it that we are at the same time receiving mercy from the people who are accepting it from us. **If this bilateral and reciprocal quality is absent, our actions are not yet true acts of mercy, nor has there yet been fully completed in us that conversion to which Christ has shown us the way by His words and example, even to the cross, nor are we yet sharing fully in the magnificent source of merciful love that has been revealed to us by Him...**"

### 3. In Comparison ['il più']

# 4: '... In this way, mercy is in a certain sense contrasted with God's justice, and **in many cases is shown to be not only more powerful than that justice but also more profound**. Even the OT teaches that, although justice is an authentic virtue in man, and in God signifies transcendent perfection, **nevertheless love is 'greater' than justice**: greater in the sense that **it is primary and fundamental**. Love, so to speak, **conditions justice** and, in the final analysis, **justice serves love**. **The primacy and superiority of love vis-à-vis justice - this is a mark of the whole of revelation** - are revealed *precisely through mercy*. This seemed to obvious to the psalmists and prophets that the very term justice ended up by meaning the salvation accomplished by the Lord in His Mercy. Ps 40{39}: 11; 98{97}:21; Is 45:21; 51:5, 8; 56:1]. *Mercy differs from justice but is not in opposition to it*, if we admit in the history of man - as the OT precisely does - the presence of God, who already as Creator has linked

Himself to His creature with particular love. Love, by its very nature, excludes hatred and ill-will towards the one to whom He once gave the gift of Himself: *Nihil odisti eorum quae fecisti*, 'you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence.' [Ws 11:24]..."

**# 5:** "... It becomes more evident that **love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice - precise and often too narrow...**"

**# 6:** "... The parable of the Prodigal Son expresses in a simple but profound way the reality of conversion. Conversion is the most concrete expression of the working of love and of the presence of mercy in the human world. The true and proper meaning of mercy does not consist only in looking, however penetratingly and compassionately, at moral, physical or material evil: mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promises and *draws good from all the forms of evil* existing in the world and in man. Understood in this way, **mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of His mission.** His disciples and followers understood and practiced mercy in the same way. Mercy never ceased to reveal itself, in their hearts and in their actions, as an especially creative proof of the love which does not allow itself to be "conquered by evil" but overcomes "evil with good" [cf. Rm 12:21]. The genuine face of mercy has to be ever revealed anew. In spite of many prejudices, mercy seems particularly necessary for our times..."

**# 7:** "... Indeed this redemption is the ultimate and definitive revelation of the holiness of God who is the absolute fullness of perfection: fullness of justice and of love, **since justice is based on love, flows from it, and tends toward it.** In the passion and death of Christ - in the fact that the Father did not spare His own Son, but 'for our sake made him sin' [cf. 2 Co 5:21] - absolute justice is expressed, for Christ undergoes the passion and cross because of the sins of humanity. This constitutes even a 'superabundance' of justice, for the sins of man are 'compensated for' by the sacrifice of the Man-God. Nevertheless, **this justice, which is properly justice 'to God's measure' springs completely from love: from the love of the Father and of the Son, and completely bears fruit in love.** Precisely for this reason **the divine justice revealed in the cross of Christ is 'to God's measure', because it springs from love and is accomplished in love, producing fruits of salvation.** *The divine dimension of redemption* is put into effect not only by bringing justice to bear upon sin, but also by restoring to love that creative power in many thanks to which he once more has access to the fullness of life and holiness that come from God. In this way, **redemption involves the revelation of mercy in its fullness...For mercy is an indispensable dimension of love; it is as it were, love's second name and, at the same time, the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected vis-à-vis the**

**reality of the evil that is in the world**, affecting and besieging man, insinuating itself even into his heart and capable of causing him to 'perish in Gehenna.' [Mt 10:28]...

**# 12:** "... And yet, it would be difficult not to notice that very often *programs which start form the idea of justice* and which ought to assist its fulfillment among individuals, groups and human societies, *in practice suffer from distortions*. Although they continue to appeal to the idea of justice, nevertheless experience shows that other negative forces have gained the upper hand over justice, such as spite, hatred and even cruelty...The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrates that justice alone is not enough, that it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if *that deeper power, which is love*, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions. It has been precisely historical experience that, among other things, has led to the formulation of the saying: *summum ius, summa iniuria*. This statement does not detract from the value of justice and does not minimize the significance of the order that is based upon it; it only indicates, under another aspect, **the need to draw from the powers of the spirit which condition the very order of justice, powers which are still more profound...**"

**# 13:** "...Some theologians affirm that mercy is the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God, and the Bible, Tradition and the whole faith life of the People of God provide particular proofs of this. It is not a question here of the perfection of the inscrutable essence of God in the mystery of the divinity itself, but of the perfection and attribute whereby man, in the intimate truth of his existence, encounters the living God particularly closely and particularly often. In harmony with Christ's words to Philip [cf. Jn 14:9-10], **the 'vision of the Father'** - a vision of God through faith - finds precisely in the encounter with His mercy a unique moment of interior simplicity and truth, similar to that which we discover in the parable of the prodigal son.

**"He who has seen me has seen the Father" [Jn 14:9].** The Church professes the mercy of God, the Church lives by it in her wide experience of faith and also in her teaching, constantly contemplating Christ, concentrating on Him, on His life and on His Gospel, on His cross and resurrection, on His whole mystery. Everything that forms the 'vision' of Christ in the Church's living faith and teaching brings us nearer to the 'vision of the Father' in the holiness of His mercy. **The Church seems in a particular way to profess the Mercy of God and to venerate it when she directs herself to the Heart of Christ.** In fact, it is precisely this drawing close to Christ in the mystery of His Heart which enables us to dwell on this point - a point in a sense central and also most accessible on the human level - of the revelation of the merciful love of the Father, a revelation which constituted the central event of the messianic mission of the Son of Man..."



**# 14:** "... *True mercy is, so to speak, the most profound source of justice.* If justice is in itself suitable for 'arbitration' between people concerning the reciprocal distribution of objective goods in an equitable manner, **love and only love [including that kindly love we call 'mercy'] is capable of restoring man to himself.**

**"Mercy that is truly Christian is also, in a certain sense, the most perfect incarnation of 'equality' between people, and therefore also the most perfection incarnation of justice as well, in so far as justice aims at the same result in its own sphere. However, the equality brought by justice is limited to the realm of objective and extrinsic goods, while love and mercy bring it about that people meet one another in that value which is man himself, with the dignity that is proper to him..."**

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#### **4. Conversion as the Conclusion:**

**# 4:** "... mercy does not pertain only to the notion of God, but it is **something that characterizes the life of the whole people of Israel** and each of its sons and daughters: ***mercy is the content of intimacy with their Lord***, the content of their dialogue with him. Under precisely this aspect, mercy is presented in the individual books of the OT with a great richness of expression..."

**# 13 f:** "... Therefore, the Church professes and proclaims **conversion. Conversion to God always consists in *discovering His mercy***, i.e., in discovering that love which is patient and kind [Mt 6:4, 6, 18] as only the Creator and Father can be; the love which the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' [Ep 3:18; cf. also Lk 11:5-13] is faithful to the uttermost consequences in the history of His covenant with man: even to the cross and to the death and resurrection of the Son. Conversion to God is always the fruit of the 'rediscovery' of the Father, who is rich in mercy.

"Authentic knowledge of the God of mercy, the God of tender love, is a constant and inexhaustible source of conversion, not only as a momentary interior act but also as **a permanent attitude, as a state of mind**. Those who come to know God in this way, who 'see' Him in this way, can live only in a state of being continually converted to Him. They live, therefore, ***in statu conversionis***; and it is this state of conversion which marks out the most profound element of the pilgrimage of every man and woman on earth *in statu viatoris*. It is obvious that the Church professes the mercy of God, as revealed in the crucified and risen Christ, not only by the word of her teaching but above all **through the deepest pulsation of the life of the whole People of God**. By means of this testimony of life, the Church fulfills the mission proper to the People of God, the mission which is **a sharing in and, in a sense, a continuation of the messianic mission of Christ Himself...**"

# 15: "... Everything that I have said in the present document on mercy should therefore *be continually transformed into an ardent prayer*: into a cry that implores mercy according to the needs of man in the modern world. *May this cry be full of that truth about mercy* which has found such rich expression in sacred Scripture and Tradition, as also in the authentic life of faith of countless generations of the People of God..."

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### **PART THREE:**

#### **O.T. BIBLICAL RITUALS OF RECONCILIATION**

##### **[A.] Occasional OT Penitential Observances**

[cf. N. CONTE, SDB, *La Misericordia del Signore e' eterna. Il Sacramento della Penitenza e della conciliazione*. EDI OFTES 1990, pp. 27-66, passim]

##### **Introduction**

[1] Many ancient cultures did have penitential rituals, or ceremonies - in fact, practically all of them that we know today were so endowed. Human beings from the beginning sensed the natural need of purifying rituals, and experienced deeply the need of pardon from one's failings. **St. Thomas** maintained that this is simply a matter of natural law: a person is almost moved to do penance of some kind for one's own misdemeanors. A sense of regret, or sorrow is experienced, and people seek some remedy for their misdeeds, and show some signs of genuine sorrow [cf. **III, q. 84, a. 7**: "... the matter of this sacrament [of penance] preexists, being provided by nature; since it is by a natural principle of reason that man is moved to repent of the evil he has done; it would be due to divine institution that one would do penance in this way, or that. It is a natural law that one should repent of the evil one has done, by grieving for having done it, and by seeking a remedy for one's grief in some way or other; and also that one should show some signs of grief [**ad 1 um**].

[2] The People of God had the enormous benefit and gift of the revealed Word of God. Inspired by this, more and more individuals, as well as the People at large, discovered themselves to be profoundly at variance with God and with one another wounded and divided within themselves. Their own lived experiences showed that they were indeed inclined toward evil, and immersed in sin: daily life made clear that wills were weakened and their minds darkened. This sense of sinfulness - both personal as well as national - is one of the arguments some biblical scholars would use to show that the "**Suffering Servant of Yahweh**" [Is 53, etc.] could not ultimately have been identified with Israel as a nation - the Suffering Servant personally was convinced of his own innocence - while Israel [and the Holy Church since] have never been. There are some "Suffering Servant" traits to be found in the People of Israel as well as in the Church - but, this corporate personality originally had a messianic leaning.

[3] This daily experience of being "off the mark" - plus the need to eke out a hardy existence on the edges of the encroaching desert- struggling with armies to the north [Assyria], south [Egypt] and east [Babylon] - and the "great sea" to the west the Mediterranean] - often brought Israel to its knees. What the periodically marauding hordes might not be able to do, sometimes the elements of nature would: whether it

was the locusts - or the sky turning to “bronze” and the earth to “iron” [poet’s description of drought?] - Israel developed **a sense of sorrow** for her sins. The original plan of the Creator had been for a peace-filled Garden of Delights - toward which the prophets rather looked more forward to in hope - than back on in nostalgia. Israel had the built in formula for personal, as well as common rituals of repentance. The **“Desert, Darkness and the Deep”** spiritualized and remained the challenges also in the spiritual life of God’s People.

[4] The celebrations of repentance were of two categories:

- occasional: at the time of national calamity, conversion, disasters, threats;
- fixed, established: these would take place at the change of the seasons, the years, to commemorate some festival.

[a] As emergencies came from natural phenomena, or from the threat of invading armies, or perhaps internal insurrection - very often these happenings came to be looked upon as “punishment” for sin both personal as well as collective. On such occasions, God’s People were inspired through penitential rituals to beg the Lord for His pardon and also for the deliverance of whatever was plaguing them, which they believed came to them because of their misdemeanors.

[b] The biblical “reasons” for reverses, sufferings and trials go beyond the one category of “punishment” - e.g., purification, pedagogy, eschatology, redemption. While the Suffering Servant shows the “value” of “salvific suffering”, the wisdom tradition thinks of the “School of God” - or, as gold and silver are tried in the furnace, so God’s holy ones are “tried.” The truly wise person knows that a thousand years are like an hour of the night [cf. Ps 90] - all is passing, we do not have here a lasting home. The entire desert experience was a “test” to see if Israel would truly love its God.

[c] While no complete listing is fully known, some of the better known “motivations” for Israel’s sufferings would be the following:

- famine, or epidemics [cf. I K 8:37, ff.];
- drought [cf. 1 K 8:35-37];
- storms [cf. Jl 1:4-6];
- military defeats [cf. I K 8:46, ff.; Jgs 20:24, ff.];
- enforced exile [cf. 1 K 8:46, ff.; IS 40:1, ff.; Ezk 36:22, ff.].

All these realities were most often looked upon and interpreted as signs of divine intervention punishing the sins of the people, the kings, or individuals. However, they were also seen as powerful divine appeals for conversion.

[d] Looking a bit more closely at some of these situations might offer the idea of how the idea of penance, repentance developed among the People of God under divine inspiration. “Mercy” [as in Ps 103] soon came to be seen as the encounter of the infinite creative power of God’s mercy [*hesed-rahaim*] would swoop down like the desert eagle, to lift Israel up to a better way of life, to a better view, liberation from the confinement of the nest, and then impart the Canticle of the “New Song” [cf. Ex 19; Dt 32]. From all this, and the Lord’s continuing, abiding presence with His People [Emmanuel], believers come to understand that the primary, relative divine attribute is mercy.

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1. Jgs 20:20-48: The Israelites pledge themselves through a fraternal, civil war, to avenge the crime of the men of Gibeah who violated the woman - a truly terrible story in all its aspects:

“... In the morning the Israelites marched out and pitched their camp facing Gibeah... the Israelites went before the Lord and wept until evening; they consulted Yahweh ... [after initial defeats], the Israelites and the whole people went up to Bethel; they wept and sat in the Lord’s presence; they fasted all day till the evening and offered holocausts and communion sacrifices before Yahweh; then the Israelites consulted Yahweh... the battle was fierce ... Yahweh defeated Benjamin before Israel ...[after total victory], the Israelites were sorry for their brother Benjamin... one tribe had been cut off from Israel ... **[In those days, there was no king in Israel, and every man did as he pleased...]** [final verse of Jgs 21:25]: frontier justice!

a. The context of this horrific story is a war that Israel fought against one of her own to avenge the violation and eventual homicide of the woman of the Ephraimite home of the Levite that occurred at Gibeah, inflicted by the men of the tribe of Benjamin. On the first foray, Israel suffered a resounding defeat - perhaps also an indication of the ferocity of an army defending its own sacred territory against any attacker. However that might be, once again Israel recurred to the Lord, with fasting and prayer, begging His intervention, protection and support against the Benjaminites. From this encounter, they received direction from the Lord to go on with the struggle for righteousness. Encouraged by what they interpreted as a divine mandate, Israel once more took up the encounter - and once more, Israel was apparently defeated.

b. Every defeat was seen as divine punishment - so, once again, Israel returned to the Lord in prayer, supplication, sacrificing and fasting. They appealed to

the Lord in repentant tears and fervent prayer - the whole people were involved in this ritual, in going before the sanctuary of Bethel. They fasted night and day, offered communion sacrifices, holocausts and prayers before the Lord, once more seeking His direction.

c. These untoward events brought Israel to her knees, and to reconsider her own position in the presence of the Lord. It was noted that many among them up to that moment had acted without seeking the Lord's direction, or blessing on the conduct of the battle. Defeat both surprised and discouraged them. They were convinced that their struggle was in the name of the Lord, to respond to a horrible breach of justice perpetrated by the Benjaminites that they were convinced should not go unpunished. However, what they were finding was that the "punishers were being punished" - for their own status before the Lord. They came to realize that, at least implicitly, they were relying much more on their own strength and their own over-powering numbers, rather than handing over the entire conflict for divine justice to the Lord.

d. Ultimately, convinced of their own sinfulness, the Israelites come back to the Lord, invoking His mercy, manifesting all the traditional external "signs" such as weeping, fasting. To these personal manifestations, the faithful unite the bloody rituals: holocausts, communion sacrifices. These are the usual rituals celebrated at the outset of a military campaign, seeking the Lord Sabaoth's abiding assistance in the harsh conflict about the ensue [cf. 1 S 10:8; 13:9]. Very often in Israel's History there were such rites.

e. Military defeat was always read in a religious sense, as the effect, indication of a state of sin in which in some way, the whole people was involved. Only in removing the obstacle would it be possible to cancel the shadow of divine disfavor. In faith, and repentance, Israel returned to the Lord, confessed their own sins and invoked the infinite mercy of God. The Lord listened to the supplication of the People and the tears, fasting were shown to be pleasing to Him, and the sweet odor of the sincere sacrifices arose up to Him. In the light of all this, the Lord would extend His Pardon [cf. Ps 31:5].

f. The Lord took away the sins of His chosen People and re-established His communion with them. He thus returns to His stance of "**emmanuel**", being one with His people in their life-long exodus, spiritual combat. In the end, the victory is truly "His"; it was the Lord who defeats Israel's enemies.

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2. Penitential Psalm 130: tradition has zeroed in on seven Psalms, consistently thought to be "penitential": [Pss **32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143**]. The 6th of these, Ps 130, is a **Penitential Psalm**, known by many from its Latin beginnings: *De Profundis* - has

been consistently prayed as much for its sentiments of hope. The Christian liturgy has repeatedly used this among her prayers for the faithful departed. It is not thought of so much as a lament, as it would be sublime expression of trust in the saving power of the coming Redeemer: [for these notes, cf. Louis Jacquet, *Les Psaumes et le cœur de l'homme. Etude textuelle, littéraire et doctrinale*. Belgium: Duculot 1979, Vol. 3, pp. 498-509].

### Presentation:

[1] With the proclamation of the Little Flower as a “doctress” of the Church - the third woman, and the youngest of all the 33 so named - once more an appreciation of the **Carmelite “Night”** has surfaced from her descriptions of her terrible “Night of Faith”, the last 19 months of her life. The Scriptures abound in the symbolism of the **Desert**, the **Darkness** and the **Deep**: *‘per crucem, noctem, ad lucem!* **“The Night is my illumination!”** It would suffice to recall to mind Israel’s faith experiences of the Night: Exodus - Creation - Ps 69 - Job - Jonas - Jeremiah - Sheol [the “Pit”] - the Nativity - Holy Saturday - and the Resurrection. Like the watchman yearning for the dawn, so was the soul of ancient Israel, so is the heart of every believer today!

[2] Technically, this is the 11th “Song of the Ascents” [Pss 120-134]. They were most likely sung by weary, anxious, hope-filled, faithful Wayfarers on their way to the Holy City. Along their long and arduous migration, they would have passed through the Valley of Balsam - not unlike the “weeping willow” [cf. Ps 84: 6 +]. This seems to have been at the point of the junction of the roads leading to Jerusalem.

[3] While this is basically a great prayer of hope, the unknown psalmist at the same time admits his own personal guilt: the Lord will watch over His People so that they will never be totally over-whelmed by the wicked. The faithful good likewise will never give up their “quest for the Lord.”

[4] This is a Psalm that sounds very much like the prayer of **Jonah** [cf. 2:3-11] in his own “ordeal” imposed for his conversion:

“... Out of my distress, I cried to Yahweh - and he answered me. From the belly of Sheol, I cried out - and you heard my voice...

For You threw me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods closed round me...

But, You raised my life from the Pit. Yahweh, my God! When my soul was growing ever weaker, Yahweh, I remembered You - and my prayer reached you in your holy Temple.

Some abandon their faithful love by worshipping false gods, but I shall **sacrifice** to You, with **Songs of Praise!**

The **vow** I have made, I shall fulfill...!"

[5] The closing of the **Prophet Micah** also offers consolation along the lines of the **De Profundis**:

"What god can compare with you for pardoning guilt, and for overlooking crime?

He does not harbor anger forever, since He delights in showing faithful love!

Once more, have pity on us, tread down our faults; throw all our sins to the bottom of the seas.

Grant Jacob your faithfulness, and Abraham, your faithful love, as you swore to our ancestors long ago..." [cf. Mi 7:18-20].

[6] Some of the Fathers of the Church [as Sts. Hilary, John Chrysostom, Theodoretus] thought that this Psalm was written for the cessation of the Babylonian Captivity. Many modern interpreters have held that this Prayer is particularly suited for anyone undergoing a very painful human experience, as: sickness, persecution, rejection, imprisonment, fear, loneliness, mourning.

[a] The text seems to have been composed in the first place by one who had known personally the anguish of a sense of sinfulness.

[b] Biblical scholars do not think that this Penitential Psalm reaches the *pathos*, the spiritual richness and psychological depths of the **Miserere**. Yet, it seems to flow from the same "school" of religious inspiration. It is a most moving composition, endowed with freshness, spontaneity - proceeding from its sublime faith in the infinite mercy of God: "... with You is forgiveness, O Lord...I rely on Your promise ... my whole being **HOPES** in the Lord...!" Its supplication of crying out from one's own depths is based on the sublime divine goodness.

[7] This Psalm offers its own "theology" of the efficacy of every humble and trusting Prayer. The writer of these verses was convinced of the Divine Goodness and that the culpable would indeed be redeemed. This is a spirit that was already looking far into the distance to the gospel times:

"... Take comfort, my child, **your sins are forgiven...**! [Jesus' words to the paralytic - cf. Mt 9:12].

"... Then Peter went up to Him and said: 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? as often as seven time?

Jesus answered: Not seven, I tell you, but **70 times 7 times...**!" [cf. Mt 18:21, ff.]



[8] Redemption, then, is the core and the grandeur of this Psalm. The central concern of this suppliant has been his own past sins - and along with this, and surpassing it - the **pardon** that the Lord will bestow. The entire Psalm rests on the solid foundation, or the capital dogma of the gratuity of Pardon. From this central belief, two factors emerge as certain:

- first of all, that God is Pardon - that the divine life in our regard is forgiveness;
- if this were not the case, humanity would simply cease to be!

[9] Three images seem to "circulate" throughout the Psalm:

- the unhappy person, who cries out from the deep abyss of whatever is engulfing him;
- the watchmen, who long for the return of first light into their lives - frequently looking to the distant eastern horizon for the initial glimpses of the new dawn;
- the conviction of the fidelity of God and His generous pardon.

[a] These three "circulate" around these images:

- sin is compared to a flood, a marine unruly abyss, and the floods seem to engulf the wretched sinner - and only God can extend a saving hand;
- there is the image of the Dark Night, and only the Dawn of Divine Pardon can dissipate the pervading gloom;
- thirdly, the unknown psalmist is all weighed down by his own brand of slavery. The Most High Himself has already made it known that He would be willing personally to pay the ransom price.

[b] Sin is presented by this anonymous believing psalmist as the most profound distress of humanity - and it is a distress that only God can resolve by saving the engulfed one from the flood, and by bringing a ray of hope into a profoundly disheartened life.

[10] Many interpreters have read Ps 130 as an Individual Lament -later made into a National Lament, only ultimately to be re-applied to an individual. Many scholars believe that this might would greatly lessen its impact. Yet, the author feels himself in profound solidarity with his people, "Israel" - comparing the nation looking forward to the better Messianic Age, as a night-watchman would look forward for the first streaks of the Dawn of the distant eastern horizon. Such a reading would allow this "Individual Poem" to have a "collective interpretation". Some would see that the

conclusion of the Psalm: [“... For with Yahweh is faithful love, with Him, generous ransom - and He will forgive Israel of all his sins...”] - to be a declaration taken from an ancient Penitential Ritual of the Old Temple.

[11] Nonetheless, the common reading of this work of art is that it is part of the Gradual Psalms, the Songs of Ascent. In the Liturgy of the old Temple a Canticle such as this is eminently suited to inculcate in the Pilgrims profound sentiments of contrition for their personal faults - as well as for their national sins. Such sentiments would seem indispensable for any authentic piety toward the Lord. It would seem that the Liturgical usage of this Psalm would have been associated with an appropriate sacrifice for sin [cf. Lv 4-6]:

“... Three times a year, you will hold a festival in My honor. you will observe the **Feast of Unleavened Bread**. For seven days you will eat unleavened bread, as I have commanded you, at the appointed time of the month of Abib, for in that month you came out [of the land of slavery...]

You will also observe the **Feast of the Harvest of the first-fruits** of your labors

... and the Feast **of Ingathering** at the end of the year... You will bring the best of the first-fruits of your soil to the house of Yahweh, your God! ...” [cf. Ex 23; 15, .ff.].

“... Three times a year you must appear before Yahweh, your God...: at the **Feast of the Unleavened Bread**, at the **Feast of Weeks**, at the **Feast of Shelters**. No one must appear empty-handed before the Lord - each must give in proportion to the blessings which the Lord God has bestowed on you...” [cf. Dt 16:16, ff.].

“... The **Jewish Passover** was drawing near, and many of the country-people who had gone up to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves, **were looking out for Jesus...**” [cf. Jn 11:55] - the stance of every penitent!

[12] Some scholars think that Ps 130 might date from the time of Nehemiah, that era following the long and harsh [Babylonian Captivity] exile. Some others see the Psalm in the spirit of St. Peter - after his denial of the Lord, when he went out into the night and wept bitterly - and was pardoned by the Lord. In the feelings of being engulfed by what he had done, Peter in great humility earnestly sought for forgiveness.

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#### a. The Supplication of the Penitent

Verse 1: “... Out of the depths I **cry** to you, O Lord - Lord hear my cry! Listen attentively to the sound of my **pleading**...! [vv. 1, 2].

1.] There are numerous Psalms that skillfully make use of images to convey the depths of their message. Here there is a most artful description of the situation of one who is almost overwhelmed, engulfed by the sense of his own unhappiness - using the single simple metaphor of the “depths”.

2.] The cry of pleading: does not seem unlike the cry of ancient Israel, groaning out in its slavery - and their cry came up to God. As many think that description in Exodus [cf. 2:23, ff.] of the people appealing to the Lord can be read in the context of a Plaintive Liturgy.

3.] In the early Creation story, the powerful Creative and Redeeming Spirit of the Most High hovered over [like a giant redeeming eagle] the three declared enemies of humanity: the **Desert**, the **Darkness** and the **Deep**. It may be that all three images are present here:

- the **Desert**: as the watchman of the desert camp, looks furtively as the long night wears on, toward the eastern horizon for the first hints at the new day of the Lord. He yearns for the passing of the terrifying desert night.

- the **Darkness**: yearning for the coming of the New Dawn, the anonymous guardian of the Bedouin camp-site is a “type”, a paradigm, or model for all who would yearn for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Light from the East, the only authentic Light of the Nations, to come to them - as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

- the **Deep**: the conclusion of this trio of alliteration - these primordial powers of chaos which then were “spiritualized” as the great enemies in the Spiritual Exodus, the New Creation. The “Deep” is often present as a biblical theme of spirituality:

“... Yahweh is my Rock and my Fortress, my Deliverer is my God.... I take refuge in Him, my rock, my Shield, my saving Strength... With Death’s breakers closing in on me - Belial’s torrents ready to swallow me... Sheol’s snares on every side of me ... I called to Yahweh in my anguish... and my cry came to his ears...” [cf. Ps 18].

“... I am exhausted with calling out, my throat is hoarse, my eyes are worn out searching for my God... Let not the waters wash over me, nor the deep swallow me up, nor the Pit closes its mouth on me...” [cf. Ps 69:3, 15].

“... the flood [of fear] is around me all day long, closes in on me all at once ... all that I know is darkness...” [cf. Ps 88:17].

“... Was it not You, O Lord, Who dried up the sea, the waters of the great Abyss Who made the sea bed into a road for the redeemed to go across?... they will enter Zion shouting for joy... their sorrow and sighing will take flight...” [cf. Is 51: 10, ff.].

“... you have been wrecked by the waves, o Tyre, by the depths of the sea...” [cf. Ezk 27:4].

4.] The Flood in the Night: is an overwhelming reality with which to cope - and the greater the darkness, the deeper the yearning for the Dawn:

“... my being hopes in the Lord, as watchmen yearn for the **day-break...**” [v. 6]

“You Yourself, o Lord, are my Lamp - my God lights up my darkness...” [cf. Ps 18:29]

“... at the break of day, God comes to the rescue...” [cf. Ps 46:6 - the “Dawn” is a special time for redemption: **At dawn of the third day...**! [cf. Ex 19:16].

“... you have plunged me into the darkness into the depths, ... I call to You, o Lord, to You I stretch out my hands...” [cf. Ps 88:7].

“... each morning fills us with Your faithful love - and we shall sing and be happy all our days...” [cf. Ps 90: 14].

“... they cried out to the Lord in their distress, He rescued them from their plight. He brought them out from the gloom and the shadow dark as death, and shattered their chains...” [cf. Ps 107:13, ff.].

“... let the Dawn bring news of Your faithful love, for I place my trust in You - show me the road to travel for You to relieve my heart...” [cf. Ps 143:8].

5.] The metaphor of the **Flood in the Night** gives some idea of the indescribable misery that strikes this unknown psalmist. He seems to find himself without recourse, without any exit from his plight. He seems to be bereft of all light, and is undergoing a long oppression, a sense of dereliction, apparently having been abandoned, or having lost all that was dear to him. He seems to have “anticipated Sheol” in his life.

6.] In **Sheol**, at this stage of Revelation [cf. Nb 16:33, ff.], the dead are silent shadows of their former selves and have no relationship with God [cf. Ps 30:9; 88:5, 10-12; Is 38:18].

“... to You, o God, I cry - my Rock, do not be deaf to me! If You stay silent I shall be like those who sink into oblivion [cf. Ps 28:1].

a.] The agonies of which these writers express themselves seem to be those of a religious order - their misfortune very often assumes “biblical traits” such as “**desert**” - “**darkness**” - or, the “**deep**.”

b.] The Psalmist is not one presently undergoing any persecution; nor does he seem to be a prisoner of anyone, nor one actually dying - he is one who thinks of himself as a **sinner**. He seems to be groaning out under the weight of his own culpability, his wretchedness of mind and heart.

7.] Biblically, “sin” itself comes across as an abyss, one that is very deep, threatening and dark. In faith, one who has an understanding of sin experiences an emptiness, perhaps like no other. It does not seem that the ravines of an undulating **desert** - or, the waves of the **sea** - or pitch blackness of the stormy **night** - to give some distant idea when used as a metaphor.

a.] Yet, the Prophets in their message of hope will remind sinners of all ages that the hand of the Lord is never too short to reach out to them - no matter what situation they find themselves in. He never hardens His heart, and will never turn away from the praying sinner. The faith vision is that the sinner himself has set up a gulf between himself and God. Our sins can turn us away from the Lord:

“... No, the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear - our guilty deeds have made a gulf between us and God ...” [cf. Is 59:1, ff.].

b.] This is taking sin at its face gravity, and its full weight - its blinding reality - its deafening roar, that shuts out all else. The believing sinner may experience being struck by God -or, that divine Providence does not seem as welcoming. There are times when the sinner may simply feel overwhelmed, reduced to powerlessness, crushed by the realization of the goodness of God, and one’s own human frailty.

8.] It seems that it is from a context such as this that the “appeal” of Ps 130 goes out - almost in the style of the “Confessions of Jeremiah”: “... Pay attention to me, o Lord!” [cf. Jr 18:19]. Such a cry, begging for a hearing, goes out from the depths of the psalmist who finds himself before an enemy who seems beyond his capacity. He begs the Lord to give heed, and not to turn away from him. This sense of urgency is much in accord with the passages that follow:

“... Give ear to my words, o Lord, spare a thought for my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God. TO You I pray, Yahweh, at daybreak you hear my voice...! [cf. Ps 5:2, ff.].

“... Hear the sound of my prayer when I call upon You, when I raise my hands, Yahweh, towards your Holy of Holies... Blessed by Yahweh, for He hears the sound of my prayer...” [cf. Ps 28: 2, 6].

“... In a state of terror I cried: I have been cut off from your sight! Yet, you heard my plea for help, when I cried out for You...!” [cf. Ps 32:22, ff.].

“... God, hear my prayer, do not hide away from my plea - give me a hearing, answer me, my troubles give me no peace...” [cf. Ps 55: 2, ff.].

“...Lord, You are kind and forgiving, **rich in faithful love** for all who call upon You. Yahweh, hear my prayer, listen to the sound of my pleading. In my day of distress, I call upon You, because You answer me, O Lord...” [cf. Ps 86: 6, ff.].

“... I am filled with love when Yahweh listens, to the sound of my prayer, when He bends down to hear me, as I call...” [cf. Ps 116:1].

“... Listen to my calling, for I am miserably weak!” [cf. Ps 142:7].

9.] From the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed to God in these terms:

“... Out of my distress, I cried to Yahweh, and He answered me, from the belly of **SHEOL** I cried out, You heard my voice! For You threw me into the **deep**, into the heart of the **seas**, and the **floods** closed round me... The **waters** round me rose to my neck; the **deep** was closing in round me. But, You raised my life from the **PIT**, Yahweh, my God - when my soul was growing weaker and my prayer reached You, as I remembered You, in Your holy Temple. Some abandon their faithful love by worshipping false gods - but, I shall sacrifice to You, with songs of praise...! The vow that I have made, I shall fulfill! Salvation comes from Yahweh...!” [cf. Jon 2:3-10 - passim].

a.] This poem from Jonah is really a mosaic of Psalm-texts and is constructed on the conventional pattern of Thanksgiving Psalms: description of sufferings, undergone on account of deliverance from them. For the Psalmists, “grave danger” is often “**death**” and deliverance from this, is “**redemption**”. The “sea” is God’s primordial enemy [cf. Jb 7: 12, ff.], often understood as the Kingdom of Death, or the way leading to it. Jonah’s adventure was used by **Jesus** [cf. Mt 12:40; Lk 11:30], as a figure of his own **three days in the heart of the earth**. The kingdom of death is depicted to let Him go in the resurrection. The analogy between Christian

**Baptism** and the **Resurrection** of Jesus has led to the use of the figure of Jonah in Baptismal Typology [cf. JB note for Jon 2:3, ff.].

b.] “... For as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea-monster for three days and for three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights...” [cf. Mt 12:40]. This ready-made expression is borrowed from Jon 2:12 - and only approximately indicating the space of time between Jesus’ death and His resurrection:

“... This is an evil generation; it is looking for a sign. The only sign that it will be given is **the sign of Jonah**. For just as Jonah becomes a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be a sign to this generation... when Jonah preached, they repented; and look, there is something greater than Jonah here...” [cf. Lk 11:30, ff.].

10.] St. Augustine’s Classical Commentary on the Psalms [cf. Ps 130]:

a.] Out of the depths have I called unto thee, O Lord....! Jonas cried from the deep”, from within the whale [cf. Jon 2:2]. He was not only beneath the waves, but also had been swallowed up by them. Nevertheless, those waves, and his tomb under them, did not prevent his prayer from reaching God - nothing could subdue the power of his prayer. Prayer penetrates all things - and reaches the very ears of God. **The ears of God are in the heart of anyone who prays! For all of us, this present life is our “depths”**. Throughout the Scriptures, anyone who found himself over-whelmed, groaned, sighed and prayed to be delivered from whatever deep seemed to be threatening. **The real depths - from which there is no rescue - would be the sin against the Holy Spirit: simply not to cry out in the Lord’s Name, to give up on prayer.** The Lord Himself directs us to **pray out of the depths of this present moment in our lives**.

b.] O Lord, hear my voice! Who is it in this Psalm crying out from the depths of his own failure, discouragement? **It is a sinner**. He prays with inspired hope, however - the One Who came on earth to absolve us from all our sins, **to heal all our wounds** - gives hope even to sinners who are engulfed in the self-made depths - or, in the events that happen to us. **Our “depths” are the human condition** - which Christ Himself assumed in becoming one of us. He was like us in all things, save sin. Every conscience is accused of something - one who trusts in his/her own righteousness, simply would not be welcomed by the Most High.

11.] The “Cry” of Ps 130 - is much like the “groaning in their slavery” of Exodus - when the cry came up to the ears of the Lord in heaven - perhaps a **Lamentation Liturgy**, pleasing to the Lord. Here the “Cry” of these Psalmists is a prayer deeply inspired by the Hope for salvation. This is not an indication of any

merely human hope, or an expression of some kind of natural optimism: this is much more a Hope that flows out of a profound faith, in a personal and living God. This is “**theological hope**” at its best!

a.] Ps 22: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me...? - this seems to be a Lament and entreaty of the innocent under persecution and ends in thanksgiving for the rescue [vv. 22-26]. This Canticle earned a place in the national liturgy, and has truly “inclusive language”: “**all** the race of Jacob, revere Him - revere Him, **all** the race of Israel” [cf. v. 23]. The conclusion is also “universal”: “... **the whole wide world** will remember and return to Yahweh - all the families of nations will bow down before Him...” [cf. vv. 27, ff.].

b.] This is all to be kept in mind in that the opening verse of this Psalm may set its style: beginning in the depths of discouragement, but eventually finding hope in the Lord: “... My God, I call by day, but you do not answer - at night, but I find no respite...!” [cf. v. 2].

c.] Ps 130, then, rightfully is put in the class of the *Miserere*, Ps 51. The appeal and the prayer are for **pardon**, that the soul of the Psalmist be healed. St. Augustine is a good one to listen to in this Psalm - he had the experience of the depths of his own life of sin distant from God. Whoever feels overwhelmed and still believes, almost characteristically cries out, appeals to the goodness of the Lord to be taken up out of the “depths”, to be “rescued”.

12.] In this first part of the Psalm, called “Supplication”, this anonymous believer of ancient times experiences the infinite distance from his God and Creator - and has added to this separation by his own choice of sin, detachment from the Lord. It is much like the way-farer who is already over-whelmed by the vast **desert**, has now fallen into a deep crevice, and cannot seem to get out. Or, if the image is the **sea**, there is a long way to go - exhaustion is taking over and the sea seems to unruly. This is a person hopelessly lost in the **night** - with increasing fears.

a.] Yet, the believer instinctively cries out in prayer and is deeply convinced that God is an upright and holy king. Ancient history is deeply lodged in the hearts of the believers of old: they remember that God spoke to His people through a pillar of fire, and all obeyed Him. The reward for the obedience of faith is divine protection. God answered His People of old, for He is **a God of Forgiveness** [cf. Ps 99].

b.] The God of Israel does not sleep but attends on His People with open eyes: cf. Solomon’s Prayer for His People: “... Now, o God, may your eyes be open and your ears attentive to prayer offered in this place ... remember the faithful love of Your servant, David...” [cf. 2 Ch 6:40, ff.]. Yahweh then appears: “...



Now, and for the future, My eyes are open and My ears are attentive to the prayer offered in this place - for now I have chosen and consecrated this temple... [cf. 2 Ch 7:15, ff.].

c.] The Lord is most attentive - especially to the needy - to the sinner - to the ANAWIM. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who turns to Him in supplication. He is infinitely disposed to draw anyone up out of the abyss: 'the Lord is eternally disposed for His Covenant of Mercy': this seems to be the revealed principle behind the entire mystery of Redemption.

13.] The Lord as "Redeemer" is already noted by Job [cf. 19:25] - as in many of the Psalms [cf. Ps 19:14; 78:35]. The Prophet Jeremiah refers to the idea [cf. Jr 50:34], and it is a frequent theme in the "Book of Consolation" [cf. Is 40-55 - viz., Is 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 49:7; 59:20]. The Lord God is the savior and the Rescuer from death of His People and His Servants:

"... [Lament on the Sacking of the Temple]: ...Remember, Lord, the People You took to Yourself long ago, Your own tribe, which You redeemed, and this Mount Zion where You came to live..." [cf. Ps 74:2].

"... Do not let the down-trodden retreat in confusion - give the poor and needy cause to praise Your name..." [cf. v.21].

14.] There is an abundant NT Fulfillment:

"... [The Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Merciful Father]: ... I will leave this place and go to my Father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men. So he left the place and went back to his father..." While he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him..." [cf. Lk 15:17-19 - in fact, this whole Lk 15 and the Parables of Mercy it contains].

"... If we say we have never sinned, we make him a liar, and his word has no place in him..." [cf. I Jn 1:10].

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#### b. **Motive for Trust: Divine Mercy**

Verses 3-5: "...If You kept a record of our sins, Lord, who could stand their ground? But **with You is forgiveness**, that You may be revered. I rely, **my whole being relies, Yahweh, on Your promises....**"

1.] The Psalmist does not make known the concrete content of his request. In the deeply felt need for pardon, the sinner simply expresses sin in a general way.

a.] The beauty of the doctrine of this Psalm resides also in the sublime faith that inspires the Psalmist's hope that moves him to prayer. There is nothing human about this pardon - it is not based on anything "human." It is not that God would deign to accept some pious work in order to be approached - He offers His help gratuitously. The ancients were convinced that in the presence of the Most High, no one can ever claim to be "just" [other than in the NT, Mary - who was raised from her "lowly state" and brought on high - a characteristic of the ANAWIM]:

"... I am aware of my offenses...my sin is constantly on my mind ... purify me..." [cf. Ps 51].

"... He does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us as befits our offenses ... He knows what we are made of, He knows that we are dust..." [cf. Ps 103:10, 14].

"... In my terror, I said: no human being can be relied on..." [cf. Ps 116:11].

"... do not put Your servant on trial, for no one living can be found guiltless at Your tribunal..." [cf. Ps 143:2].

"... since you are neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of My mouth..." [cf. Rv. 3:16]

b.] The prime motivation for the Psalmist's Prayer is the Divine Condescendence, that gratuitously extends His pardon. This is the supreme Liberality of the sovereign Judge - Who brings undying praise and thanksgiving to the hearts of those devoted to Him, because **He simply does not remember sins of the past**:

[**The New Covenant of Mercy**]: "... They will all come to know Me, from the least to the greatest, Yahweh declares, since I shall forgive their guilt and never more call their sin to mind..." [cf. Jr 31:31-34].

"... and You, (O Lord), for Your part, took away my guilt, forgave my sin... That is why each of Your faithful ones prays to You in time of distress - even if **floods** overflow, they will never reach Your faithful..." [cf. Ps 32].

"... Bless the Lord... He forgives all your offenses, cures all your diseases, He redeems your life from the abyss, crowns you with faithful love and tenderness..." [cf. Ps 103].

2.] This Lord's own Pity is greater than even His Wisdom - and His **justice is subservient to His Mercy!** The divinity chooses to be "blind" [believes nothing that He hears, and only half that He sees!]. The Merciful God chooses to forget - while offering us the perpetual Memorial of His love for us in the Eucharist. The Lord's forgiveness resides in His free will - and His joy is the sincerity of the human heart [cf. Ps 51].

a.] Already on Sinai, the Lord revealed Himself as **"the One Who pardons iniquity, crime and sin"** of anyone who would repent:

"... Yahweh, Yahweh, God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy, maintaining His faithful love to thousands, forgiving faults, crime and sin..." [cf. Ex 34:7].

b.] This **supreme divine attribute** plays a central role in the teaching of the Prophets:

"... Come, let us talk this over, says Yahweh. Though your sins be as scarlet; they shall be white as snow, though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool..." [cf. Is 1:18, ff.].

"... I have dispelled your acts of revolt like a cloud, and your sins like a mist. Come back to Me, for I have redeemed you." [cf. Is 44:22].

"... Come back, disloyal Israel, Yahweh declares, I shall frown on you no more, since I am merciful ... only acknowledge your guilt... Come back, disloyal children, Yahweh declares for I alone am your Master... We are here, we are coming to You, for You are Yahweh our God. After all, our God is the saving God ... Let us lie down in our shame..." [cf. Jr 3:12-25 - The Poem on Conversion].

"... I shall bring back the captives... I shall rebuild them as before ... I shall cleanse them of their guilt, by which they have offended Me... I shall forgive them all their guilty actions, by which they have offended Me, and rebelled against Me..." [cf. Jr 33:8].

"... If the wicked, however, renounces all the sins he has committed, respects My laws, and is law-abiding and upright, he shall certainly live; he will not die. None of the crimes he committed will be remembered against him from then on; he will most certainly live because of his upright actions..." [cf. Ezk 18:22-31, ff.].

c.] Even in the phrasing of the Confession of Sins, the ancients used the terminology making known their deepest faith regarding God:

“... But because You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, patient and rich in faithful love, You did not abandon me...” [cf. Ne 9:17].

d.] The Psalmist begins with, and rejects, what seems to be a “popular” idea of God, as One who has a “little black book”, keeping a minute record of each and every sin. If this is the true image of God, the Psalmist realizes that no one can hold his own ground in the presence of God. There is some wisdom in the ancient story of Jacob reprimanding his son, Joseph:

“... his father scolded him. A fine dream to have! - he said to him. Are all of us, then, myself, your mother, your brothers, to come and bow to the ground before you? His brothers held it against him, but **his father pondered the matter...**” [cf. Gn 37:10, ff. - this is somewhat prophetic of Mary treasuring her Son in her heart - cf. Lk 2: 19, 51].

e.] Perhaps there is an evident contrast here: the father [much like the later Compassionate Father high-lighted in the Parables of Mercy, Lk 15] pondered the matter in his heart - whereas the sons held it against their brother. Needless to say, the father was closer to God than his other sons. The penitents of the ages would hope to encounter a God who would forget, not call to mind the sins of the past - and not one like the “brothers” who would hold it always against them.

f.] It may be that the Psalmist has in mind here the ancient task of the Royal Assessor, or the Finance Minister - one who keeps a very careful accounting ledger - if not the likes of a “Police Blotter”, or modern computer that traces those outside the law. Once the record is written there, there is a stain against the person arrested until eventual pardon has been obtained: “... wipe away my offenses.” [as from a blotter].

g.] What the Psalmist hopes to meet is what described by another: “... faithful love and loyalty join together, Saving Justice and Peace embrace...” [cf. Ps 85: 11, ff.].

“... How blessed is the nation that learns to acclaim You! They will live, Yahweh, in the light of Your presence. In Your name they rejoice all day long, by Your saving justice they are raised up...” [cf. Ps 89: 15, ff.].

3.] One could almost imagine a formal Court Trial here - only, there is no District Attorney, or Accuser standing forth, reading off the list of crimes committed against the divinity, or sins against God. Instead, the self-accusing sinner - to his great relief, finds that the Judge Himself is most favorably disposed toward him, despite all the sins committed. There is “no record of sins” being read off - because in this Court Room, all there is to be found is **the Paraclete, Mercy**. The

Primacy in the House of Trial is the **forgiveness** by which the Lord will always be revered. He offers His **Pardon** - "go now, and sin no more...!"

a.] Rather than the simple "Justice of God", the image of the Prophet Hoseah is close to this point: "... Ephraim's guilt is locked away- his sin is locked up..." [cf. Ho 13:12].

b.] This "Assessor of Pardon" enjoys a certain privilege of primacy before all others who have access to the royal throne. With full power, then, this Assessor is always at the service of God, and is ready at each instant to intervene in the Name of the Lord, to resolve all sinful cases.

c.] God has locked up in a cage, as it were, or in a file, all the sins, all the accusations leveled by the penitent against himself. In strict justice, this could also imply that at the proper moment, a functionary could go to the file and chance upon the right folder to bring forth the weighty charges against the Accused: "... may sinners vanish from the earth, and the wicked exist no more...!" [cf. Ps 104:35].

d.] If this aspect of humanity is unilaterally emphasized - his inherent sinfulness - then all hope would be lost: "... God's justice will walk before him, treading out a path..." [cf. Ps 85:13].

e.] The image is that God's saving Justice [including His Mercy] blazes the trail - this is the condition of all peace and happiness. The appeal goes out, from all 'defendants' before the divine tribunal, 'without a leg to stand on', in the spirit of this Ps 130: "... if you kept a record of our sins, who could stand...?"

"... do not put Your servant on trial, for no living being can be found guiltless at Your tribunal..." [cf. Ps 143:2].

"... so perishes the hope of the godless..." [cf. Jb 8:15].

"... But will anyone produce the pure from what is impure? No one can..." [cf. Jb 14:4].

"... for there is no one who does not sin..." [cf. I K 8:46]

"... the angel of the Covenant, for whom you long, is on his way... Who will be able to resist the day of his coming? Who will remain standing when he appears?" [cf. Ml 3:2].

"... Yahweh is slow to anger, but great in power... He never lets evil go unpunished..." [cf. Na 1:3; cf. "Exodus Antiphon", a variation: Ex 34:6 +].

“... No one on earth is sufficiently upright to do good without ever sinning...” [cf. Qo 7:20].

“... Who can say: I have cleansed my heart, I am purified of my sin...” [cf. Pr 20:9]

f.] The ancient Talmud pointed out that if God really had wanted to exercise His full justice, then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never would have survived. St. Paul himself, who certainly experienced the Mercy of God in sublime manner, makes this very clear: “... all have sinned, and lack God’s glory... but all are justified by the free gift of His grace being set free in Christ Jesus...” [cf. Rm 8:28].

4.] From such texts, it is abundantly clear - in the OT and certainly in the NT - that there would indeed be a universal condemnation, were it not for the ‘Assessor’, the Paraclete, before the Throne of the Most High, whose portfolio contains the documents of the full Divine Pardon, Goodness and Mercy. It is very clear that this mystery gradually unfolds in divine revelation: that **Mercy is the primacy of functions in the divine Tribunal over all others:**

“... How blessed are those whose offense is forgiven... to whom God imputes no guilt ... I made my sin known to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said: I shall confess my offense to Yahweh. And You, for Your part, took away my guilt, forgave my sin... Do not be like a horse or mule- they do not understand bridle and bit...” [cf. Ps 32 - another of the Penitential Psalms].

“... Have mercy on me, o God, in Your faithful love, in Your great kindness, wipe away my offenses...” [Ps 51].

“... As tenderly as a father treats his children, so Yahweh treats those who fear Him... as the height of heaven above the earth, so strong is His faithful love for those who fear Him. As the distance of east from west, so far from us does He put our faults...” [cf. Ps 103]

a.] A universal condemnation would simply deprive the Creator [the first Article of the Creed] from that faculty of bestowing everlasting life [the last Article of the Creed!]. The supreme divine power and satisfaction is that of saving creation. The heart cannot be found among believers that could rely on divine justice - then the imperfect hearts of all human beings need to depend on God’s Mercy.

b.] There are some beautiful prayers in the ordinary Sunday’s of the year: “Pardon all our sins, o Lord - since our weakness renders us captive of our sins. May Your Divine Tenderness deliver us from it all!”

c.] The view is expressed that the depths, the intensity of the Hope for salvation is a measure of the Mercy that the Lord will extend - when one's hope is ardent for personal pardon, such a believer will also be challenged to be most generous in pardoning others.

5.] In the magnificent prayer of Moses, the Church today may still derive a lesson in sublime hope and the revealed reasons for it:

"... So, I fell prostrate before Yahweh and lay there those 40 days and 40 nights - Yahweh having said that He was going to destroy you. And I pleaded with Yahweh:

'My Lord Yahweh, do not destroy Your people, Your heritage, whom in Your greatness You have redeemed, whom You have brought out of Egypt with Your mighty hand. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - take no notice of this people's stubbornness, their wickedness and their sin, so that in the country from which You have brought us, it may not be said: 'Yahweh was not able to save His people...' But, these are Your people, Your heritage, whom You Yourself have brought out by Your great power and Your outstretched arm.'" [cf. Dt 9:26, ff.]

"... If the foundations fall to ruin, what can the upright do...? [cf. Ps 11:3].

a.] Hope is based on Faith that the Lord watches over the world, His gaze does scrutinize all the children of Adam [cf. Ps 11].

b.] One can see the extraordinary development of Hope in so many of these texts - which developed further in the NT times being brought to unimaginable heights, with the coming of Jesus Christ, the Father's Mercy Incarnate. Those who have recourse to Him in their sorrows of life and regret for personal failures will always receive a healing, strengthening in their repentant recourse to God. Such a mentality is antecedently assured of a favorable response - each penitent is encouraged to aspire ardently, in an attitude full of confidence that they will be promptly heard. This means that one should literally "leap in the dark" - a jaunt into the unknown, and trust without hesitancy, the infinite Mercy of God.

c.] The particular word for "**forgiveness**" that is used in v. 4 of Ps 130: ["... but with You is forgiveness] is a word that is found only in a very few other OT passages:

"... But, because You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, patient and rich in faithful love. You did not abandon Your people..."! [cf. Ne 9:17 - another variation on the "**Exodus Antiphon**" -cf. Ex 34:6]

“... O Lord, we have sinned against You... And it is for the Lord, our God to have mercy and to pardon, since we have betrayed Him...” [cf. Dn 9:9]

“... Lord, You are a kind and forgiving, rich in faithful love, for all who call upon You...” [cf. Ps 86:5].

6.] This Psalm 130, then, is indeed a sublime Act of Faith of the Psalmist **in the infinite Mercy of God**. At the same time, it is a fervent prayer addressed to God Himself reminding Him that He can procure His own glory by granting the favors requested to this lowly suppliant. It is simply a fact of human life that greater respect is shown to Mercy and Magnanimity on the part of God toward the “Little Ones” [the ANAWIM]. In allowing them pardon, shielded by His Mercy, **the “Pardoned” becomes His “Adorers”, worshippers in Spirit and in truth**.

a.] If His Divine Justice must indeed lash out against all offenders, then no one would be left to worship Him! In the depths of SHEOL, at this stage of divine revelation, there is little adoration offered to the Lord:

“... I am worn out with groaning ... For Yahweh has heard the sound of my weeping - my pleading. Yahweh will accept my prayer...” [cf. Ps 6:6]

“... What point is there in my death, my going down to the **abyss**? Can dust praise You, or proclaim Your faithfulness? Listen, Yahweh, take pity on me, Yahweh be My help...! [cf. Ps 30:10].

“... You have plunged me to the bottom of the **grave**, in the **darkness**, in the **depths** ... kept low by Your **waves**. I call to You, Yahweh, all day. I stretch out my hands to You...” [cf. Ps 88: 6, ff.]

“... If Yahweh did not come to my help, I should soon find myself dwelling in the silence. I need only to say: I am slipping - for Your faithful love, Yahweh, to support me...” [cf. Ps 94:17; cf. also Ps 115:17; Is 38:18, ff.].

b.] It seems that the “logic” of this believing Psalmist leads him to land upon a decisive argument to arouse the divine clemency in favor of himself, his People, all sinners. For all who have betrayed the Lord, or who may be afflicted in any way, this Psalmist remains a perennial spokes-person:

7.] St. Augustine’s view of Ps 130:3: “For with Thee, there is forgiveness!

a.] What is this propitiation, forgiveness, if not “sacrifice”? And what is sacrifice, save that which hath been offered to the Father for us? The pouring forth of innocent blood, blotted out, washed away, healed all the sins of the



guilty. So great a price paid down so generously redeemed all captives from the hand of the enemy who had captured them.

b.] With Thee, then, o Lord, there is propitiation. For, if there were no Mercy with You, if Thou chose to be Judge only, and refused to be merciful, You would mark all our iniquities and even aggressively search after them - and who could abide that? who could stand before You and say: I am innocent? Who could stand divine judgment? There is, therefore, only one Hope: the Law of Mercy.

c.] The Law was made that all might see themselves. The Law proved one guilty and the Lawgiver gratuitously freed the offender, for He is Supreme Power. there is, therefore, a **Law of the Mercy of God**, a Law of the Propitiation of God. The one has a law of fear, and the other is a **law of love**. The Law of Love gives forgiveness to sins, blots out the past, gives warning regarding the future.

d.] The Law, then, becomes a **companion** along the way. It is necessary in this sense to agree with the Adversary - for the Word of God can be an authentic "Adversary", as long as one does not agree with it, or live in accord with it. But, when one does agree with the Law of the Lord and His Love, it then becomes a delight to do God's Word and commands. Then He Who was once "Adversary", becomes "Friend" - so, when the Way is finished, there will be none to deliver you to the Judge!

e.] Thus it is said: 'For Your sake and that of your Law, I have waited for You, o Lord. The Lord has indeed condescended to bring in a Law of Mercy to forgive all sins, to give future guidance, warning that one not offend in the future. this is the 'reason' for this Law. In the deepest need, one will be freed - provided that he/she does not forsake the Law of Mercy. This offers some insight into why the Psalmist urges the souls of all - like his own - to "wait" for the Lord!

8.] The NT Echo: this is the great dream, which is conviction, that Jesus will not forget His "own" - those who hear His word and try to do it!

"... So, for anyone who is in Christ, there is a New Creation. The old order is gone now and a new being is there to see. It is all God's work: He reconciled us to Himself through Christ and He gave us the Ministry of Reconciliation. I mean: God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself not holding anyone's faults against them, but entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So, we are Ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were urging you through us, and in the name of Christ we appeal to you to be reconciled to God. For our sake, He made the Sinless One a Victim for sin, so that in Him we might become the uprightness of God..." [cf. 2 Co 5:17-19]

“... Today, salvation has come to this house... for the Son of Man has come to seek out what was lost...” [cf. Lk 19:10].

“... If you only knew what God is offering and Who it is that is saying to you: ‘Give Me something to drink’ - you would have been the one to ask, and He would have given you the living water...” [cf. Jn 4:10, ff.]

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c. **The Assurance of Pardon**

Verses 5-6: “... I rely, my whole being relies, Yahweh, on Your Promise. My whole being hopes in the Lord, more than watch-men for day-break. More than watch-men for day-break, let Israel hope in the Lord.

1.] In this segment, the Psalmist re-enforces his proposal. He not only emphasizes his faith in obtaining pardon for his faults- here he expresses a quality of supernatural faith, its certitude. Faith makes clear now what, who God is, through the communication of His Word through the ages - and it gradually becomes clearer and clearer than in His attributes. Mercy has a particular primacy [cf. Dives in Misericordia]. The Psalmist is simply convinced that the Lord will bend down over the sinner, as a parent would lean over a helpless child - or as a nurse/doctor might over a helpless patient. God will ‘condescend marvelously’ over the most poor of the poor, the sinner, and over any injured, ailing person [cf. Ps 51]:

“... Yahweh has leaned down from the heights of His sanctuary, has looked down from heaven to earth, to listen to the sighing of the captive, and set free those condemned to death...” [cf. Ps 102:19, ff.].

“... Who is like Yahweh, our God? His throne is set on high, but he stoops to look down on heaven and earth. He raises the poor from the dust, he lifts up the needy... to give them a place among the princes...” [cf. Ps 113].

2.] The opening lines of this Psalm 130 [...Out of the depths I call to You, o Lord, hear my cry...] - permeate throughout the entire canticle. The Psalmist is convinced that the Lord will indeed allow the suppliant to hear the sound of joy and gladness [cf. Ps 51:8], ff.]. The hope-filled suppliant is convinced that he will be freed of his affliction:

“... they cried out to Yahweh in their distress; He rescued them from their plight, He sent out His Word and cured them, and rescued them from the **abyss**. Let them thank God for His faithful love...” [cf. Ps 107: 20, ff.].

“... for Your word is my **hope** ... when will You have pity on me....? You are my Refuge and Shield, I put my **hope** in Your word ... I shall observe the commandments of my God ... I call with all my heart; answer me, Yahweh, and I shall observe your judgments. I call to you, save me, and I will keep Your instructions. I am awake before the **dawn** to cry for help - I put my hope in Your word. My eyes awake before each watch of the night, to ponder Your promise...” [cf. Ps 119:81, 82, 114, 147].

3.] This type of hope is epitomized in the words of the Prophet Nathan, after David’s terrible sin - and his asking pardon of the Lord: “...David said to Nathan: ‘I have sinned against Yahweh...’Nathan then said to David: ‘Yahweh, for His part, forgives you your sin...’” [cf. 2 S 12:13].

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d. **A New Image: the Night-Watch-Man and the New Dawn**

1.] The Psalmist here brings up a new image: the Night-watch-Man. From the divine response to his request for pardon, the Psalmist proclaims himself to be assured of the divine intervention- and is anxious that it would happen - as the lonely night shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks during the long night. This image is so highly reminiscent of the Christmas story: “... In the country-side, close by, there were shepherds out in the fields keeping guard over their sheep during the watches of the night ...” [cf. Lk 2:8].

2.] Such sentinels are like defenses for the flock, much like living ramparts for the people:

“... Yahweh is your Guardian, your Shade ... at your right hand. By day, the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night. Yahweh guards you from all harm; Yahweh guards your life...” [cf. Ps 121].

“... From Seir, someone shouts: Watchman, what time of night is it...? The Watchman answers: Morning is coming... then night again...” [cf. Is 21:11, ff.].

3.] These images offer a sense of security - the belief in the unfailing protection of God, symbolized by the shepherd keeping watch in the night. Perhaps in a way, the Psalmist has broadened the image: in all that concerns the Divine Pardon, there is the same assurance, the same impatience, the same yearned-for renovation. It even seems to be implied here that as a Flock would simply “trust” in the watchful care of the shepherd, so **the believer should have a far superior assurance, hope and trust in the divine pardon**. In the order of the divine interventions, even the slightest defect on God’s part should never be feared.

4.] This entire magnificent act of **hope-filled faith** is a sublime expression on the part of an ancient repentant sinner - whose words are still "actual" today. He manifests sublime confidence that God will simply restore the broken friendship. The faith is simply this: that God will draw up out of **the chaotic abyss** anyone who has fallen into misery - much like in omnipotent power, He drew creation up out of the **Primordial Chaos**: the desert, the darkness and the deep. His Power, as His **Mercy**, has **LIFE** as its primary intent.

5.] In the NT, St. Peter will have an experience like this: when he is in over his head, he asks the Lord to reach out and to save him. He was also pardoned three times for his three-fold denial of the Lord: "... we have confirmation of the words of the prophets. You will be right to pay attention to it as to **a lamp for lighting your way through the dark**, until the **dawn** comes and **the morning star** rises in your minds..." [cf. 2 P 1:19]

6.] St. John sees Jesus as the Morning star in the Judgment: "... I AM the Bright star of the morning..." [Apoc 2:28; 22:16]

7.] St. Augustine comments on the "Dawn":

a.] The morning-watch is the end of the night - but, this does not mean that the Lord is for one day only. This verse seems to look forward to the time when the Lord would arise, at dawn on the third day. Like the Visitation of the Lord on Mount Sinai, at dawn on the 3rd day - [Ex 19]. We may hope that after of life-long Exodus - what happened to the Lord, will also occur in us. He is the First-Born of the New Creation, **His Resurrection is our fundamental hope, and the source of the energy of our new life**.

b.] While it is true that all our sins have **already** been forgiven, yet we still have **not yet** risen. All that had died in Jesus Christ arose in him. What we have seen in Him, we now **hope** for in our own lives. The reason is that the Lord assumed our human nature: in some way, Jesus Christ is united to each person [cf. GS 22]. He received human life from us that He might offer us the divine life - He assumed our temporality that we might assume His eternity. He took on our weakness, that He might share with us His strength. He assumed our flesh, that He might give us His Spirit.

c.] When Jesus is "**consecrated**" and sent into this world [cf. Jn 10], He is like a great **High Priest** Who offers the Atonement for our sins. We have offered Him human nature so that there would be no separation from the priest offering and the **Victim** that is offered. This is what He gives us back in the resurrection, i.e., Holy Communion, with the Most Holy Trinity that will last forever.

d.] In receiving human nature from ours, He became **Victim**. He was made a **Holocaust** - He was made a **Sacrifice** - in the Passion He endured. But in the Resurrection, He renewed that which was claim and offered it as His First-Fruit unto God. We need to live in **Hope** that as He is the First-Born of the New Creation, we share in that by His breathing new life into us by His Holy Spirit of Reconciliation, as also in the Eucharist.

e.] Jesus rose with the morning watch - from His rising at **Dawn on the Third Day**, our **Hope** began in earnest. Even unto the dark night we hope - this can mean even until we fall asleep in death, we live in **Hope** that we, too, will arise at **the Dawn of the Eternal Day of the Lord**:

“... Here is a saying that you can rely on: and nobody should doubt ...  
‘that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...’ [cf. 1 Tm 1:16].

“... but I am not ashamed, because I know in Whom I have put my trust,  
and I have no doubt at all that He is able to safeguard until that Day that I  
have entrusted to Him...” [cf. 2 Tm 1:12]

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e. **Ultimate Motive: Divine Mercy:**

Verse 7: “... For with Yahweh is **faithful love**, with Him **generous ransom**...!”

1.] The underlying “motif” in all this Canticle is **the infinite Mercy** of God. Within God, it is **the Divine Will of Ransom**, the divine “desire” for Rehabilitation of the sinner. The divine **HESED** is limitless - in extent of intensity, time - it is **everlasting**. The only condition that God asks of those who would follow Him is the demand to repent:

“... For I am well aware of my offenses, my sin is constantly in mind.  
Against You, You alone, have I sinned, I have done what You see to be  
wrong ... You delight in sincerity of heart... Turn away Your face from my  
sins, wipe away my guilt... Sacrifice to God is this broken spirit, a broken  
contrite heart, You never scorn...” [cf. Ps 51].

“... But, You, o Lord, **God of tenderness and mercy**, slow to anger, rich in  
faithful love and loyalty, turn to me and pity me...” [variation on the  
Exodus Antiphon: Ex 34:6; cf. also Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8].

“... I shall sing of the faithful love of Yahweh forever, from age to age my  
lips shall declare Your constancy, for You have said: love is built to last  
forever, You have fixed Your constancy firm in the heavens...” [cf. Ps 89:1,  
ff.].

“... Deliverance He sends to His People, His Covenant He imposes forever.” [cf. Ps 111:9].

“... Deliver Me, Yahweh, I beg You. Yahweh is merciful and upright, our God is tenderness. Yahweh looks after the simple, when I was brought low, He gave me strength...” {cf. Ps 116:5}.

2.] A new image seems to emerge in these latter lines of Ps 130: that of a slave/captive in need of a ransom price. Surely the image of the Prodigal Son/Compassionate Father [cf. Lk 15] would apply very well here. All of this simply corroborates so many biblical testimonies regarding the essential disposition within God of His magnanimous Mercy.

Verse 8: “...and He will ransom Israel from all its iniquities...”

1.] It is significant to note that the most “individualistic” Psalms - those in which the deepest interior life of an anonymous individual is exposed - very often make allusion to the whole People of God, Israel. So many psalmists made of their own personal experience, or spirituality, a special application to the people as a whole. Perhaps this is a clear indication of the “**Mystique of the Covenant**” very much **alive, and lived**. Thus, the individualism in this Canticle is then transposed to the collective level, in order to instruct Pilgrims better. This Psalm enters into the long line of those which present the sentiments of the people that has been humiliated by its sins, and is made contrite:

**“for my hope, Yahweh is in You. ransom Israel, o God, from all its troubles...”**  
[cf. Ps 25:2].

“... For God will save Zion, and rebuild the cities of Judah, and people will live there on their own land...” [cf. Ps 69:36]

2.] Psalms of this nature echo the solemn Confession of public faults made by the Levites in the name of the whole People, in Liturgies, or Meetings, to express their repentance, as in the times of the Prophets:

“... It is I, I it is Who blots out your acts of revolt for My own sake and shall not call your sins to mind...” [cf. Is 43:25]

“... Let the sinner turn back to Yahweh Who will take pity on the sinner - to our God, Who is rich in forgiveness ... for My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways...” [cf. Is 55:7 - “Exodus Antiphon”?].

“... What god can compare with you for pardoning guilt, and for overlooking crime? He does not harbor anger forever, since He delights in His showing faithful love...” [cf. Mi 7:19].

“... [In **Ne 9**, there is a long ceremony of expiation].

3.] As far as the “Grace of Salvation” is concerned, this remains essential in all divine action in regard to humanity. The NT will ascribe this activity to Jesus Christ, as is clear from the message of the Angel:

**“... you must name Him Jesus, because He is the One Who is to save His people from their sins...”** [cf. Mt 1:21].

4.] The NT clearly echoes these sentiments of the anonymous Psalmist who wrote this Canticle of Pardon:

“... He showed them His hands and His side... and He said to them again: Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, so I am sending you.

After saying this, He breathed on them and said:

‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven: If you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained...” [cf. Jn 20:22, ff.]

“... in Whom, through His blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins... you have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of Promise... for the freedom of the people of God has taken for his own.. for the praise of His glory...~” [cf. Ep 1:3-4]

“... Husbands should love their wives, just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed Himself for her to make her holy by washing her in cleansing water with a form of words...” [cf. Ep 5: 26, ff.].

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### **Use of Ps 130 in the Life of the Church**

[1] Psalm 130 has been described as the Psalm for sinful souls, and all believers are convinced they pertain to that category! It is also the Psalm most often prayed for the Faithful departed. There is no formula that would translate better than this Canticle the aspirations of the sinful and the deceased, **for the Incarnate Word**, Who would pronounce over them the words of Pardon:

“... Then, the King will say to those on His right hand: Come you whom the Father has blessed and take as your heritage the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...” [cf. Mt 25:34].

This is the central consolation of the Christian faith: the Lamb of God has entered into the realm of human misery - and there are no depths of wretchedness that the Divine Mercy cannot fathom.

[2] This Psalm as much as any writing, sheds much light on God and His Revelation, as well as on the human condition. Humble but confident, the suppliant raises a **prayer of hope** that comes from the depths of the anonymous Psalmist. As much as any other writing of comparative length, over the centuries this Psalm has been able to instill hope into the faithful believer. This Canticle has been able to raise up, galvanize, instill dynamism into many Christian lives. It has been noted that the whole climate of the NT is one of **deliverance by means of divine Mercy**. The hard-won freedom comes to the repentant as the free and gracious gift of God - it is a Canticle of deliverance from sin, death and the shackles of the old Law. This Canticle provides a climate that is both merciful and one of new life - it is **a Poem of Pardon and New Creation**:

“... Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic: ‘My child, your sins are forgiven... Which is easier to say to the paralytic: ‘Your sins are forgiven’ - or, to say: ‘Get up, pick up your stretcher and walk?’ But, to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth, He said to the paralytic: ‘I order you: Get up - pick up your stretcher and walk...!’” [cf. Mk 2:5-11].

[3] Miracles aside, this Psalm 130 inculcates this **climate of new life, new freedom, new beginnings**. It offers the fresh air of **a hope-filled faith in the Divine Mercy**. It inspires one to live anew in the Law of Pardon, Grace. This inspires a **submission to a New Law** which moves one to accept others, in knowing that each is accepted by God - this is a challenge to extend pardon, knowing that one has been forgiven so many times.

[4] This is a Canticle, par excellence, of Repentance and Misery, on the part of the suppliant - and of clemency and condescension on the part of God. This is **a truly fraternal prayer, steeped, anchored above in the paternal mercy of God**. It can move one to give more to putting up with the difficulties of others, as God Himself alleviates all human misery in His own way and time.

[5] It is noted that in addition to his specific Commentary on the Psalms, St. Augustine mentions Ps 130 at least three times in his Confessions: he is most convincing when he “confesses” to the readers of the centuries the depths of the **abyss** from which the Lord had saved him [cf. Bk 2, c. 3, n.5]. The recitation of this Canticle would remind the great convert of the **depths** of his own miseries, which the mercy of God simply swept aside to rescue him. Augustine made his own the cries of this Psalmist, with some of his own, for avoiding whatever future temptations, to



avoid those sins that had brought him to the depths of his prior misery of distance from God.

[6] It can indeed be said that this is a Psalm for our times. In a period that often vindicates the wealthy, the powerful, giving them a false sense of security, lived by many. The challenge is to alleviate the many “depths” of our fellow human beings:

“... He offered Himself to ransom us... to purify a people...” [cf. Tt 2:14]. -  
 “... He has loved us and washed away our sins... made us a Kingdom of Priests...” [Rv 1: 5, ff.].

[This Ps 130 has been prayed in **Christmas Vespers** - for the **Deceased** - for **Repentance**]

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### **3. Ne 8-10: Purification for Covenant Renewal: Birth of Judaism, through a Solemn Ceremony of Atonement:**

#### **Presentation:**

[1] To Israel in the Babylonian Captivity, the coming of the Persian Cyrus was a ray of new hope - they saw in him one who might defeat Babylon and allow the exiles to return home. When this was achieved, the Israelites started rebuilding their Temple and Nation under Darius [522-485 b.c.e.]. Like Cyrus before him, Darius was benevolently inclined to allow the peoples of his vast regions left over from Alexander the Great's conquests to practice their own religion. It is in this context of “re-construction” that scholars generally place Ezra and Nehemiah.

[2] One of the real biblical challenges is to describe the precise connection between these two - only once does one mention the other - Ezra is noted by Nehemiah [cf. Ne 12:36]. There are hardly any sources that describe the life of the People in the 4th century b.c.e. - it does seem that it was a time of quiet and peaceful progress. It is interesting, too, to note that Ne is mentioned in Sirach's praise of famous men [cf. Si 49:15] - while Ezra is not. Furthermore, Ezra is not mentioned in the NT - while references to him in the TALMUD abound. Josephus, too, gives much space to Ezra.

[3] As these two biblical books now stand, they are concerned with two significant periods in the history following the Exile:

- the Edict of Cyrus allowing the hostages to go home [Ezr 1-6];
- the activity of those returned expatriates [cf. Ezr 7 - Ne 13]

[4] Throughout there is a repeated reference to “**the Book of the Law**” - whatever it really was it at least seems to have been some kind of a written text. A technical

question is whether Ezra brought along the entire TORAH, or simply what we would now know as the "P" Code. Many scholars believe it was substantially the **Pentateuch in its entirety, or close to it.**

[5] There is a further debate regarding the connection of Ezr-Ne and the work of the biblical **Chroniclers** [cf. 1 & 2 Ch]. Many thought that Ezr-Ne were merely a continuation of the two Book of Chronicles - many others see these two as a "post-Chronistic" redactions.

[6] Regarding their achievements:

- Ezra: for many it is at least possible - if not probable - that Ezra edited and presented the Pentateuch as we now have it. Little political influence is attached to him - his approach to community life still has valid points for today His apostolate was the soul of his people - and that the Word of God needs to be its basic nourishment.

- Nehemiah: had powerful political connections - he is credited with the reconstruction of the temple and altar. Some say he founded a library. There is perhaps one allusion to him in the NT [cf. Ac 4:24]. He, too, manifested great concern for the people and their welfare. His memoirs are generously enlivened with prayerful utterances calling upon God to be mindful of the good he was trying to do. He combined his "steely" nature with the commitment with love of God and his People.

[7] Perhaps their main contribution is their development of what we now call as "**Salvation History**". Events are to be evaluated always in their connection with God. They were convinced that the Persian Kings were simply instruments in the hands of God for the liberation of Israel. They were strong in their appeal of those who believed to live their faith, no matter where they were. They manifested a great love for, and commitment to, the Book of the Law, **the Word of God.**

[8] The **LAW** clearly has an honored place in prayer - this leads many to note the numerous connections with the Psalter. What we have here, too, a "Doxology of Judgment" - the Lord indeed is "in the right"! There is evidence of hymnic style interspersed also with communal lament. There is concentration on the collective leadership of the Levites. No lame excuses are offered for poor moral responses to God's word in the past. The overt manifestation of confession acknowledge that the People had not always done God's Will The gift of the land and its abundance - the glory of God is rooted in His sublime love for His People, "no matter what" - while He strives to convince them always of the **importance of the matter of His Word.** [cf. Jacob M. Myers. *Ezra-Nehemiah*. Anchor Bible 14. Garden City NY: Doubleday 1965; H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*. Word Biblical Commentary 16. Waco TX Word Books 1985; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*. The OT Library. Philadelphia" Westminster 1988]. [For what follows, cf. N. Conte, o.c., pp. 41, ff.].

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a. The Israelites had come back from their forced Babylonian Captivity - and they began the arduous task of building their cities anew, and of re-organizing their social and religious life. Their leaders in this “sacred” enterprise were the Priests and their leaders. In this Re-construction Era”, the religious and cultic aspect enjoyed a role of the highest level. The reading of the “**Law of God**” [cf. Ne 8:1-18] awakened among the People the consciousness of being the **Holy Nation, a Kingdom of Priests**, specially chosen, much loved, upon whom the Lord still looked with gentleness.

b. On the occasion of the Festival of **Tents, or Tabernacles** [cf. 8:13-18], the People came into sacred assembly for the avowed purpose of listening to the Word of God and for a ritual of purification: all of this was with an eye to the Renewal of the Covenant. The spirit of this situation was clearly one of **penitential prayerfulness** noted in such verbs as: **to confess, to profess**. These verbs are “rich” with powerful, complementary two-fold connotation:

- to recognize and to confess one’s own sins; to confess one’s sins is indeed implicitly already to recognize the greatness of God, and His Faithful Mercy is eternally disposed for pardon.

- then, to recognize - to praise, worship, the Lord; in similar manner, to offer praise to God is already implicitly the admission of one’s abject unworthiness. Yet this is what will inspire the humble and confident confession of sin, recognizing in joy the infinite Mercy of God

c. On the appointed day of the **Seventh Month** the assembly came together for fasting and penance. Standing, all listened with reverence to the long reading of the Law, then prostrate - they confessed their sin - offering great glory to God, Who is Just and Faithful [cf. Ne 9: 3, ff.] The Assembly is presided over by the Levites, who proclaimed the Word of God in the name of all the People, calling on the Lord [cf. vv. 4, f.; Jl 2:12, ff.]. The long and articulated Levitical prayer concludes with the Penitential Rite, that unfolds according to the ancient Canons of Israel - one might notice hints of the Catholic Anaphora or Eucharistic Prayer.

d. The Memorial: recalling Israel’s Sacred History [vv. 6-31]: the first part of the prayer is a succinct summary of Salvation History. The prayer raises up to God, Who is acclaimed and celebrated, in His personal and “functional” titles and recalling to mind and heart the “**sacred wonders**”: that He has performed for His People through the ages:

1.] He is invoked as the Lord - the Lord God- the Lord, our God - Creator - a propitious God - Clement and Merciful - grand in His love - Faithful - the

Unique Good God - the Just One. The Lord God, omnipotent, has created out of love all that exists. He is addressed in endearing terms: 'You have made the heavens, the heavens of the heavens and all their hosts, the earth and all there is in it, the seas and all that is in them. You bring life to all things, and the armies of the heavens adore You!'

2.] In this accounting of the sacred past, it is remembered that God chose Abraham, a man after His own heart [cf. Gn 12: 1, ff; 17: 5] and established with Him a pact of **Eternal Covenant**, promising both the land and a descendency [cf. Gn 15; 17:9, ff.] The Lord did call to mind, made a "**memorial**" out of the promises extended to the Patriarch and delivered Israel centuries later, from the House of Captivity: You saw the affliction of our people and listened to their groaning rising up to You.

3.] Then follows a kind of "list" of the divine benefits in Israel's behalf:

- He worked signs for His People [not plagues] and wonders against their Captors [cf. Ex 7:14-10:42];

- He separated the Seas - in an act of New Creation [dividing the waters from the left and right, instead of those above from those below in the First Creation] - the waters then closed over their persecutors Ex 13:21;14:19];

- He exercised the role of Guide: by day, in a pillar of smoke, and cloud - by night, by a pillar of fire Ex 13:21; 14:19];

- on Sinai the Lord Himself spoke to Moses and gave him the Law [cf. Ex 19-24, the first Covenant with the entire People];

- He promised to lead them to the Promised Land, if they would remain faithful to His Word and Law;

4.] The response of the People in the presence of this divine concern and compassion was infidelity and apostasy. Nonetheless, the Lord showed Himself eternally disposed to pardon, to mercy, to pity - slow to anger and rich in kindness - this recalls the "**Exodus Antiphon**" [cf. Ex 34:6], evidently some kind of a liturgical piece, repeated then throughout the OT numerous times. To Israel's infidelity, the Lord remained precisely what He is: **the Faithful God**. The initiative for re-establishing the fragmented Covenant was always taken by the Lord. In His Mercy, He reveals Himself always ready to forgive, generous in His compassion. Even when Israel committed the major insult of the Golden Calf, the Lord did not turn His back on His People.

5.] In the desert, the Lord continued to pour out His gifts abundantly: in His mercy, He never abandoned His own in their desert failure. The Pillar of Smoke stayed with them, and the Pillar of Fire was never lacking in the desert night He sent them His good Spirit to point out the way to them, to teach them - and He did not hold back His Bread from Heaven, this Bread of Emergency and Wisdom - and He gave them water from the stone, creating the fresh streams of the Waters of Salvation, from which they were invited to draw "joyfully" [cf. Is 12:1, ff.].

6.] God surpassed Israel's wildest dreams by bringing them to the Land that He had Promised to them. This was the fulfillment of His Plan of Salvation, and this promise is permanent to God's People of all ages and times. This was a special land, rich in its produce and blessings. A vast land, fertile, full of all good, cisterns with fresh, cool and sparkling water, vineyards, olive groves, fruit trees beyond counting - rounded out the divine benefits for following Him. The nomads ate and had their fill, and they lived in delight [cf. Dt 32: 15, f.] - the land almost seemed like a Return to Paradise, after the penance of the Exodus Journey. Conversion of heart still exchanges the desert of life for the Garden of Paradise.

7.] Even to all this, Israel's response remained Infidelity - they were disobedient, rebelling against this Provident God. They disregarded His Law - killed the prophets He sent to them, and who were calling them to task - and still they refused repentance. Yet, in the teeth of these insults, the Lord God dug even more deeply into His gifts of mercy, and initiated a new appeal for their love. In order to receive His blessings, once more there would be a kind of **Second Exodus**: they were given over to their enemies, and experienced a kind of further enslavement. In these sufferings, they gradually returned to the Lord, asked pardon for their sin, appealing to the Lord's forgiveness. Once more, the Lord is "rich in mercy, slow to anger" and once more, He heard their groaning in slavery that arose up to Him, and He came to liberate them.

8.] The Covenant Relationship initiated by God to reach out to His People developed mightily across the generations and simply went on and on. The Lord showered every blessing on His People - and in prosperity, they continued to show themselves unfaithful and rebellious. The Lord then intervened and punished sin with His castigation, always measured, tempered by His Mercy. The People would then turn to the Lord, confess their sin, and over and over again, the Lord would pardon them, being rich in kindness, and slow to anger [cf. Ps 77; Jgs 6:1, ff.].

9.] The Mystery of Iniquity still seemed to triumph! The People of God remained obstinate against Him by continuing the life of sin. salvation History is simply the encounter of two constants: the infinite Mercy of God - and the abysmal misery of humanity. The story is a long one, of the Lord reaching down to heal lowly humanity - the Lord knows what we are made of, He knows we are dust [cf. Ps 103].

f. The “Epiclesis”: Prayer for Divine Help:

1.] The Levites painstakingly documented and emphasized the **divine salvific interventions** throughout Israel’s history. All of this gravitates around **the infinite Mercy of God**, extending pardon in every age across the centuries as His response to human misery. As it was in the beginning so it ever will be - the Lord consistently manifests His great compassion and love in extending His benevolence to all. He is ever ready to shower His gifts on the faithful. All He asks is that they confess their sins and their fidelity toward God. He appeals that all return to Him and offer Him **the oblation of their hearts**.

2.] The emphasis is **this Day**, this present Assembly of God’s People to honor Him. The gathered People are implored to recognize, in union with their Fathers in the centuries long gone, that they too still need the Mercy of God. Their supplication is raised up to the Lord in the hope and confidence that they will be fully accepted. This is all in consideration of the fact that God has already accepted the prayers of the generations who gave one before them. The **Faithful God** will never reject His inheritance, **nor will He ever abandon His People**.

3.] The prayer rises up that the Lord on this day, right now, in His power and awesome holiness, will maintain the Covenant He started in the first place. The People “reminds” the Lord of the misfortunes that have pummeled them, raining down on all the levels of their society: on the kings, the priests, as well as on the lowliest of the low. The Lord is indeed just in all His relationships toward His People. The reason for this castigation is simply and clearly the fact that every level of the above-noted society has turned its back on God, and rejected Him, rebelled against Him. The People admits to the Lord in this beautiful Prayer that they abused this land of plenty, this divine promise that was so fulfilled. Israel asks for pardon through her Levites, through her prayer.

Summary

[1] Nehemiah’s insistence is clearly on the community aspect of the need of repentance, celebrated in the Liturgical assembly. On the established day, the Israelites came together, gathered, assembled: as one sole person. This communitary character is not just the physical being together, but there is achieved through God’s help a solidarity of hearts, a union of minds and intentions with one another - horizontally; and vertically, in union with the ages long past, ascending to God. All accept the responsibility for sin - all confess their sins in unison, in harmony - and all offer to God their heartfelt praises.

[2] Nehemiah also offers what seem to be the broad outlines of the celebrations of the centuries. The People of God assemble to hear the Word of God - they stood in

their places where they were and gave heed to the **reading of God's Holy Word**, for a fourth of the day. It is only after hearing the Word of God - and as the immediate result of this heartfelt listening, do they **recognize their sins** and the malice of their rejection of God. Then, the People **blesse, praises and thanks God**, in His clemency and mercy, in reconciling His People.

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4. **Dn 9:1-19: The Seventy Weeks of Years** [cf. John J. Collins, *Daniel*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress 1993, pp. 65, ff.].

Presentation:

[1] The two Books of **Maccabees** and **Daniel** were confronted with the same problem: a Greek interference after the conquests and death of Alexander the Great, that took the guise of cruel persecution, and the active Hellenization of Judaism. However, the Maccabees answered by armed revolt - while Daniel took a more reasoned course. While 1 & 2 M directly mention this Hellenistic and totally unwanted reform, Dn does not even refer to it. Dn presents a distinct view of the persecution - even though many of the events are in "violation of the Covenant" - the main problem is that the king has rebelled against God. **Dn has no problem with legitimate culture, whatever its source: but God's Word is supreme.**

[2] Dn 1-6 shows the nations serving God's purposes - but in 7-12, it is all out of "whack" - the foreign nations rebel against the Most High God. While the desecration of the Temple is the "abomination of abominations" the real evil is the infidelity of the King. What is needed is the removal of the sinful kingdom and the restoration of divine sovereignty.

[3] Along with the better known ANAWIM, Dn emphasizes two other anonymous groups within the Holy People of God:

[a] The **MASKILIM**: the "Sages", the Wise. Those who teach others wisdom will shine like stars for all eternity. The truly "wise" are those who will come up out of the dust and live forever [cf. Dn 12:1, ff.] These are the ones who truly "know", experience the Lord. Dn offers no clear support for the Maccabean revolt -their ultimate defeat vindicates Dn's position - even though 1 & 2 M may be seen in the backdrop of the life-long "**Spiritual Combat**" for the Lord and His reign. Dn was not truly anti-Maccabean, but he dreamed of another way.

[b] The **HASIDIM**: these "leading citizens" do not seem to have of the military class - they are often seen in a cultic situation. While they were peace-makers, they were not necessarily "pacifists" in the modern sense of the term. While there is not clear evidence to support this, many scholars believe that the collection and canonization of the Prophetic Books may be attributed to this group.

[4] Wisdom and Worship: Dn seem attributable to “**wisdom circles**”. These groups strove to educate the common people in the traditions of ancient Israel. One of the privileged means for handing on the **wisdom of the ages** is **through cultic celebration**, the dramatization of the “**sacred memories**” of Israel’s salvation History. There might also be here a development from older-style “restoration eschatology” to a brand new creation, a different future world - apocalypticism. This is more a question for the experts. [cf. also: James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of The Book of Daniel*. Edinburgh: Clark 1989, latest impression; W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*. Interpretation. Atlanta: Knox 1984].

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a. Praise: this is a long and articulated prayer in which the Prophetic Sage invokes the divine Pardon, for himself and for all the People. He asks that the terrible obstacle be removed that has separated the People from their Merciful God. This barrier has been the cause of such pain among the People and brought shame to those whom the Lord had chosen as His own “special treasure.” The invocation opens with a prayed praise - the Lord truly is great and tremendous, faithful to His Covenant, gentle toward all those who love Him, observing His Word.

b. Confession: Sin is idolatry, wickedness. The People **has** chosen to distance itself from God, by giving up the divine teachings, the wisdom of the ages. It has chosen not to listen to His voice [cf. Ps 94:8 ff.] The real malice of the People is n their closing of their minds and hearts to the Word of God, brought to them through the Prophets. Persisting in their evil ways, this brought on the shame of the exile. Infidelity led to dispersion - this had already been threatened in the Book of the Law [cf. Lv 26:14, ff.]. Under this painfully heavy yoke, Israel is eventually led to confess her own sinfulness and to profess God’s justice: The Lord’s is mercy and pardon, and indeed we have rebelled against Him. Shame is all our own fault.

c. Profession: the prayer comes to a close with prayed supplications for the divine intervention. This calls to mind the great salvific wonders of Israel’s past A direct appeal is addressed to the divine mercy, for the specially Chosen People of God have been reduced to an object of scorn. Israel pleads that the Lord will listen to them, and once again allow His face to shine upon them. Israel begs for the Lord’s ear - that He turn His merciful gaze toward His people. The Lord is reminded that His Name is being invoked in His own city and among His Own People.

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## **[B.]    The Seasonal, Annual OT Penitential Celebrations**

There were various kinds of expiatory sacrifices, that might be classified as follows:

- **HATTAT**: the sacrifice for **sin**;
- **ASHAM**: the sacrifice of **reparation**;
- **KIPPUR**: the annual great sacrifice of **expiation**.

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### **1.    Sacrifice for Sin:**

a.     The root meaning of the verb would be: to err, to make a mistake, to be found lacking. More commonly, the verb is given an ethical, religious sense. It is one's unjust activity perpetrated against someone - in this instance, **against the Divine Will made clear in the TORAH**. On the lips of the sinner, it has the implication of being a '**confession**': - we/I have sinned!

b.     This human error, moral mistake, originally could be repaired by some material payment, or restitution. Later, it assumed more spiritual and moral proportions - to sin is to betray the Covenant, and consequently, it always meant that it was a conscious action against the divine Will made clear through the Law. Thus, when one was guilty of missing this mark, it meant that he swapped his own ways for the Way of the Lord. "**Conversion**" always implied the abandonment of one's own way, and the following once more the Word of the Lord.

c.     The sacrifice to make up for this moral error would involve turning toward the Lord, offering Him the QORBAN. Leviticus [4:1-5:13] offers the best description of this "Sacrifice for Sin" - there is a four-fold application: the sin of the High Priest; the People, the King; or the simple citizen. For every single case, the gravity of the sin, or its effect, was taken into consideration by the sinner, and his influence over the community would have some bearing on its gravity - for the various cases envisaged, the ritual had its own particularities:

1.]    For the High Priest, whose actions would thus place the People in a state of sin - he was obliged to expiate his own sin by offering to the Lord of a young animal. The Ritual would unfold something like this:

- the priest places his hand on the bull's head and immolates it in the presence of the Lord;

- with the blood of the victim, he brings this to the Tent of Meeting;

- with his hand dipped in the blood, he performs a seven-fold aspersion in the direction of the KIPPUR;

- still with his hand, he anoints the horns of the altar of incense;

- the rest of the blood he pours out at the base of the altar;

- the fatty parts of the animal he burns on the altar;

- the rest of the cadaver, he carries outside the camp and burns it all there.

2.] The sacrifice for the sins of the community, the Ritual is identical with what precedes. The sole difference is that the imposition of the hand and the slaughter of the animal is carried out by the Elders.

3.] The Ritual for the expiation of the sins of the King or of some private citizen, is much simplified:

- the sinner making the offering places his hand on the victim and immolates it;

- the priest, with his hand dipped into the blood of the victim. asperges the horns of the altar;

- he pours the rest of the blood at the base of the altar, and on this he burns the fatty parts of the altar.

4.] There is needed to use as the sacrificial animal, bull, one that is "without blemish" to expiate the sin of the High Priest - this is also used for those "inadvertent" sins of the people. For the expiation of the sins of the King, there is offered a goat - and the same, or a lamb, for the individual believer. For the poor, there were foreseen certain adaptations: those who were really poor, could offer pigeons, or doves - or, even flour [cf. Lv 4].

2. **The ASHAM, the sacrifice of Reparation:** with this word, there is indicated primarily the victim for the sacrifice, the sacrifice itself as well as the situation of fault.

a. The verb form means to be, or to be rendered culpable, responsible. - but at the same time, implying the reparation for the fault, the manner of paying the penalty [cf. Gn 26:10; Est 9:7-15]. The noun form indicates the wrong perpetrated as one's neighbor, i.e., against God [cf. 2 Ch 24:18; Ps 68:22; 69:6].

b. The Legislation regarding the ASHAM is found in Lv 5:14-26; 7:1-10. This particular form was required in two specific situations: any offense against the sacred realities dedicated to God - and that perpetrated against the patrimony of one's neighbor.

c. The Sacrifice of Expiation unfolds according to the *HATTAT* but, simplified substantially, thus distinguishing the two rituals. For the *ASHAM*, the presence of the offerer was not required - it would suffice that he would pay the temple fee for the required sacrifice. The accent fell on the required reparation to which the guilty party was required - even more than the attitude of interior conversion and of participation expressed externally in the liturgical ritual. In this sense, the *ASHAM* did not imply the formal recognition of one's own faults, or the realization that one was indeed a sinner. The fundamental meaning was that one was indeed indebted towards someone, that the guilty part "owed" something to another. The *ASHAM* also indicated what was owed.

d. The reparation for the harmful transgression of another's property consisted in the obligation of paying something on an equal value to what had been harmed - increased by a fifth. For the debts incurred for offenses against the realities sacred to the Lord, the payment was made to the priests. It is to be noted that the expression: "to bear the burden" - it is noted that the dominating thought is not so much the satisfaction made to divine justice, nor is it some ritual of revenge. The sinful Israelite is not so much "paying a debt", but rather personally experiencing what his irrational behavior against God, his God - has brought to him. This ritual also perfected, actualized one's return to the Lord.

e. This sacrifice in its original meaning consists in the punishment of the guilty party, obliged to pay off his debtor [cf. 2 K 12:17]. Later on, there was added the expiatory sacrifice. The sin itself was canceled not so much at the altar as with the actual restitution which rendered the sacrifice acceptable to God, and by reintegrating one into the social cultic life of the community.

3. **The Sacrifice of Expiation [KIPPUR]:** The "Day of Expiation" remained the principal such celebration in Israel's history. This was always the principal festival of a penitential character for all the Hebrews and was always one of the most important observances in the annual calendar. It was celebrated in the "Seventh Month", in association with the Feast of Tabernacles, the joyous festival of harvest. On this Day of Expiation, no work was done and a fast was observed [cf. Lv 23:26-32; Nm 29:7-11].

a. The root letters [KPR] can be understood in the sense of "to extirpate, to cancel, to purify"[in a cultic sense] - and also the meaning of "to cover", to hide." Following either line of interpretation, the *KIPPUR* would have as its effect that of purifying the people from sin - or, more simply, that of "covering" one's sin.

b. In this sense the sinner is being protected against the action that comes to the fore from the combination of factors formed of the association between sin

and disgrace. The ritual is described in Lv 16:1-29 - and these verses might be coupled with Si 50:16-21; Ezk 40-48. The structure is fairly well explained.

c. On the established day, the community of the Israelites would assemble in the temple to fast, live out some mortification, to confess their sins, and to offer to God sacrifices of expiation and communion. In the Liturgical Action, the people would be guided by the High Priest, who would exercise the role of **Mediator**, as a “sign” of encounter between God and His People. His function was marked also by the linen robe he would wear, so that he would be completely **“covered.”**

d. The priest, too, was thought of as a sinner, and he was obliged to offer sacrifices for himself and for his house - and only then would he be able to develop his role of Mediator and to intercede for his people. For himself, and for his own household, he would offer a bull as an expiatory sacrifice - and a ram for the holocaust. He would also add two fistfuls of incense ground into dust - along with the blood of the animal. The High Priest would then go into the most interior part of the temple, behind the veil, that curtain which separated the “Holy” from the “Holy of Holiness”. Here there had been placed the Ark of the Covenant, the witness of God’s love for His People [cf. Ex 26:33; Heb 9:2-5]

e. In the Holy of Holies the High Priest would perform a two-fold penitential ritual: he would burn the incense on the fire and would sprinkle the propitiatory with the blood of the victim seven times. The cloud of incense that covered the propitiatory and the sprinkled blood were thought of as a “sign” of the meeting between sinful man and the good and merciful God, who purifies and pardons.

f. Once the Ritual of Purification was completed for himself and for his own household, the High Priest then would begin the Purification for the People. He would take two goats, presented by the People themselves, and place them ritually in the presence of the Lord and would cast lots over them to choose one. The one destined for the Lord would be sacrificed, and with that, there would be accomplished the Expiatory Sacrifice for the People. In this second case, too, the High Priest would go in behind the curtain of the Temple and with the blood of the scape-goat he would sprinkle the propitiatory. With this blood of the victim he would carry out the Ritual of Aspersions over the altar of the holocausts, purifying and sanctifying it. The sin in fact, would contaminate also the Temple, the Sanctuary and the Altar.

g. The Liturgy of the Sprinkling of the Blood as a Liturgy of Purification and also of union [through the blood of the same Victim, joining the altar representing God, and the heads of the People present, representing the entire nation] “survived” the OT and has major importance throughout the NT, especially in Hebrews. Here it

is all interpreted in a **Christological key**. [cf. Jn 19:34; Rm 3:25, f.; 1 P1:19; I Jn 2:2; 4:10; Heb 9:11-14; cc. 9 & 10]

h. According to an ancient Semitic sentiment, in the blood there resides the life of the person, or of the animal. And **this belongs always exclusively to God**. There might be understood in this why the Bible was so stringent in its legislation forbidding the consumption of the blood of victims [cf. Dt 12:23; Lv 17:11]. Life, and its sign, blood, belong exclusively to God. **In the ritual of the blood**, Israel was **united more intimately in the one life with the Lord God**.

i. At the conclusion of the Sacrifice of Expiation, the High Priest places his hand on the head of the goat assigned to Azazel, and thus burdens the animal with all the sins of the People, making over him the confession of all sins. He then would hand the goat over to the care of the one whose task it was to lead the animal out into the desert with all the sins of the People.

1.] The name "Azazel" is most difficult to interpret satisfactorily - the most plausible attempt is to read this as either the Demon, or the Prince of Demons. Azazel is in opposition to God and is interpreted as a personified evil. Since he is always placed in relationship to sin, there seems to be here a reference to a thoroughly evil demon, in constant battle with the Lord and His interests [cf. Gn 3]. His "dwelling" is the desert [cf. Jb 8:3; Mt 4:1-11; 12:43].

2.] The scape-goat is no sacrifice "honoring" Azazel - rather, the poor animal was abandoned, still alive, in the desert with all the sins of the people ritually "transferred" upon it. For a sacrifice honoring God, there was always needed the pouring out of the blood.

j. At the conclusion of the penitential celebration of Reconciliation, the High Priest would bless the People [cf. Si 50:20, f.] **This priestly blessing "established" the community once more in communion with God and among themselves**. All of this was a prophecy, a type, of the full and definitive blessing of Jesus Christ - Who in the Holy Spirit re-establishes humanity in its original state of **four-fold communion: with God, with other human beings; with oneself; and with the universe**.

k. **YOM KIPPURIM** was that great day, the most sacred in the entire year - sometimes called the "OT Good Friday." When Jesus Christ is raised up on the Cross, He washes all sins in His Precious Blood - and renders all **participants in the very Life of God the Father, in the same Filiation of the Son through the Holy Spirit**. This is our hope - perpetuated, then, in Eternal Life.

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### [C.] Theological Reflections

1. **Sin and Mercy:** The Lord reveals and manifests Himself as good and merciful - in accord with the oft-repeated "Exodus Antiphon" [ Ex 34:6] - He is always faithful to His Covenant [cf. Dn 9:4, ff.]. He makes His Chosen People participants in His own Divine Life, and bestows His favor on anyone who would turn toward Him. He sends repeated appeals, striving to elicit a response from the sinner, and for a lived experience of His Word, Adherence to His Word leads to a life-long conversion to the Lord. In this sense, the life of the believer is meaning to be a constant response on the part of each and every one to the divine initiatives.

2. **The Classification of Sins** the OT knew of sins in word, deed, thought and omission [cf. Lv 5, etc.] There is a distinction between "grave" and "lesser" sins - even "sins through inadvertence", much less noted with the passing of time. Some of the sins against which the divine spokes-persons would lash out, would be: apostates; idolaters; homicides; adulterers; the impure; those who sin against nature; those who curse; false witnesses; those who oppress the poor; those who kidnap; those who disrespect their parents.

3. **The Works of Conversion:** the interior decision to turn toward the Lord needs to be manifested by external works. The confession of one's sins involved the whole person, in the fullness of his/her existence. The following are some of the works of "conversion": Confession; fasting; weeping; wearing sack-cloth; prayer; being sprinkled with ashes, dust; to bend one's head; to scourge oneself; rend one's garments; pluck one's beard, hair; prayer; sacrifice.

So much of this prepared the way admirably for Jesus Christ, so named to save the world from sin.

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[Please read: S. Lyonnet - L. Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice. A Biblical and Patristic Study*. Analecta Biblica # 48. Rome: Biblicum - re-issued from 1970, in 1998. (A profound study, with ample bibliography)].

[For much of the material for this PART THREE, cf. Nunzio CONTE, SDB, *La Misericordia del Signore e' eterna [Sl 137: 8 a. IL Sacramento dell penitence e della concilizzazione*. EDI OFTES 1990, pp. 27-67, passim].

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## PART FOUR

### N.T. EXPRESSIONS OF RECONCILIATION

[cf. Giovanni MOIOLI, *Il quarto sacramento*. Milano: Glossa 1996, pp. 3-59, passim]

#### Presentation:

[1] At the heart of NT writing stands the resurrection of Jesus Christ - the Crucified is the Risen, and all sins have been forgiven. Yet, the Church needs to “make up for” whatever is lacking to the sufferings of Jesus Christ [cf. Col 1:24, f.] - i.e., apply His merits to each one’s life.

[2] The Divine Plan has been totally manifested, and we wait for no new Revelation [cf. DV 4]. His divine Will of Universal Salvation [cf. 1 Tm 2:4, f.] - for this, the Church has come into existence through the continuing Gift of the Holy Spirit. It is this gift of the Church, specifically through her sacramental ministry, that the believing community is assured of the continuing and efficacious presence of the Risen Christ.

[3] This Gift of the Holy Spirit is objectively connected with the remission of sins, and with that faith lived in the “Way” of the new community. All is connected with the Baptism already received [cf. Rm 6:1, ff.].

[4] It is only in the light of the Resurrection that anyone can make any sense of out of the Cross. God will follow His Plan, as Jesus “had” to suffer in order to enter His Glory - all is “according to the Scriptures” [cf. 1 Co 15: 1, ff.] - and the Church can only hand on what she has received from Jesus Christ. The Risen One is the Lord and Messiah, He is the definitive Judge, it is He Who guarantees salvation to those who will base their entire lives on their obedience of Faith in him.

[5] There seems to be a repeated indication that Reconciliation was both practiced and celebrated in the Early Community, whatever its actual ritual might have been. We will begin with the Acts of the Apostles - in that this offers some description of the early Church, in which the Gospels and Epistles were written and found their home in the hearts of willing listeners.

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#### **A. The Acts of the Apostles**

1. The Apostolic Preaching: in unanimity the early kerygma stressed the importance of the Risen One in the lives of all believers. For this to be a reality, it became the first mission of the Church to continue the Mission of Jesus Christ: as the Father sent Him, He likewise sent His Apostles [cf. Jn 20:21, .f]. His initial message in what might have been the very first “Gospel” is simply this: “... The time has come

...the reign of God is close at hand ... Repent, and believe the Good News...!” [cf. Mk 1: 15, f.].

a. Two basic words were used:

- ***metaneo/metanoia***: this accentuates the religious consciousness of the believer, the realization that each is a sinner - and this leads to a repentance;

- ***epistrepho*** and its substantive, which is rare, ***epistrephe***. This emphasizes the more the radical change of one’s position, and leads one to re-orientate his/her entire life toward God, or the Lord.

b. In truth, one does not stand without the other: the object of all this always is: “... Paul was urging both Jews and Greeks to turn to God and to believe in Jesus Christ...” [cf. Ac 20:21 +; cf. Ac 17:30, f.; 1 Th 1: 9, f.; 1 Co 8:4-6 - faith and conversion have to go together - this is the summary of Pauline preaching].

c. The Apostolic Preaching was a providential arrangement, offering to all the chance to be united to the Risen Lord: “... All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” [cf. Ac 2:21+ - this is what Christians call themselves: those who call on the name of the Lord: Ac 9:14, 21; 22:16; 1 Co 1:2; 2 Tm 2:22; the title “Lord” is not “Yahweh” now, but Jesus Christ. On Judgment day people will be saved or rejected according as they have, or have not invoked this name i.e., acknowledged Jesus as the Lord [cf. Ac 4:12; Rm 10:9].

d. “God overlooked past behavior when men were ignorant, but now He is telling everyone everywhere that they must repent, because He has fixed a day when the whole world will be judged, and judged in righteousness...” [cf. Ac 17:30, f. + m-Christ’s resurrection justifies belief in His coming as Judge at the end of time {cf. Rm 14:9; 2 Tm 4:1; 1 P 4:5- cf. “JB” Note}].

e. Paul started preaching in Damascus, Jerusalem, in the Judean countryside, and also to the pagans urging them to repent and to turn to God, proving their change of heart by their deeds [cf. Ac 26:20, f.]. He often made reference to the Crucified as the One Whose Resurrection revealed Him as the Suffering Servant Messiah. Hearing these early sermons, many were “cut to the heart” and they asked for direction. Peter told them that they would have to repent and be baptized in Jesus Christ, the early formula [cf. Ac 2: 37, ff. +]. In Peter’s address to the People he told them that all the Prophets had said that Jesus would “have” to suffer - now all must repent and turn to God so that all sins might be wiped out [cf. Ac 3:18, f. +].

f. By repentance a human being comes back to God [cf. Mt 3:2+]:

- for pagans, this meant forsaking idols [cf. 1 Th 1:9; Ga 4:9; 1 Co 10:7, 14; Ac 14:15; 15: 19; 26” 18, 20];



- for Jews, they must acknowledge Jesus as Lord [cf. 2 Co 3:16; Ac 9:35].

g. In substance, both Jews and Gentiles need to recognize themselves as sinners before the Risen Christ, their Judge. It might be that this diverse form of repentance could have referred to a slightly diverse structure in their “conversion”.

2. Be converted to the Risen Lord! there always seemed to be a pronounced sense of urgency to this message - whether for Jew or Gentile, whether for a return to God or to Jesus, the Risen Christ, the *terminus ad quem* proves to be the same.

a. When Peter cured the paralytic at Lydda, everybody in the neighborhood saw this, and they were all converted to the Lord [cf. Ac 9:35]. Paul and Barnabas state that they have come to Iconium with the Good News to have everyone turn from their empty idols to the living God. [cf. Ac 14:15 + - in preaching against polytheism it was customary to contrast the true God with the false - the living God with lifeless idols, as the appeal for conversion. There are “summaries” of Paul’s preaching to be found - 1 Th 1:9-10; Ga 4:9 - ““JB” Note].

b. James rules that instead of making things more difficult for pagans who are turning to God, his letter offers very concrete suggestions on liturgical and moral behavior for conversion to the Lord. This indicates that James was the “primate” in the Jerusalem Church [cf. Ac 12:27 + - cf. “JB” Note].

c. In his speech before King Agrippa, Paul speaks of his own conversion, and his message from Jesus Christ: turn from darkness to light, open your eyes, unto the forgiveness of sins and a share in the inheritance of the sanctified [cf. Ac 26:18, ff.]. It is “faith” that serves as the foundation for “repentance”, “conversion”, “reconciliation.” Faith leads one to the Living God - He is the Lord and savior of all - there is need to turn away from previous “vanity”. Repentance includes one strong affirmation in the one and transcendent God. This One God saves us all in Jesus Christ: [cf. Paul’s speech in the Areopagus, Ac 17:22-32 + when he mentioned the resurrection from the dead, some laughed - but others wanted to hear about this again - cf. “JB” Note]

3. God Himself takes the Initiative: in its apostolic mission the Church has the divine charge throughout all the time intervenes until the Last Day to communicate the Gift of the Holy Spirit in the remission of sins. The Church has the responsibility of inviting anyone who will listen to repent, to be converted and to come to God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

a. What this preaching asks is a permanent state of life in response to the invitation to repent and convert: at Antioch, Barnabas could see for himself that God had given the grace - so, he urged them all to remain faithful to the Lord and with heartfelt devotion. As his very name states, he was a “son of encouragement” [cf. Ac

4:36]. They were being invited to follow the new “Way”. [cf. Ac 11:23]. The appeal was always for a “change of heart” - a “change of ways” [cf. Ac 26:20].

b. The Christian must be so not only in name, but in following the “Way” of the Lord Jesus - this is the only “Way” pleasing to God. Apollos, for example, had been given eloquence, sound knowledge of the scriptures, and had been given instruction in the “Way of the Lord Jesus” - even though he had only been given John’s baptism [cf. Ac 18:25] - Some would attack this “Way” [cf. Ac 19:9 & 23]. Paul did manage to teach Felix more about the “Way” than most people [cf. Ac 24:22] - although this Roman Governor put off the challenge of personal conversion [cf. Ac 24:22].

c. Even though each conversion is “personal”, “individual” - all the converts were then added to the “communities”. The style of Christian Life is always community life - all are called to the “Church.” All of this is under the divine initiative - even when each personal individually makes up his/her mind to follow the “Way” of the Lord. The only “Way” that sin can be forgiven is in the Name of the Lord Jesus [cf. Ac 10:43]. It was well recognized by the early Church that Glory must be given to God - for He can evidently grant the pagans as well that repentance that leads to life [cf. Ac 11: 18].

d. The Acts of the Apostles has been nick-named “the Gospel of the Holy Spirit.” Yet, there needs to be cooperation with the divine message and initiative on the part of each convert: a good example is Lydia - she listened to the word of God and it is the Lord Who opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying [cf. Ac 16:14]. When Paul and Barnabas preached to non-believers they were happy to hear the message and they thanked the Lord for His message [cf. Ac 13:48].

4. The “Way” [cf. Ac 9:2 +] of Holiness always, inexorably leads through Repentance: “holiness”, union with God, close following of Jesus Christ - this is what the “Way” leads to There is a sublime need for “holiness”, which is all that matters. The change that is required in order to go through the “Way” to achieve this is “conversion”, “repentance.” When the terrible crime of “simony” was committed , Peter made the appeal to repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord - one can be forgiven for thinking the way one does on occasion[cf. Ac 8:22]

a. The converts were expected to produce fruits worthy of their conversion and repentance: in sorrow for sin and turning to God, transgressions indeed may be wiped out [cf. Ac 3:19]. The change of heart needs to be “proven” by the deeds one performs [cf. Ac 26:20]. This does not happen automatically, as there are strong appeals to persevere in good works: Barnabas urged all at Antioch to remain faithful to the Lord [cf. Ac 11:23]. The Church described in Acts does not really seem to be confronted with Tertullian’s problem: when converts fall away

repeatedly, always asking for forgiveness. Tertullian does not seem to have been practically aware of the pardon extended 70 times 7 times [cf. Mt 18:22].

b. There is one tragic episode that did not seem to leave room for repentance - that of Ananias and Sapphira [cf. Ac 5: 1, ff.] that led to immediate punishment, rather than repentance. The lesson that seems to be in this tragedy is the insistence on the incompatibility between a false Christianity and the holiness of the Church.

c. There are two other situations that draw attention:

- a believer, Simon the Magician, has been baptized, and yet Peter stills invites him to conversion [cf. Ac 8: 13-24];

- the believers of Ephesus need to give up the commitment to magical rituals - the question is where these activities prior, or subsequent, to their conversion.

#### Summary:

[1] There seem to be hints, here and there, of a possible "Second Conversion" - i.e., after the converts coming to the "Way", and they once more failed the Lord. This Second Conversion does not seem to be the object of any particular attention - nor can we speak here of any semblance of an "institutionalization" of a Ritual of Repentance. This may be present in Matthew.

[2] The problems facing the community described in the Acts of the Apostles were different. Lk's concern was to show how these difficulties arose, and how they would be met by the action of the Holy Spirit. He presented them in a positive light. Furthermore, the apostolic activity described in Lk's Second Volume is seen as an act of discernment under the guidance of the events and concrete situations. An example of this would be Peter's position when making a decision regarding Cornelius and his household [cf. Ac 10:1, ff.]. Perhaps another example would be the way the Council of Jerusalem is described cf. Ac 15: 1, ff.]. Thus, in a progressive manner, the community of the Acts of the Apostles came to grasp the sense of its own newness.

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## **B. Synoptic Catechesis**

### Presentation:

The penitential theme is most important in Mk [cf. L: 15; 6:12]. However, for many interpreters Lk and also Mt had to take up the question of how believers, converted to the following of Christ, would then later fall into sin. To such as these

would be addressed the pressing message of penance as this would be most in accord with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

1, Lk 5:32 & 15; 17:3-4: "...I have not come to call the virtuous, but sinners to repentance..." - "... [Three parables of God's Mercy: The Lost Sheep - Drachma - the Compassionate Father] ... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over the 99 virtuous men who have no need of repentance ... I have found the drachma I have lost - I tell you, there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner... It is only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found..." [Lk 15].

a. Lk 15, for many interpreters, has a purely pastoral meaning. Divine Mercy does not eliminate sinners from the just. This is what seems to underlie these passages, proper to Lk. They have the enormous impact of presenting us with a manifestation of divine mercy in response to Pharisaical contestation. There is repeatedly a kind of coupling between the "just and the sinners": "sinners" are the unfaithful disciples or Christians - the "just" are simply those who have remained faithful to the Lord. This antithesis does not have as its intention the doctrine of retribution, as in Judaism. Oddly, the perseverance of the just seems to give less joy to God than would the return of sinners. Once again the sinner is the beneficiary, even after his/her entrance into the reign, of God's mercy.

b. The introduction to Lk 15 [vv. 1 & 2] presents the theme: this man welcomes sinners and eats with them! The three parables, then, must be read in the religious context of the Christian community. Jesus has already stated [cf. 5:32] that he has not come to call the just, but sinners to repentance [cf. also Mk 2:17; Mt 9:13] Lk 15 then, is the best commentary on Lk 5:32.

c. This is also the sense of Lk 17:3-4: "... Watch yourselves! If your brother does something wrong, reprove him, and, if he is sorry, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says: 'I am sorry', you must forgive him..."

d. To summarize Lk's Gospel most commentators see it much like Ac. Lk does show a pre-dilection for the theme of "Penance - Conversion", but this is always in the context of the invitation of receiving the reign of God as a reality that is not merely eschatological, but has already begun to be actualized in the Church - it is the "reign of God" in embryo: the kingdom of God is already present on this earth in mystery [cf. GS 39]. The Church is the initial "budding forth" of the Kingdom present in Jesus Christ [cf. LG 5]. Lk's presentation of Jesus' mercy toward those in need of conversion [first, or second!] is to respond to Pharisaical criticism of Jesus' openness to sinners.

2. Mt 9:1-8; 16:13-20; 18: "... [The Cure of the Paralytic] ... to prove to you that the Son of Man has the power to forgive sins - he said to the paralytic - Get up, and pick up your bed and go home. And the man got up and went home. A feeling of awe came over the crowd when they saw him, and they praised God for giving such power to men..." - "... [Conferral of Primacy on Peter] ... on this Rock I will build My Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven..." - "... Who is the greatest? - Leading others astray - The Lost Sheep - Brotherly Correction - Prayer in Common - Forgiveness of Injuries - Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor]..."

a. Mt is sometimes described as "**the Ecclesiastical Gospel**" This Gospel sees Church life as one in constant reference to the continuing presence of Jesus Who has risen, to Whom has been given all power in heaven and on earth [cf. 28:18, ff.]. The emphasis Mt gives to the Apostolic Mission is that the power of the apostles is simply an emanation of that of the Risen Christ. The Church, the Christian Community, is the authentic realization of ancient Israel - the Church is the continuation of Israel of old, its fullness, and therefore a totally new reality. There is a continuing comparison/confrontation between the community of old and new Christian Assembly.

b. Mt shows that the ancient "Law" has been "fulfilled". From this conclusion will flow certain basic criteria for a reading of this Gospel. In speaking of the healed Paralytic there is great admiration of the crowd because of the power of Jesus in healing, forgiving [compare with Mk 2:12; Lk 5:25, f.]. For some interpreters this is Mt writing for a basically Christian audience. The clear implication - that this power has been given to men - is that this wondrous power of healing forgiveness remains within the Church, and may be used by the successors of the Apostles [cf. Mt 28:18, ff.; 19:28]. There is here an indication of the Apostles sharing in the "judiciary" power of the Son of Man. This is already anticipated here on earth [cf. 9:5] as power over sin. Mt's emphasis, then, for many interpreters is to show that the power to forgive sin remains as a permanent aspect of the Apostolic Mission within the Church.

1.] With all the difficulties in these chapters of Mt [16 & 18] two of their verses seem similar: "... I will give you the keys of the kingdom..." [cf. MT 16:18] - and: "... I tell you solemnly, whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven..." [cf. 18:18]. In both cases it is a matter of the power of "binding-loosing" - and in Mt 18 this power is clearly given in the context of sins committed after believers have converted to Jesus Christ. There have been interpreters who would "restrict Mt 18:18 to the Apostles, and that this was not a power handed down through the centuries to

their successors. Others would respond by joining Mt 16:18 & 18:18 to bring out the true situation of Peter, the Apostles and their successors.

2.] It does seem, at a first reading, that the passage in Mt 18 is directed immediately to the Apostles. This would mean that the power of “binding-loosing” was meant solely for the Apostolic Community. It is clear that this power bestowed on the Apostles enabled them to “bind-loose” sins committed by community members. Many interpreters read all of Mt 18 as dealing with the so-called “Second Conversion”: emphasis is given to the “brothers” [cf. Mt 15:21, 35]. When they sin, they need to encounter a merciful attitude, just like that of the Heavenly Father. Special attention needs to be given to the little ones” - there is always great concern that they might be lost. Even the Apostles themselves are not above “sinning” [cf. Mt 18:1-21]. This power needs to be **exercised always with the Heavenly Father’s own Mercy**. The challenge is to determine the sense of Mt 18:18 - some would limit this to the Apostolic Age; the Catholic view sees this as a conferral of the power of pardoning to the Church of all ages.

3.] Other commentators see the pairing of the two verbs: “to bind/to lose” merely, as what the French call, the *binômes de totalité* - that is, as a figure of totality of the Apostolic Mission, shown by opposing terms. In this view, it is not so much a matter of “power” as it is of mission, activity. The idea would be that if the community should find among its members one who proved incorrigible - they would then be forced to take the unhappy decision of excluding the recalcitrant from their membership. This view would limit the reading to the temporal situation of the Early Church. However, not many favor this limiting interpretation - the major interpretation, however, within the Catholic Church is that this entire section refers to the ecclesial community, and that this power of the forgiveness of sins was intended by the Lord to be handed on to the Successors of the Apostles.

4.] Any restricting interpretation of these passages would still maintain the antithesis of reference on the doctrinal level - but would see it simply as one already operative in the understanding of Judaism: this would be that the authentic interpretation of the TORAH both “opens”, allows entry - and “closes”, excludes membership. This would mean that whoever has the authority to interpret the TORAH authentically would also have the accompanying power to judge human conduct that would either be in harmony with, or against the living of the TORAH.

5.] However, it is also necessary to point out that Mt 18:18 as applied to the sinful brother/sister - but, that its application is expressed in a newer manner, indicating far more than a mere contemporary situation. This entire power of binding and dissolving is seen with a view to eternal salvation and it is a power that must always be measured by the Heavenly Father’s Mercy. Thus, this ecclesial power, communicated by Jesus Christ in His Resurrection, is a share in His authority and is

communicated by Him personally to the Church. All is seen as an interpretation of the divine mind - there has to be within the Church a kind of conduct, and an interpretation of such conduct, "on earth as it is in heaven." No decision, as well as no conduct can be tolerated in the Church during its sojourn through time, that would not be acceptable to divine Mercy. All initiative for eternal salvation flows from the Father, through the Risen Christ, to the Apostles and their successors. There is no hint, or danger here of some "magical" ritual - the forgiveness of sins demands a certain kind of conduct and repentance.

c. The Apostolic Mission includes making the authoritative judgments regarding the Christian Message and regarding the "Way" that must be followed to live it. All of this is in function of the salvific divine authority expressed within it.

1.] However, there have been some Catholic scholars [such as Rahner] who wonder whether Mt 18:18 is simply a kind of transfer of the Jewish usage of excommunication from their ranks for doctrines or conduct not in harmony with the teachings of Israel - and that this power of such "excommunication" is simply handed on to the Church. The Catholic "twist" here would be the interpretation that according to the institution of Jesus Christ, the government over sinners would not only be in the external order - namely, keeping different people together in some kind of harmony, uniformity with the Church. The belief of the Catholic Church is that this power of "binding/loosing" is based on the celestial, eternal order, before God. This is a genuine novelty regarding the institution of Christ of the sacrament of Reconciliation, in, through and for the Church.

2.] The Catholic view of this is that the Lord truly conferred His own authority regarding "faith and morals" on His Apostles and on the Church through the ages. What emerges is that there is a kind of doctrinal or moral incompatibility that can arise between those who reject the teachings of Jesus Christ regarding the truths to be believed, and the "way" to follow. There has to be a terrestrial "translation", or exercise of this salvific judgment that would have eternal consequences. In the end, the Merciful God judges over all. His Church has the duty both to "proclaim" positively the message of mercy, and to "protect" the faith, in all its dimensions.

d. still others offer the interpretation here that in the background is the presence of the "Powers of Darkness" [cf. Cong. for the Doctrine of Faith, Demonology. June 26, 1975 - cf. Flannery, Vol. I, Doc 108 - pp. 456, ff.]. As the Church has been given a share in Christ's power regarding eternity, it has likewise been given the faculty to meet the power of personified evil and vanquish it. The devil is the prince of this world - and does "bind" certain ones to his realm - their healing is a loosening of this crippling bond [cf. Lk 13:16].

1.] The Apostolic Mission also includes the power, the capacity of conquering the Evil One and of maintaining the Church in her antithesis toward Evil. The “holiness” bestowed in the Church by its Founder includes its goal, and its means - and the battle goes on for its members. The Church will never abandon anyone to Satan who would reach out to Christ through her - her role is to build up the Communion of Saints.

2.] The Church made some “difficult” decisions and judgments in her divinely recorded early history: there is the striking story of Ananias and Sapphira [cf. Ac 5] - there is the terrifying story of Elymas, who was struck blind [cf. Ac 13:10-11] - and the revolting story of handing over those who practice incest to the devil [cf. 1 Co 5:5 - the sensual body must be destroyed, and one’s spirit saved for the Lord].

3.] There is a constant battle between Jesus Christ and Satan - the Church continues across the ages with the struggle against the Powers of Darkness. The reign of the Devil is characterized by sin, evil and death. Hence, the Church understands that she has received personally from the Risen Christ a share in the Divine Nature, and the capacity to act “in the Person of Jesus Christ”.

3. The Gospel of Mark [1:15; 3:28-29; 6:12; 16:16]: “... The time has come ... and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News...” - “...I tell you solemnly, all men’s sins will be forgiven, and all their blasphemies; but let anyone blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and he will never have forgiveness: he is guilty of an eternal sin...” - “... [The Mission of the 12]: So they set off to preach repentance; and they cast out many devils, and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them...” - “[The Apostolic Mission of Jesus conferred after His resurrection]... Go out into the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned...”

a. This may have been the first “Gospel” composed - among its characteristics would be the intimate tie between the Apostolic Mission of the *kerygma*, and the challenge to “repent”. Along with bringing up again the perspective of Acts, there is some tie with Heb 6:4-8:

“... As for those people:

- who were once brought into the light,
- and tasted the gift from heaven,
- and received a share of the Holy Spirit,
- and appreciate the Good Message of God and the powers of the world to come,



- and yet in spite of this have fallen away -

it is impossible for them to be renewed a second time! They cannot be repentant if they have willfully crucified the Son of God and openly mocked him. A field that has been well watered by frequent rain, and gives the crops that are wanted by the owners who grew them, is given God's blessing; but one that grows brambles and thistles is abandoned, and practically cursed. It will end by being burnt!"

b. For many interpreters, the concerns here would be for those who would reject Baptism once they are convinced that Jesus truly is the Savior of Humanity. The "sin that cannot be forgiven" as the Rejection of the Redeemer once one has been convinced of Jesus - the rejection of God's Mercy. Variations on this interpretation that the "sin against the Holy Spirit" would be anyone who would refuse effective salvation. This would seem to be concerned more with what moral theologians would call "positive incredulity", that freely chosen rejection of Jesus Christ.

c. The old adage: "as long as there is life, there is hope" - the Church never gives up on "repentance", "conversion". In Lk 12:10 this matter is placed not so much in the debate between the Pharisees and Scribes against Jesus as it is more directed to His disciples. He is challenging them to the open, persevering profession of their faith. The "unforgivable sin" would be when one of the inner circle had already had some lived experience of Jesus' Resurrection and would still deny the Son of Man and His Father's Mercy. A "sin against the Son of Man" could be forgiven, as was Peter's cursing the Lord in his three-fold denial of Jesus: Peter was more concerned about saving his own skin, than he was in totally rejecting his Lord. Needless to say, we are dealing with challenging passages.

4. Synoptic Reflections: there are several other real challenging texts that and to be looked at here: the matter of Jesus' Temptations - and the concluding verses of the Lord's Prayer: deliver us from evil!

a. Jesus' Temptations: Mt and Lk have a more developed account of Jesus' Temptation scene, and they have done this with particular reference to Israel's History of Salvation, as now applied to the life of the Church.

1.] Of these two, Mt seems a bit more attentive to this connection than does Lk Mt is striving to show Jesus Christ as the authentic Israel, faithful to the Word of God, even under trial [cf. Dt 8:2--4; 16:6; 6:13, f.]. Jesus is the "New Moses", the Legislator for the New Community, both in the desert as well as on the Holy Mountain. [cf. Ex 34:28; Dt 9:9, 18]. Moses offers a prayer of intercession before proceeding to expiation. As the "Truth" for the New Israel, and the initiator of this

New People of God, Jesus' conduct has a typical value in reference to the life of the Church.

2.] Lk, on the other hand, sees the initial temptations as an anticipation of the supreme "trial" that He will have to go in Gethsemane and in Jerusalem. This is His Exodus, His "Passover" to the Father. His Passion makes a unity with His Resurrection and the sending out of the Holy Spirit. The Resurrection/Ascension are inseparable for the Church.

a.] Lk also notes the connection between Jesus' temptations with reference to the life of the Apostles and the reality of the Church. The conquering Christ illuminates and continues in the Church as the Christians struggle in their own temptations [from the devil] and from "trials" [which may also be permitted by God]: [cf. Lk 8:13; 22:28, 40, 46]. Luke alone speaks of those who first welcome the word of God with joy - they believe for a while, and then give up [cf. Lk 8:13].

b.] There seems to be here at least the allusion not only for the difficulty of persevering in the faith received - but, also to the distinct possibility that among those who did indeed receive the reign of God, and who did follow Him after their initial "repentance", "conversion" [as noted in Mk1:15] - only then subsequently to fall away. Nothing was said about their situation, and how the Church should act toward them. The amazing account of Jesus' genuine Temptations is then projected for the entire Church. This shows why the Church herself is indeed genuinely "tempted". In the terrible hour of trial and temptation, the Church needs to remain close to Jesus, and to model her behavior on His. The challenge is always perseverance [cf. Lk 22:28]: you are the men who stood by me faithfully in my trials, and now I confer a reign on you just as the Father conferred one on me!

c.] This is a pressing invitation to optimism in the abiding presence of Jesus Christ. His victory is already a guarantee for the Church's eventual total victory. There are, then, serious exegetes who engage in an "ecclesiastical" reading of the Temptation scene of Jesus.

b. "Lead us not into Temptation, but deliver us from evil!" cf. Mt 6:13; Lk 11:4]: this is the eschatological prayer entrusted to the early Church by Jesus Himself, the treasure of His "very own" Prayer. This all follows the challenging petition: forgive us our debts as we forgive those indebted to us!

1.] This brings up the unusual passage in Mt 18:19, f.: "... if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven For where two or three meet in My name, I shall be there with them..." Underneath this is the real possibility that the carrying out of some penitential practice, as well as some prayer, are most efficacious. This kind of exercise has with

it the promise that the Lord in His glory will never be far from such exercises in the faith.

2.] In prayer for sinners there is some indication for still another aspect of the commitment undertaken by the entire Church towards these Church members. It is also in this way, that the Apostolic Power of “binding/loosing” is exercised. This challenge is presented near the conclusion of 1 Jn [cf. 5:14-17], but the specific context is not clear: “... We are quite confident that if we ask Him for anything and it is in accordance with His Will, He will hear us; and knowing that whatever we may ask, He hears us, we know that we have already been granted what we asked of Him. If anybody sees his brother commit a sin, that is not a deadly sin, he has only to pray, and God will give life to the sinner - not those who commit a deadly sin; for there is a sin that is death, and I will not say that you must pray about that. Every kind of wrong-doing is a sin, but not all sin is deadly...” [There certainly are challenges in this text!]

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### C. The Pauline Communities

1. Conversion is the Fundamental Christian Act: Paul does use the “penitential vocabulary” but not as frequently as do the Acts of the Apostles. He emphasizes “conversion”: “... [as for those who are injuring you] it will be to their punishment to be lost eternally, excluded from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His strength...” [cf. 2 Th 1:9] - “... Once you were ignorant of God and enslaved to ‘gods’ who are not really gods at all; but now you have come to acknowledge God - or rather, God has acknowledged you - how can you want to go back to elemental things like these, that can do nothing and give nothing, and be their slaves? You and your special days and months and seasons and years! You make me feel I have wasted my time with you! [cf. Ga 4:8-12] - “... we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter like mirrors reflecting the brightness of the Lord... until we are turned into the image we reflect...” [cf. 2 Co 3:16] - “... are you abusing His abundant goodness, patience and toleration, not realizing that this goodness of God is meant to lead you to repentance...? [cf. Rm 2:4].

a. It soon becomes clear that Paul’s theology offers a very profound insight - perhaps even beyond that of the Synoptics and Acts. For Paul, the situation of a person considered outside Christ is not simply a “returning” to idols, or even being “imprisoned by the law”. For Paul, such conduct is simply a “sin.” He sees “conversion” as a totally new reality: “... sin entered the world through one man ... so, by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous... however great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater...” [cf. Rm 5:12-21].

b. The Christian truly is a “New Creation” - which presupposes a radical novelty: “... what matters for each is that everyone become an altogether New Creature. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, who form the Israel of God...” [cf. Ga 6:15, f.] - “... And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a New Creation; the old creation is gone and the New one is here...” [cf. 2 Co 5:14, ff.] - “... You have stripped off all your old behavior with your old self; and you have put on the New Self which makes progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of the Creator...” [cf. Ga 3:9-11] - “... From the beginning until now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; but not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit...” [cf. Rm 8: 22, f.]

c. Paul’s discourse is not limited to the moral field, but seems to include that and even more - in some way, Paul might be thinking of the “ontological” level. “Justification” for Paul goes beyond the moral sense of “justice” - it is rather that state of salvation in being united with the Lord and the keeping of His Word: this is what “creates” the New People of God. “Conversion”, therefore, presupposes the faith that is verified in the Baptismal event. It represents a profoundly deep interior passage from being in “sin” to existence in Jesus Christ, in the deepest levels of one’s human being. Jesus Christ is our Justification, Wisdom and Sanctification. By Baptism, we enter into communion with Him, with His Death and Resurrection [cf. Rm 6]. The “victory” of the Holy Spirit within one is the breaking away from the past in a complete and definitive manner.

d. Even with Paul’s extraordinary insights of being “in Christ”, one remains very much a part of this world - each one is still “carnal”. Each must be encouraged and stimulated, guided to live in such a way that in him/her there will be expressed the fruits of the Holy Spirit [cf. Ga 5]. Paul speaks as though all the non-believing customs were already buried with Christ - yet, he constantly puts the early Church on the alert as he knew only all too well the infinite distance between the ideal and the reality. Paul does not hesitate to list those sins that perennially trap human beings [cf. e.g., 1 Co 5:9-11].

2. There is room for the “Second Conversion”: The big question is: what happened to a person who had indeed embraced this “New Creation”, but then in temptation, or under trial - fell back into the “old” ways of sin? How should the community regard him/her? How does God? While there is no exhaustive treatment, there are some consoling hints: “...keep away from any of the brothers who refuses to work or live according to the tradition we passed on to you ... do not let anyone have food if he refuses to work ... never grow tired of doing what is right... there are brothers in need of correction...” [cf. 2 Th 3:6-15]. This is something like Mt 18.

3. The ‘Parousia’ is no “Excuse” for immorality: some members “rationalized” their bad behavior - they argued that “eat, drink and be merry” for it all will end soon.

This attitude - and all immorality - are simply contrary to the “holiness” to which all are called - this type of behavior is simply contrary to the sacred tradition all had received. Paul argues for morality in the strength of his apostolic authority: “in the Name of the Lord Jesus”. There may not be explicit mention here of any ritual of repentance, reconciliation, but there may be a hint: “... I see that my [earlier letter] did distress you, at least for a time; but, I am happy now - not because I distressed you - but because your suffering led to repentance. Yours has been the kind of suffering that God approves... to suffer in God’s way means changing for the better and leaves no regrets...” [cf. 2 Co 7:9-10].

4. Recalcitrants, Incurables are Excommunicated: Paul does not this reality [cf. 1 Co 5]. as the community should have expelled the man living in incest, but failed to do so. There is some contrast in Paul’s texts, depending on varying situations: “... pray that the Lord’s message may spread quickly ... do not tire of doing good ... May the Lord of peace give you peace all the time...” [cf. 2 Th 3].

a. Each community was charged with eliminating any evil that cropped up within it. Paul thought of Easter as the “new life”, and that all are being called to “live for God” - he also sharply contrasted the newness of life in the Holy Spirit, with that antiquated life of the Law [cf. Rm 7:6]. The Life of the Spirit is that life of Jesus Christ to which all are called by being immersed into Him [cf. Rm 6: 1 Co 6:9-11; 2 Co 5:14-18]. There is need always to avoid the leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees [cf. Mt 15:1-20], which means their self-justifying interpretation of these texts.

b. Paul judges and expels the scandalous person from the community - but, this is the judgment of the community. Such a terrible sin calls for such a terrible response - always in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. All that any Church does in order to be valid needs to flow from that mission entrusted to it by Jesus Christ through the Apostles. What “piques” many thinkers - what happened to that poor incestuous sinner. Could he ever have been re-admitted? Was there any kind of a Ritual of Reconciliation?

5. The Severely Punished could be Re-instated [cf. 2 Co 2:5-11]: Paul intervenes personally to deliver a person who had already been severely punished: “... someone has been the cause of pain ... the punishment has already been imposed by the majority ... and the best thing now is to give him your forgiveness and encouragement... So, I am asking you to give some definite proof of your love for him...” [cf. 2 Co 2:5-11].

a. Whatever this case is it does not seem apparent with what went on in 1 Co. Paul has passionately defended his right to participate in the Apostolic Mission. He even believed he could call on the Divine Judgment and was convinced of his hope in the presence of God. Reality needs to be seen always in the light of the charity of

Jesus Paul to preach “reconciliation”. Jesus Christ Who has died and risen up again is the sole principle of our being justified in God through him.

b. As the community remained “human”, although living the life of the Risen Christ, the temptation to return to the more bland, easier, and far more appealing ways of non-belief was powerful always. Paul’s concern for “conversion” remained uppermost in his mind and heart. The “old” ways were in sharp contrast with this New Creation of the Pasch [cf. 2 Co 5:17; 6:14-18]. The challenge of holiness [cf. 2 C 7:1] was always at the forefront - sadness before God leads to “conversion” [cf. ib., vv. 8-12].

c. In 2 Co 10 it is made very clear how conscientious Paul was in his share of the Apostolic Mission. On the basis of his convictions he was more than willing to undertake whatever hardships it would take [cf. 2 Co 10:6-11;13:2]. Despite this, he still would wish that the wayward conduct of the Corinthians would not necessitate these difficulties for him. Paul would hope that the community might change in its conduct and that some of the members, in particular, would repent of their sins of the flesh [cf. 2 Co 12:21].

6. The Pastoral Letters: the picture does not change much here, in a body of literature in which the “ecclesiastical” dimension is much accentuated. The “style” of this writing is to bring closely together the “soteriological” and the “ecclesiastical” dimensions: as in Tt 3:5 where the “baptismal bath” is substituted for by the phrase: “God saves” by means of Baptism.

a. There is the same insistence on the fundamental importance of the beginnings, representing the initial encounter with salvation and the great pardon: “...God’s grace has been revealed, making salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God... we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in the present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessings that will come with the Appearing of the glory of the great God and savior, Jesus Christ. He sacrificed Himself in order to set us free...” [cf. Tt 2:11-14] - “... Remember, there was a time that we, too, were ignorant, disobedient, misled and enslaved... we lived in ill-will, hating each other...but when the kindness and love of God our savior for mankind were revealed... it was all for his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing bath of rebirth and by renewing us in the Holy Spirit...” [cf. Tt 3: 3, ff.] - “... Mercy was shown me...the grace of God filled me with faith and with the love that is in Christ...no one should doubt that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...” [cf. 1 Tm 1: 12-17].

b. As for the community into which the new “converts” were inserted was seen to be the “House of God” with a sublime need for holiness [cf. 2 Tm 2:19]. This

ideal, however, also admitted of a wide variety of gifts and the view also realized that there had to be space for the reality of moral fragility and failure. At the same time, the ecclesiastical community was seen to be the place for the formation in the Christian life and the responsibility for this weighed on the community itself. Paul challenges Timothy and Titus to correct without weakness [cf. 2 Tm 3:5-8; 4:15; Tt 3:10-11], offering their faithful witness [1 Tm 5:20; 2 Tm 2:25; 4:2; Tt 1:5; 3:9-11].

c. The dominant concern here is the integrity and the unity of the faith. The teachings of the Church leaders needs to be nourished on the Scriptures, and should avoid all useless disquisitions. Nonetheless, it would have to meet head-on those who tamper with the teaching [cf. Tt 3:10] received from the Lord Jesus Himself and entrusted to the Church. Those who do not accept the full teaching need "correction", "conversion" [cf. 2 Tm 2:25] - and there were likewise instances where they were to be "avoided" [cf. Tt 3:10, f.]: "...I mean men like Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have turned over to Satan to teach them not to be blasphemous." [cf. 1 Tm 1:20].

d. Some interpreters find texts that they think might hint at "penitents": "... Do not be too quick to lay hands on any man, and never make yourself an accomplice to anybody else's sin; keep yourself pure..." [cf. 1 Tm 5:22]. Yet, there are many other scholars who would read this text as one indicating the transmission of sacred power. The previous argument runs, however, that there was also some kind of an "imposition of hands" in the forgiveness of sins – and, in the text quoted, there is an implication of possible previous sins. As is clear, it is not easy to interpret a number of these texts.

e. Both in 2 Co and in the Pastorals, however, many interpreters feel that there must have been some way of receiving people who fell into sin after embracing the Way of Jesus Christ. There seems to have been some kind of an official gesture in the name of Jesus Christ for "Second Conversion", that would re-admit sinners into the full life of the Church. Nonetheless, the question does not admit of any easy resolution.

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#### **D. The Document to the Hebrews**

1. Difficult Struggles with Montanism and Novatianism: there are three very difficult texts here that offer little agreement among interpreters. They seem to contain a categorical refusal of pardon for certain sins committed by the Baptized - for these, the Church grants no "conversion": there were people brought into the light, who had tasted the gift from heaven, shared the Holy Spirit, appreciated the good message of God and the powers of the world to come - and yet, in spite of all this, they have fallen away. It is impossible for them to be renewed a second time.

They cannot be repentant... [cf. Heb 6:4-8] - If after we have been given knowledge of the truth, we should deliberately sin, there is no longer any sacrifice for this... anyone who tramples on the Son of God and who treats the blood of the covenant which sanctified him as if it were not holy and who insults the Spirit of grace, will be condemned to a far more ever punishment ... It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God! [cf. Heb 10:26-31] - Be careful that no root of bitterness be allowed to grow... that there is no immorality, or that any of you does not degrade religion ... remember, that though Esau pleaded for his birthright with tars, he was unable to elicit a change of heart... [cf. Heb 12:14-17].

2. Heb is a Letter of Encouragement to persevere in the Faith: the Letter seems to be a “document” - an Easter Homily developing OT “Sacrifice” as fulfilled in Christ - the situation of those to whom the Letter is addressed is that all are undergoing a severe temptation to give up the Christian “Way”, to return to their earlier Jewish observance. In the “Diaspora” they are not accepted because of their Jewish heritage - so, they have come home for the “high holidays” and are not accepted by their fellow Israelites, because of their Christian faith.

a. The author is making every effort to sustain this faith in danger with a two-fold approach:

- on the one hand, the unknown author is trying to inculcate the greatness of Jesus Christ, Mediator of the New Covenant in which the Old Alliance has been fulfilled, and completed. All are implored to find in Him Who is the only Son of God, the transcendent principle of unity. Salvation can be found only in Him and it makes absolutely no sense to seek this in what is now radically powerless and to admit that what was previously followed now is emptied of significance. Characteristic of this New Covenant is above all the complete pardon of sins which allows believers access to God with the prescribed holiness [cf. Heb 7-10]. The High Priest Who fulfills expiation and Who in the real sanctuary intercedes for us. He is full of mercy, because He has understood the human fragility and the temptation to which all are subject, as He was Himself while remaining without sin [cf. Heb 2:10-18; 4:14-5:10];

- then, on the other hand the author of Hebrews is striving to arouse a sense of responsibility.

b. As heir of the Israelite attitude of faith, and as being profoundly imbued with this [cf. Heb 11], the author’s “formula” for salvation is once more to sojourn across the desert of new times towards repose in God alone [c. 4]. The real sin in this would be “apostasy” - this is presented precisely as the threat to the way-farer. It is directly contrasted with perseverance, which is absolutely required for anyone making the arduous journey of faith. To waver, or to wander, in the ultimate analysis, indicates a lack of confidence in God. Each must give up any wayward ways, that



means following a pathway that has no scope - it is like turning backward - as when one loses the way, going off the beaten path.

c. This would be a most serious digression, because the only One Who can open up the Way toward the true Sanctuary is Jesus Christ Himself. To abandon the journey set out for us all means that one gives up every possibility of finding the true way home. This renders salvation impossible, the remission of sins, and any access to the one God. It seems that it is against “apostasy” that these “hard” texts of Hebrews are addressed. Any other interpretation would present some real theological challenges - even to think of sins unable to be forgiven. Only those sins that one would refuse to submit to the Church for pardon is the core of these texts, according to many interpreters.

### 3. Reflections on Heb 6:4-8: “it is impossible to be ‘renewed’ a second time”!

a. The author has initiated his discourse referring to Jesus the great High Priest with every intention of continuing this, despite the lack of the spiritual theological preparation of many of his listeners. They show every indication that they need instruction in the very rudiments of the faith [cf. 6:1-2]. Since they are quite fragile in its practice, they do not need so much the “heights” of theology. Furthermore, the author has not ruled this out that in the future they would receive just such a catechesis [cf. 6:3]. The question arose, though, whether this would indeed be possible, given the coldness of their faith, and their tendency toward apostasy [cf. 6:6]. The author wonders whether they would accept such a message - whether they would have the spiritual freshness necessary for renewal - whether indeed God would grant a “second conversion.”

b. The author seems personally categorical in his response: it is just impossible! [cf. 6:4]. There just is no human feasibility that they would return from the sin of infidelity, as this was expressed by the citizens of Jerusalem in their crucifixion of the Son of God, and their total rejection of their only Savior. From this terrible “Deicide”, the *kerygma* set out to recall all to “conversion”. If the Hebrews to whom this Letter is addressed commit the sin of apostasy and withdraw from their situation in which they have had first-hand experience as Christians of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, there will simply be no way they could find their way back. Apostates would place themselves in that very situation of those who curse not only against the Son of God but also against the Spirit of God.

c. In harmony with any global reading of the NT “impossibility” does not refer to “conversion” - for wherever sin abounds God’s grace superabounds [cf. Rm 5:20, f.]. There can be no question either of whether or not the Church would have the power to forgive apostasy. The “sinner” in the view of Heb is simply one who knowingly and willingly cuts him/herself off from the community and the way to

salvation - and wants to keep it that way. The “impossibility” is found rather in the will of the apostate who chooses to be such - the denunciation here is that of a spiritual situation extremely dangerous in which any Christian could chose to lace him/herself. To choose to b an “apostate” in this view is the free decision to close oneself off from the only road to salvation, which had once been accepted and now is freely and knowingly rejected.

d. There is still another possible insight helpful in the reading of these “hard” texts. This supposes a different interpretation of the introduction [cf. Heb 5:11; 6:1-3]: “... anyone who is still living on milk cannot dispel the doctrine of righteousness, because he is still a baby...” - “...let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ and concentrate on its completion, without going over the fundamental doctrines again: the turning away from dead actions and towards faith in God; the teaching about baptisms and the laying-on of hands; the teaching about the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment...”

1.] The “immaturity” of the readers [or, their perfection] ought to be seen on the basis of the relationship between the OT and the NT. Those to whom the Letter is addressed wish to return to the old observances: this would be to go back to a childish way of understanding even their earlier faith. What is needed is a mature penetration of the sense of the observances and of the ancient cult in general, all that should now be seen in the light of Jesus Christ.

2.] The author expresses his willingness to go back over some points in their earlier instruction, and does so to some extent in cc. 9 & 10. But, evidently, there would be needed a more mature format. Furthermore, any different course of action would not help much for the “repentance” of those who had fallen away. It is simply impossible that any re-proposal of Judaism would serve that scope:

- objectively, the reasoning is based on the fact that for the author the only way to salvation is Jesus Christ in Whom alone does God now call all to “penance”;

- subjectively, too, because this would give some support to that radical incredulity that would prefer one’s own way to salvation, over the one offered by God, and of which the Hebrews in question here would already have had some personal experience.

#### 4. Observations on Heb 10:26-31: it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

a. The underlying theme remains the same - it is “impossible” to pretend to find salvation in this context, under the aspect of the forgiveness of sin anywhere else other than in Jesus Christ. There is little hope for those who choose knowingly

and willingly to abandon the path, the “Way”, once so enthusiastically known and experienced.

b. Christ is the great High Priest Who has offered Himself as the one and definitive oblation for sin. If, therefore, anyone voluntarily detaches him/herself from Him, there would be excluded the authentic Liturgy of Propitiation and of expiation. One who chooses to neglect Jesus Christ will remain a “sinner”, without any other hope of pardon. If already in Israel sins were committed with raised fists in open rebellion, with obstinacy against God, this provoked extermination. With even greater reason, then, anyone who would willingly disdain the Son of God would contaminate the Blood of the Covenant - the price of the only redemption possible.

c. In itself, the sin of apostasy places one in an impossible situation - the inevitable consequence is eternal damnation. The author does not consider here other possible determinations, as practically were there any rituals of pardon - of excommunication. Presupposing that pardon is always possible in a Church that was ordered to forgive 70 times 7 times [cf. Mt 18:22] - were there prescriptions, or practices that the community by this time would have followed to allow one to re-enter into full communion once more.

5. Observations on Heb 12:14-17: even though Esau pleaded, there was no change in the loss of his birth-right:

a. This text seems particularly harsh - it seems to accentuate even further the “impossibility of a penitential return” from apostasy, even if there were a deep change within an individual subject: “even when Esau wanted to return, he was rejected.”

b. To interpret this for the reasons already given, there is no clear ecclesiological reference - there is absolutely no exclusion here of ecclesiastical repentance. There are two possible readings that interpreters have given here:

1.] For some interpreters, in speaking of “conversion” the author has Isaac in mind - and in this sense, even the tears of Esau would not change that divine choice. Even this view, though, is not totally cleared of difficulty - the tenor of any global reading of the Letter to the Hebrews would indicate that repentance is always dear to the heart of Christ. There can be no limitation placed on the divine willingness to pardon sinners.

2.] If this “conversion” in the text applies to Esau, the text might come closer to the situation of an apostate. The text then would simply describe the psychological state of one who would voluntarily sin against the truth which he/she really knows is authentic.

### Summary

[1] These are challenging texts, to say the least to be excluded:

- on the one hand, the author of Heb is not a witness to some early Church rigorism, in opposition to so much else of the NT where justice is ordered to mercy;

- but neither can one point to Heb to find support for some kind of an ecclesial ritual of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

[2] The emphasis of Heb is that in his reading of the “New Covenant” as the “truth” of the remission of sins, what is really important is the High Priest Himself. He personifies mercy, and also the fact that He personally was “tempted”. He offered the one and only expiatory sacrifice, one that is completely sufficient. Hence, Heb is much more **a composition based on hope, urging perseverance, teaching trust in the Divine Mercy.**

[3] The Letter to the Hebrews certainly does not ignore the real danger that within the Christian community there might be insinuated a certain poisonous virus, “sin” - and, the unknown author would like this sorely tempted community of Hebrews to be on the guard.

[4] The real worry of this author is “apostasy” - the apostate abandons the Christian community, no longer walks in harmony with it, but wanders off the path [cf. Heb 10:25; 13:16]. Thus, the fundamental problem is that of showing the objective insufficiency of the believers’ earlier following of the Old Covenant for salvation. God has now definitively spoken through His own only Son [cf. the “Prologue”, Heb 1:1-3]. The author was acutely aware of the spiritual position of one who would fail in hope-filled faith in Jesus Christ.

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## **E. The Johannine Letters and Gospel**

### **[I] The Three Letters**

These Letters are chosen first primarily because of the theme under discussion: the Letters are more directly concerned with the life and the problems of the early Christian communities to which John addresses himself. While the Gospel considers sin more on the “historical” level in that it is a reality experienced by Jesus’ contemporaries - the 1 Jn considers it more from the “ecclesial” point of view. This Epistle seeks to explain the problem in the life of the members of the community, and places them on guard against it. The insistence is on the incompatibility of sin with the Christian existence received by God. Furthermore, it offers precise

indications concerning the nature of sin. There might even be a liturgical hint in the words “confess your sins”.

1. There are three texts that will be considered here more in particular: 1 Jn 1:9; 3:6-9; 5:16-17. The emphasis in this Letter is what may be termed a “knowledge which has become communion” with God. This is the meaning of Christian “**Filiation**” which means a clear derivation from God, a structural relationship with Jesus Christ [“character”?] Who is precisely God’s own and only Son, Who has come to us in the flesh. Communion with God is also communion with others who share this **adoptive “Filiation”**. All of these **share in the same Holy Spirit** and have been blessed with the same ‘**anointing**’. They are gifted with the “seed” of the same Word of God in that same “**charity**” which God is: in that all “participate” in the very nature of God [cf. 2 P 1:4].

2. More in particular, this “communion” is verified with the Apostles and their own “**experience of Christ which has become witness of Him.**” The children of God have in themselves the Word and the Anointing of the Faith. They are structurally in harmony with this Witness. This is, therefore, one of the manifestations of the authenticity of the Children of God. This places all who share in this adoptive “Filiation” in the most radical antithesis with sin. They are called to observe the commandments, and above all, they manifest with their “charity” a life fully measured by Jesus Christ, Whose “God is Love” [cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16].

a. A Kind of Eschatological “Dualism”, or Paradox: this is not any “metaphysical dualism”, but rather the constant contrast between two antithetical spiritual situations: God/World - Christ/Satan - Light/Darkness - Truth/Lie, and others. This is not truly dualism in that these contrasting realities are not equal - the “positive” dimension always predominates, i.e., “God” - “Christ” - “Light” - “Truth.”

b. A “Manifestation”: within God’s creation, brought into unity by the LOGOS Who is Christ, the rebellion of the Powers of Darkness has broken out, through those who are faithful to him, rather than to Jesus Christ. This satanic rebellion determines the spiritual situation as a battle with an outright antithesis with God. This terrifying struggle means that the “last times” are here. There is in this reality a kind of anticipated eschatology which does not eliminate the unfolding of human history.

1.] This creates rather a characteristic situation of tension, and makes it seem to many that they belong to two worlds: this means that the committed Christian finds him/herself inevitably because of each person’s freedom, in a situation that is at one and the same time “definitive” and “precarious”.

2.] Precisely because what is “precarious” and changeable is considered from the point of view of what is “definitive” there may be seen in John that substantially the present life appears more like a visible expression of the definitive invisible situation. Christian existence has to express itself as Eschatology - in truth, it is Eschatology that truly constructs Christian existence, gives it its fundamental perspective in the light of Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension. It is up to the free will of each believer to make the difficult choice of the “definitive” over the “precarious”. This is the challenge of the eschatological “Manifestation”. John’s choice for the “definitive”, for Jesus Christ, for the Light and the Truth - is most clear. It is to this choice that he encourages his readers of all ages.

3. From this point of view as described here, it might be easier to comprehend why John can insist at the same time on presenting the Christian as one who considers himself a sinner before Christ and the Christian community - and, paradoxically, at the same time, to think of him/herself as one protected, “impeccable”, at least from the perspective of the grace that the Lord offers to each one that is always superior to every temptation. This perspective more readily sees who all sin is “pardonable” by virtue of Jesus Christ. Iniquity, in its eschatological phase, is under the sway of Jesus Christ Who has already conquered sin and death. Another way of looking at this same truth would be to describe the Christian as one who has an infallible sense of Faith and Charity - and yet, is so weak that sin against faith and charity would place one in solidarity with the Anti-Christ, and to be like Cain.

4. The Following three Texts are important:

a. 1 Jn 1:9: “... but if we acknowledge our sins, then God Who is faithful and just will **forgive our sins** and **purify us** from everything that is wrong...”

1.] The Christian is called to walk in the light, like Christ - simply because God, from Whom He is born, is the Light. Doing so, is an external indication that all Christians have been purified by His blood. There is incompatibility between sin and the Christian existence. To consider oneself either beyond, or without sin, is simply a lie - sinfulness means not walking in the light, it is a denial that Christ really did die for us. The Christian is simply one who realizes that he/she is a sinner, when sin is committed - and is one at the same time, is convinced that all human beings have in Jesus Christ a propitiatory offering, and a “Paraclete” of universal efficacy.

2.] The Christian, then, is never neutral in the matter of sin: each Christian is called to admit, to confess, that he/she is a sinner. This is an affirmation that has come into present use in the Judaic communities - and there is a very clear-cut witness to this as being a conviction of perhaps the first Christian communities in the *Didache* [depending on what date one would agree to regarding this Antiochian

composition]. There is some possibility, then, that Jn is alluding here to some kind of a community penitential rite, of a liturgical nature.

3.] However, it must be admitted that it is difficult to interpret Jn's words here in precisely this way - there is no total assurance that there is meant a here some kind of a ritual confession. This is all the more true when one accepts the fact that all the members of the community "confessed" that indeed they were sinners. There is still exegetical ecumenical debate concerning Jn 20:21, when Christ "breathed" the power of forgiveness and mercy on His Apostles, whether this indeed is the formal institution of the Sacrament of Reconciliation [for Catholics, this was settled by the Council of Trent - [cf. below]. This also holds true for 1 Jn 5:16-17 as will be seen below - whether indeed "confession" is actually the sacrament, some other ritual - or merely, a general sense of response to the community conviction of being sinful.

b. 1 Jn 3:6-9: "... anyone who lives in God does not sin, and anyone who sins has never seen him or known him. My children, do not let anyone lead you astray; to live a holy life is to **be holy just as He is holy**; to lead a sinful life is to belong to the devil, since the devil was a sinner from the beginning. It was to undo all that the devil has done that the Son of God appeared. No one who has been begotten by God sins; because God's seed remains inside him, he cannot sin when he has been begotten by God..."

1.] A "main line" interpretation of these rather categorical words is that they must be seen in the light of eschatology. The privilege of God's People in the Messianic-Eschatological era, as predicted by the Prophets, is lived incipiently in the Christian life. Perfection of holiness will be had in eternity. In this sense, one who lives "in God" is impeccable - as the two realities exclude one another. The very being of a Christian cannot be defined as beginning with sin, or including any willful sin.

2.] The reality of sin, in so far as the human condition is so prone to it, is always an "abnormal" situation for the ideals of authentic Christian living. In so far as one is "Christian", he/she is from God, and it is from God that there is this absolute incompatibility with all "iniquity", "injustice", "idolatry" [cf. 1 Jn 5:21]. Precisely as "Christian", a human being is called to live a way of life that is totally contrary to any sin. The Christian is "born of God", having deep within a "seed", which is the Word of God. If one indeed does sin, then the verdict would be that such a person is not yet completely Christian. One is not "radically" a follower of Jesus Christ whenever he/she rejects faith in Him, and all that this faith demands, such as the rejection of hatred, as Cain failed to do [cf. Gn 4:9].

c. 1 Jn 5:16-17: "...If anybody sees his brother commit a sin that is not a deadly sin, he has only to pray, and God will give life to the sinner - not those who

commit a deadly sin; for there is a sin that is death, and I will not say that you must pray about that. Every kind of wrong-doing is sin, but not all sin is deadly..."

1.] "Communion with God" is structurally "Communion with Christ and with one's brothers and sisters." This expresses itself also in prayer for one another, prayer in accord with the Will of God. This means that all prayer is submitted to what God's Will is for us, and what He has given us to have. In this sense, prayer is infallible.

2.] In the first of the two situations noted above, viz., concerning sin that is not "deadly", it would simply be beyond Jn's view even to think of Christian prayer as not infallible. If such prayer should not be heard, it would mean that it was a prayer not totally Christian, one that would not perfectly express "communion" with God, Christ and with one's brothers and sisters. Jesus Christ is our First Paraclete before the Father - and Christians assume this role toward others as long as they are in union with Him. Jesus is "Paraclete" precisely regarding "our" sins. Christians of the community continue this aspect of Christ's Mission from the Father regarding their sinful brothers and sisters. It still is not clear whether this is some kind of liturgical ritual, community prayer - or just what it is. There remains the problem for the "deadly" sin - the common belief within the Catholic Church that Christ has bestowed on her His own power of Mercy.

3.] Looking more closely at the two orders of sinners - those committing sins that are "not deadly" -and then there are those who indeed do commit a "deadly" sin - there are only a few observations that can be made, based on the text as we have it:

a.] For the first category, the "non-deadly sin" Christians will pray both as a community and as individuals - in so doing, they will become "paracletes" to the sinner and life will be bestowed on such a person.

b.] A real problem arises those who commit "deadly sin" and Jn states: I will NOT say that you pray about that! This certainly seems enigmatic to many - it is just difficult to imagine any category of sin that would be beyond Christian prayer.

[1] The solution to this enigma is not simple. Certainly we are not talking here about venial sins as opposed to mortal sins. What seems to be in Jn's mind is a certain type of conduct that would be absolutely incompatible with KOINONIA with God, Christ and the Community.

[2] Jn could be thinking of the positively incredulous, those who reject Jesus Christ, knowingly and willingly. These would be "children of lies, of Satan", those who would be dominated by hatred. This solution would



eliminate one major problem regarding “deadly” sins. If one sins in “deadly” manner, this means that he/she merits death. There are indeed sins which - if left unrepented - would lead to eternal damnation.

[3] The real solution might be that of the overall reading of this difficult letter - to see it all from an eschatological perspective. Sinning in deadly manner is already an eschatological death - when all is said and done, nothing can change the condemnation of this category of sin - not all the prayer ever offered can change what is in itself “mortally” sinful into something else, or anything less. The Law of God is eternal in this regard.

[4] Jn might be thinking of this reality in a kind of “anticipation.” This would be simply to ponder the definitive, [objective] category of what constitutes “deadly” sin - nothing can change this status in God’s eternal Law. These interpretations neither support, nor reject the existence of some kind of Ecclesial Ritual for forgiveness - and furthermore, these texts do not eliminate the universal power of forgiveness of Jesus Christ entrusted to the Church by Him.

5. Mercy is the Supreme Divine Relative Attribute: there can be no doubt for a believer that there is any limitation on the part of God for His Mercy toward anyone who would seek it, or the Church praying for it. Furthermore, in understanding Christ’s Message of Divine Compassion there can be no doubt that those persons who may have the misfortune to fall into mortal sin, will always have available to them the superabundant grace of God’s Mercy. Anyone who sincerely seeks to be forgiven within the Church, can be!

a. There has to be some other explanation for Jn’s text “excluding” certain sins unto death from any hope of pardon, and even from the Church’s prayer. Christian prayer does not help to change the category of sins considered “unto death” - such sins, considered in themselves, are always “mortal.” Christian Prayer when offered in accord with the Will of God is infallibly heard by him, in His own way. Such prayer is a manifestation of the believers’ union with God, Christ and each other. Sin “unto death”, considered in itself, is always in total adversity with any communion with God, Christ and His Church. By being unable to pray in this regard is merely a revelation that the Church and believers need to remain in communion with God, Christ and each other. Those who are in communion with God cannot at the same time be in communion with iniquity.

b. Concerning the concrete situation of believers who unhappily fall into mortal sin - this is not the question presented here by Jn. Jesus Christ is the universal Paraclete, and He calls others to share this aspect of His Mission from the Heavenly Father of communicating Divine Mercy. Jesus is the “propitiation” for all sin [cf. I Jn 2:1-2] - however, He also states categorically that for the “world” [under the devil] He cannot pray [cf. Jn 17:9]. There is no question here of personal salvation of sinners.

That always remains within the divine power of Mercy. These sins, or this aspect of the “world”, would be considered in itself, as accepting forever the sway of the Powers of Darkness.

c. It hardly seems hardly necessary to note here that nowhere in Jn’s thought is there ever suggested an prohibition of Christian Prayer because of some kind of hatred, or aversion against one’s enemies, even in the sense of God’s “enemies” - those who choose to defy Him by choosing to remain in sin.. There is no contradiction in the revealed word with the revelation, example and invitation of Jesus Christ - the Church will always be a refuge for sinners. The emphasis here is on that “eschatological communion” - that is diametrically opposed to eschatological damnation. These are two situations that objectively reject one another - and not a matter of people being called to hate each other. Hatred is typical of the iniquitous and can never be ascribed to one who has been impregnated with the Word of God.

6. 2 & 3 Jn: just two points:

a. 2 Jn 7-11:

1.] The Text: “... there are many deceivers in the world, refusing to admit that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. They are the Deceiver; they are the Antichrist. Watch yourselves, or all our work will be lost and not get the reward it deserves. If anybody does not keep within the teaching of Christ but goes beyond it, he cannot have God within him: only those who keep to what He taught can have the Father and the Son with them. If anyone comes to you bringing a different doctrine, you must not receive him in your house or even give him a greeting. TO greet him would make you a partner in his wicked work...”

2.] A Comment: this text establishes what seems to be any communication between believers and the deniers of Christ, even to refusing them hospitality. Modern minds might see this as *excommunicatus vitandus* - but, there is no textual proof for such a view. Once more, interpreters take refuge in an “eschatological” reading as noted for 1 Jn. There might also have been some concrete, historical situation of which we know nothing today. It might be similar to the situation treated in the Pastorals.

b. 3 Jn: 9-10: “... Diotrephes seems to enjoy being in charge... he refuses to accept us. So, if I come I shall tell everyone how he has behaved and about the wicked accusations he has been circulating against us. As if that were not enough, he not only refuses to welcome our brothers, but prevents other people who would have liked to from doing it, and expels them from the church...” - the Apostle feels the need of invoking his own Apostolic authority against some unusual man, who is

“excommunicating” [an “AntiPope”?] all those who want union in the Apostolic Church. This is an unusual passage for interpreters.

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## [II] The Fourth Gospel

1. Jn 20:21: Proclaimed by Trent “... and He said to them again: ‘Peace be with you!’ As the Father sent me so am I sending you. . After saying this, He breathed on them and said to them: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained...”

a. This is the “penitential” text ‘par excellence’: at least for Catholics, the Church has made this declaration at the Council of Trent: “... Canon 3: If anyone says that these words of the Lord Savior: ‘Receive yet the Holy Spirit, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain they are retained...’ [cf. Jn 20:22, f.], are not to be understood of the power of remitting and retaining sins in the sacrament of penance, as the Catholic Church has always understood from the beginning, but, contrary to the institution of this sacrament, distorts them to an authority for preaching the Gospel: let him be anathema [cf. also n. 1670] [cf. **D-S 1703** ].

b. The definition of Trent does not exclude the serious study of the text - what has been said above concerning the Letters, may also apply here - one needs to understand the “eschatological” situation of the early Community.

2. Jn 20:30-31: Jn’s “Intention”: “... There are many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name...”

a. Jn does not only intend to provide some view into the reality of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is done by Jn’s providing in the events and in the words of Jesus’ earthly life “signs” of the One Who is God’s Word. Furthermore, though, by presenting the Incarnate Jesus and what happened around Him, some indication is provided regarding humanity and its ultimate destiny.

b. In the “world” of Jesus’ time, among His contemporary fellow “Jews”, among His “disciples” and in the crowd: this is the spiritual story of humanity and of every person. Each human being, in fact, is called to choose Jesus Christ, or to choose against Him, realizing in this manner the “judgment.”

c. It is in this context that one needs to ponder the ideal of “**conversion**”, even though the explicit term is not here. In Jn, all may be reassumed into his dynamic and global concept of “**faith**”. This supposes a sincere quest for Jesus Christ,

but in the end, all remains as a response to the divine initiative of the Father [cf. 6:44-46], through the Gift of the Holy Spirit which the Father and the Glorified Son send to believers, i.e., to the Church [cf. Jn 13-17, the Priestly Prayer of Farewell].

3. Within Christians, the Holy Spirit witnesses to Jesus Christ against the “world”:

- it is the Holy Spirit who renders believers stable in the Faith, notwithstanding bitter persecutions [cf. Jn 16:8-11]. In so far as the perspective of eschatological actuality carries him, in the Gospel as in the Letters, especially regarding those assertions that seem to convey absolute opposition to sinners - Jn does not ignore the variety of concrete positions of human liberty before Christ. Particularly in the case of believers, the IVth Gospel presents us with clarity certain situations of uncertainty, or oscillation - as well as certain situations indicating that some believers were truly immature in faith. A few cases come to mind: the situation of Peter [Jn 13]; Philip [Jn 14:8-22]; Thomas [20:24-29]. There surely was some “space” for sinners among the “disciples of the Risen One”, among those re-born in water and in the Holy Spirit.

4. Clear Ecclesiological and Sacramental Dimensions in Jn:

a. Even though Jn does assume a “meta-historical” perspective, he remains profoundly adhering to **“the time of the Church.”** He was particularly sensitive to the situation in specific Christian communities. As the life of Christ on earth according to Jn is a kind of anticipation of His continuing action in the Church across the centuries - in similar manner, the life of the Church is in its turn in the Johannine writings an anticipation of the life of the blessed in the life after death. One of Jn’s concerns was to show the continuity between Jesus Christ and His Church - in other words, the connection between this phase of Salvation History and the historical sojourn on earth of Jesus Christ. He is the Risen One, and through His Holy Spirit, He continues His work. The “signs” accomplished by Jesus are all “remembered”, “re-collected”, re-presented” also through the interior witness of the Holy Spirit - these are presently operative in the Church.

b. Some scholars would limit this general principle of “eschatology” basically to the sacraments. This view would read various sections of Jn’s Gospel as pertaining either to Baptism or to the Eucharist. Protestant exegesis, for the most part, would not recognize any of the other sacraments, other than these two. However, other interpreters in their contemplation of Jn’s Gospel would extend such a “reading.”

1.] For our point of discussion here, a number of Catholic interpreters make other sacramental connections:

- Jn 20: the sacrament of reconciliation - already defined;

- Jn 13:4-11 [the washing of the feet]; 11:1-44 [the calling of Lazarus back to life]. These passages, in the views of many interpreters, just lend themselves to a penitential, sacramental reading - but, as always, there is need to fathom the “author’s intention” under divine inspiration.

2.] However one would read these passages, the student cannot lose sight of the fact that in the 4th Gospel, Jesus as Son of God is present always in the actual life of the Church as the Author of that great “Renewal”. He is indeed the “Lamb of God” Who takes away the sins of the world [cf. Jn 1:29] - and that when He is “raised up” from this earth [12:32] fulfills the ancient prophecies: He is the **Pierced Shepherd**, and from His side will flow a fountain to cleanse the sins and impurity of the People [cf. Zc 12: 10-13:1- cf. also Jn 19:33-37]. Therefore, Jn sees in Christ Crucified the realization of the Pierced One, into Whose presence Israel is being “drawn” to an authentic, interior repentance on the initiative of Yahweh Himself. He is the One Who opens up the **Streams of Salvation** [cf. Is 12:1, ff.], this **Fountain of Purification**. The water will flow, as Ezk saw a **trickle of water** become a refreshing flood coming from the right side of the **Temple** [cf. 47: 1, ff.].

c. Jn presents the Crucified Who has Risen as the grand motive for “conversion” - and as the source of life-giving waters from the Font of Purification. Many read Jn here as thinking of Baptism and its “conversion”. Others, however, raise the question whether there is also a possibility, albeit remote, that there could be a veiled reference to the eventual situation of sin present in the Church, among those previously baptized. Jn has already pondered this [as noted in 1 Jn 1:8-2:2]. Here the Christian “**confesses**” his/her sin and looks toward Jesus as the **Propitiatory** for “our” sins and those of the entire world.

d. The least than could be deduced from all this would be that Jn 20 is not something simply cut off from the rest of the Gospel, with no connection with what precedes. The entire passage regarding the Risen Christ completely illumines the Calvary scene. In and through the Church in which the Holy Spirit dwells, the Mission of Jesus Christ Himself will be carried on through each believer. Thus, there is a kind of “vast Inclusion” of Semitic style that is present in the 4th Gospel: this opens with a Revelation of the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world and baptizes in the Holy Spirit; and then concludes with the remission of sins on the part of this same Lamb of God, Who has conquered the Prince of this World.

##### 5. Jn 20:19-23: Observations:

a. This text is rightly considered the Johannine Pentecost: the Risen Jesus, the Lord, has now “passed over” and “ascended” to the Father. He is revealed as the Lord of the Spirit, Who **breathes** on the Apostles, to constitute them **the first-fruits of the New Creation**. Despite His visible, physical appearance, He is with His Apostles, in

whom He continues His Father's Mission. In using the verb *apostello*, Jn seems to be insisting on the fact that Jesus being sent bases His entire Mission on the Father's authority - with the verb *pompein*, he intends to declare that God Himself takes part in Jesus' activity. This use of the verb is what is found in Jn 20:21 - and here the emphasis is on Jesus Himself taking part in the harvest. The Apostolic Mission is basically His own Work, and this is why He sends His Apostles.

b. One might add here Mt 28:20, the "**Apostolic Mission**" that concludes the Gospel: there is a specific mention of the Gift of the Holy Spirit as an expression of the presence of Jesus, which is somewhat typical of Lk:

1.] The sense of this "Mission" which implies and expresses the Gift of the Holy Spirit is for Jn the beginning of the **New Creation**. It is the **First Day of the New Week** [cf. Jn 20:1-19] - and the "Breathing" of the Holy Spirit is a reminder of the Creation story in Genesis. All this implies the remission of sins which Christ achieves as He is indeed the Lamb Who takes away the sins of the world - through His Spirit and through His Apostles. Jn quotes this specific statement on the lips of Jesus: 'Whose sins you remit, pardon - and there is no limitation placed on what kind of "sins" - they are forgiven; and whose sins you retain, they are retained. There are several possible interpretations here:

a.] By force of a parallel with Lk 24:47-49 a, a Protestant exegesis had interpreted all this as to be simply a "figure of speech" meaning the *kerygma* in general. This view was formally rejected by the Council of Trent [cf. DS 1670; 1703, as noted above]. This kind of exegesis also runs into scientific problems: philologically it would mean that the "preaching of conversion", binds, or looses in so far as the Word preached would be received in faith, or rejected. . It would therefore be solely in a translated sense that one could ever interpret the discourse in such a manner.

b.] The Word of God, preached by the Apostles - this Word is Jesus Christ, endowed with Creative efficacy, and also that of judging. This would mean the judgment of the world which in the Holy Spirit, the Apostolic Testimony objectively achieves, prolonging across the ages the very judgment of Jesus Christ. The explanation would be somewhat better in this case and would be in some coherence with Jn's over-all theology.

2.] However, even this view would in some way neglect the intrinsic relationship existing in the same theology between "word" and the "sign": in the Unique Word of God to the world, is Jesus Christ. And here, there are no "words" regarding Him that are not likewise "signs". And the "signs" in reference to Him are interpreted by "words".

c. The quest for a meaning of these lines: At first sight, the most obvious response seems to be one that individuates the “sign” in Baptism. To accept, or not to accept Baptism is concretely one manner to “remit”, or to “retain” sins. The question then is: if this suffices, is there any exegetical reason that would justify this exclusivism in the reading of this text, which is rather beyond the generic affirmation of the Apostolic Mission as one ordered toward the actions of a sinner, by bring him/her to justification. The other reading of this is that exegesis that supposes a certain judgment regarding the comportment of the apostolic community, and this would “hone in” on the mission received from Christ only in the sense of Baptism. Other scholars can legitimately ask whether on the exegetical level there are reasons to make even more precise the words of Christ.

d. Some would see a connection between these lines in Jn and Mt 18:18: “...I tell you solemnly, whatever you bind on earth, shall be considered bound in heaven...” For some interpreters, it is immediately obvious that there is an earlier writing behind these two texts, perhaps originating in the same ancient *logion*, or perhaps there is here some inner connection to allow for this derivation in Jn and Mt. [There might be a similar connection between I Jn 5:16-17 [cf. above] and Mt 18:19 [“... I tell you solemnly once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be with them...”]. This juridical terminology implies the power of judging. Such power is a reflection of the Son of Man, Who indeed is Judge. With good reason, the Church has seen in these words of Jesus, the foundation of the power of pardoning sins through the sacrament of Penance. As the life and the teaching of Jesus [cf. Jn 9:39], evangelization introduces division in the world. The disciples are declared competent to discern whether one indeed does correspond to this message. To them it pertains the judgment both prior to, as well as subsequent to Baptism.

e. If there is added, then, that the genuine “judgment” of the Son of Man regarding sin, as on the Prince of this World, it would be **His victory** over both [Jn 12]. The judgment is that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the One Who has been sent into this world not for “judgment”, but for the “salvation” of the world. Thus the Apostolic Participation in the “judgment” of the Son of Man is all the more actual when they are “judging” sin, in the sense that through them, Jesus Christ conquers it in the sinful person, i.e., pardons it. Surely, there also is in Jn a “judgment” over the devil, over the world, over sin - that places before them all, by making fully evident [through the very success of the divine plan] their “wrong”.

f. It is the “Spirit Who accuses” them: in the very act in which He becomes the Paraclete of Jesus Christ in the hearts of the “disciples” before the world. Something similar should be recognized also in the apostolic mission. There are two

choices for the Church: either to allow sinners to go to their divine Judge at the end of their lives in the state of sin being powerless to do anything about it - or, to anticipate this judgment in an authentic and even definitive manner. The Church cannot remain tacit in the presence of sin - the divine will itself is of itself the creative force behind the forgiveness exercised in the Church [cf. Jn 6:44; 10:29; 17:12].

g. These are the very questions addressed to the Gospel of Mt: and they serve again here to show how difficult it is to place in evidence just how difficult it is to interpret rigorously in our case the image of judgment that one could exercise in two directions, and then have it ratified in heaven. Perhaps for Jn it might be added that because of his eschatological dualism, of itself the declaration of the impossibility of “pardoning” a sin would be equivalent to manifesting the actual presence of eschatological iniquity. Basically, then, once again we will have the matter of the objective situation of sin in itself, and not so much in the subject, in some person. The entire discourse, then, would be more one of principle, yet one that would in some way - not made clear in the Scriptures - be applicable to a contingent situation. It is difficult here to proceed merely exegetically - because of the dogmatic overtones.

6. Observations on Jn 11 [The Resurrection of Lazarus] & 13:4-20 [The washing of the Apostles’ feet]: The exegetical certainty of an ecclesiological-sacramental interpretation of these two passages has added a chapter to the history of exegesis in this sense. The challenge is to pass over from any allegorism, which is always possible - but, admittedly is generally beyond the explicit intentions of the author - to readings and interpretations that would be more in coherence with his fundamental intentions.

a. Jn 11: The Baptismal and Penitential reading of the Lazarus story already served as one example for St. Augustine. The last words of Jesus in Jn 11:44 would easily lend themselves to this reading: “Unbind him and let him go free!” These words do have a certain analogy with Jn 20 and with Mt 18. Raymond Brown rejects this reading, without giving his reasons, while he does make a passing reference to the baptismal interpretation - which he also rejected.

b. There is greater interest in the sacramental reading of Jn 13: other than having the meaning of a kind of “parable in act”, in which Jesus would place in evidence the meaning of His Passion and of the Apostolic Mission. In this view, the text would refer to the Sacraments of the Church. There are serious scholars who propose a Eucharistic reading for Jn 13: vv. 9-10 contain an evident allusion to Baptism. The words mean that whoever has already received Baptism has no need of a Second Baptism, even if he has taken up sinning again. Since Baptism cannot be repeated, this is not the situation with the Supper. Due to sins committed after Baptism it is necessary that the disciples should always have recourse with Christ and



one's fellow believers, to the Eucharistic celebration. The reference would be indirect, or more to gather the meaning of the Eucharistic Celebration than to tie in the ritual of the Church to the gesture of institution.

c. There are also those who would think that the Washing of the Feet has penitential over-tones, or under-currents. Bultmann totally rejects the Eucharistic interpretation and surprisingly adheres to a penitential reading of this passage.

1.] Philologically, there is a distinction between "taking a bath" and "washing" - and then there is a shift in meaning between "pure" - that can either mean external cleanliness and an interior state. These terms, then, have a two-fold meaning - and their sacramental usage in the NT might be established: "to bathe" can refer to Baptism - and "to wash" has support Go wash in the Pool of Siloam...when I washed I could see, I washed and I can see! [cf. Jn 9:7, 11, 15 - the Man born Blind].

2.] Jn 15:3 applies to the Word of Jesus a purifying power: "... You are pruned already by the word that I have spoken to you..." This leads us to a fundamental Johannine structure: the *logos* refers to the concrete gesture. Here there seems to be a reference to two diverse gestures: one referring to the "bath" [certainly baptismal] and the other to a "washing." **The question arises: would "bath" indicate Baptism, and does "washing" indicate Penance.**

3.] Historically it seems hard not to bond together these general factors with the fact [cf. I Jn] that already in the Apostolic Church attention was given to the problem of Christian sinners. The ecclesial gesture to which Jn refers, according to many interpreters, is a sort of mutual service for purification entrusted to all the disciples and particularly to the Apostles. If this is correct, then Jn 20 would lean more explicitly in that direction: vv. 19-20 place the "disciples" to the forefront. This is not only to call to mind the origins of the Church, even though this aspect is not absent from the passage. Through the disciples, there can be seen the Church contemporary with the Evangelist, structured with **a ministry that would prolong that of the disciples**. These disciples would have a function analogous to that of the "disciple" whom Jesus loved. **The Beloved Disciple, then, is "Re-presentative"**, indicating that "type" of Christian who would believe that Jesus has risen without benefit of having seen Him [cf. Jn 20:8, 29].

4.] The example of Jesus and the order given by Him to the Apostles to "wash the feet of one another" - even though in the beginning this would have indicated the attitude of humility, necessary for all Church leadership - became reinterpreted in the Johannine tradition and applied to the penitential practices then in use, whatever may have been the concrete manner in which these actually

unfolded: such as mutual confessions, intercession for sinners, sacramental remission of sins.

5.] Perhaps, for some scholars, it is possible to see here a reference in the episode to the Eucharistic celebration, but only as a prelude to it, and not to the celebration itself. However, there is not full agreement on these interpretations. There are serious scholars who do not accept the referral of this passage to Ecclesiastical purification.

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## **F. The Other Apostolic Writings and the Apocalypse**

### **1. Jas, Jud and 2 P:**

a. All of these writings present a pastoral situation with evident analogies: there is the concern of calling back to authenticity the Christian life of the communities in which there seems to have been quite operative the powerful temptation to slacken. The one responsible for this tepidity certainly is not God, but the “malign heart, that evil concupiscence” which is within us all [cf. Jas 1:13-15; 4:1-4]. This is all notwithstanding the divine initiative of grace for which we have been called to become sharers in the divine nature [2 P 1:4].

b. This makes for a contradictory state in the way the Christians, in some instances, were living the Christian faith: faith was separated from “works” [Jas 2] - love for this world and charity for God attempt a harmonious co-existence which is simply impossible [cf. Jas 4:4] - the community was scarred by violence [cf. 2 P 2:9-22]. All three of these letters call to mind in a forceful manner the prospective of eschatological judgment.

c. The God of Jesus Christ, Who in and through Him is working out our salvation, and already active in Israel’s History [Jud 5] - will not show Himself to be any less than just in punishing all who rebels against Him, as is clear from earlier history of the People [cf. 2 P 2; Jud 5-7]. Yet, the Lord exercises exquisite patience towards us all, because he does not want any to perish, but that all return and do penance [cf. 2 P 3:9] - the Lord truly wants everyone to be saved [as in 1 Tm 2:4], the universal salvific will of God.

d. Each of these compositions presents its own style in detail - [in fact, some interpreters indicate that Jas would represent one position, and 2 P and Jud another]. Jas and Jud do reveal a certain concern regarding the calling back to order those who have strayed:

1.] Both offer as part of the solution the responsibility of fraternal correction: if anyone would have deviated from the truth, and is encountered by

someone else who has been converted, fraternal correction must be offered. Let it be remembered that anyone who changes a sinner from his wayward conduct will also save his [whose?] soul from death and this will cover a multitude of sins [cf. Jas 5:19-20]. It is therefore possible for anyone in the community to be converted through the means of fraternal correction.

2.] As for Jude 22-23, he distinguishes three categories of sinners:

- those who are hesitant, convince them!
- those who are to be saved, by rescuing from the fire!
- of all the rest, take pity mixed with fear, having horror even for the least contamination from their flesh.

e. Of these three “cases”, the last one seems to allude to situations already encountered regarding separation from the community - even though nothing has been said concerning the manner of activating such a “separation. The second situation noted above is quite ambiguous - however, it is necessary to use even energetic means, as when one would have to save someone already engulfed in flames. The first “case” could more directly refer to fraternal correction - keeping in mind the injunction to use mercy in judging them. There would be parallels to this perhaps in some texts from St. Paul, as 2 Th 3:15; 2 Co 2:5-11.

f. Jas offers a presentation of the spiritual attitude which concludes, or in which “conversion” would be expressed: “... The nearer you go to God, the nearer He will come to you. Clean your hands, you sinners, and clear your minds, your waverers. Look at your wretched condition, and weep for it in misery; be miserable, instead of laughing, gloomy instead of happy. Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up...” [cf. Jas 4:8-10]. Even though the terms used here do hint of the eschatological situation of the divine judgment, the context [especially the final verse] clearly places some reference to an actual, contemporary situation of repentance.

g. It is also necessary to recall Jas 5:14-16: “... If one of you is ill, he should send for the elders of the Church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven, So, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and this will cure you; the heartfelt prayer of a good man works very powerfully...” The immediate reference is to the ailing Christian. It does not mean that for James illness is a punishment for sin - nonetheless, the anointing and the prayer of the “presbyters” can also obtain the effect of the complete remission of these eventual sins.

h. In this context, there returns the admonition already found in Jn about “confessing” sins to each other in the Church and that mutual prayers be offered that all be “cured.” Not much can be deduced from these last two admonitions: perhaps James is thinking more of the background in which the anointing of the sick unfolds.

2. The Apocalypse: It would only be the three initial chapters that would be of interest to our discussion here. In a way, the entire composition is somewhat dominated by “**the looking on the One we have Pierced**” [cf. Jn 19; Zc 12] - this would determine the weeping over the definitive eschatological punishment [cf. Rv 1:7]. The Son of Man sends through Jn a message to the Churches. For many of these, Jesus’ proclamation delivered by Jn is **an invitation to “conversion”**. For the Church of Ephesus, it is a “conversion” demanding their return to charity [cf. 2:4-5]. For Smyrna “conversion” consists rather in eliminating from the community the Nicolaitans, who are hopelessly compromised with idolatric cults [cf. 2:12-17]. An analogous criticism is directed toward the Church of Thyatira, which has given its supported to a seductive prophetess, and many have not heeded the many invitations to “conversion” [cf. 2:18-29]. Other pressing invitations to “conversion” are addressed to the Churches of Sardis as well as that of Laodicea: the appeal is to return to their spiritual situation lived so enthusiastically at their beginnings, an appeal to go back to their initial fervor [cf. 3:14-20].

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### G. Concluding Reflections

[1] The NT does recognize a “penance”, or a “conversion” of those who are already Christians. Without doubt, this is not an ever-present reality, such as the fundamental “conversion” for Baptism. This concept, however, even in Baptism is such that it should enter into the permanent attitude of the Christian, and be a definitive “mind-set” of life-long conversion. Conversion needs to be carried out in the entire life-time of each Christian. Under this aspect, it might be said that for the NT, the entire Christian existence has to be one that is for the “converted” - as such, there is not needed any new” conversion added on to this. **Conversion is simply the Christian state of existence.**

[a] from the outset, it needs to be noted that the Baptismal Event, with its “conversion” spirit, is already a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a New Birth and Communion with God. As a result, it places each of the baptized into a life-long situation of intrinsic and objective incompatibility with all that pertains to “sin” and to this “world.”

[b] Therefore, it is already something of a challenge to speak of a Christian in need of “conversion” - remembering that there is the incompatibility, a

contradiction in terms, between the baptismal state and sinfulness. But, this is the lived reality. [cf. the Parable of the Darnel explained in Mt 13:24-30, 36-43: this is the parable of the sower].

[2] There is the Problem of Actual Sin: throughout all the “time of the Church” - the Church and the faithful live in a precarious situation - the Church is in the final period of eschatology, but her condition is NOT YET definitive.

[a] The Church and her members live in a situation of life-long “temptation”, with the characteristic points of origin: the world, the flesh, the devil. This reveals a condition that is not yet total” liberation or “spiritualization”. each believer can still draw back from “earlier Charity”, as the community noted in the Apocalypse; the Church can also go back to her pre-Christian way of life [as the theme of Hebrews indicates].

[b] The NT in general, and Paul in particular, knew this kind of possibility from close at hand experience. The fairly oft-repeated “catalogue of vices” that different NT authors have compiled show the real battle underway in the early communities in their efforts to live the sublime “Christian novelty.” Here are some of the texts:

- Synoptics: Mt 15:19; Mk 7:21; Lk 18:11;

- Jn: Rv 9:21; 21:8; 22:15;

- Paul: Rm 1:29; 13:13; 16:17; 1 Co 6:9; 5:10; 2 Co 12:20; Ga 5:20; Col 3:5; Ph 2:3; Ep 4:19; 1 Tm 1:10; 3:2; 1 Th 4:5;

- Pastorals: 1 P 2:1; 4:3; 2 P 2:18; Tt 3:3; Jas 3:16.

[c] There have been serious efforts among scholars to place these “vices” in some kind of descending order according to the place, more or less important, that they occupy in the texts: Impurity [i.e., adultery, fornication, pederasty, concupiscence, dishonest words] - Killing [homicide, patricide, matricide, fratricide] - Idolatry - Magic - Avarice - Stealing - Envy [jealousy; avidity, love of vainglory; hatred] - Lying [false witness; false oaths; hypocrisy; calumny] - Meanness [ anger; insubordination; suits; perversity; evil character; indecency; injury; injustice] - Pride [ambition; vanity; arrogance] - Inconstancy - Drunkenness and Intemperance.

[d] Because of the lack of systematic order it is somewhat difficult to build up a symmetrical list of opposing virtues. Due to the notable importance given to the vice of impurity it is not illegitimate to deduce that for the NT “purity” would be the fundamental virtue. Some of the lists of virtues are found in these passages:

- Ga 5:22; Col 3:12| Ep 4:23-32; Ph 2:1;

- 1 Tm 6:11; 2 Tm 2:22; Tt 1:8; 2:3; 3:1; 1 P 3:8; 1 P 1:5.

[e] These lists of vices have in mind difficulties facing the early communities as pastoral problems. In the fullness of their importance, they would exclude one from the reign of heaven. Some sins create real difficulties, such as those against the proper use of sexuality and those against fraternal charity. These are problems that hinder the Christian education - some of these represent typical styles of conduct of the society, that are greatly in contrast with the baptized life. In most cases, these would be sins of those still living in the community, not yet having totally apostatized. These lists do make clear that there is some conduct that is just totally incompatible with Christian existence and the life of the community.

[f] It must be admitted that throughout Scripture there is a certain imprecision regarding the very nature of these vices that are described here, especially as these have been committed in a concrete human subject. Nonetheless, these lists do make it clear that there is a real challenge of the interior living of morality, and there is taken up again the insistence on sins that are “grave”, “deadly”, “mortal” - distinguished from those that are not. There is no real clarification, of course, of sins concretely committed out of “ignorance”, “habit”, or under the influence of “other social or psychological factors. [cf. CCC ## 1735; 2352].

[3] All Sins can be forgiven by Divine Compassion: this is clearly the message of God’s word, despite the real difficulties presented by the so-called “blaspheming against the Holy Spirit”, or those “harsh sounding” passages in Hebrews.

[a] There is not the slightest impression of any “dualism” that would place the devil on a par with God. On the other hand, there is certainly no hint that the battle against sin is won once and for all by the baptismal “conversion”. There is, though, insistence on God’s “patience” which calls out to all “Christian sinners” and “non-believers” - there is a merciful divine invitation for “conversion” [cf. 2 P 3:9]. There is the merciful theme of God searching out the “little ones” [cf. Mt 18] - where the Son of Man has infinite “power” over sin [cf. Mt 9]. His Precious Blood” has unlimited power of purification [cf. Heb], not only for our sins, but also for those of the whole world [cf. 1 Jn 2:2].

[b] In both Testaments, God is One Who calls for Repentance for all His People. The sins of the baptized cannot lead to any modification in the image of God the Savior, as One Who would pardon one time only. In a different sense there is a challenging sense in the challenge of Christians in their pardoning of one another to strive to imitate the divine *agape*, by forgiving one another seventy times seven times [cf. Mt 18].

[c] Yet, it cannot be presumed from all of this that sin is not offensive to God, that He simply goes on pardoning at any and all costs - as if the whole process was “mechanical”, or “magical”. There is in every sin freedom and responsibility. In the OT, there could be a “stiffening” against God, as in the NT, a “hardening of heart” - and this state of mind, freely chosen, can lead to the definitive loss of God.

[4] The Church has Exclusive Power of God’s Mercy, to “loose”/“bind”:

[a] Each Christian is “wounded”, “ill” - or, better, one who is “convalescing” and one who must commit new energies at his/her disposition for the sake of on-going deliverance from sin. Success in this area can never be “once and for all”, but must be continuous, and will only be “total” in eternity. It would not be under this aspect that a Christian sinner would be a problem to the community. What is being asked is that each one honestly admit that he/she truly is a sinner, and must make this “confession” [cf. 1 Jn 1-2; Jas 5] - and “pray” for “deliverance from evil” [cf. Mt 6], and for “mutual healing” [Jas 5]. This is more the exercise of “humility” that is well founded over past experience [cf. Ga 6:1-6].

[b] There is a real problem for interpreters, as for the Church of all times even more so [!] - for those cases in which being a sinner means concretely to re-enter, with or without obstinacy, into one, or several categories, recalled to mind in those “catalogues of vices” Under the pastoral profile, it would have to be said was most important to the NT writers. The need is for these believers come authentically to “conversion”, sincerely and in humility. This is the fundamental duty of the sinful Christian and of the entire community which has the charge to assist in this process. This is done through fraternal correction that is always more and more pressing - there would not be excluded here a certain severity for some situations [cf. Mt 18] - and constant prayer [cf. Mt 18:19, f.; 1 Jn 5].

[c] In its charitable responsibility, the Christian community seeks [as God and Jesus Christ do!] the sinner’s salvation [cf. Mt 18] - each will be treated more as a friend, than an enemy [cf. 2 Th 3:15; 2 Co 7]. Sometimes this can only be done by “saddening” them, but precisely so that one day there might be mutual rejoicing and harmony. Such “sadness” is always “according to God” [cf. 2 Co 7; Jas 4:8-10; Jn 19]. Yet, there is a certain “intolerance” of the sinner on the part of the community, based on the Word of God Himself. This “rejection” of the sinner has as its sole purpose that each one be motivated to do whatever in him/her lies to accept the grace of conversion, and that one have life anew [cf. 1 Jn 5]. This “intolerance” toward a sinner is so that the community might gain a brother/sister [cf. Mt 18:15; Jas 5:19-20].

[d] This “ecclesial intolerance” could even reach the level of a “radical exclusion” - in a situation where the sinner might in obstinacy render incompatible his/her relationship with the community - which also has to defend itself.

{1} “Being placed outside the Church” [cf. 2 Jn], “being handed over to Satan” [Paul]; “no longer considered in the prayers of the community or its members” [cf. 1 Jn 5; Jn 17:9]: - these another like phrases have in mind the sense of **the Church as a Mystery of the Covenant** - and therefore, of salvation - that is the definitive one, having acquired a unique significance.

{2} The emphasis falls above all on the incompatibility of the objective” situations, while the problem of eternal salvation of these “excluded”, not tolerated”, “excommunicated” sinners - remains unprejudiced.

[e] The mystery of God as Universal Savior, for Whom there is simply no such reality as an unforgivable sin - yet, does not let Himself be compromised in these cases of extreme gravity. And there is simply no basis for the belief that there could ever be a “conversion” that would not draw His compassion, administered through the Church - it is unthinkable that the Church would ever reject the authentically “converted”. A similar conduct seems to be in contrast with the concern of salvation which ought to dominate the community, following the lead of Jesus Christ, in regard to her sinful members.

[5] There is an Apostolic Responsibility over the Community: the line of conduct outlined in the Pastorals and other early documents sustains this fact. Their main role is to continue the humble service of the Son of Man, Who has come to give His life as a ransom [cf. Mt 20:25-28], or for “the purification from sins” [cf. Jn 13; Heb; 1 Jn 1-2].

[a] One aspect of this is the aspect of exhortation, dominated [cf. 2 Co 5] by the consciousness of having the duty to announce the mystery of “reconciliation.” The invitation to “conversion”, either through exhortation, or correction, is the fact of life in the Early Church it would suffice to think of 1 & 2 Co; the Pastorals; James; Jude; the Apocalypse. In this activity, the Apostle, or the “Head” of the Community {“over-seer”} - while not overlooking the concern for the salvation of the sinner, is also challenged by responsibilities before his local Church, where the permanence of determined sinners might indeed compromise the authenticity of the faith and of the Christian, comportment

[b] Thus, the responsibility of even excluding some from the Church weighs heavily on all the members of the Church [cf. 1 Jn 5; 2 Jn 10; Jud 22-23; Ap]. However, this weighs particularly on whoever is the Head of the Community, or on the Apostle. It would be helpful here to consider Paul’s conduct, and that He suggested to Timothy and Titus. He felt challenged to recall this precise responsibility to the communities.



[6] Some support in Contemporary Jewish Society: this whole complex attitude we are trying to describe here of the weighty responsibility of the membership in general, and that particular, personal responsibility entrusted by Christ on His Apostles before “sinful Christians” presents some analogies with the conduct of contemporary Jewish communities. However, it would not be intelligible if one were to prescind from the consciousness that the Churches have of their own relationship, particularly through the Apostles [cf. 1 Jn 1:2-3] with the Risen Christ.

[a] The consciousness of the Church being the continuation of Jesus Christ is a fact commonly affirmed in the NT - it would suffice to think of Mt, Lk, Jn and Rv. The theme of the Church as the “Body”, “the Wisdom” of Jesus Christ is much developed by Paul. Christ “lives”, is present and He expresses Himself in the Church through the Gift and the action of His Spirit. It is the Spirit who “creates” the Apostles [cf. Pentecost; Jn 20], and articulates the communities in hierarchical manner. For this reason, the “time of the Church”, as the realization of the New Covenant, is also that unique “time” for the remission of all sins [cf. Ac 2; Heb 7-10]. It is in this “time” that there is fully revealed the “authority, power” that the Son of Man has over sin, after having offered Himself as “expiation” [Heb], “propitiation” [Rm 3; Jn 2]. “ransom” [cf. Mt 20:25-28] for the sins of the world [cf. Jn 1:29], realizing His figure of the Suffering Servant.

[b] This power/authority of the Risen One coincides with the out-pouring Gift of the Holy Spirit. It is expressed and works through the *kerygma* that leads to “conversion” [cf. Ac] and in Baptism - but, it is not limited to these. If the theme of ***Christ as Doctor*** can assume in the Synoptics [particularly in **Mt 9:1-8; Lk 10:25-37**] an ecclesiological reference, and comes to be read as a sign of spiritual “healing” from sin worked among Church members, there would be here a most suggestive appeal.

[c] Mt and Jn have given explicit emphasis to this aspect of the Apostolic Mission. For them, the fullness of the “power” of Christ’s own Mission, entrusted to the Apostles, includes the sin and the sinners among the members of the Church. They have the power not only of “loosing and binding” [cf. Mt], but also of “pardoning and remitting sins” [cf. Jn]. This is not only in the sense of admitting, or not admitting one into the Church, by verifying the reality of the “conversion” of Baptism - but also relatively to those who had already been numbered among the believers. For Mt, this seems to appear evidently in his ecclesiological context; for Jn this can be verified through reference to Mt and from a penitential interpretation of the Washing of the Apostles’ feet [cf. Jn 13].

[d] In the light of what had been presented earlier, to “bind” and to “retain” become in the concrete also the equivalent of judging what is incompatible with the “newness” of the Christian community. The perpetrators of some serious

sinful behavior can be expelled from the community. In converse manner, the “loosing” and the “pardoning” would signify in the concrete to recognize the authenticity of the “conversion” for which counsels, correction and prayer were employed.

[e] It is only in the power of the Spirit of Christ that this ‘power’ is exercised through the Church [cf. Ac]. So, in similar manner, it is only in the Holy Spirit that such a “judgment” could ever be made [cf. Jn 20]. Furthermore, it is precisely in the Holy Spirit that the Son of Man is achieving now in the “time of the Church” His Mission as eschatological Judge [cf. Jn]. A “judgment” of this nature pertains not only to those who are “outside”, or who not yet been admitted to the Ecclesial Community - this power of judging refers to all, Christians [cf. 2 P; Jas; Jud] and to all the churches [Rv].

[f.] This consideration might also shed some light on the correspondence/solidarity affirmed both in Mt as in Jn between the apostolic conduct and that of God Himself. This is understood in the sense that in the Apostolic Action in the presence of sinful Christians there is expressed an action of the Spirit of Christ Who builds up the Church and therefore saves it and judges it.

[g] It should, however, be noted that the divine “judgment” is of itself a **salvific** action, that arouses and sustains **hope**. The reason is that such judgment is ordained toward expressing itself as victory over sin, and all that is connected to it. Only in a very secondary manner is the divine judgment a condemnation, and that for only those who do not want to be open to it. Thus, the very “nature” of the Apostolic Judgment over sinners will not be that of being able to be exercised indifferently in one sense or another. As such, it is **all ordered to the realizing salvation**. This is so, even if one may note the obstinacy of sinners, where to declare faithfulness to the Spirit of Christ that such a spiritual attitude is incompatible with one’s permanence in the Church. One “excommunicates” him/herself as long as that attitude persists.

[h] It might even be said: as the baptismal event is realized when the Baptism is bestowed on the one who is genuinely converted - and it is not conferred when one does not manifest the proper dispositions. In like manner the “Penitential Judgment” is realized in its salvific nature when the Christian “sinner” who completes the process of conversion, and is authentically a “convert”, such a person may be received joyfully into the Church.

[i] It is difficult for the exegete to represent clearly the concrete situation in which a Christian “sinner”, rejected by the Church, comes to find acceptance within the community. Certainly the Church cannot “condemn” to eternal damnation, but the situation is a most serious one by reason of one’s sinful obstinacy. In this sense, this can appear [cf. 1 Jn] as a kind of prelude to eschatological iniquity - illness [cf. I Co 5 & 11] or death [cf. Ac 5] can accompany this, and present a most disturbing sign.

[7] The Church “discerns” the Authenticity of Conversion: the question is often asked whether this “penitential judgment” could be reduced to a simple discernment in the Holy Spirit, regarding a variety of diverse moral situations.

[a] In discerning in the Holy Spirit regarding the authenticity of the “conversion” of the Christian “sinner, the Apostle, or the one who shares in that power, and the entire community would, in some way, make some judgment regarding the fulfillment of some event that would be considered “salvific”, or opposed to this. This must also correspond to the interior work of the Holy Spirit, active deep in the soul of people through grace. This is not only a question of Christian Penance - this would hold true also for the other sacraments, beginning with Baptism. In a way, this power of judgment pertains to the very reality of the Church, both as “institution” as well as “charism.”

[b] Surely all sin, in some way, places the perpetrator “outside the Church” - through the penitential judgment of the Church one is “re-admitted”. The structure of the pardon is not something merely verbal, or juridical. rather, it needs to be “creative”, and include “conversion”. These two realities: sin and the penitential judgment - are seen to be distinct, but convergent - but, it does not all appear clearly to one’s sight.

[c] The “confession” worked within the sinner, through the Holy Spirit, can be said in some way to lead one back to the Church - even though there is the judicial affirmation regarding one’s reintegration into the community is also an expression of the Spirit of Jesus Christ acting in and through the Church. All of these elements make up the mystery of what we call “Christian Penance.”

[8] There is a Challenge for both the Community and those in Charge of it: this is a charge that weighs heavily on the Church, but most especially on those responsible for her.

[a] This brings up the problem whether and in what measure the “Apostolic” Participation in the power of Jesus Christ regarding sinful Christians devolves on the entire Church, which, in some way, is actually founded on “sinners.” This is evidently a general question and goes back to the sense of the “apostolicity” of the Church. The Church can never accept that view of some theologians that the Community is over her ministers. There has to be, by divine will, a ministry of reconciliation exercised by the hierarchical priesthood.

[b] There has been divinely instituted a “presidency of reconciliation” which represents a function of responsibility, or of guide in the life of the community itself. This is what is assured by Jesus Christ Himself through the sacrament of Orders.

[c] It should also be added that this reference in the sacrament of the Eucharist is supposed to be actual. This implies that the actual offering of reconciliation is the mission of the one who is "sacramentally responsible" for the community. In this context we have the full and proper sense of "sacramental reconciliation."

[9] Details are not given in the NT: there is no "procedure" minutely outlined in the NT - not for the "loosening", or for the "pardoning" [cf. 1 Tm 5:22 - does this refer to a penitential liturgy?] - as there is not for the "binding" or the "retaining."

[a] The only gestures that are probably "liturgical" are remembered in an explicit manner would be the "penitential confession" and the "prayer" [cf. 1 Jn 1 & 5; Jas 5]. However, the problem might be raised regarding the relationship between reconciliation with the community, and participation in the Eucharist - or, vice versa, between the exclusion from the community, or from the Eucharist.

[b] Already in Ac it seems that the "breaking of the bread" is the gesture of the Christian community. And even more this appears in Paul, both as the affirmation of principle [cf. 1 Co 10:17], as well as the reaction to the profanation of celebrating the Eucharist in a divided group [cf. 1 Co 11; perhaps something similar in Jas 2:1-4]. If then there is unworthiness in sharing in the body and the blood of the Lord without being concerned with creating the community in charity [and, therefore, without comprehending that the Eucharist, the body that is handed over is the announcement of His death] how much more possible would be the case in which "sin" would have excluded one from the Christian community.

[c] As a result it does not seem hazardous to state that the reconciliation of the Christian sinner ought naturally to be concretized in the *koinonia* with the Body of the Lord.

[10] The Eucharist can remit [venial] sins: this is based on Jn 13 for some scholars - some would state this more blandly, less clearly: 'the Eucharist is simply the sacrament of the Remission of the sins of the baptized.' From merely the exegetical point of view, this affirmation might seem to be a simplification, especially where Jn 6 is interpreted from a Eucharistic perspective.

[a] However, the problem of the relationship between the Eucharist and the remission of sins is raised, as there seem to be Eucharistic formulae present.

[b] Thus, in the Mt/Mk recensions, the Eucharistic wine is the Blood of the Covenant - shed 'for the many', for the remission of sins'! In the Lk/Paul recensions there is more insistence on the body that is given up 'for you'. This is the celebration of the New Covenant.

[c] Precisely for this reason, the New Covenant, the Eucharist, has a very profound and real connection with the remission of sins [cf. Heb and the connections there with the OT]. It is necessary, therefore, to give attention to not reading these texts in function of our critical sensitivity as the imposition of a “confession” for participation in the Eucharist. It is rather simplified to find in these recensions some point of support for an eventual discussion for such a pastoral practice.

[d] The affirmation of the substantial identity between the Eucharist and the Cross - and, therefore, its characteristic of being the New Covenant - does not mean that for the NT that this does not exclude the presence of other gestures of objective communion with the Pasch of the Lord, as is the case especially with Baptism.

[e] Thus, in the NT the remission of sins as a constitutive dimension of the New Covenant comes from the Eucharist, and above all its celebration supposes the baptismal “conversion” which “aggregates” one to the Church and inserts the recipient into the passion/resurrection of Jesus Christ. This can also suppose - standing the reality of sin among Christians which places them in some manner really outside the Church - a new, second “conversion” which we might call “penitential.” Neither the one, nor the other can be included automatically - and be only by an institutional/ extrinsic reference to the Eucharist. This is precisely because this is, as a celebration of the Covenant, the remission of sins.

[11] Pardon is indeed an Ecclesial Act acting with the Holy Spirit: “Sin” truly upsets one’s ‘belonging’ to the Church - “sin” is indeed a worry! For its pardon, the ultimate protagonist of the sinner’s “conversion” is the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ - “repentance” is totally referred to God.

[NB: for pages 57-94 of these notes, cf. Giovanni Moiola, *Il quarto sacramento*. Milano: Glossa. Re-printed 1996, pp. 3-59, passim].

§§§§§

## PART FIVE

### THE MERCIFUL GOD: ETERNALLY DISPOSED FOR COVENANT

[cf. Alfons Deissler, *Yahweh' come Dio disposto all'Alleanza*. in: *Mysterium Salutis. Nuovo corso di dogmatica come teologia della storia di salvezza*. Vol. 3. *La storia della salvezza prima di Cristo*. Brescia: Queriniana 1972, pp. 307-341, passim]

#### A. The Personality of God

1. He is the “**Mysterium Tremendum**” because of His Transcendence - Who “speaks” in “Dialogue” from the Heart:

a. He is revealed as “supra-temporal - supra- cosmic - supra-regional”, beyond any external “pressure”, whimsical reaction to human events. He can only respond to His own interior initiatives. The ultimate explanation for all this is not simply the divine “nature” - but also at the very same time, **His personality** - at times expressed in the plural: Let **US** make humanity to **OUR** own image [cf. Gn 1:26]. For the philosopher, “God”, “Yahweh”, is “Self-sufficient”, He signifies the fulfillment of the concept of “being”. The notion of divine personality is achieved primarily from earthly knowledge and experiences - through which human beings recognize and experience other similar beings as persons. However, when this is applied to God, abstraction intervenes, elevating the divine Personality from all limitation - this is the way open to the infinite. In the philosophical approach to the Mystery of God the only possible avenue is that toward what is beyond limitation.

b. From Divine Revelation it is clear that God manifests Himself in a “personal” manner, without equal. Such Revelation is understood immediately as a Self-manifestation of God toward humanity from the very outset - this revealed data elevates all human consideration toward the mystery of **divine personality**. From revelation, one learns immediately that Sacred Scripture is not the making known of some infinite “neuter” - but rather, repeatedly there is an abundant use of personal pronouns. God reveals Himself clearly as “personal.”

c. Perhaps the most sublime initial expression of this is the Divine capacity **to speak**. Some kind of intelligible language is what is used biblically to indicate rational personality - this is far beyond some natural “instinct”, as found abundantly in nature. A most common word used in Hebrew to describe animals is “mute”. For the OT mind, the ability to talk has become the supreme category, full of nearly endless possibilities, that unveils to some extent the divine being. To speak includes the word of God to human beings which commands, instructs, threatens, promises, blesses. This would include **the word of creation** with apparently endless ramifications - extraordinary distances, heights, depths - this would likewise mean

**the divine oracles** that condemn, as well as pardon - all so decisive for the History of Salvation.

d. The most common divine expressions are those that move within the ambit of **dialogue, conversation**. So often the divine oracles are expressive of the Divine Speaker using the first personal pronoun [**"I"**] speaking to another person, using either the second person singular or plural pronoun **"You"**: He truly wants His Word welcomed in the human heart. Repeatedly, too, the indication of the first person singular is underlined, emphasized. The common formula for the introduction of the Book of the Covenant begins with the solemn: **I am Yahweh, your God!** [cf. Ex 20:2]. The divine oracles to the Prophets are introduced with this - or similar formulae - in the Word addressed to them by God. These prophetic oracles usually involve the sending of the person of the Prophet, invade his thinking, willing and acting. In II-Is, this reduplication of the first person singular pronoun on the lips of Yahweh Himself, is found repeatedly [cf. Is 43:11, 25; 48:15; 51:12: "... I, I am Yahweh - there is no other savior but me! - I it is, it is I ... who must blot out everything and not remember your sins ... I, yes I myself have prospered the plans of my chosen servant ... I, I am your consoler. How then can you be afraid? ..."]

e. The great majority of the "anthropomorphisms" and the "anthropopathisms" used in the OT have the specific function of shedding greater light on the absolute personality of God - **yearning for relationship** with this world. The basic "image" of God, the model for creation, already constitutes human beings in direct relationship with the Creator. This divine Personality is the sovereign of the universe in which humanity lives: "... what is man that you should spare a thought for him ...? Yet, you have made him a little less than a god..." [cf. Ps 8]. This divine sovereignty is rooted in the divine Personality of the Creator. That which God manifests of Himself would be His own personal activity more than anything else. Very often God "allows" His special "treasure", humanity, to "look" into the depths of His being, the **divine heart** - which in the Hebrew, would mean the very depths of one's personality. This is the specific aspect of "personhood".

f. The term **Heart** in reference to God recurs often:

"... Yahweh regretted having made man on the earth; His Heart was grieved..." [cf. Gn 6:6].

"...Yahweh has searched out a man for Himself after His own Heart..." [cf. 1 S 13:14].

"... How could I give you up ... My Heart trembles at the thought..." [cf. Hos 11:8]

“... Yahweh’s plans hold good forever, the intentions of His Heart from age to age...” [cf. Ps 33:11].

g. All of these references might “peak” in Ho 11:8: “... <y whole being trembles at the thought [of giving up Ephraim]. The Lord truly is in anguish, agony over His Beloved People: “... Is Ephraim, then, so dear a son to Me, a child so favored, that after each threat of Mine I must still remember him, still **be deeply moved** for him, and let My **tenderness** yearn over him? It is Yahweh Who speaks!” [cf. Jr 31:20]. Here it is particularly clear that Yahweh is fully a “person”, to Whom pertains in an unimaginable manner, that spontaneity of One Who profoundly loves - One Who is constantly **giving of Himself**, reaching out to His creatures -and yet, One Who is totally free: “... My purpose shall last; I will do whatever I choose...” [cf. Is 46:10].

## 2. Yahweh is a “Transcendent Person” Who is absolutely Free initiates a Covenant of Mercy:

a. Corresponding to the unconditional independence from all that is not God, there is the limitless power within to make disposition of Himself, in one word: “Freedom”. From His absolute liberty, God has decided to transcend in a certain sense, even Himself towards the world He created, and in a particular way, toward the culmination of this universe, humanity itself. Thus, it can be called - always remaining within the biblical manner of expression regarding God: His entire free will choice of initiating a **Covenant of Mercy** toward creation, and the establishing of Salvation History. Both of these realities indicate a passing over from deep within God toward the outside.

b. This ultimate divine [relative] disposition regarding this universe and human beings at its center - is, in speculative theological terms, a real relationship, both natural and supernatural of dependence, which God has impressed on His creation. This **great mystery of mercy** is the center of the entire divine message of Sacred Scripture. This is the basic “**good news**” in the truest sense of these words. The very foundation which renders possible such a disposition of God are His transcendence over this world and His absolutely free personality - **infinitely disposed for mercy**.

c. This is the supreme **mysterium tremendum** of God’s Holy Word. Its unheard of emphasis in divine revelation and its unutterable splendor render this a **mysterium fascinosum**, this mystery that so “fascinates” weak, sinful human beings is simply this: the Infinite personal God is “inclined” towards each human person.



## B. Yahweh implies the Divine Will for the Covenant of Mercy

### [I] “An Immanent Name” [cf. Ex 3:14]

#### 1. An Ancient Name, both Unique and Singular:

a. All levels of OT Revelation testify to this Name. From the IIIrd century b.c.e., out of fear of pronouncing a sacred name, was never said out loud. The later books of Sirach and Esther, do not even use it - furthermore, in what so many call “the Second Book of Psalms” [Ps 42-83], a “substitute” Name is presented: **Elohim**. In the OT, the Name appears almost 700 times in the complete form - and the incomplete [JAH] is found 25 more times. In extra-biblical documents the complete form is found on the ancient “stele of Mesa [about 850 b.c.e. - as again, in the ancient Letters of Lachis [around 890 b.c.e.] In the long history of biblical studies, there still is no agreement on the reason [s] for this difference between the long and the short forms. This is one of the most impenetrable “natural” mysteries of biblical studies - yet, there is clarity on some essential points.

b. Several texts are commonly held to date perhaps from Moses’ time:

“... And God said to Moses: **I AM WHO I AM** - I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as **El Shaddai**. I did not make Myself known to them as **Yahweh** ... [cf. Ex 3:14; 6:3].

Moses was considered early on to be the Mediator of the First Covenant with the People: “... I have been Yahweh, your God, since the days in the land of captivity. I will make you live in Tents again...” [cf. Ho 12:10].

The “J” Tradition does not deny this; however, it does seem to presuppose, in a way, that from the very ancient times, there was some knowledge of the name YAHWEH, even though it may have been forgotten: “... A son was born to Seth, and he named him Enosh. This man was the first to invoke the name *Yahweh*... [cf. Gn 4:26].

c. For many scholars, the OT notes that the name “Yahweh” was formally revealed first to Moses. It is of no small interest the Moses’ Mother’s Name was: **JOCHEBED** [cf. Ex 6:20] - which was often found in ancient Semitic names, of unknown meaning: IAU. Thus, many hold that the name *Yahweh* was really an “in-graft” from the outside, and therefore, something new for the People. This would have been part of a totally new signification.

2. The Name indicated Something of the Reality: the bestowal, sharing of His Name on the part of Yahweh also meant that He was communicating something of Himself. Moses’ concern was: If they ask me what the Lord’s Name is, what am I to say? [cf. Ex 3:13].

a. As the Greeks worshipped the “Unknown God” [cf. Ac 17”23], the Egyptians were reputed to have a supreme divinity whose name was “AMMON-RE” i.e., the god with the secret name. This was to hold concealed his true name behind an array of other names so that he would never fall under the fatal magical sway of humans devoted to others. With the revelation of His Name the God of Israel indicated that this very act of conferral on His part and was a clear sign of His grace of having chosen this People. By the same token, this would protect the people against any false gods.

b. There are also some interpretations that Moses was not really treated with God’s authentic name, but that the Lord’s response was “evasive”: I AM WHO I AM. Yet, many scholars do not accept this opinion even from a grammatical point of view. One challenge here is the tense of the verb {**am**} - it is surrounded by other verbs in the future, but this might be a Hebrew imperfect. In Ex 3:15 we read that the God of Jacob HAS sent me to you! This is His name forever, this is the way He is to be involved through the ages. This context would seem to exclude any possibility that the Lord was trying to “mask”, conceal His true Name.

3. The Name is even a Grammatical Mystery! Behind this form, might be more ancient forms indicating “He is here” - “the One Who exists”.

a. When the LXX chose the translation as “the One Who is”, they opened up a theological reflection: the verb “to be” here is not so much opposed to meanings such as becoming, or the opposite, lessening - but rather a vibrant implication such as to be realized, formed, to happen, to exist **vitality**. This dynamic aspect of the verb “to be” is the one that predominates.

b. Any merely metaphysical translation would not suffice here, both for grammatical reasons [the verb just does not mean this] - as well as for “historical, sociological” reasons: the ancient Israelites were not of a philosophical bent of mind. For these ancient believers, the existence of God was not really a problem. The emphasis remained on: I am here, the One Who is here. The reality in Whom they believed was both present and active. This seems to be alluded to by the very forceful repetition of the relative proposition

c. It is significant that the verb seems to be in the imperfect tense - as this seems to be “leaning toward the future”, as “not yet”! This is what has led some interpreters [as M. Buber] to translate this as future: I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. However, there are other scholars who would respond that this translation simply places the accent only on one aspect of this mysterious name. This has led other serious interpreters to offer this kind of an interpretation: I am here Present, as your God Who wills the **Covenant Relationship** and Who will be of help no matter what else might happen! This would be the supreme reading of Ex 3:14.

d. This seems to be the solution suggested by the over-all context here. This is further delineated by the forceful announcement of **Liberation from Slavery**. This at the same time identifies the God of Israel as a Liberator, **the God of the Covenant** with the Fathers. In the **Covenant Documents**, the Lord presents Himself as: I am Yahweh, your God, Who has brought you up out of the land of captivity, from the House of Slavery [cf. Ex 20:2; Dt 5:6]. The Prophet Hoseah seems to have been of this bent of mind, in the context of a **Nuptial Covenant**: I am your God, from the times of your captivity [cf. Ho 1:9]. Because of Israel's spousal infidelity, Hoseah is inspired to write: because you are NOT My People I am NOT your God!

#### 4. A Covenant Name:

a. Yahweh is totally committed by Nature and by name to the Covenant of Mercy. There is no intention here, as at least it seems to most interpreters, on the part of God to make known His "metaphysical" nature. Rather, He is communicating His existence as revealed in His Word as extended toward His People, in **Divine Availability**. He has decided to turn toward humanity in the person of His child, Israel as His special treasure - eventually, this adoptive Filiation will be extended to the far corners of the globe. The word used for this is "Covenant" of Mercy.

b. This particular choice of a Name would be well within the realm of the Semitic mind and heart. God wills to make clear also through His own Name **His Will for Covenant** as the heart of His "heart", the center of His **Mind**, the meaning of His **Being**: eternally open to **relationship**. This will be continued in the NT, saying: Jesus is Yahweh saves! With this Name of sacred prodigy, it will be continued in the New Covenant, with Paul's magnificent Christological Carmen: "... God gave Him a **Name that is above all other names...**" [cf. Ph 2:9].

c. Perhaps rather than translations such as: "Yahweh" means "really existing Person" - or, "Personal Being Himself" - it might be better to think of this Covenant Relationship as the ultimate meaning of the Name. The Infinite and Eternal God - but, He can always be this, present always and everywhere, with His Divine Will for the Covenant of Mercy. li-Is is a good one to heed regarding the Divine Name:

"... Yahweh is everlasting - He does not grow tired or weary..." [cf. Is 40: 28]

"... I, Yahweh, Who am the First and shall be with the last..." [cf. I 41:4]

"... it is I. No go was formed before Me, nor will be after Me...I am your God, I am He from eternity..." [cf. Is 43:10, f.]

"... I am the First and the Last; there is no other besides Me..." [cf. Is 44:6]

"... I am the First, I am the Last. My hand laid the foundations of earth..." [cf. Is 48:12].

## [II] An “Economic” Name [Ex 34:6]

“... Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, for thousands He maintains His kindness...” [the “Exodus Antiphon”]

- cf. also: Ex 20: 5, f.; Nb 14:18; Dt 5: 9, f.; 7:9; 2 Ch 30:9; Ne 1:5; 9:16-19; Ps 51: 1, ff.; 86:5, 15; 100: 4, f.; 103:7, f.; 111: 3, ff.; 112: 1, ff.; 116:5; 130: 7, f.; 145: 7-10; Jr 32: 17, f.; Dn 9: 8, f.; Jl 2: 12, f.; Jon 4:2; Na 1: 2, f.; Si 2:10, f. - cf. **Ep 2: 4, ff.**]

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[cf. Bernard Renaud, *L’Alliance: un mystère de Miséricorde. Une lecture de Exode 32-34*. Lectio Divina 169. Paris: Cerf 1988, pp. 188-203, passim]

1. Preparations: [Ex 34:1, ff.] this Theophany was reserved for Moses alone [cf. Ex 33:18-23]. Once again, and without warning, Yahweh reveals Himself as most concerned with His Covenant.

a. He understands clearly Moses’ request: to obtain the divine pardon for Israel and to ratify in some way this unbreakable solidarity which Moses experienced with regard to the community: “... Leave your burning wrath, O Lord; relent ... So, Yahweh relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He threatened...” [cf. Ex 32:11-14 - the Prayer of Moses].

b. The divine decision to write again on the new tablets the Words of the Covenant allows **a sublime hope in the return of God’s Mercy**. These tablets are clearly identified and described: Cut the tablets of stone like the first ones...! [cf. Ex 34:1, 4]. The tables might have been broken, but God shows His initiative in asking the new tablets be prepared. For His part, the Covenant was not broken - Israel was unfaithful. Moses gets up early in the morning and climbs the mountain as he had done in the drawing up of the initial Covenant [cf. Ex 24: 4, 15]. Harmony and concord between Yahweh and His People is about to being anew.

2. God’s Solemn Manifestation: “... And Yahweh descended in the form of a cloud, and Moses stood with Him there. He called on the Name of the Lord. Yahweh passed before Him and he [**Yahweh?**] **proclaimed:** ‘Yahweh, Yahweh...!’]

a. For some interpreters, the repetition of the Name is an indication of the hand of the redactor. The “descent” of God in the cloud for many is an indication of the **Priestly** hand. For many, the identification of the subject of the verb: is this the Lord composing the Hymn? or, is this Moses praying to God?

1.] For those who would opt also for the **“D” tradent** in this section, then the subject would most likely be Moses. It is he who climbed back up the

mountain and it would logically be he who would invoke the Divine Name. In this prayer, Moses would be calling to his mind the revelation that he personally had received on the mountain from the burning bush [cf. Ex 3:15]: this was to be the Lord's for ever and ever, His Memorial.

2.] However, as a further indication of this would be that the Lord would "remember" His own promise [cf. Ex 33:19] - and Moses would pronounce the divine Name. In this view, Moses calls out to Him as He passes by, manifesting His august presence. Thus in Ex 34:6, Moses does call on the name of the Lord - and Yahweh passed before him - and HE [who is "HE"?] called on His name - it remains a challenging passage for many interpreters.

3.] At any rate, God "ratifies" Moses calling upon Him. It is helpful to remember that in the **D** presentation of Ex 3:13-15, at the first revelation of God's Name, the manifestation of the Name was intimately connected with the offering of prayer. From then on, as part of **the Prayer of the Memorial**, there would be included the Name of the Lord. The pronouncement of the Divine Name establishes theologically its invocation in the mouth of every believer. Here God "authorizes" the use of His special Name in every celebration of the "Memorial". The divine Name becomes a "Memorial."

b. The Lord passes before Moses who begged to see His "Glory". The old adage is simple: a human being cannot see God and live [cf. Ex 33:20]. Yet, in some way, in a protected manner, the Lord can manifest His presence.

1.] The verb "passes by" hints at the transcendent being of God - He may never be "contained." Even in prayer, the believer is unable to lay a hand on God, and much less encounter Him. This verb also connotes a certain theophanic trait. In the various visions of Amos, the Lord "threatens": the end has arrived for My People - I will not pass before them any more [cf. Am 8:2; 7:8].

2.] The "passing by" of God is also interpreted as a divine intervention of salvation. - "not to pass by any more" is the equivalent of a sentence of condemnation and of sanction [cf. Ex 33:19]: I will show compassion, pity... The salvific presence of God is always "gratifying", "justifying." In this context, the goodness of God is seen as "Glory".

c. This divine salvific "passage" is accompanied by the proclamation of the Divine Name, repeated: Yahweh, Yahweh! This matching proclamation harmonizes well with the harmonizing communication of mercy: I will have compassion on whom I will, and I will show pity to whom I please! This re-duplication has the intended value of emphasis.

1.] The actual "theophany" here is depicted simply as God "passing by." The cosmic accompaniment: lightning, tremors, thunder, flaming arrows [cf. Ex 19:16, 18] are here noticeably absent. The proclamation of the Divine Name, and Yahweh's proclamation of its meaning being connected with compassion, pity, constitute the essentials of the theophany.

2.] This is just as good as "seeing God" [cf. ex 33:18-23] - it consists not so much in experiencing any awesome cosmic display - but, much more in **knowing God's name**, His authentic Name, and grasping the sublime significance of that Name. It cannot be forgotten that Yahweh does mean "**He is**"! However, on the "lips" of God Himself it resonates more as **I AM!** [cf. ex 3:14] Thus, the proclamation of the Name of God has the equivalent value of an attestation of His presence. In the mouth of Yahweh Himself [cf. 34:6], YAHWEH means: **I AM HERE!**

### 3. The Divine Name as Mercy:

a. There is not much reflection on the structure of this formulation - it is simply, it appears, a rhythmic pattern of "two's": Yahweh, Yahweh: Compassion, Pity. This may then continue: slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness [**Formula of Grace**]; for thousands His kindness, and yet lets nothing go unchecked [the "**D**" **Logion of Retribution**].

b. This final "couplet" here is outstanding for its contrast: in the other members, the second noted strengthens the earlier - but, here, there is contrast: for gives to thousands, but punishes to third or fourth generation. Some interpreters wonder if what we have here would be the bringing together of separate traditions and simply fusing them here.

1.] Regarding the prior of the two mentioned - if these were isolated, they are seen as a "**Formulation of Grace**": God is tender and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in fidelity. Under its complete form it is found at least seven times in the Bible [cf. Ex 34:6; Jl 2:13; Jon 4:2; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Ne 9:17].

2.] Furthermore, segments of this positive approach are found in about 20 other texts - and the majority of these might be noted in late compositions. The complete formula is not found prior to the time of the Exile. Nonetheless, the context of these occurrences give the impression that the phrase is received as traditional data. As a result, this "antiphon" is judged to have had a very long history, the traces of which have been lost.

3.] The theology of God's Mercy, however, is indeed found in a number of pre-exilic texts:

“... My love shall go to the House of Judah and through Yahweh their God I mean to save them...” [cf. the names of Hoseah’s children: 1:6-9] - “... Ephraim, how could I part with you... My heart recoils from it, My whole being trembles at the thought ... I will not give reign to My fierce anger ... for I am God, not man...and have no wish to destroy...” [cf. Ho 11:8, ff.] - “... If you come back, I will take you back into My service; and if you utter noble, not despicable thoughts - you shall be as My own mouth...” [cf. Jr 15:19].

4.] This verse: for thousands, He maintains kindness... yet, He lets nothing go unchecked...” [cf. Ex 34:7] manifests a “D” background - as there are close parallels with this in Dt 5:9, ff.; 7:9, ff.]

c. The repetition of the divine Name: Yahweh, Yahweh! - seems to be an indication of solemnity, imposed by the redactor as part of the “style” of a **Theophany**.

1.] The “positive” elements of the Formula of Grace and the “D” “logion” are found in Nb 14:18; again in **Moses’ Prayer** [cf. Nb 14:13-19] - and they are very close to what is found in Ex 32:11-14. Furthermore, in Nb 14:18 this association is found in an analogous manner with reference to a proclamation by God: “... You have spoken in these terms: ‘Yahweh, slow to anger and rich in fidelity, Who puts up with revolt and sin, but lets nothing go unchecked’.” Because of similarities, Nb 14:1 and Ex 34:6, seem to be of the hand of the same redactor. This theological construction marks a decisive step in **the unveiling of the Mystery of God as a Mystery of Mercy** - rather than offering a detailed analysis of this divine declaration.

2.] These components shed light on the two complementary facets of the divine mystery. The **Formula of Grace** unfolds as a kind of “register of divine attributes” which touch on the very **being** of God. The “**D Logion of Retribution**”, the second member of these couplets, seems to indicate more the divine conduct, His **activity**. Put in other terms, the divine “activity” flows from His very “being”. The Formula of Grace holds the first place and “explains” the divine conduct. This Formula of Grace is entirely positive, totally centered on mercy and kindness. The rather “ambivalent” conduct of Yahweh includes His “punitive side” - and always has to be evaluated with relationship to the revelation of this divine love.

3.] The **Formula of Grace** is equivalent to a description of the “divine manners.” It is different from the Creed [cf. Dt 26:6-10, 21-24] and also from the formula of “Self-presentation” [cf. Ex 20:1] which bear directly on the divine activities. This rather presents an attempt to describe the very Being of God. The **Formula of Grace**, then, is not concerned with God’s Being in itself, but rather makes clear that this is a **Being for others**. This zeroes in on “**the Face of God**” in so far as this is

**“turned toward human beings.”** This Divine Face reveals itself to be essentially and uniquely benevolent. The divine qualities that this formula enumerates do not reveal so much His order of Power, as they make known the **infinitude of His love**. The name YAHWEH, then, means: **tenderness, mercy, patience, attachment, fidelity** - all those qualities which are the explication of this “goodness” which God has promised to accomplish in passing “before” Moses.

a.] The first couplet brings together **compassion and pity**. The first adjective expresses what is tantamount to **maternal solicitude** [cf. Is 49:15] - the second, indicates **divine favor, grace** that is exercised by one in a position of authority, or power. In Ne 9:16, this same couplet is a kind of introduction of direct address to the **God of Pardon**. In Ne 9:31, it is associated with the **grandiose compassion of God**, which had chosen not to hand Israel over to destruction.

2.] The second couplet: **“slow to anger, rich in kindness”** develops the effects of the first couplet. The **Benevolence** and **Tenderness** of God are so great that they are translated through an **infinite patience** which moves Him to put off His anger, to leave plenty of space for repentance and conversion. In short, Yahweh manifests a fidelity under every trial.

3.] From the very outset of this sad history of sinfulness, the Lord had let it be known that He wanted “space to act” [cf. ex 32:10 - **“Leave Me, now... I will make of you a great nation...!”**]. Moses is invited to make his intervention to hold back the Divine “Arms of Vengeance”. It is because of this Divine Patience that Moses finds the courage to intercede in favor of His People. In this series of adjectives which have some bearing on the very being of God, there emerges the term **HESED** - which has no immediate translation in the modern languages. It evokes **solidarity in Covenant relationships**, that which we would translate by the word **“attachment”, “fidelity”, “Covenant Love”** - often in association with **EMET** - that kind of **trusting attachment** that one would have toward another with whom he might be engaged. This passage of the Divine Goodness [cf. Ex 33:19; 34:5-6] is not limited to the communication of the divine benefits. This further unveils the very interior of God Himself, His very Being. In simple terms: **Yahweh is a God of Tenderness, of Favor, of Mercy!**

d. This term **HESED** recurs in the second part of the declaration [v. 7], thus assuring the transition between the two components. Its presence in each part of this proclamation has favored the association of the **Formula of Grace** with the **Logion of Retribution**. Inserted within the list of divine qualifications, the term is intimately tied to the very being of God.

1.] Ordinarily, this term translates the concrete manner of acting that is all-inclusive, made up of **respect, benevolence and fidelity**. This is the case in



Ex 34:7 as the translation shows: "... for thousands, He maintains kindness, forgives faults, transgressions, sins". It is not clear whether these three last words actually do refer to different kinds of wrongs - as might be the case in the early lines of Ps 51: [blotches, wounds, missing the mark]. The vocabulary of "sin" in general, however, is somewhat generalized - and the three terms found in v. 7 are the most common. The formula suggests that Yahweh will be patient with sin. The participle is used here: "maintaining", supporting - which has the force of length without specifications. This reinforces the idea expressed in the verb "**watches over**" which also implies a rather extended duration. Thus, Yahweh shows that His fidelity is manifested as God Who is slow to anger!

2.] The second part of this sentence is the **D Logion of Retribution**: "... yet, He lets nothing go unchecked, punishing the father's fault in the sons and the grandsons to the third and fourth generation." This seems almost brutally to contradict the just stated revelation of a God of Tenderness and of Mercy. Incontestably, this perspective, where the descendants are brought to bear the chastisements merited by their fathers, runs counter to our modern sense of justice and even against our conception of God. Some appeal might be made to the "Collective Mentality", which our modern individualism would not be able to understand. This Collective Personality considers human beings as tightly bound to a community without which no person could survive.

3.] Malediction, as well as benediction, according to this mentality, of necessity affect the community - the families, the tribes, the nation - in which every person is profoundly inserted. Thus, Job takes comfort in his descendants up to the fourth generation [cf. Jb 42:16]. The inverse is also true: sanctions await humanity in its descendants [cf. 2 S 12: 1, ff.' 1 K 14:12, f.]. Many believe that "three or four generations" could conceivably be seen during the lifetime of the sheik, or family patriarch. The guilty are sanctioned in what which they hold the most dear, their descendency.

4.] It is useful here, too, to recall to mind the conception of sin in Scripture. This incurs not only subjective responsibility, on the individual level - there is also national, tribal, family responsibility. According to the OT, sin exudes into the world a maleficent power and it bears within itself a decisive level of evil. Surprisingly for the modern mentality, God's Word attributes this to God Himself due to its concern for strict monotheism - it does not accept the risk of attributing this to a power of evil which would place itself as a rival to the unique divinity. Thus, in the world everything - in one way or another - leads back to God.

5.] The end result of all this is the fact that the Merciful God does not eliminate chastisement from His role of "Kindness". While this is the Merciful God, He is likewise **the Thrice-Holy God**, Who simply cannot tolerate sin. The biblical

God is not some kind of celestial “Good Egg”, to Whom nothing makes any difference. The declaration in Ex 34:7 speaks most seriously, articulately about Divine Love - it is truly **a passionate caring**. The Word of God sometimes describes God as “jealous” [cf. Ex 34:14] - Whose passion becomes anger which His patience is at its “limit”

6.] Despite its dramatic character, even tragic, this ex 34:7 does not neutralize what appears just above: the central message of sacred Scripture regarding God is that He is the God of Mercy. In this regard, three considerations might be forthcoming:

a.] First of all, from the simple literary point of view, it is clear that the positive element needs to be kept in mind: for the **Formula of Grace** there is a full verse and half; for the **D Logion of Retribution** there is only a half a verse.

b.] Secondly, since Grace extends out over thousands - which in the biblical language means the infinite - chastisement, on the contrary, extends only to the third or fourth generation. This means, divine wrath would be “spent” within the lifetime of a sinful sheik, or clan patriarch.

c.] Lastly, and most importantly perhaps, according to the structure proposed above, it appears that the proclamation regarding God Himself is essentially positive: **Yahweh indeed is a God of tenderness and mercy**, without any limitation This is **His fundamental trait**: with Him is Grace, Compassion, Attachment, Fidelity. This revelation anticipates in its own way, the eventual “peak” of Sacred Scripture: “**God is Love**” [cf. 1 Jn 4: 16]. It is not any accident that the “D” Redactor has placed in first place, this **Formula of Grace**.

{1} This is indeed the heart of the proclamation made to Moses and then repeated through the centuries in the “Exodus Antiphon”. In what concerns that which God has **done**, the Divine Word brings out forcefully this tenderness and compassion as **Mercy and Pardon** [cf. Ex 34:7 a]. This benevolent comportment placed immediately after “slow to anger, rich in kindness” flows directly from all that God **is**.

{2} The contrast between the **Formula of Grace** and the **D Logion of Retribution** even suggests that the chastisement bears particularly on those who remain steadfast in their sin. Surely, there is no contradiction between these two members of the same sentence. There is, though, a noticeable difference of mentality between the sinners in v. 7a - who receive God’s Mercy - and those envisioned in v. 7 b, who do not seem to feel any need of God’s forgiveness.

{3} God defers His anger in view of the pending **conversion**. If one refuses His kindness, the only alternative foreseen here is

punishment. The text closest to this is Dt 5:9, f., where there is added: I am a jealous God who pursues the fault of the fathers onto their children and their children's children... of those who hate Me! [cf. Dt 7:10].

e. This uniting of the two aspects of the one sentence brings together an approach that is both literary and historical. The analysis above came from the conclusions of scholars who note that in the passage Ex 34:6-7, most likely v. 7 is from a "D" Source. The texts closest to this are: Dt 5:9, ff.; 7:9, ff.

1.] At the very source of this opinion is the striking similitude between these three texts [cf. Ex 34: 6, f.; Dt 5:9, f.; 7:9, f.]. While they are similar, there are also noted striking differences - these would be some conclusions of this school of interpretation:

- **Dt. 7: 9**, ff. would pertain to the most ancient levels of the D Redaction, at the very beginning perhaps of the Babylonian Exile;

- **Dt 5:9**, f., then, would date from a later decade during the Babylonian Captivity;

- **Ex 34:6**, f. would then date from near the end of the Captivity, or perhaps from the very first years of the Post-exilic period.

2.] For most interpreters of this matter, both Dt 5:9, ff. and Dt 7: 9, ff. do seem older than Ex 34: 6, ff. However, it is necessary to keep in mind the great incertitude regarding the genesis of the Decalogue in particular, and even more broadly, the entire formation of the Book of Deuteronomy - it would seem more prudent to many not to try to determine a close chronological sequence in the unfolding of these texts. Both texts from Dt do offer the same theological content, with some variations, it is true.

f. The message of ex 34: 6, ff. is indeed marked by the two Dt texts:

1.] Dt 5:9, f.: "... For I Yahweh, your Go, am a jealous God and I punish the fathers' fault in the sons, the grand-sons, and the great-grand-sons of those who hate Me - but, I show kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments..."

a.] This first text is perhaps the closer to Ex 34: 7. It strongly brings out the severity of this theology of retribution. This Logion which has taken its place within the Decalogue, the "Magna Charta: of Israel, is the basis of the First Commandment. This was seen as the most important of all, and is that which has often been referred to as "the commandment of principle", that severe interdiction of serving and adoring strange gods, or to make images.

b.] According to the “D Theology”, this is precisely the terrible sin of Israel [cf. 1 K 17:21; cf. Dt 29:24-25; 2 K 17:7, ff.]. The “Great Sin” was the construction of the Golden Calf, which forever afterwards served as the paradigm of rebellion against God [cf. Ex 32:21, 30, f.]. Even more, the redactor of the Decalogue connects this formulation of retribution to the expression: “I am a Jealous God” - this has within it the spirit of threat.

c.] This is why the negative sanction is placed in the first place in this text. However, it does not reveal any blind wrath on the part of God. His punitive visitation does not concern all sinners, but only those who join their present culpability to those of the ancestors: “**those who hate Me!**”. On the contrary, the divine benevolence reaches out to **those who love God and keep His commandments**.

2.] Dt 7:9, ff.: “... Know, then, that Yahweh your God is God indeed, the faithful God Who is true to His Covenant and His graciousness for a thousand generations towards those who love Him and keep His commandments but Who punishes in their own persons those who hate Him. He is not slow to destroy the man who hates Him; He makes him work out his punishment in person...”

a.] This marks a significant development over the Decalogue formulation: First of all, there may be noted the absence of the expression: “I am a Jealous God”. Furthermore, there is an inversion of the two sides of “retribution”: the **Formula of Grace** passes before the **Logion of Retribution**. These two modifications are intimately connected. The immediate context [cf. Dt 7:7 f.] brings out the more the benevolent action of Yahweh, Who has delivered Israel from slavery. It is true that as in Dt 5:9, ff., Grace has become Law.

b.] A key revelation here is that **God is true to His Covenant**. This fidelity of God **maintains** His Mercy - and the believer needs to respond to this by **keeping** His Commandments! The language employed here seems to inspire affectivity -love that commits itself on the part of God, seeks a response in love on the part of the believer. When one meets God, the person will either love, or reject [hate] Him.

g. Whatever the chronological order of these texts might eventually prove to be, from the theological point of view Dt 7:9, f. functions also as a transition between Dt 5: 9, ff.; and Ex 34:6, f. - since Dt 7:9, ff., is the reverse of Dt 5:9, f.. Thus Ex 34:6, f. reverses the sanctions: the **Formula of Grace** [v. 7 a] stands before the **D Logion of Retribution** [v. 7 b]. However, as distinct from the two texts of Dt, the Ex text adds to the interior of the positive sanction: “supporting faults, transgressions, sins”.

1.] **Mercy assumes the form of pardon** and this is something that the other two texts do not consider. And this Mercy is absolutely gratuitous - there is not even here any insistence on the keeping of the commandments. Let it not be forgotten, however, that in the style of the D rendition of Exodus, this divine proclamation comes after the Great Sin of Ex 32. In asking to “see” the divine glory [cf. Ex 33:18]. Moses in a sense “forces the hand of Yahweh”, so to speak, to unveil **the very core of His Being, which is a merciful tenderness**. In Ex 34: 6, f., there is found essentially a “saying” concerning God - whereas the other two texts emphasize the conduct of the believer and they have a kind of style of constraint [cf. Dt 5:9, f.], or a parenthesis [cf. Dt 7:9, ff.].

2.] The realization dawns that Ex 34:6, f. is the only one which has the **Logion of Retribution** follows the **Formula of Grace**. Furthermore, this goes beyond the description of God’s conduct, and sheds some light into the very depths of His Being. The revelation implies that the divine “Face” is turned toward this world - and all finds a special place in His divine Heart. This God of Tenderness and Compassion is also the Jealous God!

h. This theology indeed might reflect in practical terms the “experience” of the “fourth generation”! We are now near the end of the Exile, or perhaps near the beginning of the Post-Exilic time. During three, or four generations Israel had to endure the sanction of the divine judgment, because of the sins of their fathers. This time is now over, and now the era of Pardon for a thousand generations has begun, a pardon without restriction.

1.] With this revelation from the very lips of Yahweh Himself, the **revelation of the divine mystery** reaches something of a summit. The first revelation of the Divine Name [cf. Ex 3:13-15] was very enigmatic: Yahweh! - even though this was clearly associated with the efficacious and salvific presence of God. He is here, there - He will be with you! [cf. Ex 3:12, 34:6, f.] But, this second revelation of the Divine Name goes much further. It opens up perspectives that heretofore had been beyond imagination regarding the very being of God. He unveils Himself **not only as a God of Tenderness and Pity, but also one of Pardon and Mercy**.

2.] Yahweh no longer uses here the language of power, but that of love, and this love is extended onward sinners who are not able to merit of themselves. God puts up with faults, rebellion, sin. It is from this tradition that Jewry developed its 13 Rules [MIDDOT] through which God manifests His Mercy, especially on **the Day of the Great Pardon**.

3.] From this time on, believers would find support from these proclamations to confess their faith, particularly in expressing the **Formula of Grace**. Ps 103 will offer a more detailed Commentary, all centered on the divine pardon

which it presents as the attribute of God Himself [cf. vv. 3, 8-12] The unknown Psalmist will use some of the terminology found here on the lips of Moss.

4.] This sort of “conflict”, “rivalry” between the Wrath and the Mercy of God that might be seen in Dt 5:9, ff. and 7:9, ff., is ultimately resolved in this unveiling of the meaning of the sacred Name. This is a “Victory for Mercy.” Ne 9:7 will define Yahweh as the God of Pardons - and Dn 9:9 will declare: To Yahweh belong mercy and pardon [cf. Ps 86:15]

4. **Moses’ Reaction:** “... And Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshipped. ‘If I have indeed won Your favor, Lord, he said, ‘let my Lord come with us, I beg. True, they are a headstrong people, but **forgive us our faults** and our sins, and **adopt us** as Your heritage...” [cf. Ex 34:8, f.].

a. This is the definitive manifestation of the Divine Glory that Moses had asked to see [cf. Ex 34: 18]. The Divine Glory indeed is **Goodness** [cf. Ex 33:19] - **Tenderness** and **Mercy** [cf. Ex 34:6, f.]. In the face of a revelation such as this, there is no other adequate attitude than **Adoration**. The kneeling and the prostration of Moses are translated into that recognition of this transcendent presence of a love that offers itself at the Encounter - rather than thanksgiving and full and entire adherence of the human beneficiary of this love.

b. This prostration, in any case, does not signify extreme abasement in the presence of the Sacred. Quite to the contrary, Moses retained his freedom and his voice. He stands before God as a responsible partner.

1.] This unexpected revelation opened wide before Moses brand new perspectives, full of hope: the God Who refused to accompany His People because, as He Himself had said, He would present a menace of death [cf. Ex 33:1-5], now reveals Himself in reality as a God of Mercy.

2.] Finding support in this theophany. Moses reformulates his request that had been previously the object of his prayer cf. Ex 32:32: that God once more become the companion of Israel’s journey [cf. Ex 33:12-17 - that the Lord march WITH us]. Here Moses shifts the emphasis notably: If I have truly found favor with You [cf. Ex 33:3, 5], come along, I beg of You, **in the midst of us** - for this is a headstrong people [cf. Ex 32:9; 33:3,5] - please pardon our fault and sin [cf. Ex 32:21,30, 31, 33].

3.] This is indeed the proof that, in union with His People from the outset - in asking to see His Glory [cf. Ex 33:18], this would have been an exorbitant privilege. What the wily Moses seems to have been driving at was to induce God to reveal **the very depths of His Being**, His genuine visage. Then he was able to formulate his ultimate supplication: Please **pardon** our fault, our sin! This verb has

strong theological connotations and is not placed by chance as the conclusion of the prayer. This action is reserved to God alone, and fits in perfectly here following the manifestation of Ex 34: 6, f. This Divine Pardon goes far beyond the simple expression: God “relented” over the evil [cf. Ex 32:12, 14]. According to Jr 50:20 [cf. also Ex 31:34], **Pardon** implies as well the disappearance of all fault, of every culpability.

c. Even more astonishing is the motivation that Moses advances in his seeking the Lord’s Pardon: that the Lord come along in our midst, for this is a stiff-necked people!

1.] This relationship is just the opposite of that presented in Ex 33: 3, 5 where Yahweh utilizes that same argument to justify His withdrawal and His absence from the People. Now Moses takes up the argument to give a reason why the Lord should be in their “midst”. In order to avoid an apparent contradiction, some translate all this as a kind of “concessive clause”: **even though** this is indeed a stiff-necked people! However, the so-called causative sense: **because, for this very reason** this is a stiff-necked People!

2.] Whatever might be the ultimate conclusion of the grammar experts, this expression of Moses does admit that the People has been stubborn in the past in its dealings with God. Moses’ argument is: despite this sinfulness, come to the People’s help! What had previously been the underlying reason for the divine punishment is now turned around and becomes the theological argument for pardon: this is a stubborn people. And God is reminded that He is One Who sustains sins, rebellion and faults [cf. Ex 34: 7 a]. For this reason, the patient, merciful Lord will not be out of place in the midst of a sinful people.

3.] The fundamental question which lies under Ex 33 is: How could the Thrice-Holy God remain in the midst of a sinful People? Here the radical answer is provided. Communion with God does not rest on the holiness of the People, but rather on the gratuity of **the pardoning love of Yahweh**.

4.] This Ex 34:1-9 has considerable theological weight. On its first reading, v. 9 seems to be foreign to its development. In truth, not only in literary fashion, but also theologically, this situates itself in a direct line with all that precedes: “... they are a headstrong people, but forgive us our faults and our sins, and adopt us as Your heritage!” This flows from what the Lord revealed to Moses: “... I will do what you have asked, because you have won My favor and because I know you by name!” [cf. Ex 33:17].

d. Moses then draws the ultimate consequences: make us Your inheritance! The Divine Pardon effaces sins and faults, and permits one to re-

establish with the Lord even new and harmonious relationships with Him. Because of sin, Israel had lost the right of inheritance [cf. Dt 9:26, 29; 1 K 8:51, 53; Is 63:17; Jl 2:17; Mi 7:14, 18; Ps 28: 9; 74: 2; 94: 5, 14; 106:5]. Like Pardon, this **privilege of inheritance** reposes uniquely on **the gratuity of divine love**. The term is theologically charged. It is a part of **the Covenant vocabulary**, adding to this the idea of “**special belonging**” which allows Israel to pass over from the sphere of the “profane” - with all other peoples - to the very world of God. This theological category is translated simply by “**special treasure**” [**segullah**] in Ex 19:5. This final demand also prepares Yahweh’s response which treats of the Renewal of the Covenant [cf. Ex 34:10-28].

[NB: for pages 97-109 of these notes, cf. Bernard Renaud, *L’Alliance: Un mystère de Miséricorde*. Lectio Divina 169. Cerf, pp. 189-203]

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### C. “YAHWEH”: the Divine Lord as Covenant Partner

[NB: for pages 109, ff. of these notes, cf. Alfons Deissler, “Yahweh come disposto all’Alleanza”, in: *Mysterium Salutis. Nuovo corso di dogmatica come teologia della storia della salvezza*. Vol. 3. Brescia: Queriniana 1969, pp. 314-341, passim].

#### [I] “Covenant” as Category of Revelation

1. Yahweh took the Initiative for Special Relationship with His People: this is the nearly unanimous agreement of a wide variety of OT texts.

a. The etymology of “Covenant” of the word seems to be a combination of words which in the end would mean: ‘the community bond that would be achieved and expressed by the banquet idea.’ In this view, emphasis is placed on the many times “Covenants” are drawn up during a meal [cf. Gn 26:30; 31:46, 54]. There is further noted the fact that in the ancient Covenants of Israel **the convivial oblation** is central to **the sacrificial banquet**.

b. The testimonies connecting Covenant and the community table are important in the description of the formation of the **Paschal Banquet** celebrating **the founding intervention** on the part of God of **Liberating His People**. Of major importance here is the ancient **Covenant Banquet of Sinai** [cf. Ex 24:11]. There is also the reserved position in the Liturgy for **the Covenant of Peace** where salvation is established through the Covenant: in this, there was the oblation of the slaughtered victims, in which **the sacrificial banquet** was integral to the proceedings. The experts are able to make a careful distinction in these ancient rites between oblations, communion sacrifices and holocausts [cf. Ex 24:5; Ps 50:5].

2. “Covenant” has wide applications, but Distinguishable Stable Elements: from a broad variety of sources - including extra-biblical customs - it becomes clear that



“Covenant” knew a variety of forms. There seems to have been a close tie between the Contract of Sovereignty [including controls over life and vassalage] and the Divine Mosaic Covenant. In such pacts, very unequal partners could be joined in some kind of a **community** in which the more powerful member assures protection and security, called “**SHALOM**” - and the less powerful member would promise **loyalty** and material **support**.

a. The “classical” Pact would usually contains such elements as the following: 1. Preamble; 2. Historical Prologue; 3. Stipulations; 4. Periodic Reading; 5. Witness; 6. Curses and Blessings. These proceedings had to be consigned to writing. There is an abundance of OT parallels to substantiate this structure.

b. From the theological point of view the God of Revelation chose this type of political agreement as the “form” for **His own Covenant relationship of intimacy and mercy with Israel**. The actual “content” of these covenants greatly varied over the generations depending on the type of Covenant and the historical background - but, the entire structure served as a “natural” to be filled in with religious stipulations. Oddly, perhaps, the religious use of this is somewhat reserved for Israel. It developed over the years from land agreements, last wills and testaments, to nuptial agreements - to God’s favored “tool” for uniting His Chosen People to Himself through an agreement of mercy in exchange for keeping the Ten Commandments.

c. However, when all was said and done, the central factor to all this was this basic fact: the transcendent God. on His free will, **lowered Himself toward Israel**. Through this Chosen People the Creator God revealed Himself to be Redeemer, by fundamentally elevating all of humanity to a **Relationship of Community** with Himself. This divine initiative transformed all of “history” into “**Salvation History**”, and all was directed toward **SHALOM**. This meant the fullness of life in being together with God, a way of life shaped by God’s Word in which every human being could work out union with God. This basic “content” may be found in many OT passages even though the term itself was avoided by some of the important Prophets, as Is, Am and Mi.

d. However, there was also a dangerous trap in the use of this terminology and structure. When it is kept in mind that “Covenant” is an association of fixed interests and sealed with partners who are almost equal socially and politically, Israel often fell into the temptation of considering “Covenant” under this light. It became understood more as a juridical contest in which the People “gave” to God token worship, lip-service, in the routine expectation that He would simply give back in abundance what they believed they deserved. This may be the reason why the Prophets noted above would not use the formal term “Covenant”. By their time in Israel’s history, the use of “Covenant” had degenerated so the prophetic revelation of

all this was the Yahweh-Israel relationship was emphasized primarily as one of a one of **Divine Benevolence**.

e. By this shift in emphasis, the Prophets did nothing more than restore to its original place of honor that accent already clearly discernible in the Divine Mosaic Covenant as placed on **the sovereignty and holiness of God** which concedes than in every subsequent “agreement” with God the Lord God of Israel must be considered simply superior. The community relationship has its fundamental constitution in the totally mysterious Divine Personality that transcends the cosmos, time and Israel!

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## [II] The Divine Initiative for the Covenant of Mercy in Salvation History

### Premise:

[1] Israel early on began to experience herself as a “chosen” People, one assumed on the divine initiative into communion and a Covenant relationship with God. This experience flowed from her experience as a People, beginning to “take hold” in the Exodus experience - which enabled them to “remember”, look back, on the earlier traditions. Israel’s reflection on her sacred wonders enabled the present to be considered as generated and born from their history. This simultaneously opened up encouraging vistas for the unknown future.

[2] This field of Israel’s historical consciousness continually enlarged under the light of her faith. Eventually it went from creative redemption - the dividing of the Sea of Reeds [cf. Ex 14: 15, ff.]; to the miracle of the tapping of the stone for water [cf. Ex 17: 1, ff.] - backward to the separating of the light from the darkness, and the division of the waters above from the waters below [cf. Gn 1: 2, ff.]: indications of redemptive creation. This same image went forward to the day when the feet of the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant touched the Jordan River at that time when the waters were at the full: “... the upper waters stood still and made one heap over a wide space - while those flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah, i.e., the Salt Sea, stopped running altogether...” [cf. Jos 3: 14, ff.]. The creative, redemptive power of the Lord is manifested in His dominion over the primordial chaos - His influence extended to the skies above, the seas below, as far east and west as could be dreamed.

[3] These events handed on through the succeeding generations through worship and recollection enabled Israel to interpret each day’s events as unfolding from the plan of the Creator of the Cosmos who is also the Sovereign of sacred History. There might be discerned a general theme running through all of the Pentateuch: the hand of the Lord is in all places, in all events - there is a progressive development, despite all the obstacles. The ultimate goal of all this is the “creation” of a theocracy, the

Chosen, Covenanted People in constant relationship with God, keeping His Word. Palestine is the Promise Land, and the TORAH is its constitution.

[4] This ideal was protected further on toward the unknown universal and eschatological distances by Prophets - and would be pondered, contemplated by the Sages. This divine plan would extend as far as the rays of the sun, as far as the east is from the west, or the sky from the land, to the depths of the sea: "... Pride of the heights, shining vault, so, in a glorious spectacle, the sky appears, the sun... And then the moon, always punctual, marks the months, signals the feasts... the glory of the stars makes the beauty of the sky, a brilliant decoration in the heights of the Lord ... See the rainbow and praise its Maker! [cf. Si 43: 1, ff.]...Next, let us praise our illustrious ancestors, in their successive generations...the Lord has created an abundance of glory and displayed His greatness from earliest times... [cf. Si 44: 1, ff.].

[5] One of the Prayer Stances that helped Israel ponder these wonders was to recollect on the sacred memories of her past: "Keep this day in remembrance ...no leavened bread must be eaten! [cf. Ex 13: 3].

[a] "... Do not forget the things your eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your heart all the days of your life; rather, tell them to your children and to your children's children...Put this question, then, to the ages that are past, that went before you, from the time God created man on earth. Was there ever a Word so majestic, from one end of heaven to the other...?" [cf. Dt 4:9, 32].

[b] "... Remember how Yahweh your God led you for 40 years in the wilderness, to humble you, to test you and know your inmost heart - whether you would keep His commandments or not..." [cf. Dt 8:2] - "... Think back on the days of old, think over the years, down the ages, ask of your father, let him teach you; of your elders, let them enlighten you..." [cf. Dt 32:7]

[c] Prophets: "... But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will be born for me the one who is to rule over Israel; his origin goes back to the distant past, to the days of old..." [cf. Mi 5:1 +]

[d] Wisdom: "... Question the generation that has passed, meditate on the experience of the Fathers, We, sons of yesterday, know nothing; our life on earth passes like a shadow. But, they will teach you, they will tell you and these are the words they speak from the heart..." [cf. Jb 8: 8, ff.] - "... Are you the first-born of the human race brought into the world before the hills> Have you been a listener at Gods council, or established a monopoly of wisdom...? [cf. Jb 15:7, ff.]. - "... And remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before evil days come and the years approach when you say: 'These give me no pleasure' - before sun and light and moon and stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain..." [cf. Si 12:1, ff.] - "...Do not

underrate the talk of old men, after all, they themselves learned it from their fathers; from them you will learn how to think, and the art of the timely answer..." [cf. Si 8:9, ff.).

[e] Psalms: "... My soul thirst for God, the God of life; when shall I go to see the face of God? ... I remember, and my soul melts within me...!" [cf. Ps 42] - "...God, we have heard with our own ears, our ancestors have told us, of the deeds you performed in their days, in days long ago, by your hand..." [cf. Ps 44:1, ff.] - "... On my bed, I think of you, I meditate on you all night long for you have always helped me. I sing for joy in the shadow of your wins; my soul clings close to you, your right hand supports me..." [cf. Ps 63:7] - "... I thought of the olden days, years long past came back to me. I spent all night meditating in my heart, I pondered and my spirit asked the question... I reflect on all you did, I ponder on all your achievements..." [cf. Ps 77:5, ff., 12]. - "... Listen to this Law, my People, pay attention to what I say; I am going to speak to you in parable, and expound the mysteries of our past ... What we have heard and known for ourselves and what our ancestors have told us, must not be withheld from their descendants but be handed on by us to the next generation; that is: the titles of Yahweh, his power, and the miracles He has done...He instituted a TORAH in Israel, He gave our ancestors strict orders to teach it to their children, the next generation was to learn it, these children still to be born..." [cf. Ps 78:1, ff.] - "... Remembering your rulings in the past, Yahweh, I take comfort..." [cf. Ps 119:52]. - "... I recall the days of old, I reflect on all you did, I ponder your deeds; I stretch out my hands, like thirsty ground, I yearn for you..." [cf. Ps 143: 5].

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1. **God and Early Humanity**: Most agree that the so-called "P Tradent" has had the dominating part in the final redaction of the Pentateuch. Thus, it has placed Gn 1 presenting God as the "Universal Creator" as the Prologue of the entire history of the Covenant. From this redemptive creation depart all the lines of this interweaving story, with all the aspects of life beginning from on high - centering on the ultimate, the pinnacle of creation, ADAM AND EVE.

a. Primordial humanity is described just a bit differently from the rest of creation: as Adam and Eve are made to the image and likeness of God [cf. Gn 1:26]. This means that the first man and woman are given "dominion" by God over the rest of the universe: "... Yahweh, our Lord, how great your name throughout the earth! Above the heavens is your majesty chanted, by the mouths of children...I look up at the heavens, made by your fingers, at the moon and stars you set in place - ah, what is man that you should spare a thought for him, the son of man that you should care for him? Yet, you have made him a little less than the gods..." [ELOHIM!] [cf. Ps 8].

b. This remarkable text offers some explanation of the relationship between God's image and humanity, as His sovereign representation on earth. This

all flows from the human vocation bestowed in creation to realize the challenge of living out the human vocation, by conducting one's entire life in accord with the Word of God, and in His Name. The earthly field of endeavor entrusted to human beings is meant to become structured in such a manner that it truly be a Reign of God on earth, that His will and word be done on earth as they are in heaven.

c. Even though the word "**Covenant**" does not appear in the formal sense - perhaps for the simple reason that in the format, the idea of "stipulations would be spelled out clearly - nonetheless, from the very style of composition there is evidently manifested a connection between God and humanity in the context of the visible world. There is clearly established on the divine initiative a very special relationship that each human being is the Lord's "lieutenant", "vicar" - not only in acting, but on the sublime level of human being. This is evident in the very care the Creator exercises in fashioning humanity out of the dust of the earth, and breathing into each a living soul.

d. The fundamental dignity that the Creator has shared with His specially loved creature is "**personality**". It is this participation in the divinity that makes **communication** possible, and opens up the almost endless possibilities of "**relationship**." The great wonder of all this is that humanity is created **theomorphic**. With this great gift, God has attested that His eternal will of creating was already determined by His loving will to the establishment of **Covenant**.

e. The style of "J" Writing would connect the ancient past with the present, here and now. There is the constant effort to show that King David - perhaps always reigning in the Yahwist's ideal - is constantly connected to the Patriarchs, to Moses - the ideal leader:

1.] "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy - because on that day he had rested after all his work of creating..." [cf. Gn 2:3] - in this remarkable passage, the word "**Covenant**" is not found - nor, is there any mention of the violation of the Covenant. However, objectively, the Covenant Couple, Adam and Eve, are represented in **the Garden of Eden, Paradise**. This is the reward, a kind of idyllic **Promised Land**, where the Lord simply "is", in regular contact with the human inhabitants.

2.] In this **sacred history**, God testifies how He out of total freedom, realized in an incredible fullness the "**obediential potency**" within the human personality imparted to each person at creation. The Lord Himself has placed humanity before **the open door of the Way to Salvation**. This is intended by God from the outset to lead **from the Tree of Life to Life Eternal**.

3.] For all this to happen, it is the Divine Will that the human being place him/herself **under the Divine Commands** - to keep the Word of God, to carry out His Will, keeps the way to salvation open. All of this has come to human beings from the Redeeming, Creator God, **eternally “disposed” for Covenant**. The freedom of God turns toward humanity in the form of **the Divine Initiative for Covenant**. This challenges each human being to make a decision to live out the free dispositions of the Covenant with God. To reject this **Covenant of Mercy** would be tantamount to human beings closing the open Way to the Promised Land, to turn away from the Gate opened for each to enter and become a **part of the Flock of the Divine Good Shepherd**.

4.] The human disobedience is revealed as having come from **incredulity** in God’s intentions for Covenant. In this **rejection of confidence, trust and love for God**, human beings unilaterally broke the bond of the Covenant of Mercy.

f. Despite this unilateral distancing themselves from God, He did not retaliate by rejecting men and women forever. God “respected” human free will in allowing the rejection in the first place - and this same “**weakness**”, which St. Paul would eventually come to understand a **strength** in which he could glory [cf. 2 Co 12:9,f.].

1.] Right away, there is the promise of a “redeemer” in what has come to be called the “initial Gospel”: “... I will make you [the snake] enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel...” [cf. Gn 3:15].

2.] The careful attention of God to the human scene can be noted throughout these extraordinary passages: at the birth of Cain, Eve exclaims: I have acquired a man **with the help of Yahweh!** [cf. Gn 4:1] - Yahweh intervenes in the activities of Cain and Abel, just being a part of their daily lives [cf. Gn 4:6]. And even after Cain’s terrible crime, the Lord “protected” him: the Lord put a mark on Cain to protect him [v. 10, ff.].

3.] The theme of judgment and grace - in which grace always superabounds [cf. Rm 5:15, ff.] - permeates all of this pre-history. This goes all the way to the Flood Story, that comes to a climax with the Covenant made with Noah [cf. Gn 9:1, ff.]. In this chapter, the God of Revelation testifies in the manner of a priestly theologian. Despite all the human rejections of God, the Divine Will remains firmly fixed on the Covenant of Mercy - this is His definitive Will

. This is what sustains and governs history.

2. **The God of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**: these ancient accounts show a two-fold characteristic:

- on the one hand, they contain very ancient material, dating from pre-Mosaic times;

- however, this material has been brought together, styled and interpreted in the light of the later Mosaic and post-Mosaic revelation.

a. For the believer, this has all happened under the inspiring assistance of the God of Revelation. From this it would follow that God, in this Patriarchal History, gradually unveils how He already at that time, was forgiving this History as One of **Salvation History**. Seen in its totality as the “Hesateuch” the Patriarchal Epoch is the Time of the Promises made. These are gradually fulfilled as the history unfolds through Moses, Joshua and all that happens thereafter.

b. Even though the word “Covenant” does not appear until later, in the representation of ancient materials in a later style, nonetheless all the essentials in these ancient traditions of the “**Documentary Hypothesis**” [or, in what remains of J-E-D-P], most scholars would agree that the revealed relationship between Yahweh and Israel, established in the age of the “Fathers”, is actually presented as a **Covenant**.

1.] Throughout, God reveals Himself as **the personal God of the Covenant**. He manifests a delicate attention for the Patriarchs, their families, their destinies. God shows Himself interiorally disposed for communion. This is emphasized especially by the fact that He follows through on the initiatives He undertakes. Although the Lord is totally transcendent, He “commits” Himself by His inherent **fidelity** to carry through His Word. On the part of the Fathers, there is asked by God for their own **faithfulness** in response to His commands.

2.] The actual “history” of Israel [following 11 Chapters of Pre-History, including Adam & Eve, up through the Flood] seems to begin with **the Call of Abraham [Gn 12]**. On this Father in the Faith, there is imposed by God a new way to follow, a whole new way of life, in a new land that the Lord Himself would show him. This corresponds to the **Grand Promise**. This theme of the Promise then runs throughout the entire Patriarchal Period [cf. Gn 12:1 ff.; 13:14, ff.; 15:5, ff., 18; 18:10; 22:17; 26:24; 28:3, ff., 13; 35:9, ff.; 46:16, ff.]. Israel becomes known as **the People of the Promise**, and their **God is the Faithful to His Promises**.

3.] The God of the entire Cosmos Who may freely dispose in space of the ancient empires along the banks of the Ephrates and the Nile, of a little strip of land on the edge of the “Fertile Crescent”, benevolently “leans down over” Abraham and offers him two gifts: His descendancy will increase like the sands of the sea; and He will be granted possession of the Land of Canaan. This relationship of salvation and grace, according to the ancient tradition, already satisfies the requirements for a

full blown “Covenant.” It is all presented in a manner that is different in the various traditions, “J” and “P”.

1.] The “J” - Gn 15:7-18: perhaps one of the most ancient fragments of all: these are the Divine Promises and the Covenant - in the **cutting of the birds**, and Abraham and the Lord God walked through them. There may be noted here the Ritual of the Stipulations of the Covenant in which oblation and the meal are on a second level - and the emphasis is clearly placed on the “curses” for non-compliance, a “dead-duck/pigeon”! The Covenant with God is not supposed to be violated [cf. Jr 34:17, ff.]. In looking at the pathway between the divided animals, Abraham has a profound experience in the dream and the appearance of the **Fire** from on high, the symbol representing Yahweh Himself. This passage then concludes with the drawing up of the Covenant. This would be one of the more outstanding - as well as one of the most ancient - passages, indicating beyond any doubt, the clear divine will for conducting His relationship with His beloved creation through “Covenant”.

2.] The “P” - Gn 17:1-14: the account of **the Covenant and the Circumcision**: Yahweh appears absolutely as the initiator of the Covenant - the “P” theology speaks more of “establishing” a covenant, “granting” one: “... Here now is **My Covenant** with you: you shall become the father of a multitude of nations...” [cf. v. 4]. The Lord promises to give to him and to his descendancy after him, the land where Abraham sojourns as a stranger, the entire land of Canaan - and Yahweh will be “his” God [v. 8]. By this divine initiative of the Covenant, God Himself opens up a brand new and grandiose future for covenanted humanity. This pertains primarily to the People of Israel, chosen by God for this. However, this also introduces contemporaneously into the History of Salvation, the key for understanding all that follows: in Abraham will be blessed all the tribes of the earth! [cf. 12:3]

c. The very heart of God’s Self-manifestation is this Will for Covenant. In this are brought together in unique manner his omnipotent power and infinite mercy. The “center of His divine heart” is manifested here: “...Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants...” [cf. Gn 15:1-6].

1.] Abraham sees himself in a terrible spot, one that is difficult to overcome from any human wisdom, caught between promise and what seems to be his inability to realize this. In this difficulty, God simply renews His promise in an impressive manner: this one and only son of his, which he is being asked to surrender, somehow will be the beginnings of a descendancy as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sands of the sea. In the renewal of the divine word, Abraham shows his “mettle”: Abram put his faith in Yahweh, Who counted this as making him justified! [cf. 15:6].



2.] “To believe” in Hebrew means” to stand, be, solidly with Yahweh. It implies trust in His promises, and this all flows from, and is nourished by the “sacred memories” of ancient Israel: the Lord is truly faithful to His word! This “faith” is always also “action” and as such it implies the human fundamental correspondence to the relationship of holy communion, which God Himself has founded and inaugurated through the Covenant. Nothing other is intended by the biblical word “justice” - perhaps simply fidelity to the Covenant of God, the living of His Word.

d. The “God of Abraham” becomes eventually the “God of Isaac” [cf. Gn 26:3, 24] - the “God of Jacob” [cf. Gn 28:13; 31:42; 35:12; 48:15; 50:23]. In summary, the “God of the Fathers” is simply “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” [cf. Ex 3:6, 15; 4:5, etc.]. All the traits of His activity, as well as His nature, as can be seen in the later historical developments concerning Covenant, are already at least implicitly contained here. With the unfolding of history, the revelation of “**Covenant**” remains the most outstanding and impressive manifestation of **the inherent and eternal divine disposition towards humanity, disposed for Covenant**.

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### 3. The Redeeming, Liberating God and the Sinai/Horeb Covenant:

a. The “Seed of Abraham” as the People Israel came to be known [cf. Ex 1:7] became a people in Egypt of some stature. Because of the changes of their fortunes in history, they became **an enslaved people** [cf. Ex 1:8, ff.]. Then, it was that the God of their Fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob came to the rescue! He saw the humiliation of His People in the land of slavery, and heard their groaning because of their harsh overseers. The Lord understood their suffering. Then it was He decided to come to their rescue from their oppressors [cf. Ex 3:6, ff.].

1.] Here God is revealed as speaking intimately bound, connected to His beloved People, now suffering great reverses, hardships. He would like to deliver this People from their slavery - as later one would “**redeem**” “**ransom**” a family member, or servant, who fell into insoluble debt [cf. Lv 25:48, f.]. A number of the expressions used in this context are significant:

- I will **redeem** you with outstretched arm! [cf. 15:13];

- You have guided with Your favor this people You have **redeemed**! [cf. Ps 74:2; 77:16; 78:35; 106:10].

2.] The term that keeps recurring here is **GO’EL**, a word that is derived from family law. It came to mean also the defense through vengeance, by even the shedding of blood. This term came into greater and greater usage in the liberation of Israel from the Land of Slavery. The Book of Deuteronomy brings GO’EL together with

another word rich in meaning: **PADAH**, that comes for commercial terminology [cf. Dt 9:26; 13:6; 21:8]. This emphasizes the special relationship of “belonging” on the part of Israel toward God - and His very special, personal “proprietaryship” on the part of God toward Israel. [cf. Ex 19:5].

3.] Throughout the arduous **Exodus sojourn** out from the Land of Captivity to the Promised Land, **the Will of Yahweh for the Covenant** was manifested in such an intense manner and manifested itself as a **Liberating Power**. This deliverance was so significant that it remained deeply embedded in the religious and spiritual consciousness of Israel. This Exodus experience always served as the measuring stick, as the pure and simple type of Redemption that Yahweh repeatedly worked in behalf of Israel, in greater or lesser circumstances, as Salvation History unfolded. What further added to its splendor was the fact that **the Divine Name** was revealed at the outset - as the Lord God who would lead His people to redemption.

b. Throughout the Pentateuch tradition, this divine manner of acting of God toward Israel His “partner”, eventually led to Horeb/Sinai for a solemn stipulation of the Covenant - in which the relationship initiated by Yahweh toward Israel became expressed in a fixed and permanent form. Both traditions: that involving the Exodus Journey and the one involving the Covenant on the Mountain - became more and more intimately intertwined. The view followed by many exegetes, perhaps, is that the “Exodus” tradition and the “Sinai” tradition were two separate realities in the ancient past. However, they were fused by Israel, as well as in the understanding of most modern scholars. The fact of Sinai became presented in the so-called “Sinai Pericope” [cf. Ex 19-34]. In its actual form, the experts realize that it is the ultimate result of a lengthy process. Nonetheless, this does not distract in the least from its essential historical nucleus.

c. **Ex 19-24** are dedicated to **the “Stipulations” of the Covenant of Sinai**. In the final redaction, they were all joined together as **“The Book of the Covenant”**, even though most likely materials from other sources would have been added to the ancient traditions.

1.] **Ex 19** is the Proposal of the Covenant on the part of Yahweh. The **Oracle of the Desert Eagle** [cf. Ex 19:4; Dt 32] has its own “pre-history”: You yourselves have seen what I have done to the persecutors, and how the Lord Himself lifted you up on eagles’ wings and have brought you here to Myself. There follows then immediately the **Declaration of Principle**: And now, if you will listen to My voice and if you will keep My Covenant, **you will be my special treasure, as all the world is Mine. You will be for Me a Realm of Priests and a holy nation!** [cf. Ex 19:5, ff.].

2.] **Ex 20** presents the authentic Covenant Document, the “contract” fixed forever in writing, as would have been required throughout antiquity for those

contracts of sovereignty of the ancient Middle East. The Decalogue is referred to as “the Book of the Covenant”, as the solemn stipulations of the Covenant [cf. Ex 24:7].

a.] This opens with God’s Self-presentation: I am the Lord, your God, Who brought you out of the land of slavery! This is known as the **Preamble**, including the name and title of the regent. Next would follow the **Historical Prologue**, the antecedent benefits bestowed on the Covenant partner by the more powerful of the contracting parties - in this case, the Creator, the Redeemer. This declaration would contain two of Israel’s many sacred wonders: “**creative redemption**” and “**redemptive creation**.” This is not so much a declaration of the divine sovereignty on the part of God, but much more and solemn

indication of His inherent Will that He truly “wants to be” for Israel the God of the Covenant, their Absolute Legislator. Yahweh has willed to be for Israel the God of the Covenant, and He has “proven” His worth in the deliverance of Israel from slavery.

b.] In this Self-presentation of Yahweh as the Liberator God there is implicitly already included His commitment to remain faithful for the people’s future history. This formula contains in a nut-shell Yahweh’s total disposition for humanity, represented here by one People, Israel. This disposition springs from the Will of Covenant that is operative in and through the Covenant. With these ideas there is what many interpreters consider to be the most impressive condensation of the entire OT of the Good News - meaning, God’s good disposition for Covenant and His subsequent actions to establish, protect this Covenant. This is already a kind of “Gospel.”

c.] The **Stipulations** are spelled out for the contracting partner in this divine Covenant, Israel. These are simply the **Decalogue**. This has the function of a fundamental declaration, determining what the “partner” has to do in this mutually binding Covenant. There are also inserted some lesser particular determinations that seem to have found their way into the text, as expressed designations of how human beings responded to this Covenant Word of God. In these, there are traceable the outlines of the essential traits willed by God for the conduct of His partners in the Covenant. They are called to maintain the human partner in a relationship of benevolent Covenant granted by God, in the sphere of salvation.

d.] A characteristic of this Decalogue is that after the first three commandments which pertain to Yahweh, the contracting partner has to agree to them. This indicates that human morality pertains integrally to the divine rights, and is demanding on the part of the agreeing partners. This means that in the context of revelation, there is an indissoluble inter-weaving of religion and community ethics: the service of one’s neighbor pertains unconditionally to the worship of God.

e.] **Periodic Reading:** The determinations of the Book of the Covenant are inserted as the Decalogue, the stipulations of the Covenant. Perhaps originally, some of these lesser requirements might have appeared at the end of the Sinai account. Nonetheless, they rather clearly bring out the communitary human character of the Covenant with God, attested to in the Decalogue. In the prophetic message, there is often considered the “Second Table of Moses”, a kind of continuation of the Covenant of Sinai in changed human circumstances [cf. Am 5:21, ff.; Ho 6:6; Is 1:14, ff.; Mi 6:88]. There are also the **Liturgies of the TORAH** [cf. Ps 15; 24; Is 33:4, ff.] that are not addressed precisely as cultic prescriptions, but rather demand the **community ethics** of the participants in the cult.

f.] In the unchanging command of Yahweh so formulated, there is resplendent once more in an impressive way how much the God of the Covenant is, and chooses to be a God orientated toward humanity. Whoever would choose to say “yes” to him may never exclude this disposition of His towards humanity, but rather ought to direct oneself toward him, and other human beings. The immediate consequence of all this is simply the following: beginning with Sinai, the vibrant and operative faith in God, as the God of **the Covenant, consists in the service of one’s neighbor.**

3.] The Covenant unfolds in accord with Ex 24: in a Liturgical Context. It seems that two traditions have been fused together by the later redactors of the ancient texts:

- Ex 24: 1, f, 9-11: this refers to a **banquet** of the Elders of Israel in the presence of God - all saw God and they ate and drank.

- Ex 24:3-8: this is the accounting of a sacrificial Liturgy, with the oblation of the holocaust and a **communion sacrifice**.

a.] The fusion of these two traditions into a single unity was rendered possible precisely by the fact that the Sacrificial Banquet on the mountain could be considered as an ‘inclusion’ of the sacrifices on the altar, at the base of the mountain - it was all one Ritual. [cf. v. 4].

b.] Two aspects of this liturgical sacrifice here are of sublime importance:

- the **Blood**: this is considered as the exclusive property of God Himself in all the sacrifices: half would be offered to God as the divine ‘companion’ at the table - whereas the other half of the blood would be poured out on the people, with the exclamation: This is the Blood of the Covenant which Yahweh has drawn up with you, on the basis of all these words! [cf. v 8].

- Prior to this aspersion, in the very heart of the liturgical action of the Adhering to the Stipulations of the Covenant, Moses took the Book of the Covenant, **the “Magna Charta” of the Decalogue** - and read it before the People and said to them: all that Yahweh has ordained we will do and carry out! [cf. Ex 24:7].

c.] **The Divine Liturgy of the Word:** the structure was as follows: as the Word of the God of the Covenant would be read out, which both made promises and issued commands, there followed the response of the People of God. All of this pertains substantially to **the Liturgy of the Covenant** and presents this as a profoundly community relationship. Through **the Aspersion of the Blood of the Covenant**, this reserved property of God Himself, the Community of Israel is declared to be His through this Covenant of Blood. This ritual of the blood provided the most intimate and indissoluble bond, through which God could cold bind Himself to His people, and join them to Himself. From this dramatic moment on, Israel became effectively **the exclusive property of Yahweh** [cf. Ex 19:5]. In this way, Israel truly became **a reign of Priests and a Holy Nation** [cf. ex 19:6]. From this moment on, Israel’s story becomes uniquely **a History of Covenant**.

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#### 4. **The Davidic Kingdom; Covenant Fulfillment**

a. The **monarchical form of government** was the most widely known throughout the ancient Middle East. This provided the basis and the fundamental structure for all the cultures of the resident peoples.

1.] The king does not appear ordinarily to have been a despotic sovereign, but much more did this structure serve as the guarantee of the social order. He was the one who would impede social chaos, and in return for civil obedience and all that was necessary for this to be a reality, he would provide protection and a climate for peaceful living. Just how powerfully developed in Israel was this ideal conception of the king as a salvific figure might be noted in the **Messianic Ideal** presented regarding the king [cf. Is 9:6; 11: 4, ff.; Ps 72:12, ff.]: “... A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse, a scion thrusts from his roots: on him the **Spirit of Yahweh rests**, a spirit of **wisdom** and **insight**, a spirit of **counsel** and power, a spirit of **knowledge** and of the **fear** of the Lord...” [cf. Is 11: 1, ff.].

2.] In those religions in the lands surrounding Israel - particularly those with a cosmic orientation - the earthly regality was profoundly anchored, almost in a “mythical-magical” manner, in the heavenly divine regality of the supreme god, far above the Pantheon of the gods. As a result, the royal title in the ancient Middle East was the most diffused appellative for the “Supreme God.” With this there was joined the respective myths, that thought that one’s own god had

come out victorious in the awful battle of the gods against the primordial chaos and the divine “victory” was the creation of the cosmos.

b. In the revealed religion of Israel, the title “King” for Yahweh, remained in the background in the ancient origins of the people, and this is surprising to some interpreters. However, for the entire period prior to the conquest of the land of Canaan, this makes logical sense to many other scholars: the understanding of God developed along the lines of the unfolding of social structures: nomads, farmers, family life, judges- kings.

1.] The concept of “**Shepherd**” and of “**Guide**” are titles much closer to **the nomadic way of life** than would be the royal title of “king”, precisely for the cultures residential in nature. Significantly even after the establishment of the Covenant binding the 12 Tribes in Canaan, in the first attempts at constituting a Kingdom in Israel [cf. Jgs 8:23], no mention is made of “king”, but rather “lord”, or “master”. Only later [cf. I S 8:7; 12:12] does the title “king” emerge in the development of the **theocracy**.

2.] Many scholars hold the opinion that the title **MELEK** for Yahweh was accepted into theology of the Temple already in the first period of the kings over Israel, especially due to the influence of the ancient sanctuary of the Jebusites in Jerusalem. However, some passages from the Psalms chosen here and there to prove this position cannot be clearly substantiated regarding their date of composition [e.g. Ps 5:3; 24:7, ff.; 48:3; 68:25; 84:4; 93; 95-99]. What is certain is that the great theologian of Sion, Isaiah, employed in his vision of the Temple the title of “King” for Yahweh, already in the 8th century [cf. Is 6:5] - but one would be hard pressed to find other such early texts [one difficult text is Is 30:33].

3.] For this great prophet of the regality of God, there is evident perhaps hesitation in the use of the title **MELEK** as found in the Canaanite ideology: in the place of the Pantheon of the gods, there are found the Seraphim, totally despoiled of divine qualities. They make up part of the Heavenly Court. What is even more significant, the divine king is here the conqueror of the chaotic potencies of nature rather than the sovereign lord of history. This places his own people including the king within the catastrophe of judgment. They are required to respond in faith and to its challenging demands [cf. Is 7:9, ff.] - like the simple citizens, all are obligated by the **Magna Charta of the Mosaic Covenant** [cf. Is 1:10, ff.]. Israel is called to the moral option and to the plan of history inspired by God, that are moved by the ideal of future messianic salvation.

3.] The cyclic, cosmic, static structure of this “mythical-magical” concept of the universe here breaks down. Yahweh appears somewhat transformed by his accompanying role in the Conquest of Canaan. He appears at the head of the

transmigration of the people. Thus, with Ezechiel, the other great prophet of the visions, the Throne of Yahweh is transformed in a **divine chariot**. It is not bound to space, and includes **the divine Throne** for the God of the Universe: He is King and governs throughout history [cf. Ezk 1:1, ff.; 3:12, ff.; 20:33].

c. The ultimate attribution of the royal title **MELEK** to God, already noted in the early Isaiah in the biblical transformation of the civil notion of “king”, picks up added strength in the use of the verb **“to rule”** as applied to divine government.

1.] We find this first of all in the Prophets of the Exile. Thus Ezk proclaims: by My life, I will surely reign over you with a strong hand and outstretched arm and holding back My wrath, I will have you come out from those peoples among whom you have been dispersed [cf. Ezk 20: 33, ff.].

2.] II-Is directs to Sion, in view of the liberation announced by Ezk and of the new conquest of the Promised Land, this Joyful News: **Your God reigns!** [cf. Is 52:7]. Therefore, Yahweh’s regality [cf. Is 52:10] is manifested in the future action of judgment against those hostile powers which reduced Israel to slavery and in the corresponding salvific government for the People of God [cf. Is 40:6 - the King of Israel is its Liberator!].

3.] This announcement is taken up abundantly in the **Psalter**, in those Hymns particularly addressed to Yahweh as King, and are developed in a variety of directions:

- Ps 47: calls Yahweh the Great King over all the earth and his regality is over all peoples. The Psalm notes that all the princes of the earth will gather together with the People of the God of Abraham.

- Ps 93: takes up II-Is’s thought and in analogy with the Canaanite myth of creation, has the royal dominion of Yahweh **rooted in His creative power**. This brings His sovereignty into the plan of history, while the unruly seas of the primordial chaos become symbols of the hostile assault of the nations against Jerusalem [cf. also Ps 96:10]

- Pss 96; 98: place in evidence, in a particularly strong manner, the recognition of Yahweh as the King at the end of times, in the universal judgment over the nations.

4.] The Post-Exilic Prophets energetically present the same message, i.e., that the regality of Yahweh over this world and throughout history will be unveiled at the end of times, to all peoples [cf. Is 24:23; Jr 10:10; Zp 3:15; Hab 21; Zc 14:9, 16, ff.; Ml 1:14]. In view of this future which more and more shows itself already present - it can be noted [cf. Ps 145:13] that the psalmist cries out to the Lord: Your Reign is one of all the ages; Your dominion is extended from generation unto

generation! The prayer was that this royal sovereignty might lead in the end to an imperturbable and **eternal realm** - witness to this might be found in the late OT [cf. Dn 2:44; 4:22; 7:27].

d. Strangely, the texts of Yahweh the King never explicitly state that in the final times Yahweh transmits His regality to the **Messiah** - Who is called "King" only in the Prophets [cf. Jr 23:5; Ezk 37:24]:

1.] Surely the two camps were not divided in the conception of the faithful. David [cf. 1 Ch 17:14] is placed above the Kingdom and His Throne will be stable forever [cf. 28:5 - Solomon]. Here there is opened the perspective for the union of the Kingdom of Yahweh with the Messianic royal dominion:

- Ps 45:7 can say of this messianic King: Your throne is the throne of Yahweh for all eternity and for always!

- Ps 72:1 can pray: Yahweh, grant Your statutes to the king!

- Pss 2:6-9 and 110 bear witness likewise in an unmistakable manner to that union for the end of times of the royal government of God and of the Messiah.

2.] Surely in all this the regality of Yahweh remains that which will outlast all else. Thus, the OT revelation of Yahweh as King finds its fulfillment in texts like [cf. I Co 15:28]: When all will be subjected to Him, also the Son Himself, will make the act of submission to Him Who has subjected all things, so that God might be all in all!

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### **[III] THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GOD OF THE COVENANT**

#### Introduction:

[1] "I will betroth you to Myself forever; I will betroth you in justice and right, in tenderness and love - I will espouse you in fidelity and you will come to know Yahweh! - in terms such as these the Lord God, Creator of the Universe, addressed His People through His unhappily married prophet, Hoseah [cf. 2:21, ff.] Such language lays little emphasis on the obligations and conditions that God places on His Covenant Partner through the Covenant which He initiated. Rather, in such terms Yahweh Himself commits Himself to the **Covenant of Mercy**, revealing in human terms His own "mind" in paying Himself the "dowry price" to His relationship. This is what He pays as Spouse [cf. Gn 34:12, ff.].

[2] What is being stated here is not some recent change in God - this reveals His eternal attitude of reaching out to His Beloved People compared here to a fragile but loving wife. The **Nuptial Metaphor** offers some insight into the eternal government



of Yahweh with regard to His People. The biblical testimonies show this, and the result at this point is that the veil is being lifted, and the light of further revelation being cast on the personal properties of God. These are what "move" Him and inspire His conduct in the unfolding of the Covenant.

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1. **The Ultimate Divine Disposition for "Covenant: *HESED*:**

a. The possibility of the omnipotent and sovereign God initiating and maintaining a **Covenant of Mercy** with His often unfaithful People is based on what seems to be the supreme divine attribute revealed in the OT, the divine *hesed*. This word admits of no easy translation - and may be best rendered as it is by the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, as **Covenant Love**. It indicates that solidarity in thinking and in acting of persons bound by loving marriage. It indicates that the bond is both profound and operative - the relationship between the contracting partners is alive and well.

b. In the Covenant Relationship between Yahweh, Who initiated it, and Israel, who agreed to it, the divine *hesed* appears as communion of thought and in action directed by God toward His Chosen People. In the extended Covenant text of Ex 20, Yahweh is presented as the One Who shows mercy and kindness to a thousand generations in the "**Exodus Antiphon of God's Mercy**" [cf. v. 6]. This appears again [cf. Ex 34: 6, ff.] when the Covenant is restored: God is rich in mercy, slow to anger!

c. This divine *hesed* appears so often that it comes across as constitutive of the Covenant of Mercy [cf. Dt 7:9, 12; 1 K 8:23; Ne 1:15; 9:32; 2 Ch 6:14; Dn 9:4]. Yahweh is simply the One Who conserves the Covenant and His *hesed*! In other texts [as Is 54:10; 55:3; Ps 25:10; 89:29, 34, 50] testimony is given to this intimate challenging of the Covenant Partners. The divine conduct in harmony with the Covenant, is sustained by benevolent dispositions for the Covenant, indicated by the *hesed*, reaches to the heights of love in the total pardon of infidelity, transgressions and sins [cf. Ex 34:7; Nb 14:9, ff.] There is promised an eternal *hesed* to those among the People of God Who will come back to Him [cf. Is 54:7, ff.].

d. The Divine *hesed* seems to grow beyond all limits and the Covenant is **extended to all of creation** [cf. P 33:5; 36:7; 89:15; 119:64; 145:9]. According to Ps 136:1-9 creation itself is presented as being radicated in the divine will of Covenant. In two passages *hesed* seems to be used as parallel to Yahweh. People who will remain faithful to God live their lives based on their faith in this revelation of God Himself. Thus, *hesed* becomes a kind of **Self-definition for God**: the Lord simply is merciful, and will not show is anger in the divine appeal to come back to Him [cf. Jr 3:12] The Psalmist puts is beautifully in praying: The Lord is merciful in all His activity! [cf. Ps 147:5].

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## 2. The Fidelity of Yahweh:

a. One of the varied elements that are found in the divine **hesed** is fidelity, faithfulness. In itself, this indicates a kind of **committed loyalty** that resists in all the vicissitudes of life, the temptation to wander away. This explains perhaps the privileged coupling of **hesed** and **emet**, often found in some form or other in declarations concerning God [cf. Gn 24:27; 32:11; Ex 34:6; Is 16:5; Ho 2:22; Ps 25:10; 40:11, f.; 88:12; 89:3, 15].

b. These substantive forms coming from the same root indicate that stability in speaking and in deciding as manifested by God. The God of the Covenant can demand fidelity from human beings [cf. Ho 4:1 ff; Jr 5:2, ff.], because He Himself is indeed the **God of Faithfulness** [cf. Dt 32:4; Ps 31:6; 2 Ch 15:3]. He is rich in grace and in fidelity [cf. Ex 34:6; Ps 86:15] - He exercises His loyalty in the Covenant [cf. Ex 18:9; Ne 9:33]. All the divine pathways are grace and loyalty [cf. Ps 22:50], and this it will be for always, forever! [cf. Ps 117:2; 146:8].

c. Yahweh indeed is the faithful God, Who maintains His Covenant and benevolence for thousands of generations [cf. Dt 7:9]. He is indeed faithful and therefore trustworthy as is His word of Revelation, especially His promises [cf. 1 K 8:26; 2 Ch 1:9, ff.] Therefore, believers may indeed “stand” by him, have faith in Him, and be firm in their position [cf. Ps 106:12; 119:166; cf. also Gn 15:6; Nb 14:11]. These words offer the background to what it means to “believe” in Yahweh.

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## 3. The “Justice” of God:

a. The declarations on the nature and the style of government as revealed by God concerning Himself, again it is the God of the Covenant Who remains at the center. Very often a word appears with the three root letters **SDQ** = [**SADOQ**, **SEDEQ**]. These words have something to do with what we would understand as “justice”, being “fair.”

1.] Sometimes there is a kind of contrast that emerges between “grace”, that is so freely bestowed by God - and “justice” which is owed to someone. In some texts [as in Is 45:8; 46:13; 51:6] the word **SEDAQAH** stands in immediate connection with “**salvation**.” Furthermore, in some texts [as in Ps 36:11; 103:17] this same concept alternates with **hesed**.

2.] As a result of all this, the biblical word for “**justice**” is not exactly that which modern interpreters might come to understand by it. The **Justice of God** signifies in the OT, His conduct with regard to the Covenant, His Fidelity with regard

to the community - in the sense that He is a God of the Covenant, He is “just” and the “ideal” in every way. As such, God eternally “wants” and wills the good of the community of the Covenant under every aspect.

b. In the very ancient Canticle of Deborah, there is praised the **Justice of God** [cf. Jgs 5:11]. This is the constant ideal in thinking of God - His “justice” is realized in those salvific activities undertaken in behalf of the People of the Covenant. The “right” of Israel for its own existence is brought to bear by the God of the Covenant in defending this insignificant people from their more powerful enemies. [cf. Jgs 11:27; Is 12:4, ff.; Mi 6:3, ff.]. From this it becomes more understandable how it happens that in II-Is “justice” has come to mean always **salvation**, as an **action of salvation**. Truly, with this, the judgment against Israel’s enemies falls more into the background and what is more emphasized is the positive fullness of peace and salvation [cf. Is 45:25; 46:13; 48:18, f.; 51:6, 8, etc.].

c. The patronage of Yahweh is exercised within the People of God itself. Yahweh manifests Himself as the Patron of that divine right which has been given to Israel in the “Magna Charta” of the Covenant as “**statue**” and “**constitution**”. The concrete will of God for the Covenant which He has constantly revealed is elevated in the “Second Table of the Decalogue”, and in **the Book of the Covenant**, to a Law of Life. This directly appears as a vital law of the human community and is truly for the good of all the members of the People. By this Law, they are all snatched from the **chaos** of the absence of law and placed in the well ordered cosmos, ordered by the divine protecting Judge. Therefore in some texts [cf. Ho 2:21; Is 33:5; Jr 9:23]. The divine “right” appears more as a **Gift of Grace** on the part of Yahweh Who bestows it out of love.

d. Therefore, the oppressed of the ages can always appeal to the **God of Justice** [cf. Ps 14:2] so that He might assist them by “right” [cf. Ps 10:18; 26:1; 43:1]. The solicitude and care that the divine right continue to protect the weak is placed by God as the responsibility that devolves primarily on the king [cf. Dt 17:20; Ps 12] - thus, **Justice bestowed by God** will be the essential attribute of the Messianic Prince [cf. Is 9:6; 11:3, ff.; Jr 23:5, ff.; Zc 9:9].

1.] The Justice of Yahweh places Israel’s Salvation in security through punitive judgments leveled against their more powerful, but non-believing persecutors [cf. Jgs 5:11; Is 41:2, 10, ff.; 58:2; 59:16, f.; 3:1]. In analogous manner, the just government of Yahweh finds its counter-part within the Covenant. This meant the punishment of all who would violate the Covenant, for such as these would be considered as enemies of those who would entrust themselves to God, and to all the lowly “afflicted.” However, to describe this punishment the Hebrew language never uses derivatives of **SDQ**.

2.] However, all that is implied with the typically biblical concept of a **just recompense** in the testimony of revelation is always attested to in other terms. The announcement of **reward and punishment**, of **blessings and curses** [cf. Dt 28; Lv 26] - and also within the Decalogue itself [cf. Ex 20:5, ff.; Dt 5:9, ff.] - is always an integral part of the **Covenant Formula** and is absolutely expected also as a corresponding manner of God's action toward the individual.

3.] Thus, Jeremiah would confess: You are just, o Lord, if I express my lamentation toward You - nonetheless, I will ask this to you in justice. Why does the life of the wicked prosper? How come the most perfidious live in tranquility? [cf. Jr 12:1]. Here the Prophet explicitly admits that for Yahweh, the constant being "just", means the exercise of His Justice in all circumstances, while implying that in this article of faith - the Divine Justice - there are aspects of daily life that do not always seem covered by it.

4.] This challenge to traditional faith explodes in the Book of Job. The attempts at resolving this vexing problem [**"why do bad things happen to good people"**?], the classical "School Wisdom" would respond in this "neat" manner: the happiness of sinners is only apparent, and not lasting [cf. Ps 73], while the suffering of those trusting in Yahweh represents a manner of proving one's heart and transformation in the ways of God [cf. Pr 3:11; Jb 5:17, ff.]. However, this "earlier" wisdom only partially responds to this challenge to the faith that pain so often brings. Thus, we note that towards the conclusion of the Book of Job [cf. 42:7], those arguing with Job have to admit that all were trying to enter the mysterious workings of the divine plan, based solely on the simplistic notion of earthly punishment and reward more in accord with human judgments than with the divine.

5.] As already in Jeremiah [cf. 12:5], so also in Job [cf. 38:1, ff.] Yahweh simply refuses to give always to human beings an accounting for His will. With this, it does not mean that **the dogma of just retribution** is simply denied, or rejected out of hand. However, there is denied to human beings full access to understanding always just how God reacts in apparently rewarding and punishing human beings. This is the point in the unfolding OT Revelation where there is always hovering near-by the idea of **individual recompense** - either punishment or reward - that **transcends present time and this world**. There may be **hints** of this in some of the OT texts, even though this view is not always agreed to by the experts [cf. Ps 49:16; 73:26; cf. Jb 1:25; 31:14]. Furthermore, some experts see the hint of at least the vague promise of a resurrection from the dead [cf. Ezk 37:1-14; Is 26:19; Dn 12:2, ff.]. The formula eventually is clarified: the definitive judgment of God towards the individual is not totally fulfilled in this world.

Light on this vexing problem of human pain. Here, suffering of one who is absolutely innocent is revealed as **vicarious expiation** and with this, it is transformed

into an **instrument of salvation “for the many”**. Hence, there is revealed in equal manner, the vindication on the part of God against human sin. The divine right of justice creates salvation and also places at the head of His People as the Servant of the Redeemed, His own specially chosen **Suffering Servant**. Thus, the grace and wisdom of God are more and revealed as His judgments become known [cf. Ex 20:5, ff.; Ho 8:11, ff.; Jr 3:12; 31:20; Is 60:10; Ps 104: 44, ff.].

7.] This holds true in a general manner for the divine interventions in this world, and thus as God is the Creator of the universe, He is not restricted just to His Chosen People. Hence, Divine Justice is also **Salvific** [cf. Ps 37:7] - and this brings to all of creation Divine Justice, extended to all nations [cf. Is 51: 5, ff.] - and this will last for all eternity. [cf. Is 51:8; Ps 111:3; Dn 9:24]. As for the “Problem of Pain”, God’s Word offers these “explanations:

- **punishment;**
- **pedagogy;**
- **purification;**
- **redemption;**
- **eschatology;**
- **JESUS CHRIST!**

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#### 4. **The Divine Wrath, Zeal, “Jealousy”:**

a. It is simply clear OT revelation that Yahweh reacts decisively to vindicate the rights of His Justice, in correcting the wrongs brought about by human sin and injustice, that are in stark contrast with the nature and will of God. From this basic principle, the nations of the world are never exempt. This might be implied already in the punishment meted out to Sodom and Gomorra [cf. Gn 13:13; 18:20; Is 1:10; 3:9]. It is seen in the expulsion of the Canaanite tribes because of their abominations [cf. Dt 18:12], in the injustice inflicted by the Moabites on the body of the Edomite King [cf. Am 2:1, ff. a divine oracle].

1.] Perhaps, though, more than any other infraction it would be those against His Covenant of Mercy that would draw the divine punishments. However, this immediate divine reaction is not usually referred back to the Divine Justice, but much more to His **Zeal**, to the **Wrath** of God, to His divine **Jealousy**: I am Yahweh, your God, I am a jealous God Who punishes the sin of the fathers in their offspring to the third and fourth generation, for all those who hold Me in hatred! This is the statement embedded in the Magna Charta of the Book of the Covenant [cf. Ex 20:5] - and this principle is incessantly announced to Israel. There are many texts that

could be noted that uphold this revealed principle: [cf. Ex 24:14; Dt 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Jos 24:19; Na 1:2].

2.] In still other texts [cf. Dt 9:8, 19; 11:17; 29:22-27], the motive behind divine punishments is more the **Wrath** of God, which lashes out in response to the blatant violations against His Covenant of Mercy. Hence, the Zeal and the Wrath of God are behind what theologians might call "Vindictive Justice". Both modes of comportment in their realization are more broad, and are all part of the sublime Mystery of the Living God: you are temples of the living God [cf. 2 Co 6:16] - it is no small thing to fall into the hands of the living God! [cf. Heb 10:31].

b. Whenever there are passages applied to Yahweh using terms that come from the root Hebrew word generally translated as "jealousy" - a nuptial term - this most often happens in situations that read this in a positive light [cf. Si 51:18] - God's jealousy is ordained toward all that is good - toward the Temple [cf. Ps 69:10] - or, for the revelation of the Divine Will [cf. Nb 25: 11, ff.; 1 M 2:26, f.]. It is always a matter of having the absolute requirements of God Himself in His absolute dominion prevail over human events. Honor and obedience are owed to God, as is respect due to Him - if this is lacking, whether Israel herself or the "nations" are the violators - then it is that the divine "jealousy" makes itself felt.

1.] The **Zeal** of Yahweh is still another typically Hebrew expression to attest to the divine being and His comportment in regard to the Covenant of Mercy and Salvation History which are most important to His loving heart. The term is often used in contexts that would emphasize **His absolute holiness**.

2.] On this basis the Zeal of Yahweh is not only the source of vindictive judgment against a sinful people [cf. Dt 32:16; Ex 16:42] - and including all of humanity [cf. Zp 1:18; 3:8]. The "Zeal of the Lord" is most committed to the work of Israel's salvation, and particularly in those cases when her enemies have overreacted as God's "instruments" in His Chosen People's merited punishment. Thus, the "Zeal of the Lord" is transformed into the "Jealousy of God" in behalf of His People [cf. Is 26:11; cf. 42:13]. This is Yahweh's "mantle" in which He is enwrapped [cf. Is 59:17] - His "armament" [cf. Ws 5:17].

c. "Jealous" eventually emerges as a kind of title for God [cf. Ex 20:5; 34:4; Dt 4:24, etc.] - whereas the "wrath" or "anger" of God are never accorded such a distinction.

1.] This is all the more notable from the instant that in the OT there is attributed to God and entire gamut of Hebrew expressions for anger - sometimes, presented in a cumulative sense. From this might be understood Yahweh's seemingly impetuous reaction against the malicious violation of the statutes of the Covenant

[cf. Ex 32:7, ff.; Nb 25; Dt 11: 16, f.; 29:19; Is 9:11; Jr 4:4; 17:4; Ezk 5:13; 7:3; Ho 5:10; 8:5]. It also is aroused in any situation that would hold in doubt the intentions of His Will for holiness, the Covenant and Salvation History in accord with His Plan [cf. Nb 11:1; 17:11; Dt 1:34].

2.] As for the Zeal of the Lord, so also is it true of His Wrath which becomes enflamed against the enemies of His Chosen People whenever these despotically, or cruelly go beyond their prescribed limits in meting out punishment to the Chosen People, as God's representatives, to bring His beloved back in line. One eloquent example [cf. Is 30:27, ff.] would be the theophany against Assyria: Behold, the Name of the Lord God comes from afar; ardent is His wrath, great will be its unleashing; His lips are full of disdain, His tongue is like a blazing furnace. His breath is like an overwhelming torrent [cf. also Is 50:5, ff.; 14:6; Ezk 25:17; Zc 1:15].

3.] However, the unleashing of Yahweh's wrath according to the OT does not unfold always in a clearly "logical" manner - at least as far as the ordinary human comprehension is concerned. In 2 S 24:1, no reason is given for the sudden and severe unleashing of Yahweh's furor regarding the census that David took of His People. There are also other passages in which it would be difficult to give a logical explanation for the wrath of God in response to some human failures [cf. Ex 4:24, ff.; 1 S 6:19; 2 S 6:6, ff.].

4.] In these cases, it may be concluded that by these drastic divine interventions there is being revealed the importance of the worship of God, there are being revealed ritual prescriptions for the succeeding generations. In addition to this, one might be led to ponder in silence the infinite power of God, His righteousness for the sacred [cf. Ps 27:9]. There will always be need for the believer to submit before the Divine Wrath as a manifestation in stark human terms of something of the divine mystery.

5.] Nevertheless, there is no possibility ever to think of the God of the Covenant of Mercy as a spiteful, whimsical, demoniac god. Revelation directs the believer beyond any such conclusion [cf. Ex 34:6; Nb 14:1, 8; Jr 15:15; Jl 2:13; Jon 4:2; Na 1:3; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8]. There is also solid witness to the extreme patience of the Lord, His own long-suffering [cf. Pr 15:18]. The Prophets were always impressed by this divine restraint.

6.] According to Hoseah [cf. 11:9], in the exercise of the divine judgment Yahweh never acts fully according to the full ardor of His wrath. Jeremiah [cf. 3:12] hands on an Oracle of the Lord in which the Yahweh Himself proclaims I will not show you My face, in its anger, because I am merciful. I do not retain wrath forever! Isaiah [cf. 54:8] speaks of the catastrophe of the Exile: in the excess of My wrath, I have hidden for a time My face from you. But, with everlasting affection I

have had pity on you. The explosions of His anger, about which the OT offers abundant testimony, attests more to the vibrant personality of God, and as well to His absolute holiness that He reveals as demanding for His people as well. Nonetheless, at the end of it all, these revelations concerning the divine wrath are always surpassed by the ever greater **will for the Covenant** [cf. Ho 11:8; Jr 31:9, 20].

7.] However, God does always reveal Himself, also in the NT, as is evident in all these testimonies, in His all holy personality. His intention is to place before the heart of the believer **the seriousness of His divine Will for holiness**, and **His infinite Mercy** that enables this to be in sinful humanity. Above all His government through judgmental the end of time, will bear the mark of His Wrath [cf. Zp 1:18] - and some apocalyptic imagery speaks in dire terms: in the day of the Lord's wrath, there will lash out a devouring fire of His jealousy that will destroy the land! However, in the end, the Church will pray through the centuries: O Happy sin, that has merited such a Redeemer!

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## 5. The Divine Mercy

a. Basically, a Covenant is a personal relationship of communion which has a stable juridical structure. Therefore, one's entire exterior response flows from the internal conviction at the basis of this "agreement", or relationship of life. On the part of God, this is based on His divine **hesed**, roughly translated as "Covenant Love."

1.] This involves not only some set of responses, but an entire relationship of lively friendship and love. In the **Nuptial Covenant** there is such a total exchange of mind, heart and body that the two become united in one flesh. There are also deep, pure human friendships - such as the one between David the Prince, Jonathan. The bond between Covenant related partners in the biblical sense is the deepest expression of human love.

2.] In the pure masculine relationship of the Prince and the pauper, the Scriptures tell us that Jonathan's heart was attached to David's, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul [cf. 1 S 18:1]. David has immortalized this relationship in his heart-broken declaration: the anguish that grasps at me for my deceased brother, Jonathan - how dear to me you were! your friendship was more precious to me than the love for a woman [cf. 2 S 1:26].

b. Yahweh's **hesed** is also love in this sense - it is one of spontaneous inclination, on that corresponds to the most profound intimacy of the person and of his/her manner of expression. While the best we can do in speaking about God is to do so "analogically", these **human bonds of intimacy** of which we speak offer some



light into the divine initiative for **Covenant of Mercy** that the Lord God of Heaven and earth undertakes daily with human beings.

c. It is only with the Prophet **Hoseah** that we find one entrusted with the divine mandate to proclaim the God of the Covenant as the God of **[nuptial] love**. This prophet was charged to testify, first through symbolic actions of his matrimonial struggles, and the divine words that would interpret these. The Prophet was inspired to teach that apostasy toward Baal was for Israel, not only the unilateral breaking of a Covenant, but was compared to marital infidelity, "adultery." The result of this was that **Israel's bond of Covenant was compared in divine inspiration to a marriage asking fidelity of the partners**.

1.] Ho 1 & 2 simply assume such a comparison. The Prophet is called to be toward his wife - who has not been faithful to him - the same way that Yahweh has been toward Israel, who has not been faithful to Him either! Yahweh is the offended Husband who calls Israel **His unfaithful wife**! Ho 2 offers a wonderful insight into this remarkable revelation. Ho 2:4-17 shows Yahweh really saddened, hurt, offended and angry - however, this wounded love of His wills even in meting out some punishment to create the occasion of "sentencing" His unfaithful wife in terms that will enable her to come back to Him: I know, I will seduce her, and lead her back out into the desert [after the Exodus, the second desert migration would be the Babylonian Exile?] - and in these harsh surroundings, I will speak to the heart of My beloved! [cf. Ho 2:16, f.].

2.] The Lord promises that He will restore the vines devastated by the Babylonian Invasion and the burning of the Temple in 587 - and the Valley of Achor/Misfortune, will become **a Gateway to Hope**! The Lord dreams that then His beloved wife will respond to Him as in the days of her youth, as when in great joy Israel was freed long centuries before from the Land of Captivity. Ho 2:18 speaks of this renewed Covenant: on that day, you will call Me: **My Husband** - and you will not call Me: My Baal! nor, some other god: My husband! Here, as would be evident to the careful reader of these passages, the Covenant is not some juridical contract according to the Lord's own interpretation - rather, **the Covenant of Nuptial Love and Mercy is a Communion of Life**. Its founding force and its moving power is the strength of love. Yahweh loves the children of Israel even if they turn to other gods! [cf. Ho 3:1].

3.] Love transcends often enough even rational explanations, and there simply are not words to describe its depth and intensity- and here we find nuptial love as the basic paradigm of God's intense relationship with His people. When Israel was but a child, I loved her and drew my child up out of captivity [cf. Ho 11:1]. This **Ho 11** has profoundly touching imagery and develops the theme of

Yahweh's love which chooses and guides. The Lord Himself is speaking: I myself taught Ephraim how to walk. but he did not understand how much he was being loved. I drew him with leading strings of love, with bonds of loyalty. I was for My people as one who would lift an infant against his cheek - and I bent down over him to give him something to eat [cf. Ho 11: 3, ff.].

4.] The love of Yahweh here is presented in parental metaphor - drawing on the familiar imagery of the Bedouin father's and mother's care for their off-spring. There are outbursts of anger against their disobedient child, which are the overcome and "calmed" by the love of the parent for the lively child: My heart trembles within Me - I am deeply moved to compassion. I will not respond according to the ardor of My wrath - I will not destroy Ephraim, because I am God and not man. I am the Holy One in your midst and I do not love to destroy [cf. Ho 11:8, ff.]. To this may correspond these sentiments: I will heal their transgressions, and I will love them - spontaneously. This adverb seems to emphasize explicitly that noble expression of freely given love that does not make demands of any nature.

d. **Jeremiah** seems to have some kind of spiritual tie with Hoseah, He also announces the Covenant of Yahweh with His Chosen People as a **Covenant of Love** [cf. Jr 2:2; 3:1]. However, because of the infidelity of the People, this **Covenant of Mercy** has been broken. Nonetheless, the love of Yahweh for His fragile "off-spring" is not exhausted - rather it finds remarkable expression in **paternal appeals for conversion**: Return, rebellious Israel! I will not show you my angry face because I am disposed for the Covenant still. I will not maintain My wrath forever! [cf. Jr 3:12, 14, 22; 4:1]. Therefore, in the restoration of the Communion of the Covenant, God's love is revealed to be the permanent deciding motivation: I have loved you with an everlasting love and therefore, I have reserved My **hesed** for you! [cf. 31:3].

e. **Deutero-Isaiah** repeats this protest of divine love [cf. Is 43:4] and compares it above all to **maternal love**: would a woman forget the child at her breast, would a mother ever forget the child of her womb? Even if she should forget, I will never forget you! [cf. Is 49:15]. In this boldly tender attestation of love as found in **Is 54**, Israel appears as a humiliated captive woman, covered with the shame of her widowhood, but who is once more welcomed back into the house of a loving husband, and she is showered with honors and joy.

f. **The TORAH of Deuteronomy** is expressed in terms reminiscent of Hoseah. The thought of divine love permeates the Code of the Law, indicating a much more humane face to legislation [cf. Dt 4:37; 7:8, 13; 10:15; 23:6]. This is inscribed deeply within the heart of the human covenant partner so that Israel might respond with a similar love [cf. Dt 5:10; 6:5; 7:9, etc.].

1.] It is in this perspective that the TORAH is revealed to be a **gift of God's love from the God of the Covenant of Merciful Love** to His People [cf. Dt 4:6-8]. The judgment, which is part of the Law, is transformed and becomes a pedagogical tool: recognize in your heart that as a man would correct his own child, so Yahweh, your God, corrects you! [cf. Dt 8:5].

2.] The revelation of Yahweh as the God of the Covenant of Love finds its echo above all in the **Song of Songs**, which can only find its full theological explanation and application in connection with the prophetic texts of the **Covenant of Merciful Love initiated by Yahweh toward His People**.

g. All these passages which testify to the good disposition of Yahweh for the Covenant - translated by the LXX as *eleos*, meaning **compassion** - as well as those which speak of divine love in a more literal manner, often contain terms that have been formed from the root word **RHM**: originally, this word meant a "maternal being", or **womb**.

1.] This ideal would comprehend all that is in relationship with "**compassion**", and "**mercy**". Furthermore, there is often found a bringing together of words deriving from the root term **HNN**, originally meaning: **to lower oneself**. The celebrated saying of the Lord [cf. Ex 33:19]: I will extend kindness to whom I will to give kindness and I will have mercy on whomsoever I choose.

2.] This is not only an attestation of the absolute freedom of the Lord God - but is also at the same time, a testimony of **the infinite compassionate condescendence and lowering Himself of the great God Almighty**, the God of the Covenant of Merciful Love toward all that is small, and wounded.

h. All the great OT traditions attest to this infinite Mercy of God:

- Even **the accounts of the Patriarchs** include at least veiled references to this [cf. Gn 33:1, ff.; 43:29] - even before the great tradition of Sinai attested solemnly to it. [cf. Ex 20:6; 22:26; 33:19; 34:6].

- the **prophetic writings** discover this gratuitous compassion as a fundamental divine decision [cf. Ho 2:21, 25; 11:8; Mi 7:19 Jr 12:5; 31:20; 3:26; Is 14: 1; 30:19; 49:13; 54:8, ff.; 60:10; EZk 39:25; Zc 1:16].

- the **Psalms** also play their role in calling to mind very often the infinite Mercy of God [cf. Ps 4:2; 6:3; 9:14; 25:16; 51:3].

- the **very last OT books** also exalt this as a specifically eschatological gift [cf. 2 M 2:7; 7:29; Ws 3:9; 4:15].

1.] All the proclamations might be summarized in this oft-repeated formula: Yahweh, a God of Mercy and Compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness [cf. ex 34:6; Na 1:3; Jl 2:13; Jon 4:2; Ne 9:17; Ws 15:1; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8]: this is the “**Exodus Antiphon**”.

2.] The Divine Compassion is fundamentally enveloping all that is. Even when God **punishes** He aims primarily at conversion as the premise of a renewed merciful disposition on the part of God [cf. Ho 2:16; 6:1; Jr 3:12, 22; 4:1; 12:15; 26:3; Is 12:1; Ezk 18:13, 31, f.; 33:11; Jon 3:8, f; Dt 8:5, f.]. Along-side those who are classified as weak and oppressed [cf. Ex 22:26; Is 41:14; Ps 116: 5, ff.] also repentant sinners might account on the infinite mercy of God [cf. Ps 51; 130; Is 45:21, f.].

3.] There is no human “explanation” for this overwhelming, consistent testimony: the basic fact is that God is absolutely free in His compassion [cf. Ex 33:19]. Therefore, this freedom wishes to extend its government, providence under the form of Merciful Love - the basic analogies are taken from family life, either the nuptial theme, or the love of parents for a struggling, but head-strong child [cf. Jr 31:20; Is 49:15; Ps 103:13]. However, the Lord surpasses even the wildest dreams of love and gentleness expressed by human beings [cf. Is 49:15; Si 18:13]. He is completely different from humans - even here precisely in the revelation of His infinite mercy making use of the very familiar human metaphors.

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[NB: for pages 95-132 of these notes, cf. Alois Deissler, “*Yahweh come Dio Disposto all’Alleanza*”, in: *Mysterium Salutis. Nuovo corso di dogmatica come teologia della storia di salvezza*. Vol. 3. *La storia della salvezza prima di Cristo*. Brescia: Queriniana 1969, pp. 307-341, passim].

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### **The Exodus Antiphon**

“... Yahweh passed before Moses and proclaimed: ‘Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness; for thousands he maintains his kindness, forgives faults, transgression, sin; yet, he lets nothing go unchecked punishing the father’s fault in the sons and in the grandsons to the third and fourth generation.’ **And Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshipped.** [cf. Ex 34:6, f.]. [cf. also Ex 20:5, f.; Nb 14:17 ff.; Dt 5:9, f.; 7:9; 2 Ch 30:9; Ne 1:5; 9:17; Ps 51:1, ff.; 86:5, 15; 100:4, f.; 103: 7, f.; 111:3, ff.; 112:1, ff.; 116:5; 130:7, f.; 145:7-10; Jr 32: 17, f.; Dn 9:8, f.; Jl 2:12, f.; Jon 4:2; Na 1:2, f. Si 2:10, f.]

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**The Law of Holiness: Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate!** [cf. Lk 6:36, ff.].

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## EPILOGUE:

### The Merciful Father's Self-Giving

[cf. F.X. Durwell, CSSR, *Le visage du Père*, et: *Le Père. Dieu en son mystère*. Paris: du Cerf 1993, pp. 161-192, passim]

Presentation: Jesus Himself is the Father's visage - as the "Icon" of the Invisible God [cf. Col 1:15] - He is the Perfect Copy [ **character** ] of the Divine Nature - and whoever sees Him, sees the Father [cf. Jn 14: 9].. This is enough for the committed believer in Jesus Christ - to know that particularly in His Paschal Mystery he is a window into the trinity, serving as a mirror for Christianity. God has assumed the figure of this world in Jesus Christ - in pondering Him, the believer reaches the Trinity.

#### 1. A Loving Father

a. Through the centuries, in contemplating, studying, experiencing Jesus Christ, heeding the Magisterium [cf. DV 8], the believer may be blessed with an increased faith in the Heavenly Father, the Redeeming Son and the Sanctifying Holy Spirit. In pondering Calvary and the Resurrection, with God's help, the Christian eventually believes more deeply in the revelation that comes through the Letters attributed to John: "God is love" [cf. 1 Jn 4:8,, 16]. There is offered to believers a deeper appreciation of Jesus' own proclamation that the Heavenly Father loves Him [cf. Jn 3: 35; 10:17; 15:9; 17:24, 26].

b. What "proves" that God is love is the fact that He has lived His only Son's **KENOSIS**, in the fact that He so loved the world, that He did not spare His only Son, but gave Him up [cf. Rm 8:32; Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:14]. That God is love is the conclusion of one blessed by Faith who reflects that the Heavenly Father indeed has sent His Son into this world as savior. The central work of God is to bestow His love on this world - this fact, pondered by the believer, helps for an ever better appreciation of the fact that all the works of the Lord God are motivated by His love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

c. God is made known to us throughout the life of Jesus as the "One Who sent His only begotten beloved Son." He is the heavenly Father Who has generated His Son "for the many", sending Him as Priest and Victim to our world. As Jesus is "characterized" as being totally for this world, the Father Who generates Him remains the mysterious principle behind this **total Self-giving**. "Being God" means the One Who gives His "all" for those He loves - His eternal Paternity is an act of self-giving, generating eternal love.

d. This paternal love is directed primarily toward His most beloved Son [cf. Mt 3:17, par.; 15:5, par.] - this is the Son He loves [cf. Col 1:13]. He loves His Son and

shows Him all He has done [cf. Jn 5:20] - on this Son the Father has bestowed His Spirit beyond all measure [cf. Jn 3:34]. This Lord and Giver of Life is with the Son in His Paschal fullness - and is remembered as this First Gift to those who believe.

e. Between the Father and the Son there is an eternal exchange of love. The Son gives a response in love to His being lovingly, eternally generated -and Jesus lives in loving obedience as His personal response to the Father's love Who generates Him. Jesus is also convinced of the Father's eternal love for Him - even in the darkest hour when He asked why His Father had "abandoned" Him [cf. Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34], He promptly commits His Spirit into His hands [cf. Lk 23:46] - He gives His whole life for the Father's cause, and knows the Father's love in response [cf. Jn 10:17].

f. Greek theology speaks of *perichoresis* - and Latin theology speaks of *circuminc[s]ession* the constant presence, or ceding, of one Person in/to Another within the Trinity. The Father is the origin of the Son, and the Son is the *terminus* of the paternal act of generation. However, in receiving all from the Father, the Son is generated by the Father in love. The mental "Word" is not some kind of abstraction, but One Who communicates the Father's plan of eternal self-giving. The Son loves the Father in the Love He shares with Him - and this mutual Love joins Father and Son the "spiration" of the Holy Spirit.

g. The Holy Spirit is not "third" in the sense of chronology, nor in any sense of coming "later". He is eternally present as Love that gives of Life, as Lord and Life-giving. In this eternal exchange of Truth and Love, the Father is the Principle Who does not originate from anyone else - but, in no way invokes any advantage, privilege for Himself over the Others, for He is the Father in love.

## 2. The Son's "Immolation" makes known the Father's "Surrender" of the Only-Begotten, Most Beloved:

a. All authentic, truly "Christ-like" love has to be **self giving, oblation**. Such love is the **total gift of self**, that **complete genuine out-pouring** that can reach the depths of **redemptive self-emptying**. The one who is truly in love is always striving to go beyond previous horizons. Charity is of its nature "Paschal" - and Jesus' Pasch is its most sublime expression. Being One with the Father, in some way, Jesus' "immolation" on Calvary and in all that leads there, is the expression, manifestation of the Father's. By His love, in some way, God the Father gives Himself to the Son as the Oblation of Truth and to the Spirit as the Oblation of Goodness.

b. Had Jesus not become Incarnate, we would never have known of the **Father's infinite Self-Giving** [cf. Rm 8:32; Jn 3:16]. The believers are invited to look on the one whom they have pierced by their sins [cf. Jn 19:37] and to ponder this beautiful paragraph from the CCC [cf. # 112]: "... The heart of Christ can refer to

Sacred Scripture, which makes known his heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But the Scripture has been opened since the Passion; since those who from then on have understood it, consider it and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted..." In contemplating the Pierced One, the believer is blessed by the eternal reality that the Father and Jesus are One - whoever sees Him, is able in some way, to "see" the Father in hope-filled faith. Jesus loves His own unto the end [cf. Jn 13:1] - and this is a revelation of the Father's Trinitarian Love, who initiates both generation and spiration, with the Son. The Incarnate Word is in the bosom of the Father. [cf. Jn 1:16].

c. The Redemptive Incarnation is the manifestation of the eternal generation of the Divine Son - this aspect of the Eternal Filiation, assuming a human nature in time, peaks in the Paschal Oblation, dramatically noted in the pierced side of the Crucified - and leading to the Resurrection. From this open wound flows blood and water. In this Jesus reveals the Father's "oblation", "not sparing" His only Son for the redemption of the world - this is the Father's "immolation." In the ancient unfolding of the plan of God, Abraham - our father in the faith - played the role of the heavenly Father in offering his own Son to God - although the hand of the Angel of Yahweh appeared to Abraham to spare the child. [cf. Gn 22:16]. The oblation of the father of Isaac led to the ram as "substitute", provided by the Lord immediately - but, also in the long range of revelation, all of this prepared for the total Self-giving of the Second Person of the Trinity making known the Father's eternal stance toward His own: that of the Covenant of Mercy.

d. Abraham is presented as actually preparing for the oblation of his only son. The innocent son goes along with the Father's plan, questioning perhaps his will - the sacrifice of this only child seems to put in jeopardy the earlier manifested divine plan centering on this only son. The burden on this earthly father is certainly enormous - but, does offer a kind of glimpse into the mysteries of Divine Wisdom. Christians are able to see in this dramatic episode the prophetic glimpse of what would happen in the fullness of times when the Father of all hands over His most beloved Son for the redemption of the world.

e. The bond between the Cross and the Trinity has been regained from patristic times in recent decades, as presented also by the International Theological Commission [of 1981, Ignatius Press 1989, pp. 219, ff.]. Jesus as the ICON of the Invisible God shows us that with love there is always some kind of suffering. With the revelation of the infinitude of divine love, this mystery is unfathomable - however, the OT "Anthropopathisms" do offer some glimpse into the enormous commitment of God toward Israel. Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem, the City of God, this mystery of God's love for His People is further unveiled. The Paschal Mystery reveals the eternal mystery of the Most Blessed Trinity.



f. The Passover of the Lord, through the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, assumes extraordinary depths and totally eclipses the human ability to ponder it. The economic Trinity does not manifest every aspect of the extraordinary mystery of the “immanent” Trinity - the Cross does not manifest every aspect of the mystery of the “ineffable” God. Calvary opens up to the minds and hearts of believers the mystery of both the death and the resurrection of the Lord. The Resurrection of Jesus, following His death, sheds extraordinary light on the mystery of the Father.

g. As in the OT the Lord God of Heaven and earth is revealed as “rejoicing” [“dancing”??] over Daughter Zion [cf. Zp 3:17], the Heavenly Father is intimately tied to His glorified Son. There is also more joy in heaven over the one sinner who comes back [cf. Lk 15: 4, ff.] - so, by some possible logical deduction, there must be joy in and through the Holy Spirit over the Eternal Generation of the Risen Jesus [cf. Ps 2: this day, you are My Son!], and His return in glory at the head of the Ascension Thursday procession leading the saints to the heaven! The Son’s death that leads to life - His defeat which is eternal victory over the powers of darkness - going through the catharsis of Calvary, He truly “merits” the Name “Lord” who honors the Father by the fullness of His Filiation. Creation itself is epitomized in the Risen Body of the Lord, perpetuated on the altar with Eucharistic Consecration, a perennial sign of the “New Creation”. This is the “Good News”, the Gospel [cf. Ac 13:32, f.] The sharing of the Gospel is its own joy - this “heavenly joy” is perpetuated that from the rising of the sun to the setting thereof, the name of the Lord is praised [cf. Ml 1:11] especially in those who come back to Him in repentance.

h. The harsh oblation of the Cross needs to be seen in the integral context of Paschal Joy - and the reverse is also true: the believer needs to go “through the night to the light” [*per crucem and lucem - per astra ad astra!*] The Christmas Crib [Christ the **Lord** is born!] projects forward to the Calvary Cross - which is indeed the **Tree of Life**. Thus the saints, the mystics, can speak of **Crucified Joy**, joyfully sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ [cf. I P 1:6, ff.], short-lived with eternal promises. Death for the believer needs always to maintain the intimate link in the one Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ with His Resurrection. Divine Glory does not alleviate the pains of Calvary - it simply “consecrates” them. Only the Divine Will of love could take the most cruel form of capital punishment, and “transignify” this totally, by giving it a meaning of loving, pardoning redemption, salvation, sanctification. The divine omnipotence comes across right here: passing agony becomes perennial ecstasy, temporary death becomes eternal life - the power of divine love changes human hatred expressed in carrying out the sentence of Crucifixion into the divine decree of pardon: forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing! [cf. Lk 23:34]

i. Jesus comes as the unveiling of the mystery that had been secret for ages [cf. Rm 16: 25]. The mystery of nuptial union in this life is full of mystery [cf. Ep

5:22], and only in time does one even begin to fathom this mystery, Christ Jesus among us - the Spouse of the Church is indeed the Immolated Lamb. Paradox is not contradiction, but simply often appears as the vehicle for “mystery.” The entire Church ponders the One we have all Pierced - while this contemplation is never comprehension, it does open the door to the One Who is knocking [cf. Rv 3:20]. The Pierced Heart of Jesus Christ is the Tabernacle to the Trinity - the Pierced One alone is able to unravel the scrolls of God’s Word [cf. Rv 5:1, ff.]: it must all be read with this key of interpretation.

j. “Suffering in God” is an expression of modern theologians that can be understood correctly in the light of the tradition of theology. The “Crucified God” is a bit more problematic - whereas “one of the Trinity died in the Cross in His human nature” is a classical formulation. In the end, all genuine love is self-giving; Christ’s **kenosis** is self emptying. The Eucharist, as Bread that is broken and wine that is poured out, offers a good sacramental magisterial teaching on what God is. As Jesus is “**constituted**” by His priesthood in that He eternally also offers His own will Word and Glory as **an oblation to His Father** [cf. Rm 12:1, ff.] - the word “Victim” in some way would describe God Himself as His Self-giving or others. The “suffering” in God is beyond anything that human beings could understand about it - beyond “metaphor” perhaps, and hidden in the most sublime recesses of “analogy” where there is greater dissimilitude than similitude [cf. IVth Lateran], The Father as “Victim”, “Immolation” are human expressions that might help to fathom in some distant manner, the sublime mystery of “God is Love!”

k. Suffering as generally understood among human beings is the result of weakness, passivity - which are incompatible with our revealed understanding of God. However, Jesus often extols the “new wine” [cf. Mk 14:25] - the “best wine” saved for the end [cf. Jn 2:1 ff.] - yet, His followers need to drain the Cup of the Passion, be baptized **INTO** Christ Jesus, His Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension [cf. Rm 6:1, ff.]. In the end, we are invited to the eternal Nuptial Banquet: no more death, no more sadness [cf. Rv. 21:1, ff.]. Nothing of a passing nature, or imperfect that would be proper to this earth can ever be found, or “subsist” in God. Jesus is the perfect ICON of the Invisible God, the Father: the Immolated Lamb, before the constitution of this world, reveals to us the hidden secrets of the Most High God. The Divine Mystery, His Mercy is clearly expressed in the Paschal Mystery in unique manner. The entire earthly sojourn of Jesus peaks in His Paschal Mystery - the **daily oblations** are all a part of this. The death of Jesus, in such a stark manner, indicates His despoilment of this world in favor of the next world. His self-emptying is His ultimate fulfillment - His death is birth to the true life.

l. The Father’s “face” is seen in the suffering, the humiliation of Jesus Christ. His weakness is so drastic, so total - His humiliation so absolute that this is where paradoxically Omnipotence may be best seen: that the Son of God in an

assumed human nature could subsume all the sufferings of the ages of all human beings, and offer all this as a pure **redemptive oblation** - offers great consolation for God's Holy People - and enables them to see that face of God, for which Moses prayed long ago. The ultimate weakness of God is stronger than all human power - the folly of the Cross is the only wisdom that matters [cf. the Hymn of Wisdom, 1 Co 1: 18, ff.]. The Glory of God is most manifest in the abject rejection of His Chosen Son, the most beloved. John does not distinguish between the Cross and Resurrection when he speaks of Jesus being "raised up" - it is all one mystery [cf. Jn 12:32, ff.].

m. It is in the depths of His **kenosis** that the divine **kabod** is most evident to the perceptive believer: the mystery of Divine Love would include what we would call by the human term "**suffering**" deep within God. Human suffering is real incompleteness, and meant to be overcome, if at all possible. The "suffering" in God is the direct expression of divine commitment to human weakness in all its form.

n. The fire of the Holy Spirit burns without consuming, destroying - this was able to forge the harsh lance of the Crucifixion into an instrument of redemption. Only love could change an unjust capital punishment into a means of salvation, into sacrificial oblation that take away the sins of the world. It is through the Gifts of the Holy Spirit that the believer might come to some deeper conception of the Most Blessed Trinity, and a deeper appreciation of the mystery of the Divine Indwelling. Love increases by being consummated - the entire dynamism of Filiation is in relationship to the Father in the Love of the Holy Spirit. In the love of the Holy Spirit, the Father and the Son give to each in mutual love. The Holy Spirit is the Bond of Their union, the Synthesis of their completeness.

o. The intense Living Flame of Love also solders together, unites, bonds. The burnt offerings of the Old Covenant are now joined in the union of immolation and communion. The Father and the Son are considered to be "**one principle**" in active spiration - there is no distinction between them, they act as One. Through the Holy Spirit, Christian charity is at the same time, immolation, communion, and mission.

p. The sacrifice of Calvary is the immolation of the Cross that enables one to see deep within the Most Blessed Trinity - as well as offering a mirror before which the Christian must stand in the judgment of his/her own life. Self-giving is the only hope that human bonds persevere - the great model and source of all strength for marriage, life-long perseverance to a commitment to a state in life, an apostolate, is the eternal immolation of the Lamb - another way of stating His proceeding in truthful love, and loving truth. we are all invited to live out our own oblation, sharing in that of the Eternal Son Who leads us to communion with the Father in His Holy Spirit of Love.

### 3. **The Father's Compassion:**

a. In the depths of the Passion, Death, Descent, Resurrection and Ascent of the Only Begotten Son of God brings joy to the heart of the believer in discovering in all this the Face of the Heavenly Father: this is how you are to bless the sons of Israel. May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May Yahweh uncover his face to you and bring you peace! [cf. Nb 6: 22, ff.]. There will always be terrible mystery in suffering, in pain - yet, somewhere in its deepest mystery there is the love of God shining through.

b. The Lord found much "pleasure", "joy" in His Most Beloved Son, as is noted at the Trinitarian theophany at Jesus' Baptism, Transfiguration [cf. Mk I:11, ff.; 9:2, ff.]. Baptism is joined to the Chalice of the Passion, and the Transfiguration occurs on the way to Jerusalem, toward which Jesus had His face "fixed." The message for the Church is the SHEMA Israel [cf. Dt 6:4, ff.] - Listen to Him.

c. It would not be in accord with the global reading of God's Word in the Tradition of the Catholic Church to think that there could have been some kind of "separation", or 'hiatus" in this Trinitarian union over the first Easter week end - and that the Trinity would be reunited only in Jesus' Resurrection. Jesus repeats that He and the Father are always One [cf. Jn 10:30]. While we cannot fathom all the depths of this union out of love, suffering is one of the ways in which love, sacrifice are most proven. There is a level among humans of pity, com-*passion*, empathy, mercy, at the pain of another. As we are made to the image and likeness of God, there is some reflection in human beings of the interior nature of God. The Redemption of the World is the work of God in and through the Second Person of the Trinity.

d. What unites the Trinity is not some kind of coming together for a task to perform - the bonds are the eternal exchange of Truth and Goodness, Paternity, Filiation, and Spiration. The "suffering" of God the Father on Calvary is not the same as that of the Sorrowful Mother - Mary, too, in some way, reflects the infinite love of God all throughout this spectacle of human tragedy. In some way, the earthy sojourn of Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, accomplished in and through the human nature He assumed, reflects on the entire Trinity.

e. As Jesus is the Perfect Copy [*"character"*] of the Divine Nature [cf. Heb 1:1, ff.], it is of extraordinary interest to note that even in His resurrection Jesus still endured the persecution of the Church: I am Jesus Christ, Whom you are persecuting [cf. Ac 9:4, ff.] - is Jesus' message to Paul. Jesus is the Head of this Body of His still militantly struggling on its way through time. He also reminds all that whatever is done to the very least of His brothers and sisters is likewise done to Him! [cf. Mt 25:40]. Jesus is the Head of the Church, and the Spirit is believed to be its "soul" - God, the Father, is the Head of Jesus Christ [cf. 1 Co 11:3]. The bond between them is

such that without any lessening of His own Person - [in fact this is what “constitutes” it] - Jesus does not say His own Word, does not seek His own Glory - His word, Glory, are always that of the One Who sent Him [cf. Lk 10:16]. Suffering always draws Divine Compassion

f. Perhaps much more can be learned from the OT anthropomorphisms - anthropopathisms - in adopting this lowly people as His first-born, most beloved - the stage is set for a revelation of the First Born, the Most Beloved Son would indeed be the New Israel, the perfect Person, Son of God, Jesus Christ. When the first Israel went wrong and was “over”-punished, the Lord’s spousal “jealousy” would be aroused, or His Father’s Pity: the divine Heart recoils from Israel’s pain, His entire being “trembles” [cf. Ho 11:8]. In the parable, after the earlier emissaries had been killed off by the wicked husbandmen, the Lord of the Vineyard in the end sends his most beloved son [cf. Mk 12:6]. Jesus’ profound sadness over the City of God in some way reveals the Father’s involvement in His chosen ones - if you only knew the time of your Visitation! [cf. Lk 19: 41, ff.]. The Divine “Visitation” is that of the Supreme King, Prophet and Priest. The tears on the face of Jesus, Who is the Father’s perfect ICON, are some indication of the divine “involvement” in the life of His People, His Most Beloved Son. How much did the Lord God want to assemble this People [cf. Mt 23:37; Lk 13:34]. In the Old Covenant the God of Heaven and earth would send out His Prophets to gather the dispersed People into one - Jesus raised up during His Passion and His Resurrection, will draw all to Himself [cf. Jn 12:32].

g. The International Theological Commission [in 1981] pondered this mystery: One could suppose from the OT, the divine transcendence notwithstanding [cf. Jr 7:16-19] that God suffers because of the sins of men. Perhaps not all the expressions can be explained as simple anthropomorphisms [e.g., Gn 6:6, Yahweh “repented” for having made man on earth and He sorrows about this in His own heart - cf. Dt 4:25; Ps 78:41; Is 7:13; 63:10; Jr 12:7; 31:20; Ho 4:6; 6:4; Il:8, ff.]. Rabbinic theology is even stronger in this respect and speaks, for example, of a God Who abandons Himself to lamentation because of the Covenant, which he has made and which constrains him, or because of the destruction of the Temple, and at the same time affirms the weakness of God when faced with the powers of evil. In the NT, the tears of Jesus [cf. Lk 19:41], His anger [cf. Mk 3:5] and the sadness He feels, are themselves manifestations of a certain way of behavior on God’s part. In other places it is used explicitly to state that God does get “angry” [cf. Rm 1:18; 3:5; 9:22; Jn 3:36; Rv 15:1]. [cf. Ignatius Press 1989, pp. 20, ff.]. The Lord is “with” His People when they are in trouble [cf. Ps 91:11, f.].

h. This extraordinary idea of God from the truly believing Rabbinic Community shows the awesome God all mixed up and in the daily struggles of His lowly People. This is distant preparation for the sublime mystery of the Incarnation in

which the first Covenant is brought to a height that could never have been imagined. This divine “involvement” that so consistently appears in the pages of the OT certainly could not be truncated when the Revelation of God for our salvation is “completed”, perfected” in Jesus Christ - to such a level that we expect no new revelation [cf. *Dei Verbum*]. No one could ever reach this NT faith unless assisted by the Spirit, as is told to us that no one can call Jesus “Lord” unless helped by the Holy Spirit [cf. I Co 12:3].

i. God the Father had compassion on His first-born and often wayward adopted son - indeed this divine attitude is extended to His First-Born Most Beloved Son, with Whom He shares the identical nature. As the plenitude of Divine Love is eternal in some way, this dimension of divine “suffering” would remain forever - even though tragedy can be overcome by reunion, restoration, new beginnings. The sign of the divinity is the infinite ability to allow keen disappointment, regret, sorrow - remain united to joy, intense love and compassion. The Holy Spirit inspires joy despite tribulation, opposition on all sides [cf. I Th 1:6]. St. Peter is something of an “expert” in the theme of “Crucified Joy” - in persecution, in insult, it is a blessing, as this means that the Spirit of glory has already come [cf. I P 4:14].

j. As revelation reminds us, we are indeed made to the image and likeness of God [cf. Gn 1:26, ff.] - therefore, there has to be some comparison, analogy, between God’s love and our own as the Holy Spirit of God inspires this into our hearts [cf. Rm 5:5]. The Father of Mercies was totally involved in the life of His People all throughout the First Covenant - the divine unity within the Trinity. The entire Trinity is involved in the Eternal Covenant of Mercy - the Lord God “decided” on this eternally, and “works it out” through the generations of human history.

k. It is through the Paschal Mystery that we are allowed the most profound glimpse, insight, into the Most Blessed Trinity. The tragic death of the Son of God in carrying out the Father’s Plan passes over into the Joy of the Resurrection, the Eternal Stance of Jesus. Even in His darkest hour, in the grace of the hypostatic union, Jesus remained united to His Father and Holy Spirit.

1.] Pope Pius XII [cf. *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943, - cf. DS # 3812, or in earlier editions of DS, # 2289] understood that this would mean: “... But the knowledge and love of our Divine Redeemer, of which we were the object from the first moment of His Incarnation, are more than any human intellect or heart can hope to grasp. For hardly was He conceived in the womb of the Mother of God when He began to **enjoy the vision of the blessed**, and in that **vision all the members of His Mystical Body were continually and unceasingly present and He embraced them with His redeeming love**. O marvelous condescension of Divine love for us! O inestimable disposition of limitless charity! **In the crib, on the Cross, in the unending glory of the Father, Christ has all the members of the Church present before Him**

**and united to Him** in a clearer and more loving way than a mother loves her little one clasped to her breast, than anyone knows and loves him/herself...”

2.] **CCC 478:** “Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony, and his Passion, and gave himself up for each one of us: ‘The Son of God... loved me and gave himself up for me’ [cf. Ga 2:20]. He has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation [cf. Jn 19:34] ‘is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that ... love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human being’s without exception.” [Here the Catechism quotes Pius XII’s *Haurietis Aquas* and *Mystici Corporis*, the paragraph noted just above DS # 3812].

3.] This unfathomable paradox - the beatific vision and the depths of conscious agony, seems to match in some way, Jesus’ acceptance of the “curse” of hanging on the Tree [cf. Ga 3:13, 2 Co 5:21] in a state of absolute innocence - He was like us in all things, save sin! [cf. Heb 7:26; Lk 23:47].

I. Human suffering is passing, temporal; it does not pertain to the human “being”, essence, as such. The compassion that this evokes, then, must likewise be passing. However, in God love is His Being, His “Essence”. - in some way, the tragedy of sin is eternal in this sense: that wherever sin has abounded, grace super-abounds. Divine Compassion. These “paradoxes” are understood in the light of the supreme love of God.

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#### 4. **The Father of Mercies**

a. Paul is “right up front” in telling us of his earlier being overwhelmed: the things we had to undergo in Asia were more of a burden than he could normally support [cf. 2 Co 1:8]. This taught him that he could never rely on himself but only on God. This is “theological” hope - directed immediately to God Himself He is the God of all consolation, a gentle Father comforting everyone in all the sorrows of life [cf. vv. 3, f.]. God is the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is Christ who has made known in His earthly sojourn the heights of the divine mercy and tenderness. This was already initially revealed in the “Exodus Antiphon” [cf. Ex 34:6] - He comes on the gentle breeze of the evening [cf. Gn 3:8] - and not so much in the earthquake, the fire, or the trembling mountains [cf. 1 K 19: 12, ff.].

b. The Word of God is rich in its terminology to present this extraordinary mystery of the inner merciful nature of the Almighty God. The words used, each in itself, are not “exhausted” in any one simple translation. As has already been discussed, the divine *hesed* offers a gamut of interpretation: goodness, beneficent faithfulness, mercy that pardons. It is this basic divine mercy that is the foundation of

the Covenant that God initiates with Israel. God commits Himself to keep His part of the bargain, despite the innumerable defects on the part of Israel. It is with an everlasting love that God reaches out to His People - this offers some explanation why God loves His People [cf. Jr 31:3]. It is a **New Covenant of Mercy** that lies ahead, based on the fact that God simply does not call to mind His people's sins any more.

c. The goodness and fidelity of God toward His wayward People certainly is not merely in response to their goodness - as so often they betrayed their word given to God in the Covenant they freely entered with Him. Understandably, gratitude for the Lord's goodness to His People expressed in such a faithful manner is often the theme of Israel's history [cf. Ps 138:2, f.; 2 S 2:6; 15:20; Mi 7:20; Ps 25:10; 40:11, f.; 85:11]. The Lord does all this not so much for Israel's sake, but because of His own Name [cf. Ezk 36:22].

d. The "feminine mystique" applied to God comes to the fore in the metaphor used to describe God's love for His fragile child - often employing the use of the image of a loving **Mother**. Proposing the hypothetical impossibility that a mother could ever forget the child of her womb, the Lord says through His prophet that even if that did happen - He would never forget His people [cf. Is 49:15]. The Lord powerfully loves His people from the very depths of His "womb", suffering anguish for His wayward Ephraim [cf. Jr 31:20]. The Lord will always remember His child so favored, He will always be deeply compassionately moved toward the weak sinners, and the divine tenderness yearns over His lost ones, His little ones [cf. Jr 1:20].

e. Another word employed is one that is sometimes translated as "**grace**", a free gift, with few strings attached. In His infinite tenderness, God simply bestows protection from destruction and the promise that He will never abandon His People. He is indeed the God of clemency and tenderness [cf. Ne 9:31, 17]. The multiple dimensions of the divine goodness and tenderness are deployed in the Heart of God. He loves gratuitously, generously [cf. Ho 14:5] He picks His little ones up in His arms like a loving Mother would, pressing the infant against her cheek [cf. Ho 11:3; 66:13]. His goodness is unto **everlasting fidelity** [cf. P 30:6; Is 54:7, f.]. The Lord always restrains the ardor of His wrath - for He is the Holy One, and will not lash out in His fury [cf. Ho 11:9].

f. The Divine Mercy celebrated throughout the Old Covenant finds its ultimate source in God's paternity in regard to Israel. This paternity is seen as Creation and Redemption - there is no Divine Mediator - but, several human beings who offer their lives in mediation: Moses [cf. Ex 32-34] - the Suffering Servant [Is 53] - and ultimately, Jesus Christ. St. Paul beautifully summarizes all this in His expression: "... Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle Father and the



God of all consolations, who comforts us in our sorrows, so that we can offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation that we have received from God.” [cf. 2 Co 1:3, ff.]. In contemplating the Merciful Father and His Reconciliation the believer today finds hope for the life-long exodus journey. The Father of Mercies has not spared His only Son [cf. Rm 8:32] - the Lord reaches out to the ANAWIM [cf. 2 Co 7:6]. This Lord of innocence, the Son of God, has become “sin” for us, being cursed in our stead [cf. 2 Co 5:21; Ga 3:13].

g. It is in this Divine Son that the kindness and love of God appeared for us - it was out of His compassion that He saved us all [cf. Tt 3:4, ff.]. It is through the Son of God that the Mercy of God is showered upon humanity. The works of power, the signs of the miracles, are all subordinated to His Message of Mercy. Quoting Isaiah, St. Luke states the anointing of the Messiah has been to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom, sight and liberation [cf. Is 61:1, f. - in Lk 4: 18, f.]. The great honor and glory of God is in His Mercy - this is the goal of the entire Mission of Jesus, mercy over sacrifice [cf. Mt 9:13; 12:7]. Mercy is manifested in a particular way in healing maladies, both physical and spiritual. As Jesus went to look for disciples, in similar manner, He welcomed sinners and dined with them [cf. Lk 15:2, f.]. God the Father would not give up on His prodigal children, and sent His Most Beloved Son to seek them out, the lost sheep of Israel - and beyond. The Compassionate Father in the parable is overwhelmed by pity, seeing His wayward son reduced to such a condition by his own sin [cf. Lk 15:20].

h. Paul’s lived experience makes of him a spokesman for the Mercy of God - it is this infinite power of God that brought Paul from a life of blasphemy, and discrediting, persecuting the faith. His previous life found him acting out of “ignorance”, but through Mercy, he became a believer. The merciful Father has filled him with faith and love - all of this flows from the basic principle that Jesus Christ has been sent by the Father to save sinners [cf. I Co 1:13-16]. Paul was converted from being a bitter persecutor in the name of his own brand of religious zeal [cf. Ga 1:13] - he had severely persecuted, so now he is wishing peace and grace to the Church which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ [cf. 1 Th 1:1]. In His Mercy, the Father made known to Paul His Son, Jesus [cf. Ga 1:15, f.]. The Apostolic Mission entrusted to Paul, to share in the very Mission of Jesus Christ, is beyond that conferred on Moses in the Old Law [cf. 2 Co 3:7, ff.]. Jesus Christ is “revealed” through Paul [cf. Ga 1:16].

i. The long History of Salvation shows that human beings often abuse Divine Mercy. There are so many extenuating circumstances that draw on God’s Mercy, as Paul’s admission of his own earlier “ignorance”. Yet, a healthy fear of the Lord is necessary for those who would receive the Mercy of the Lord. Fear of the Lord is not that servile fear that lives in anguish regarding possible punishment; nor,

is it that fear that acts primarily because of what others would think. It is that fear of offending a loving Father, that He would be forced to hold back the hand of mercy. The Gift of the Spirit of the Fear of the Lord is that disposition, flowing from the Love of God that puts one in dread of offending the Merciful Father. As love for God increases, so does the Gift of the Fear of the Lord.

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## 5. The Father Almighty [cf. CCC ## 268-274]

a. This comprehensive divine attribute is well attested to throughout the pages of Scripture: the Lord God indeed is all-powerful! Mary reflects this in her Magnificat: He who is Mighty has done great things for me [cf. Lk 1:49]. This is the vision of the end time that Jesus leaves with His followers, citing perhaps a miscellany of earlier texts - the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of Power, coming in glory [cf. Mt 26:64 - Dn 7:13]. This is the Creed of the Church - and it may be that the natural cadence of the faithful over the centuries of praying the Creed has been to associate "Almighty" more with the "Father", than even with the Creator. It is this "power" that has been so much abused in the 20th century [cf. Zbigniew Brezezinski, *Out of Control. Global Turmoil on the Eve of the 21st Century*. NY: Scribener's-Stewart 1993]. So many limit their conception of "power" to destruction, dominion, over-powering force. The biblical concept of "Power" unites it to the revelation of the Loving, Compassionate Power - it comes across as an endless capacity to forgive. Jesus refers to the Lord God of the Heavenly Hosts, the Universal Creator, as **ABBA!** Jesus "blesses" His Father for His particular interest and care for the "little ones", the **ANAWIM** [cf. Lk 10:21]. The Power of God is His paternity. It is manifested in generating His Son, sending Him as Merciful High Priest on the Mission of Forgiveness. The divine omnipotence is a power of pardon and of life.

b. The most extraordinary manifestation of the Power of God may be found in the New Creation, the resurrection of His Most Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. This mystery offers some insight to the dimensions of Divine Omnipotence, in the most eloquent of human terms. Jesus, the Crucified, becomes the Risen - the Wounded becomes the Healed, and "by His wounds, ours are healed" [cf. Is 53:5; 1 P 2:21, ff.]. The Power of the Resurrection [cf. Ph 3:10] has made Jesus Christ the Rejected Corner-stone, come to life - the concept of the "Church" is to remain close to the Risen Lord, in order to share in His Power of the resurrection, and to hand it on [cf. I P 2:2, ff.]. The Trinity is manifested in the Son's resurrection, from the Father, in the Holy Spirit. This is a work of Love, the Resurrection is a divine generation, "this day you become My Son!" [cf. Ps 2] The Power of God, then, IS His Paternity - it is manifested in the sharing of infinite, eternal life. This omnipotence is Creative, Paternal Mercy.

c. In the First Covenant, images of God were strictly forbidden - in the NT, however, Jesus is the perfect “copy”, the “character”, ICON of the invisible God [cf. Heb1:1, ff.; Col 1:15] This is the ICON of Omnipotence, “behold the Man!” - the crowds were appalled on seeing him, so disfigured that he no longer looked human [cf. Is 52: 14, f.]. In Jesus, paradoxically the Divine Majesty, Splendor and Glory appear - in the Christmas crib, in the Washing of the Apostles Feet, in the Crucifixion and Resurrection. In Jesus, the Divine Omnipotence is at work, performing wonders for the redemption of the world. He resisted the three-fold temptation [a Semiticism indicating the severity, the reality of the Messianic Trials?] - **IF** You are the Son of God! This same challenge was hurled at Him in the desert, and on the Cross. [cf. Mt 27:40, par.]. The “Inclusion” of the Temptation scene at one end of the Synoptics, followed by the “opportune moment” for the return of the Powers of Darkness at the far end in the trials of the Garden: Jesus’ whole life is a Messianic trial to bring salvation to the world. The Decree of Condemnation reads: that this is Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified [cf. Mk 16:6]. When Peter tried to distort the Path of Weakness for the Omnipotent, Jesus asked him to return to his role of discipleship: Get behind ME! [cf. Mk 8:31, ff.] - our “ways” are so often not the ways of God.

d. Hence, there are two [opposing] ideas of “power: the paternal, merciful idea of God - and that more fearsome idea that reigns among human beings. Jesus comes as “**servant**”, both in the substantive form, as well as in the verb form: I have **not come to BE served!** [cf. Mk 10:45]. Jesus is the “Son of Man”, perhaps in the line of Daniel [cf. 7:13, f.]. While it is true that in the end, the Son of Man will come in power, and upon Him will be conferred empire, glory, royalty - yet, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head [cf. Lk 9:58]. He is the **One who has come to serve**. In order to reach His throne, His access is the way of the Cross [cf. Mt 26: 64] - only there is He raised up prior to the Resurrection.

e. This is the “stance” the Lord Jesus uses to describe His Second Coming - He will come in power, but ‘happy those servants the master finds awake on His return. I tell you, He will put on an apron’ -perhaps not unlike His attitude at the Last Supper [cf. Lk 22:27] sit them down at table and wait on them [cf. Lk 12:37]. The Power of the Father is manifested uniquely in the weakness of the Son. Jesus identifies Himself with “the least of the brethren” the poor, the naked, the hungry, the imprisoned. Jesus is no “hero” in the popular sense - perhaps even Socrates is recorded to have faced death with much greater calm than Jesus did: He is sad unto death, overwhelmed with sorrow. He does not return “an eye for an eye”, but rather “turns the other cheek” and asks His heavenly Father to forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing [cf. Lk 23:34]. Already, this is in stark contrast with the master of the vineyard who would send his army to destroy those who put his son to death [cf. Lk 20:9, ff.].

f. In deft paradoxical contrast, St. John the Evangelist presents the two extremes in the 4th Gospel Prologue: He came in the “flesh”, and we saw His “glory” [v.14]. This Son is nearest the Father’s heart, and He is the One Who makes the Father known [cf. v. 18]. Only the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Master of all He surveys, would wash the feet of His disciples. The “sovereignty” of God is manifested in His service of sinners to win them over to His Father. This lowly stance of the Lord Jesus reaches the depths that He performed some tasks that would be classified even below “servile”, such as the washing of the feet of His own disciples. This is what the sinful woman did to Jesus to prepare Him for His death [cf. Lk 7:44, ff.]. God had consigned all into the hands of His Son [cf. Jn 13:3] - in this, Jesus attains the summit of divine grandeur in the extreme depths and lowliness of service.

g. Jesus makes known through John that when He has been lifted up as the Son of Man, then all will know that “I am He” - He does nothing of Himself - what the Father has taught Him is what He does, preaches. The One Who sent Him is Emmanuel - and the Father has never abandoned Him. [cf. Jn 8:28] He offers an expanded version of being “raised up” [cf. Jn 12:32, ff.] - as in this position [on the Cross, in the Resurrection] He will **draw** all to Himself, to the Father. This is in reference to the type of death He will die. In all that He accomplished on earth, the Son did this to glorify the Father [cf. Jn 17:1, ff.] - being raised up on the Cross is one of the “Stations” on the way to the Father. This is most unusual grandeur and power - the paradox of ignominious death really meaning everlasting and glorious life.

h. The many “**I AM**” expressions have their own significance - one in particular [**I am the Good Shepherd** - cf. Jn 10] has a special depth of meaning due to the long OT insistence on Yahweh Himself being the ultimate Shepherd of Israel. The “power” of the Good Shepherd is made manifest in the fact that He is able to “lay down His life” for His sheep of His own volition [cf. J 10:11, ff.]. In the “Book of the Lamb”, the Apocalypse, the powerful Shepherd becomes an **Immolated Lamb** [cf. Rv 5:6; 7:17]. In other “**I AM**” passages, Jesus maintains that He is **the Bread of Life** [cf. Jn 6:35]. Jesus’ solemn proclamation attributes this formula once more to the divine Majesty. He is the only authentic “nourishment” to assuage spiritual hunger, providing from His open side the only fresh water from the streams of salvation to slake the thirst of the ecclesial doe yearning for the running streams [cf. Ps 42-43]. This spiritual sustenance is the only one that leads to eternal life. His flesh is the bread of eternity, for the life of the world [cf. Jn 6:51]. He is **the Pierced Shepherd, the Immolated Lamb, Bread that is broken and eaten, Wine that is poured out for the salvation of the world**. This offers some idea of His Father’s care for the life of His chosen ones.

i. Throughout His entire earthly sojourn, Jesus spoke of His Father in metaphorical and imaginative expressions, made up of both words and deeds. He did

proclaim that the time was close at hand when He would speak of the Father in plain words [cf. Jn 16:25]. In His Passover, Pasch, His entire activity reveals eloquently His heavenly Father. The infinite Power of the God the Father is paradoxically manifested in the weakness of the Cross of His Divine Son. The “power” of evil has too often been manifested in the shedding of innocent blood - the Power of God is particularly made clear through the Sacred Stigmata, these Fonts of Salvation - both the sorrowful wounds of Good Friday - and the glorious wounds of Christ’s Resurrection, the Source of the Apostolic Mission [cf. Jn 20:21, ff.]: as the Father sent Him, so He sends all the Apostolic Missionaries down through the ages. He is transfigured eternally as the Lord of Glory, and is not “buried” forever in the mystery of death. The Omnipotence of the Resurrection takes over from the weakness of the Cross - Jesus is the Lamb become Lion of Judah, yet underneath it all, He is celebrated eternally as the Immolated, Glorified Lamb [cf. Rv 5:5, ff.].

j. As Jn’s Gospel draws to a close, it peaks in Jesus’ “coronation” ceremony. He is hauled before the crowds, ridiculed in His purple robe of royalty, with a crown of thorns on His head, signifying that the Reign of God truly is within. Pile proclaims: behold the Man! {the Second Adam?}.

1.] This is the King of all sinners [cf. Jn 19:5, ff.]. Being raised up on the Cross is Jesus’ inglorious enthronement [cf. J 19:19]. When He was already dead, the tabernacle of His side was opened, flowing forth in the sacramental life of the Church, in the interpretation of many of the Fathers of the Church. These streams of salvation [cf. Is 12:1, ff.] also call to mind the Holy Spirit of God: from His side will flow these streams [cf. Jn 7:38, f.] indicating the coming of the Spirit permanently into the life of the Church, to prepare those who will persevere through to the end for eternal life.

2.] Until the end of time, there will always be those who will look upon the One Whom they have pierced [cf. Jn 19:37; Rv 1:7] - and with the loving glance of the Beloved Disciple, they will be blessed with “seeing is believing!” The Cross is both the royal throne, after serving first as the scepter of power along the way to Calvary. This is the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy: there was a yoke weighing on Him, a bar across His shoulders, the rod of His oppressor - this will be broken [cf. Is 9:3, ff.]. This Cross of shame - this awful sign of the sins of the world - becomes the insignia of His Royalty - and the only path of entry into this Realm is the royal road of the cross..

k. This is the full revelation - the ultimate out-pouring of the Mercy of God. Reason alone is unable to cope with the paradox: the abyss of human weakness, frailty, cruelty is transformed into the heights of divine power, strength and mercy. The Power of God is made visible to human beings under a form contrary - and almost contradictory - to the commonly accepted idea of “strength”. The Crucified is

the Power of God [cf. 1 Co 1:23, ff.]. What human beings consider weakness, in the plan of God, is truly Merciful Omnipotence. The Humiliation of the Son of God leads to the glorification of the adopted sons and daughters of the Merciful Father.

l. To put some hold on this union of sublime antinomies, the joining of abject weakness and awesome power, the Holy Spirit of God is breathed out on the new field of dry bones [cf. Ezk 37] - and is poured out in abundance from the open Tabernacle of the Most Blessed Trinity in the side of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is given this Mission as most “proper” to His personality as personified Love. Genuine love is humble, not strident, not showy, it comes almost meekly - this is what offers itself in immolation, and renders itself always ready to serve, to bring joy. As infinite love, the omnipotence of God is that unique capacity to give of Self so totally, that He no longer seems divine. He is able to empty Himself [cf. Ph 2:6, ff.] to such an extent that those who accept Him are able to be enriched by His poverty [cf. 2 Co 8:9, f.]. The Power of the Heavenly Father is that infinite, eternal ability to offer up, not to spare, His only begotten Son - immolated before the constitution of the world.

m. The Omnipotent Mercy of God is Trinitarian, well ordered in absolute freedom. It is all regulated by abiding relationships of Truth and Goodness, Wisdom and Self-giving. There is no limit to this infinite sway of Mercy - while Mercy never forces its way into the stubborn heart, the crafty soul. The love of the Father and the Son brings about the Spirit of Divine Love, this interior Law of Love. This love of the Holy Spirit is also present in the eternal generation of the Son. The infinite power of God is manifested through the Son as the unlimited Mercy of the Heavenly Father, in the Holy Spirit. This divine Love generates adopted children through their acceptance of His Son and His redemptive Love, in the Infinite love of the Holy Spirit. While Jesus cries out His Father’s Most noble title: as the **ABBA** of the Redeemer of the World - humanity responds in its most sublime antiphon, profession of faith: God is love! Jesus is truly the Son of the Most High. The Spirit will come as Another Paraclete.

n. One of the present challenges in presenting the Merciful Father is the failure of the image in various walks of human life. The strict monotheism of ancient Israel reflected in the Prayer **SHEMA** [cf. Dt 6:4, ff.], is remembered by Jesus and handed on to the Church as “**His**” Prayer [cf. Mt 6:7, ff.] - while it concentrates on God Himself, it is offered in the context of His **Covenant of Mercy** toward His People, which He has initiated. It is an appeal of God’s People through the ages to work for His kingdom, to hallow His name, through doing His will. These are the “stipulations”. The Blessings that He will bestow in accepting the God of Mercy are: give us today the necessary sustenance for body and spirit - forgive all sins, as His People forgive one another - lead us away from all that is tempting, and above all that is trying - delivering us from all evil.

o. God exercises His infinite power by sharing it. He does not spare His Son, but offers Him up totally and entirely - and the Son reflects this by His total Self-emptying - while the Spirit comes as the First Gift to those who believe. The Lord extends His diffusive goodness in creation, redemption, sanctification - and the inspiration of His Holy Word. In some way, all of creation reflects the Most High - in every way, the Divine Word teaches the believer how to live as the Image of God, and to develop this initial likeness into an ever clearer reflection of His Son. The Lord Himself shows how "power" must be exercised: those who truly want to be "great" must become the Servants of all [cf. Mt 20:26, f.; 23:11; Mk 9:35; 10: 43, f.; Lk 22:26].

p. With rampant evil in the world - with no totally satisfactory answer offered by human reason for the awful question: Why do bad things happen to good people? - this has led many to reject the God of Revelation. The "weakness" of Calvary and its cruelty seems to have "survived" Good Friday, and is still "alive and well"! The Creator does not impose "holiness", not does He make anyone follow the Way of His Divine Son. He offers His "explanation" for suffering and death - and His blessings on those who do strive to live the message of Divine Love.

q. There are pessimistic philosophies which use the Mystery of Calvary to state that what died on Calvary is the "myth" of the Triune God - what was immolated there was faith in the Trinity, and the Divine Plan of Salvation. However, the "signature" of God, which is suffering, has been perpetuated in the retention of the Sacred Stigmata in the Risen Lord's glorified body. These "marks" consecrate all to God, and serve as the "sign" of God's only begotten, most beloved Son. The unfortunate, the little ones of this world, the poor. all find entrance through these portals of salvation to the Heart of the Most High. In His Five Wounds Christ has poured out His precious blood as the price of our redemption. Suffering is paradoxically revealed as an act of supreme love. While some have lost the faith through suffering - for others, it has also proven to be the way of conversion. It is not a value in itself, but an evil, the residue of human rebellion against God. However, the Son of God has taken it on, and all that He has assumed, He has redeemed. In the Plan of God, the mystery of human suffering is that it can be transformed and lead to everlasting life.

r. In the long history of the Church, some have taken the biblical injunctions toward humbling oneself before God in an overly excessive manner. There is always needed balance in this - the great doctors and doctoresses of the Church always teach the equivalent of: "virtue stands in the middle!" - the Lord does not want anyone to abdicate personality, or forget that each human being is made to the image and likeness of God - and that Jesus Christ is in some way united with each human being [cf. GS 22]. Jesus is the Humility and Mercy of God - always bending down over wounded humanity, offering healing, peace and encouragement. Jesus

comes to where we are that He might take us all to where He is with the Father and Holy Spirit in eternal relationship.

s. The power of the Most High has done great things for Mary, the Handmaid of the Lord [cf. Lk 1:35, ff.]. The confidence of the Church in God the Father of Mercies is not just some subjective quest for security projected outward and upward. While the Lord Jesus did feel the “abandonment” of the Father in His darkest time - Jesus never doubted that the Father was greater than all [cf. Jn 10:29]. And in the end, Jesus had no trouble of commending His Spirit into His heavenly Father’s hands at the moment of death.

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## 5. **Holy, Holy, Holy - the Thrice-Holy God [cf. Is 6: 4, ff.]**

a. Jesus “lives” His own Prayer in Jn 17 - He refers to His Father as “**hallowed**” and He hopes that His Father’s Name will be **sanctified** [cf. Jn 17:11]. Mary echoes this in introducing us to her “theology” of God Himself: The all-powerful has done wonders for her, and **Holy** is His Name. The Divine Holiness is not only “ethical” - it is seen more as the sublime synthesis of all the divine attributes. This word for ancient Israel seems to have represented the fullness of being and vitality and strength. In the Prophet Hoseah, revelation **joins the power of God to His mercy**: He is indeed the Holy One in our midst and has no wish to destroy again [cf. Ho 11:9]. The absolute holiness of God makes Him inaccessible and explains why no one can “look” upon Him and live [cf. Ex 33:18-23; Is 6:1, ff.].

b. “**The Holy One of God**” might be the most original Name given to Jesus to express the unfathomable, inexpressible mystery of His Person [cf. Mk 1:24; Jn 6:69; 10:36; Ac 3:14; 4:27, ff.; Rv 3:7]. In Peter’s address to the People, He refers to Christ in these terms: you accused the Holy One, the Just One - you killed the Prince of life! [cf. Ac 3:14, f.] The evil spirits can recognize Him easily: they come from a totally different world, “from below” - whereas Jesus is “from above.” Right after the enigmatic temptation account, without telling the reader even who won, His victory over the Devil becomes evident when Jesus’ immediate encounter after the temptations in the desert is the Evil One: the title the Powers of Darkness give to Jesus is the Holy One of God [cf. Mk 1:24].

c. “Holiness” includes in the etymology of its Hebrew counter-part the idea of “separation”. This is reflected in the Creation story: the light from darkness; the waters above from those below, those from the left from those to the right. Therefore, anyone who would “approach” this totally “other,” “transcendent” God needs a ritual purity. In the Incarnation, Jesus does not lessen the image of transcendence, but the Lord has set up His Tent among us. The Absolute Holiness of God is revealed to us in not sparing what He held the Most dear. God’s Holiness is



Mercy, in giving the world His Most Beloved and only Son. Jesus is seen as the Son of God, and the Holy One of God. He is indeed Holy and is referred to as the Son of God [cf. Lk 1:35]. The demons seem to know this instinctively: You are the Holy One of God [cf. Mk 1:24; 3:11] In Peter's Confession that Jesus is the Holy One of God, the Son of the Living God [cf. Mk 8:27, ff.; My 16:16]. God is Holy, then, because of His infinite Mercy.

d. "Holiness" is found in the Spirit Who has this adjective as part of His "personal" Name! He inspires, sanctifies as His appropriated task, as that most in accord with His Divine Personality. He is love personified, in Self-giving, coming as Personal Gift. He is the Holiness of God the Father, Whose Mercy is shown in His not sparing his only Son, but in **giving Him up** for the redemption of the world. The "transcendence" of God might be found in the **total self giving** of the Son, and in the revealed fact that the Holy Spirit comes to the Church as "**Gift**". Thus, the Absolute Holiness of God does not separate Him from those Whom He created, redeemed and sanctified - but, He sets His tent up among us in the sending of His only Son, and in the communication of the Divine Gift, the Holy Spirit.

e. The All Holy God is present in Jesus, His Son - He is most manifest in what His name means: "**Yahweh saves!**" This is the perception that Jesus gave of Himself: this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Jesus went in search for sinners, to place them among His followers, even His Apostles. The teachings of Jesus - particularly in His Parables of Mercy [cf. Lk 15] - show the infinite care that the Heavenly Father has for sinners. The compassionate father in the parable of the Prodigal Son refers to Jesus' own Father - the Shepherd in His quest particularly for the lost sheep, leaving the 99 alone, is a revelation of God the Father. Yet, these teachings also reflect on Jesus Christ, the Son of God. he carries out the Father's mission that all of this could be possible and that the gates of Heaven could open for God's People.

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### CONCLUSION

[1] In the end, perhaps Paul offers us the best conclusion of all: How rich are the depths of God - how deep His wisdom and knowledge - and how impossible to penetrate His motives or understand His methods! [cf. Rm 11:33]. In speaking of the Power of God, His Wisdom, His holiness, - these are human “stutterings” before the ineffable God. He does not fit into any formula, transcends them all. It is in Jesus Christ that the full revelation of God is present - in His words and deeds. Whoever sees Jesus, ponders Him prays to Him, with Him - sees the Heavenly Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

[2] The divine attributes pertain to the Most Blessed Trinity - all the divine activities *ad extra* are common to all three Persons. Even the “appropriations”, theology’s way of trying to penetrate the sanctuary of Divine Love and to understand something of the divine nature, do not divide the Father and the Son Who has made the Merciful Father visible in human flesh. Much of the Father is revealed in the visible Missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit - the totality of God’s self giving, the absolute generosity in the bestowal of His gifts.

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[NB: from pages 133-149 of these notes, cf. F. X. Durwell, CSsR, *Le Père. Dieu en son mystère*. Paris: du Cerf 1993, pp. 161-192, passim].

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