

November 23, 2014
Second Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
Freedom to Die

However we are to treat the “necessity” Christ ascribes to his Passion, we should not speak of it as a *physical* necessity. It was not an mere instance of second law of thermodynamics. Nor—to pose the question theologically—can we say that Jesus *had to* die in the same sense that the rest of us have to die. Although descended in the line from Adam, Christ did not inherit the death imposed on the human race by reason of Adam’s disobedience.

Indeed, Sacred Theology rejects that possibility out of hand. Reflecting on the pertinent dominical affirmation —“I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again”—orthodox Christians have traditionally inferred that the humanity assumed by God’s Son was not, like ours, in bondage to death. The devil, who held our race in subjection to mortality, had no power over God’s Son.

Thus, Saint John Chrysostom wrote of Christ,

He everywhere endeavored to show that his death was of a new kind, inasmuch as the whole of it lay within the power of the person dying, and death did not come upon his body until he willed it, and he willed it only after he had fulfilled all things (*Homiliae in Joannem* 85, on John 19:28).

Chrysostom was hardly alone on this point. The whole Christian Tradition was insistent: Because Christ was not “fallen,” there was no “inherited obligation” for him to die.

Augustine of Hippo, wrote of him:

The Mediator did not depart from his flesh against his will but *because* he willed, when he willed and as he willed, because he was united to the Word of God by a unity of Person. . . . It was not because some power had authority over him that he was deprived of his bodily life, but he himself stripped himself of it; for he that

had it in his power not to die if he did not wish to die doubtless died because he willed it so. Therefore he subjected to mockery the principalities and powers, unhesitatingly demonstrating his Victory over them in his own Person. For this was his purpose in dying, that, by the one and truest sacrifice (*uno verissimo sacrificio*) offered up for us, he might cleanse, abolish, and extinguish whatever claim there was, by reason of our sins, for the principalities and powers to make us the objects of a just punishment (*On the Trinity* 4.13).

Within decades of this declaration, Pope Leo I of Rome, ever Augustine's close reader, repeated his thought on the subject:

No violence could have been done to the temple of Christ's body if he had not permitted it, because God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. . . . He allowed the godless to stretch forth their hands against him. The power of the deity was held in check so that he might arrive at the glory of the Passion (*Cohabita est potentia deitatis ut perveniretur ad gloriam Passionis*) (*Sermons* 65).

And again, "What [Christ] endured was endured, not of necessity, but undertaken from his own free will" (*Sermons* 54.2).

In the Middle Ages, this conviction of Chrysostom, Augustine, and Leo was repeated by Thomas Aquinas:

Because Christ, of his own accord, did not keep from his body the harm inflicted upon it, but willed that his bodily nature should succumb to the injury, it is truly said that he laid down his life (*animam*), or that he died of his accord (*Summa Theologica* III 47.1).

In other words, orthodox Christian theology affirms that our Lord's humanity, hypostatically united to the divine nature, was not obliged to die; the Savior was not subject—subjugated—to sin, death, and corruption. There was no physical necessity for him to lay down his life, because the power of death held no sway over him. We believers affirm this, not on the basis of some esoteric Christological theory, but because the Gospel of John obliges us to affirm it.

At the same time, nonetheless, Christian theology insists that Jesus was *able* to die, *capax mortis*. This is inferred from the fact that he consented to die. This capacity for death had been inherent in Adam's original freedom. That is to say, Adam *chose* death, thereby becoming subject to death.

When Christ, however—*not* being subject to death—*chose* to suffer and die, he did so with a better and more complete freedom. He did this from the motive of love for his Father and for us men and for our salvation.

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