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Spirituality of the Old Testament



Paul-Marie of the Cross, O.C.D.

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To Mary, Queen and Beauty of Carmel.

May she make fruitful in our souls
the words which she kept in her heart.

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PART II

Divine Love

Chapter I

GOD AS FATHER

We have seen the cardinal importance of the biblical revelations concerning God and the soul, the promulgation of a law of love, and the bond which links us to Him whom we have the right and duty to call *our* God. But the Old Testament contains an even richer treasure which warrants our calling its message an advance Gospel or good news.¹ What is the good news of the Old Testament? It is news of the love that God has lavished on men—a love displayed in countless circumstances which allow us to discover in Him a Father, a Savior and a Lover. This message is expressed by all the authors of the Old Testament, but the prophets had a special mission to proclaim it. In the Book of Jeremias we

¹ The term “good news” or “good tidings” is found in various Old Testament texts: “Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings” (Nah. 1:15); “The Lord shall give the word to them that preach good tidings with great power” (Ps. 67:12).

find these words spoken by God to each soul in particular as well as to the whole nation: "Thou shalt call Me Father."² Isaias refers to the second aspect of divine love: "Thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer, from everlasting is Thy name."³ Elsewhere the same prophet succeeds in illuminating the whole panorama of the divine plan: "For He that made thee shall rule over thee, the Lord of hosts. . . . Thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, shall be called the God of all the earth. For the Lord hath called thee . . . as a wife."⁴ The more familiar we become with the inspired texts, the more we realize that this is the very essence of the message it aimed to reveal. Who could fail to see how important this truth is in the spiritual life?

THE DIVINE PATERNITY

Thou shalt call Me Father.⁵

For thou art our Father, . . . from everlasting is Thy name.⁶

Thus therefore shall you pray: Our Father who art in heaven.⁷

Behold what manner of charity the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called, and should be the sons of God.⁸

The revelation of God the Father granted to us by His Son (who alone knows Him⁹) and the title of "children of God," acquired for us by the merits of the Savior, presuppose the Incarnation, the teaching of Christ and His death on the cross. Could this message reach us through the Old Testament which preceded all these events? Were men required even then to treat God as a father and to consider themselves as

² Jer. 3:19. ³ Isa. 63:16. ⁴ Isa. 54:5-6. ⁵ Jer. 3:19.

⁶ Isa. 63:16. ⁷ Matt. 6:9. ⁸ I John 3:1.

⁹ "No one knoweth . . . who the Father is, but the Son, and to whom the Son will reveal Him" (Luke 10:22).

His children? Did not St. Paul teach that until the day men were set free by Christ and became sons, and therefore heirs, they lived as servants and slaves under the domination of sin and the yoke of the Law? But this servitude and slavery was not the state in which man was originally created. The Bible's very first pages testify that Adam, created in the divine resemblance, was a son. He was "born of the Spirit,"¹⁰ as Christ was to express it later. Moreover, it showed that God, like a father passing on an inheritance, led Adam into a universe clearly marked by the seal of divine paternity.

The whole universe testified to God's paternity, as much as to His creative power. It rises from the abyss, an absolute beginning, springing from nothingness upon a simple word uttered by God in the liberty of His sovereign purpose.¹¹ All things owe their life to Him; He is the Father of all things. All that possesses being in itself, receives it from Him; everything is a thought of God, an act of His will.¹² The very first truth of faith proclaimed by Scripture is that God carries within Himself the genesis of all orders of being, spiritual and material. We can never sufficiently ponder the opening of the Sacred Book, where the first words imply the whole

¹⁰ John 3:8.

¹¹ The Gospel according to St. John opens on the same theme, expressed in almost the same way: "In the beginning was the Word. . . . The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was made nothing that was made" (John 1:1-3).

¹² "One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in us all" (Eph. 4:3). "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus in good works, which God hath prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). "For it is God who worketh in you, both to will and to accomplish, according to His good will" (Phil. 2:13).

development of the universe: "In the beginning. . . ." From that moment the divine paternity would never cease to be active. Creatures were produced in an almost bewildering variety of ways, though the human mind could always detect in God's work a pattern of development marked by both multiplicity and unity.

The first proof of God's fatherly benevolence is found in the wonderful domain of divine works proposed for man's intellect and sovereignty. A greater proof appeared in His doubly creative action in man's development. He formed man wonderfully, then re-formed him still more wonderfully. The child, by his own fault, lost the right to his inheritance, spoiled the divine resemblance, was reduced to toil and slavery, denied his Father. But the Father did not abandon him. However magnificent the epic of physical creation and the lavish outpouring of the uncreated Spirit on created spirits, we are here dealing with a different and higher order of reality: the drama of God and sinful men, of the Father and His prodigal sons. The Bible shows us the destiny of this child who is inseparably involved in the effects of his attitude toward the Father. While the child's first sorrow is caused by the first clash of his will with God's, his chief hope is also dependent on the first words of mercy uttered by the divine lips.

So begins a drama of countless episodes in which each of us is involved in turn, a drama like the story of the father in the parable, who, after much suffering, delay and failure, finally succeeded in restoring his child to life. "This my son was dead, and is come to life again; was lost, and is found." ¹³

¹³ Luke 15:24.

We can conceive some idea of the infinite nobility of God's fatherhood only if we consider the value of this life restored to His child, a life which is the very life of the Father—divine life. Christ was to teach us about it by asking us to say "our Father," and He continually referred to its treasures and blessings by His images of the kingdom and the feast. What "our Father" gives us is a life surpassing life, which flourishes in the place of ruin and corruption, which truly should be called not life but *resurrection*, the gift of the omnipotent Creator and the infinitely merciful Father.

This fatherhood is evident in the Book of Genesis, where pages overflowing with life describe the happiness and first sufferings of mankind. Throughout the sacred books it is constantly proclaimed and rouses our adoration, gratitude and love. One nation was the herald of this fatherhood of God: Israel, His beloved child. St. Paul writes: "For it is written that Abraham had two sons; the one by a bondwoman and the other by a free woman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh; but he of the free woman was by promise. Which things are said by an allegory. For these are the two Testaments." ¹⁴

The nation of Israel, born of Abraham and Sara the free woman, was appointed by God as child and heir of His promise. But in St. Paul's time a complete reversal of the spiritual situation of the chosen people occurred. By failing to recognize its Redeemer, by remaining under the hold of the Old Law, by renouncing the transcendent promise, by choosing the servant for the mother, Israel lost its rights, the privileges of God's special child. The Christian people was

¹⁴ Gal. 4:22-24.

substituted for Israel and received the inheritance promised by the Father: the adoption as children of God. What a hard and stern lesson!

But before God rejected the nation He had chosen, we are authorized to see in His relations with Israel in the Old Testament the special evidence of His paternal love. For He constantly lavished this love on Israel throughout its history, which furnishes manifold proofs of it in words and acts. It is, therefore, correct to call the Sacred Book of those times by the name *Testament*, since it transmits a divine legacy. The legacy bequeathed from generation to generation is the love of the Father for His children. The Father kept His promise so generously that He even gave them His own life, in His Son.

May we say that by showing Israel His truly paternal love, God was leading Old Testament men, in a certain sense, toward the knowledge of the First Person of the Trinity? Although certain words and images in the Bible seem to us to refer clearly to the divine hypostasis (for instance, this verse of Psalm 2: "Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee"), yet before the time of Christ mankind received only pale and secret glimmerings insufficient to illuminate the depths of a mystery that had not yet been revealed.¹⁵ But Old

¹⁵ We say that *mankind* had not yet received this revelation. There is no doubt that the divine mystery was communicated interiorly to certain individuals like Abraham, Moses and David, because they were special friends of God. "Abraham your father rejoiced that he might see My day; he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). But their testimony, which was a veiled testimony (II Cor. 3:14), seemed to concern only their own personal mystical experience. We cannot assign limits to the illumination received in this way, for God is free to give as He chooses, in the past as in the present. Moreover, the expressions used by Christ in speaking of Abraham

Testament men were well aware of the divine paternity which inspired in them a filial attitude in their relations with God. Thus, upright hearts were wonderfully prepared for the fullness of revelation which Christ would bring. For us too the fatherhood described in the inspired books is offered as a precious message and teaching. The coming of the Incarnate Word in no way invalidated this ancient message. Those who aspire to lead the true life of children of God should have hearts ever imbued with these truths.¹⁶

GOD'S CARE OF HIS CHILDREN

For one is your Father, who is in heaven.¹⁷

For the expectation of the creature waiteth for the revelation of the sons of God.¹⁸

Many men admit without difficulty that God is the first cause and master of the universe, but they think that after creating the world He abandoned it to the action of the laws governing it. They forget that He is not only the Creator but

—*he saw; he rejoiced*—indicate knowledge and delight, the essential properties of wisdom, the mark of close intimacy with God. These properties are entirely independent of the prophetic message which in no wise requires on the part of the inspired author either interior delight in or ineffable understanding of the mysteries contained in the message he imparts. Scripture discloses its full sense in the revelation made to all humanity by the Son of God: "When they shall be converted to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away" (II Cor. 3:16).

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus reached the understanding of the maternal qualities in God's fatherhood through a text of the Old Testament: "You shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you. As one whom the mother caresseth, so will I comfort you" (Isa. 66:12-13).

¹⁷ Matt. 23:9. ¹⁸ Rom. 8:19.

also the Father. This heedlessness of reality is as insulting to Him as it is distressing to those who show such ignorance of God and such spiritual poverty. God's fatherhood is such an all-embracing essential reality that if it ceased to function for a single instant, all creation would return to nothingness. So far as man withdraws from the divine paternity, he withdraws from life itself. Since the original fall, man finds dependence an unbearable insult to his liberty. Adam strove to elude this dependence when he was deceived by the prospect of becoming the equal of God: "You shall be as gods."¹⁹ Man wanted to live his own life, but alas, to live one's own life is really to live outside of life, deprived of the only true liberty, which consists in dependence upon God.

Both Scripture and experience constantly reiterate this lesson, but man learns it only with the greatest difficulty. Nor does he understand that no one is more anxious than God to establish him in liberty, to form liberty in him by the ever-increasing activity of his intellect and will, so that he may learn not only how to choose between goods of differing values, but to achieve the good itself, that is to say, to experience love and to serve God. Only then, by a divine paradox, does man's dream come true; he becomes "like God," similar to Him. Under the gentle influence of the Holy Spirit, his mind and will become capable of the good which is his whole good.

How can we possess this treasure? The evangelists and St. Paul tell us. "Unless you become as little children. . . ." ²⁰ "For you have not received the spirit of bondage again in fear; but you have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry: Abba (Father)."²¹

¹⁹ Gen. 3:5. ²⁰ Matt. 18:3. ²¹ Rom. 8:15.

The Bible has its own way of attracting us to the God who is a Father: by revealing the bonds which unite us to Him and make us His children. We are shown how to find the germ of our liberty by accepting our state of dependence, to see that the same fatherly hand which created, formed and guided us also opens the door of the kingdom promised to sons of God. "Thus saith the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, his Maker: Ask Me of things to come, concerning My children, and concerning the work of My hands give ye charge to Me. I made the earth, and I created man upon it; My hand stretched forth the heavens, and I have commanded all their host."²²

In the course of time each child of man has to learn again for himself that he is first of all a child of God, that he receives existence from Him alone and, what is more important, that he receives from Him alone the spiritual breath that animates him and has made him in the likeness and image of his Father. "Thou hast formed me, and hast laid Thy hand upon me. . . . Thou hast protected me from my mother's womb. . . . My bone is not hidden from Thee, which Thou hast made in secret."²³ God is the source of man's greatest gift and his highest dignity, free will, the principle of his liberty and his unalterable nobility. "God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of

²² Isa. 45:11-12.

²³ Ps. 138. In biblical times men had to be taught the true religion and be led to accept God as the sole Author of all life. In modern times the false allurements of materialist philosophers must be repudiated. The danger is equally great and the need to have recourse to the Scriptures is just as urgent. St. John said: "Believe not every spirit. . . . Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (I John 4:1; 5:21).

his own counsel. He added His commandments and precepts. If thou wilt keep the commandments and perform acceptable fidelity forever, they shall preserve thee.”²⁴

Ecclesiasticus also shows how all man’s moral and spiritual greatness derives from God the Creator and the Father:

God created man of the earth, . . . and gave him power over all things that are upon the earth. He put the fear of him upon all flesh, and he had dominion over beasts and fowls. He crested of him a helpmate like to himself; He gave them counsel, and a tongue, and eyes, and ears, and a heart to devise, and he filled them with the knowledge of understanding. He created in them the science of the spirit, He filled their heart with wisdom and showed them both good and evil. He set His eye upon their hearts to show them the greatness of His works. . . . Moreover He gave them instructions, and the law of life for an inheritance. . . . He showed them His justice and judgments. And their eye saw the majesty of His glory, and their ears heard His glorious voice.²⁵

This eminent dignity enabled man’s mind to subdue nature, penetrating her deepest secrets, and even to rise to the contemplation and experience of divine reality. The Psalmist was emboldened to say that man and God are related and bound by family ties. “I have said: You are gods and all of you the sons of the Most High.”²⁶ It may be alleged that this is merely a nostalgic recollection of the wonderful origins at

²⁴ Ecclus. 15:14–16. ²⁵ Ecclus. 17:1–11.

²⁶ Ps. 81:6. St. Paul retains and confirms this quality of relationship which the redemption had strengthened: “Now therefore you are no more strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and the domestics of God” (Eph. 2:19). “For this cause I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named” (Eph. 3:14).

the dawn of the world “when the morning stars praised Me together, and all the sons of God made a joyful melody.”²⁷ But it was much more than that. Though sin tarnished the divine resemblance and deprived man of divine sonship, he remained truly linked to God and depended upon Him physically and spiritually. Eve knew that she brought forth her children with God’s help. In succeeding centuries the divine inheritance was still offered to man. The day would come when he could once more become a son of God. Not only did God promise this, but to a certain extent He gave man a pledge of it. That is the whole purpose and vocation of the chosen race, the favored site of the glory promised for the future. Israel proceeded from Abraham, but God alone was Israel’s true Father. When the people sinned, Moses reproached them, saying: “Thou hast forsaken the God that begot thee, and hast forgotten the Lord that created thee.”²⁸

When the people succumbed beneath the burden entrusted to them, the prophet again cried out to God, urging Him not to shirk the duties which were part of His fatherhood: “Have I conceived all this multitude, or begotten them, that Thou shouldst say to me: Carry them in thy bosom as the nurse is wont to carry the little infant, and bear them into the land?”²⁹

Much later the Spirit was to pronounce at length the essential cry in the heart of man: *Abba* (Father). But already Ecclesiasticus addressed God thus: “O Lord, Father, and sovereign Ruler of my life. . . . O Lord, Father, and God of my life.”³⁰ The prophet Isaias emphasized the title still more: “For Thou art our Father, . . . from everlasting is

²⁷ Job 38:7. ²⁸ Deut. 32:18. ²⁹ Num. 11:12.

³⁰ Ecclus. 23:1, 4.

Thy name. . . . And now, O Lord, Thou art our Father, and we are clay; and Thou art our Maker, and we all are the works of Thy hands. . . . Behold, see we are all Thy people.”³¹

To define the meaning of our divine origin is to acclaim God as Father. But we read His paternal heart still more clearly when we perceive His constant loving care of His children. How wonderfully gracious God is to give life to His creatures and then to watch over them, not leaving them naked and helpless on earth but providing for their needs like a father.³² The weakest of His children receive His tenderest care. “Because Thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the whirlwind, a shadow from the heat.”³³

But all God’s children without distinction have a right to His care. “The Lord is sweet to all; and His tender mercies are over all His works.”³⁴ He provides for their physical needs and He is especially the guardian of their souls. He is beside each of them in combat,³⁵ responding with tireless

³¹ Isa. 63:16; 64:8–9. This image of clay molded by God, like a vessel in the hands of a potter, is found also in Wisd. 15:7, Eccles. 13, Rom. 9:21.

³² Christ was to emphasize this solicitude which provided for the material needs of creatures: “Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns, and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not you of much more value than they?” (Matt. 6:26). Also He taught us to pray: “Our Father . . . give us this day our daily bread.”

³³ Isa. 25:4.

³⁴ Ps. 144:9. “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:29–30).

³⁵ “And fear ye not them that kill the body, and are not able to kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). The welfare of the soul is more

kindness to the appeals of faith. “If I shall walk in the midst of tribulation, Thou wilt quicken me; and Thou hast stretched forth Thy hand against the wrath of my enemies; and Thy right hand hath saved me. The Lord will repay for me; Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth forever; O despise not the works of Thy hands.”³⁶

He cares especially for the Israelites, first-born of His sons, whom He jealously cherishes with all the attentions a human father lavishes on his children. He shows supreme kindness to them and provides them with abundant fruits of the earth. “He set him upon high land; that he might eat the fruits of the fields, that he might suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the hardest stone, butter of the herd, and milk of the sheep with the fat of lambs.”³⁷ He carries, guides, cherishes the nation like a beloved child, cares for it like a chosen vineyard, protects it against enemies, sallies out against those seeking to do her harm. A really jealous note is heard in these texts of Deuteronomy and Isaias:

He found him in a desert land, in a place of horror, and of vast wilderness: He led him about, and taught him; and He kept him as the apple of His eye.³⁸

In that day there shall be singing to the vineyard of pure wine. I am the Lord that keep it, I will suddenly give it drink; lest any hurt come to it, I keep it night and day.³⁹

At the end of the Book of Wisdom the author thanks God for the countless divine benefits and testifies to the dignity

important than that of the body, though it too is carefully looked after by God. “Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God, and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33).

³⁶ Ps. 137:7–8.

³⁷ Deut. 32:13.

³⁸ Deut. 32:10.

³⁹ Isa. 27:2–3.

that the people have attained through these favors. "In all things Thou didst magnify Thy people, O Lord, and didst honor them, and didst not despise them, but didst assist them at all times, and in every place."⁴⁰

Long before, Moses had invited Israel to keep in her heart the memory of God's goodness, as a son recalls with tender gratitude the benefits received from his father. "And in the wilderness (as thou hast seen) the Lord thy God hath carried thee, as a man is wont to carry his little son, all the way that you have come, until you came to this place."⁴¹

GOD TEACHES HIS CHILDREN

He hath mercy, and teacheth, and correcteth, as a shepherd doth his flock.⁴²

God gives us everything, the life of the body and of the soul, but He wills that the life that He preserves in us should grow and attain its full stature and beauty. Having made us capable of receiving His gifts, He longs to impress His image and resemblance ever more perfectly upon us. For this reason He becomes our "educator." The child left to himself would go astray. Without supernatural help he could never achieve spiritual development nor make efficacious use of the benefits and treasures bestowed upon him. God increases His fatherly care by becoming our teacher. If the plants sown by Him remain under His influence, they blossom and bear fruit. They should open their petals to grace and to the teaching of Him who calls them to a higher life.⁴³ How well

⁴⁰ Wisd. 19:20. ⁴¹ Deut. 1:31. ⁴² Ecclus. 18:13.

⁴³ The teaching of Christ and the apostles takes account of a state of childhood, then of development in man's religious life. When addressing the crowd Christ speaks in parables which are easy

this was known by the men of God who kept repeating with humble fervor in the psalms: *Doce me! Deduc me! Dirige me!*

Right from the time of the garden of Eden we hear God informing Adam of the dangers he risks and the voice he should heed: "Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death."⁴⁴ God's first rebuke to Adam was for having listened to a voice other than His own: "Because thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife. . . ." ⁴⁵ After the first sin the good was no longer the sole star shining before the eyes of men who thenceforth were fascinated by other lights. How much more necessary divine help then became; nor does God keep men waiting. When Cain was tempted he asked for help and God graciously warned and encouraged him. "Why art thou angry? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou do well, shalt thou not receive? But if ill, shall not sin forthwith be present at the door? But the lust thereof shall be under thee, and thou shalt have dominion over it."⁴⁶

Prohibitions and encouragements proceeding from the overflowing love of God's heart never ceased, and reached a climax at the time of the redemption and thenceforth.⁴⁷ But

to grasp, but in familiar conversation with His apostles He explains and develops His teaching. The Epistle to the Hebrews emphasizes the importance of giving milk to those not ready for strong meat. (Heb. 5:12-14) St. Paul treats his converts "as if a nurse should cherish her children" (I Thess. 2:7).

⁴⁴ Gen. 2:17. ⁴⁵ Gen. 3:17. ⁴⁶ Gen. 4:6-7.

⁴⁷ The Gospel often shows Christ dismayed by His disciples' slowness in attaining truly spiritual understanding. St. Mark records that He sighed deeply when the Pharisees asked for a sign from heaven (Mark 8:11-12).

men kept refusing to heed the word which should have formed them and raised them to the heights for which they were created, the word which could do for each soul what had been done for Israel. "As the eagle enticing her young to fly, and hovering over them, He spread His wings, and hath taken him and carried him on His shoulders."⁴⁸

How vivid was that image of the royal eagle teaching its fledglings to soar into space, trying to attract their attention by its own magnificent flight, enticing them to follow in its wake to become intoxicated with light, finally sheltering them beneath its wings to inspire them with yearning and courage for hazardous adventures. Thus God appeared on the mountain in dazzling glory but at the same time His voice reached the innermost depths of souls to arouse them and inspire them to take flight. He pointed out the path to the promised banquet. He suffered on seeing men take another road. He had told them that He alone was "He who is," yet they turn to the things of nothingness.

How often the Old Testament is avoided because God there appears in a frightening aspect. But we must remember the positive and educational value in the revelation of divine transcendence. Literature of recent centuries has tended to contrast the merciful Christ of the Gospels with the terrible and transcendent God of the Old Testament. But only a careless reading of both Testaments could account for such an obvious error, doubtless originating as part of the reaction against Jansenism and popularized by the trend to dilute the figure and the message of Christ. The same tendency to stress the tenderness of Christ is evident also in art and literature. But in truth neither by word nor by attitude did Christ ever

⁴⁸ Deut. 32:11.

cast off the dignity which was the mark of His divine and infinitely transcendent majesty. The Epistles also remind us of the dignity of God and of the coming of His kingdom of justice. How, indeed, can we oppose justice and mercy, for Scripture tells us that in Christ they have "kissed."⁴⁹ The Evangelists, too, in all their exhortations rely on the fear of God as a powerful motive of spiritual progress, a motive in no way opposed to trust and filial surrender.

By teaching that He is "He who is," God not only fills men with salutary fear but exercises a power of attraction that detaches them from all falsehood and illusion. God strives to lead men to seek His living presence as their goal, to pay attention to His word, to depend on His holy will.

The chief purpose of education is to give a clear knowledge of the goal to be attained, of the choice required, of what should be preferred to all else. It would, therefore, be a complete misunderstanding of the divine benefits included in the fear of God to see it merely as a moat separating God from His creatures. It is, rather, "the beginning of wisdom."⁵⁰

God takes care to develop this fear in a healthy atmosphere. He wishes, not servile fear, but the deep reverence of a child for its father, a fear which makes him docile to His voice, attentive to His teaching, a fear which inspires admiration and respect. If something of this filial feeling had not been present from the beginning, could fear have blossomed forth later into these words of the prophet Malachias: "The son honoreth the father, and the servant his master; if then I be a Father, where is My honor? And if I be a Master, where is My fear? saith the Lord of hosts."⁵¹ Even on Sinai

⁴⁹ Ps. 84:11.

⁵⁰ Ecclus. 1:14.

⁵¹ Mal. 1:6.

the fear inspired by God was imbued with love and in the midst of His resplendent majesty He sought to show Moses His kindness. He stretched His hand over him and hid him in the hollow of a rock to save him from being dazzled.⁵² Moses told the people: "Fear not; for God is come to prove you, and that the dread of Him might be in you, and you should not sin."⁵³ This fear is loving and fruitful. "Who shall give them to have such a mind, to fear Me and to keep all My commandments at all times, that it may be well with them and with their children forever?"⁵⁴ Thus does a father speak when he knows that his children will be safe from harm as long as they consent to live in obedience. The prophets repeated this message; the wisdom writers made it the basis of their teaching: Whoever fears does not flee from God in terror, does not resist God's appeal, but on the contrary draws near Him, for in realizing God's greatness, he knows His mercy too. The man who fears, finds truth and charity only in God's good pleasure. "Ye that fear the Lord, hope in Him; and mercy shall come to you for your delight."⁵⁵ By fear the humble man is strengthened; by fear God's friends are preserved in the divine friendship. Fear of God puts us on guard against ourselves, not against God. If it takes the form of a spiritual anxiety due to the dread of punishment, then it is not according to God's will and should be overcome by faith in Him who saves us by His mercy.⁵⁶

⁵² Cf. Exod. 33:21-22. ⁵³ Exod. 20:20. ⁵⁴ Deut. 5:29.

⁵⁵ Ecclus. 2:9.

⁵⁶ "Perfect charity casteth out fear" (I John 4:18). Christ wished to remove this anxiety from His disciples' souls at the very time when He was informing them of their weakness: "Watch ye, and pray. . . . The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh weak" (Matt. 26:41). Cf. John, chap. 14.

The Bible shows in God's special servants the coexistence of sentiments ranging from perfect trust to respectful fear. Absolute confidence is clearly united to humble compunction. It even seems that the quality of the fear found in a soul is in proportion to its love for God. The soul thus achieves spiritual equilibrium, which gives a true sense of values and readiness to welcome divine commands and obey them. "My son, give Me thy heart, and let thy eyes keep My ways."⁵⁷

The sage's words here echo God's voice and are addressed to hearts filled with sufficient fear of God to experience how just are His commandments and how lovable His ways. What has been forgotten in our day is that the fear evident in the Bible contains a great lesson of love. Love and the growth of love demand respect, admiration, the power of attention and fervor. The lover must also feel humble and unworthy of the one he loves; he must believe that love is gratuitous, a marvellous gift. It is not to be wondered at then, that God wishes to inspire these sentiments in the hearts of the children whom He calls to practice the supreme commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." These are commandments of love and of life; they deny that the tendency to evil is permanent; they provide the sure remedy: a return to justice and charity. They can be observed only by souls formed by God Himself. "He gave them instructions, and the law of life for an inheritance. He made an everlasting covenant with them, and He showed them His justice and judgments."⁵⁸

But besides giving rules for the welfare of His children ("Keep My laws . . . which if a man do, he shall live in

⁵⁷ Prov. 23:26. ⁵⁸ Ecclus. 17:9-10.

them”⁵⁹), God Himself became their teacher. “As a man traineth up his son, so the Lord God hath trained thee up.”⁶⁰ “I was like a foster father to Ephraim, I carried them in My arms; and they knew not that I healed them. I will draw them with the cords of Adam, with the bands of love.”⁶¹

This text well depicts the atmosphere of God’s educational process: His gentleness, patience, the goal He strives to show His children, a goal to which He leads them, not by force, but by the desires He arouses in the depths of their souls.⁶²

Of course there must be laws, like the swaddling bands which protect a child, like guide ropes that prevent his falling. But by calling the laws mankind’s guides or bonds of love, the Bible emphasized God’s merciful way with His children and also gave a mysterious foreglimpse of the living bond of love that would attach man to God in the person of His Son. The whole Old Testament displayed a form of education fitted to our measure, adapted to our human weakness and our divine vocation. “He hath mercy, and teacheth, and correcteth, as a shepherd doth his flock. He hath mercy on him that receiveth the discipline of mercy, and that maketh haste in his judgments.”⁶³

In these words of Ecclesiasticus we glimpse the long and difficult task undertaken by God, who ardently longs to form

⁵⁹ Lev. 18:5. ⁶⁰ Deut. 8:5. ⁶¹ Osee 11:3–4.

⁶² Christ explained that man’s imperfection accounted for God’s extraordinary patience in Old Testament days: “Because Moses, by reason of the hardness of your heart, permitted you to put away your wives . . .” (Matt. 19:8). The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of St. Paul show a constant aim to educate, by taking each soul at its own level, then raising it gradually toward perfection and total liberty. “To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak. I became all things to all men, that I might save all” (I Cor. 9:22).

⁶³ Eccclus. 18:13–14.

man, to enlighten him regarding his evil tendencies, to curb them and turn them toward good, to develop in his heart the awareness of eternity, to make him realize the responsibility ensuing from liberty. The child often stumbles on the hard path; many are his falls. God is no more surprised by them than a father who sees his son struggle to master his youthful personality. He is there to strengthen and encourage the child seeking the way. “Shall not he that falleth rise again? And he that is turned away, shall he not turn again?”⁶⁴

If the child does fall, God beckons him, binds his wounds and heals them, speaking like a father to his sons: “Return, you rebellious children, and I will heal your rebellions. . . . If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return to Me.”⁶⁵ Sometimes God has recourse to punishment as a stimulus to reflection and repentance: “My son, reject not the correction of the Lord, and do not faint when thou art chastised by Him; for whom the Lord loveth, He chastiseth; and as a father in the son He pleaseth Himself.”⁶⁶

God is ever near His child to pardon as soon as the fault is admitted: “He that hideth his sins, shall not prosper; but he that shall confess, and forsake them, shall obtain mercy.”⁶⁷ Ecclesiasticus also teaches the lesson of repentance. “My son,

⁶⁴ Jer. 8:4. ⁶⁵ Jer. 3:22; 4:1.

⁶⁶ Prov. 3:11–12. This passage was quoted by St. Paul: “God dealeth with you as with His sons; for what son is there, whom the father doth not correct? . . . Moreover we have had fathers of our flesh, for instructors, and we revered them; shall we not much more obey the Father of spirits, and live? Now all chastisement for the present indeed seemeth not to bring with it joy, but sorrow; but afterward it will yield, to them that are exercised by it, the most peaceable fruit of justice” (Heb. 12:7–11).

⁶⁷ Prov. 28:13.

hast thou sinned? Do so no more; but for thy former sins also pray that they may be forgiven thee. Flee from sins as from the face of a serpent; for if thou comest near them, they will take hold of thee. The teeth thereof are the teeth of a lion, killing the souls of men.”⁶⁸ Thus, in spite of obstacles and falls, God forms the heart of His child; His merciful goodness inspires trust. He trains the will to keep steadily in right paths and to use well the liberty which is destined to attain full development in true and upright living:

If thou wilt keep the commandments and perform acceptable fidelity forever, they shall preserve thee. He hath set water and fire before thee; stretch forth thy hand to which thou wilt. Before man is life and death, good and evil, that which he shall choose shall be given him; for the wisdom of God is great. . . . The eyes of the Lord are toward them that fear Him, and He knoweth all the work of man. He hath commanded no man to do wickedly, and He hath given no man license to sin.⁶⁹

God teaches men to cast off the slavery of sin, to become responsible for their actions, to be capable of rejecting temptation. “Let no man, when he is tempted, say that he is tempted by God. For God is not a tempter of evils, and He tempteth no man.”⁷⁰ “Say not: it is through God, that she

⁶⁸ Ecclus. 21:1–3. ⁶⁹ Ecclus. 15:16–21.

⁷⁰ Jas. 1:13. St. Paul had understood perfectly the divine pedagogy and he restrains his own impatience to see his children grow: “My little children, of whom I am in labor again, until Christ be formed in you. And I would willingly be present with you now, and change my voice” (Gal. 4:19–20). In all his Epistles he teaches that the adulthood which men should attain is the pursuit of perfection, “a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ; that henceforth we be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the wickedness of men”

[wisdom] is not with me; for do not thou the things that He hateth. Say not: He hath caused me to err; for He hath no need of wicked men.”⁷¹

When man’s intelligence is enlightened by divine teaching, and his will trained to virile strength, then he becomes truly free to adhere to the commandments and, by rejecting evil, to live as a child of God.

The Scriptural account of this divine pedagogy shows that it applied to God’s chosen people in general, and also to each individual person. However, those called to be the moral and spiritual leaders in Israel received the blessing of a more thorough education. Even from earliest times God directed these various levels of training: collective education, individual education, fuller formation of certain persons by reason of particular vocations. In a similar way was formed the sense of responsibility. The collective sense of responsibility appeared in the punishment by the deluge, but at the same time, or even earlier, we see cases where sin involved only the individual, such as Cain, Cham and Lot’s wife. Yet this sense of personal responsibility seems to have been blunted in the course of time and that is doubtless the reason for Ezechiel’s forcible reminder of the moral obligations of a mature conscience:

Behold all souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is Mine; the soul that sinneth, the same shall die. If a man be just, and do judgment and justice, and hath not eaten upon the mountains, nor lifted up his eyes to the idols of the

(Eph. 4:13–14). St. Peter and St. John also define the true child of God as one who can cast aside worldly desires, cling to God’s will, be holy in every action (I John 2:13–17; I Pet. 1:14–15).

⁷¹ Ecclus. 15:11–12.

house of Israel, and hath not defiled his neighbor's wife, . . . and hath not wronged any man, but hath restored the pledge to the debtor, hath taken nothing away by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment, . . . hath walked in My commandments and kept My judgments, to do truth, he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord God. And if he beget a son that is a robber, a shedder of blood, and that hath done some one of these things, . . . he shall surely die, his blood shall be upon him. But if he beget a son who, seeing all his father's sins, which he hath done, is afraid, and shall not do the like to them, . . . this man shall not die for the iniquity of his father, but living he shall live.

And you say: Why hath not the son borne the iniquity of his father? Verily, because the son hath wrought judgment and justice, hath kept all My commandments, and done them, living, he shall live. The soul that sinneth, the same shall die; the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, and the father shall not bear the iniquity of the son; the justice of the just shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked do penance for all his sins which he hath committed, and keep all My commandments, and do judgment, and justice, living he shall live, and shall not die. I will not remember all his iniquities that he hath done; in his justice which he hath wrought, he shall live. Is it My will that a sinner should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should be converted from his ways, and live?

But if the just man turn himself away from his justice, and do iniquity according to all the abominations which the wicked man useth to work, shall he live? All his justices which he hath done, shall not be remembered; in the prevarication, by which he hath prevaricated, and in his sin, which he hath committed, in them he shall die.

And you have said: The way of the Lord is not right. Hear ye,

therefore, O house of Israel: Is it My way that is not right, and are not rather your ways perverse? For when the just turneth himself away from his justice, and committeth iniquity, he shall die therein; in the injustice that he hath wrought he shall die. And when the wicked turneth himself away from his wickedness, which he hath wrought, and doeth judgment and justice, he shall save his soul alive. . . . Therefore will I judge every man according to his ways, O house of Israel, saith the Lord God. Be converted, and do penance for all your iniquities; and iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, by which you have transgressed, and make to yourselves a new heart, and a new spirit; and why will you die, O house of Israel? For I desire not the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God, return ye and live.⁷²

This text reminds men that an interior act of judgment should confront their conduct with the dictates of conscience, which is the inward echo of the Father's voice. Wherever they are, they should act, not merely according to the letter of the law, but in spirit and in truth.⁷³ They are to be judged only on their own personal actions and they alone should be responsible for them. For centuries Ezechiel's exhortation to be converted and live re-echoes in Israel. Indeed, what God most wishes to give to His children is life. It is extinguished in hearts turned to evil, but is en-

⁷² Ezech. 18:4-32.

⁷³ "Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God. Blessed is he that condemneth not himself in that which he alloweth" (Rom. 14:22). "Therefore every one of us shall render account to God for himself" (Rom. 14:12). "To him therefore who knoweth to do good, and doth it not, to him it is sin" (Jas. 4:17). It is, of course, taken for granted, as this last text implies, that the full development of individual responsibility includes a keen sense of the individual's duties toward the community to which he belongs.

kindled and shines brightly in those who abandon sin and cling to the divine precepts. "For God made not death, neither hath He pleasure in the destruction of the living. For He created all things that they might be; and He made the nations of the earth for health."⁷⁴ To form man as a being steadfast in virtue, filled with divine life and endowed with liberty, that is the great plan of the Father who wishes to share His own life with His children.

THE PRODIGALS AND THE STRAYS

It is not the will of your Father, who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.⁷⁵

Children reach an age where their sins become, as it were, a part of their education, permitting the father to show them, in a clear and practical way, the dangers to be overcome, the progress to be made, the goal to attain. Such sins are, of course, culpable, but they are caused chiefly by weakness and lack of self-control. They reveal the tendencies which struggle in a wavering will and an unsteady heart; they prove that the child needs formation rather than reformation. Ordinarily it would be wrong to see in such faults any evidence of fully conscious, deliberate rebellion against the Father's commandments, with a fixed intention of rejecting Him. Generally they are due to weakness, cowardice and egotism.

But if a man well-formed and strengthened by divine education later rebels deliberately against the Father, wilfully asserts his independence, commits personal and fully voluntary sins, even turns against the Father the talents received

⁷⁴ Wisd. 1:14-15. ⁷⁵ Matt. 18:14.

from Him, or uses divine favors as instruments of his sin, then we find a deep-seated, serious guilt.⁷⁶

In this case only the unfathomable depths of mercy and all the contrivances of divine love can arouse contrition and lead back to the straight path of love's way the prodigal son who is no longer, alas, a child of God. The door is always open to a return, pardon and a new beginning, as Ezechiel says in the text quoted above: "When the wicked turneth himself away from his wickedness, . . . he shall save his soul alive."⁷⁷ Samuel, long before, spoke likewise to the people:

Fear not, you have done all this evil; but yet depart not from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. And turn not aside after vain things which shall never profit you nor deliver you, because they are vain. . . . Therefore fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth and with your whole heart, for you have seen the great works which He hath done among you.⁷⁸

The parable of the prodigal son, Christ's wonderful picture of paternal love, can be said to summarize the whole Old Testament. From one point of view the Old Testament is simply the story of the wanderings of the Israelites, the nation adopted by God as His child. It is also the story of Israel's education by a father never disheartened in his tireless pursuit of his son. For this reason Israel's history can show each of us the history of our own soul. A vivid

⁷⁶ Men are accused by their own consciousness of sin. "If you were blind, you should not have sin; but now you say: We see. Your sin remaineth" (John 9:41). But no one should judge himself and St. John says: "If our heart reprehend us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things" (I John 3:20).

⁷⁷ Ezech. 18:27. ⁷⁸ I Kings 12:21-22, 24.

allegory of Ezechiel, remarkable for its touching, poignant realism, portrays the prodigal as impressively as the Gospel parable, and perhaps more tragically. The child received the father's generous gifts, then turned against him, but was pursued by infinite mercy striving to bring him back.

Thus saith the Lord God to Jerusalem: Thy root and thy nativity is of the land of Chanaan, thy father was an Amorrhite and thy mother a Cethite. And when thou wast born, in the day of thy nativity, thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed with water for thy health, nor salted with salt, nor swaddled with clouts. No eye had pity on thee to do any of these things for thee, out of compassion to thee; but thou wast cast out upon the face of the earth in abjection of thy soul, in the day that thou wast born.

And passing by thee, I saw that thou was trodden under foot in thy own blood; and I said to thee when thou wast in thy blood: Live. I have said to thee: Live in thy blood. I caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field; and thou didst increase and grow great, and advancedst, and camest to woman's ornament; thy breasts were fashioned and thy hair grew; and thou wast naked and full of confusion. And I passed by thee and saw thee; and behold thy time was the time of lovers; and I spread my garment over thee, and covered thy ignominy. And I swore to thee, and I entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God: and thou becamest Mine.

And I washed thee with water, and cleansed away thy blood from thee; and I anointed thee with oil. And I clothed thee with embroidery, and shod thee with violet colored shoes; and I girded thee about with fine linen, and clothed thee with fine garments. I decked thee also with ornaments, and put bracelets on thy hands, and a chain about thy neck. And I put a jewel upon thy forehead and earrings in thy ears, and a beautiful crown upon

thy head. And thou wast adorned with gold, and silver, and wast clothed with fine linen and embroidered work and many colors; thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil, and wast made exceeding beautiful; and wast advanced to be a queen. And thy renown went forth among the nations for thy beauty; for thou wast perfect through My beauty, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God.

But trusting in thy beauty, thou playedst the harlot because of thy renown, and thou hast prostituted thyself to every passenger, to be his. . . . And thou tookest thy beautiful vessels, of My gold and My silver, which I gave thee, and thou madest thee images of men, and hast committed fornication with them. And thou tookest thy garments of divers colors, and coveredst them; and settest My oil and My sweet incense before them. And My bread which I gave thee, the fine flour, and oil, and honey, wherewith I fed thee, thou hast set before them for a sweet odor; and it was done, saith the Lord God.

And after all thy abominations and fornications, thou hast not remembered the days of thy youth, when thou wast naked and full of confusion, trodden under foot in thy own blood. And it came to pass after all thy wickedness (woe, woe to thee) . . . thou hast borne thy wickedness and thy disgrace, saith the Lord God.

For thus saith the Lord God; I will deal with thee, as thou hast despised the oath, in breaking the covenant; and I will remember My covenant with thee in the days of thy youth; and I will establish with thee an everlasting covenant. And thou shalt remember thy ways, and be ashamed. . . . And I will establish My covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord. That thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and mayest no more open thy mouth because of thy confusion, when I shall be pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ezech. 16:3-23; 58-63.

With what tender sorrow God reproaches unfaithful men! The prophet's words show us that sinful rebellion and proud ingratitude are the causes of all the varied species of human sin which spawn throughout the Bible's pages. Under the influence of sin, men left the straight path and wandered in darkness. God's longest and hardest task on behalf of His children consists in leading them back to Himself as in the parable. This thankless labor throws into relief the divine Father's intense love.

Although we should never confuse Israel in the Old Testament with individual Israelites who merited just condemnation, the texts presented show that the nation was considered by God as a moral entity, unfaithful to its commitments and guilty of sin. God speaks directly to the nation which had broken the ties of love binding it to Him. He addresses, not a fictitious person, but a living reality. In the broad outlines of its unfinished history, Israel reveals the same portrait which the Gospel was to entitle "The Prodigal Son." God's attitude to Israel was the same as that of the father in the Gospel parable. For this reason we shall not recount the actual events of the history of the chosen people, but shall emphasize rather the Father's attitude to sin and to the secret beginnings of conversion on the part of His children. This conduct of God is especially evident in the writings of the prophets,⁸⁰ who do not describe exact details of conditions of their time, but behold past, present and future opened to

⁸⁰ The New Testament follows the same general scheme. While Christ's mission was to find what was lost and to lead the straying sheep back to the fold by His redeeming death, He did not neglect to teach and to urge penance as well as to threaten punishment in His effort to secure man's cooperation with grace, his voluntary renouncement of sin and the return of his heart to God.

their vision by inward illumination. In the light of this vision they reveal the divine attitude, changeless throughout the centuries. Thus Amos, though he came on the scene in prosperous times, nonetheless saw clearly the approaching punishment of Israel, to be followed by a glorious restoration of God's people. Viewing everything from the vantage point of sin, the prophets foretold God's attitude to sinners and His actual way of dealing with them, pleading for contrition and penance, merciful punishment and pardon. They asserted that God spares no effort to obtain the conversion and rehabilitation of sinners. We now shall venture to sketch, as in a vast mural, these necessary stages in the conversion of the prodigal sons, whether they be individuals or the nation in general. God in His mercy wills this process of conversion and He prepares the way for it. The same process is ever repeated throughout the ages.

CONVERSION OF SINNERS

Knowest thou not, that the benignity of God leadeth thee to penance? ⁸¹

In the light of God's commandments and His revealed teaching, men certainly should know and acknowledge their faults. But the most characteristic trait of the sinner is to justify himself and to make excuses. Sin is a barrier between God and the sinner, who is blinded by it and requires another grace from God—an inner and merciful light—to open his eyes. In this God shows that He truly wishes to be completely paternal, for He is not stingy with His grace. He struggles against sin, tries to arouse sluggish hearts and to pierce the shadows with His light. "I knew thee in the desert,

⁸¹ Rom. 2:4.

in the land of the wilderness. According to their pastures they were filled, and were made full; and they lifted up their heart, and have forgotten Me.”⁸² He often reminds men of His benefits: “I spoke to thee in thy prosperity; and thou saidst: I will not hear; this hath been thy way from thy youth, because thou hast not heard My voice.”⁸³

But do men heed His voice? Ingratitude and rebellion are deeply rooted in disordered self-love, the worst obstacle to grace. “And thou hast trusted in thy wickedness, and hast said: There is none that seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, this hath deceived thee. And thou hast said in thy heart: I am, and besides me there is no other.”⁸⁴

Thereupon the soul abandons God’s path and wanders astray. “But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear; but walked in their own will and in the perversity of their wicked heart; and went backward and not forward.”⁸⁵ Gradually the sinner slips into falsehood and soon loses all dignity and honor, the honor that God had so jealously guarded. Disobedience and hardness of heart blind men so pitifully that they come to prefer illusion to truth. Their moral sense becomes perverted.

For it is a people that provoketh to wrath, and lying children, children that will not hear the law of God. Who say to the seers: See not; and to them that behold: Behold not for us those things that are right; speak unto us pleasant things, see errors for us.⁸⁶

Woe to you that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.⁸⁷

⁸² Osee 13:4–5. ⁸³ Jer. 22:21. Cf. also John, chap. 8.

⁸⁴ Isa. 47:10. ⁸⁵ Jer. 7:24. ⁸⁶ Isa. 30:9–10.

⁸⁷ Isa. 5:20.

The Father is particularly distressed when such perversion infects the leaders and guides of the people.

For from the least of them even to the greatest, all are given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, all are guilty of deceit. And they healed the breach of the daughter of My people disgracefully, saying: Peace, peace, and there was no peace. They were confounded because they committed abomination; yea, rather they were not confounded with confusion, and they knew not how to blush. . . . Thus saith the Lord: Stand ye on the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, which is the good way, and walk ye in it; and you shall find refreshment for your souls. And they said: We will not walk. And I appointed watchmen over you, saying: Harken ye to the sound of the trumpet. And they said: We will not hearken.⁸⁸

Those to whom God has given more light in order that they may lead others are all the more guilty when they despise Him and even lead souls to ruin. In God’s name the prophet Jeremias calls down punishment on these false guides: “Woe to the pastors that destroy and tear the sheep of My pasture, saith the Lord.”⁸⁹ God is surprised and painfully dismayed on seeing His children desert the loving home where they had received every blessing. “The kite in the air hath known her time; the turtle, and the swallow, and the stork have observed the time of their coming; but My people have not known the judgment of the Lord.”⁹⁰

No longer can God recognize the sons whose souls and intellects He had so patiently and lovingly formed. Sin erases the Father’s resemblance in men’s hearts, breaks off their association with God. “For my foolish people have not known Me; they are foolish and senseless children; they

⁸⁸ Jer. 6:13–17. ⁸⁹ Jer. 23:1. ⁹⁰ Jer. 8:7.

are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge.”⁹¹ Like tar, sin once touched, sticks to the heart, soils it, blackens it. God, therefore, tries to lead His children back to the light by revealing their faults to them, showing them how to remove evil, and to see it as a defilement and an obstacle. To admit sin is already to repudiate it. “But yet acknowledge thy iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God.”⁹² If, along with this confession, there appear humility, poverty and purity—the virtues opposed to the soul’s evil tendencies—then the roots of evil are cut off and sin is swept away. “You shall be displeased with yourselves in your own sight, for all your wicked deeds which you committed.”⁹³

This is the interior renovation that the prophets seek in their urgings and insistent pleadings to penance. For sin is not expelled by gentleness, but must at any cost be unmasked, torn out, opposed by its most formidable enemy—the process of conversion prescribed by the prophets: fastings, hair shirts and (what is more important) humility and compunction of heart expressed in tears and prayer.⁹⁴ “Gird thee with sackcloth, O daughter of My people, and sprinkle thee with ashes; make thee mourning as for an only son, a

⁹¹ Jer. 4:22.

⁹² Jer. 3:13. John the Baptist and then Christ at the beginning of His public life were to preach penance also, both in the same terms: “And in those days cometh John the Baptist preaching. . . . Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:1–2). “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say: Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17).

⁹³ Ezech. 20:43.

⁹⁴ Christ was to propose to the cities of Judea the ancient example of Ninive, the pagan city which had been saved by worthy fruits of penance (Matt. 12:41).

bitter lamentation.”⁹⁵ “Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth. . . . gird yourselves, and lament, O ye priests, howl, ye ministers of the altars; go in, lie in sackcloth, ye ministers of my God. . . . Sanctify ye a fast, call an assembly; gather together the ancients, call the inhabitants of the land into the house of your God.”⁹⁶

But God indeed is less concerned with men’s turning away from evil than with their turning once more to good. The heart’s one truly fruitful gesture is to adhere to God, to derive all strength from Him, and thus to be converted from sin with the help of divine grace. Even sinners who have strayed for a long time need not fear to return in search of support from their God and their Father.

Now therefore saith the Lord: Be converted to Me with all your heart, in fasting, and in weeping, and in mourning. And rend your hearts, and not your garments, and turn to the Lord your God; for He is gracious and merciful, patient and rich in mercy, and ready to repent of the evil. . . . Blow the trumpet in Sion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather together the people, sanctify the church. . . . Let the bridegroom go forth from his bed, and the bride out of her bride chamber. Between the porch and the altar the priests, the Lord’s ministers, shall weep, and shall say: Spare, O Lord, spare Thy people, and give not Thy inheritance to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them. Why should they say among the nations: Where is their God?⁹⁷

The child who returns home should not fear his Father’s anger, but should count on His mercy. By deciding to return to God, he has chosen to return to life. “Seek ye Me, and you

⁹⁵ Jer. 6:26.

⁹⁶ Joel 1:8, 13–14.

⁹⁷ Joel 2:11–17.

shall live. . . . Seek ye good and not evil, that you may live.”⁹⁸ When men gather together all their strength to turn homeward by penance, they find God awaiting them there.⁹⁹ “Assemble yourselves together, be gathered together, O nation not worthy to be loved; before the decree bring forth the day as dust passing away, before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you, before the day of the Lord’s indignation come upon you. Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth, you that have wrought His judgment; seek the just, seek the meek; if by any means you may be hid in the day of the Lord’s indignation.”¹⁰⁰

Sinners can find a Father who is eager to show His merciful love to the prodigal and repentant son. “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of affliction, to give you an end and patience. And you shall call upon Me, and you shall go; and you shall pray to Me, and I will hear you. You shall seek Me and shall find Me, when you shall seek Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you, saith the Lord.”¹⁰¹

God comes to meet men halfway, knowing what is in human hearts, knowing that they cannot of their own accord attain virtue and persevere in it. Provided only that men acquiesce in the Father’s plan of salvation, they will be saved. He strives to bring them back to Himself with truly effective determination.

As a father hath compassion on his children, so hath the Lord compassion on them that fear Him, for He knoweth our frame. He remembereth that we are dust.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Amos 5:4, 14.

⁹⁹ Similarly the father of the prodigal son said: “It was fit that we should make merry and be glad, for this thy brother was dead and is come to life again” (Luke 15:32).

¹⁰⁰ Soph. 2:1–3. ¹⁰¹ Jer. 29:11–14. ¹⁰² Ps. 102:13–14.

Is it My will that a sinner should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should be converted from his ways and live? . . . For I desire not the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God; return ye and live.¹⁰³

I will kill and I will make to live; I will strike and I will heal.¹⁰⁴

After all God’s multiple appeals, can He not expect His child to return with a transformed and renewed heart? Alas, the reading of the Old Testament leaves no illusion regarding the human heart’s weakness and hypocrisy: “How long do you halt between two sides?”¹⁰⁵ So spoke Elias in ancient times.

Man’s heart is so weak¹⁰⁶ and so attached to sin that without constant recourse to God’s power, it is ever on the verge of new betrayals, even while the voice still calls out to Him. At times a child may decide to return to God because the paternal appeals touch the heart, making the sinner realize his faults, but not his fundamental weakness. The impulse is certainly sincere, but short-lived because lacking depth. The history of Israel provides many examples of these conversions quickly begun and quickly ended. Sometimes in days of war or when catastrophe threatened, the cries of the prophets seemed to find an echo, as Jeremias testified: “A voice was heard in the highways, weeping and howling of the children of Israel. . . . Behold we come to Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God. . . . We have sinned against the Lord our God.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Ezech. 18:23, 32. ¹⁰⁴ Deut. 32:39. ¹⁰⁵ II Kings 18:21.

¹⁰⁶ But man’s weakness, though it attracts God’s compassion, cannot excuse the sinner, who at all times is given the grace to overcome his sin. “Let no temptation take hold on you, but such as is human. And God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able; but will make also with

While those who cried "Lord, Lord," indeed made a sincere confession, did they afterward do the will of the Father? They set out to seek Him with a light step: "In their affliction they will rise early to Me; come, and let us return to the Lord. . . . We shall know, and we shall follow on, that we may know the Lord. His going forth is prepared as the morning light, and He will come to us as the early and the latter rain to the earth."¹⁰⁸

But the outward gesture had no sequence. The first obstacle stopped them, dampened their enthusiasm, sent them back to their wandering ways, a cause of grief to God. How can God bring back to Himself these inconsistent souls, unsteady as sand? How can the good seed germinate and take root in such shallow soil? In such cases true conversion of heart—the only genuine conversion—has not taken place. "What shall I do to thee, O Ephraim? What shall I do to thee, O Juda? Your mercy is as a morning cloud, and as the dew that goeth away in the morning."¹⁰⁹ "I attended and hearkened; no man speaketh what is good, there is none that doth penance for his sin, saying: What have I done?"¹¹⁰ These are the weak and cowardly souls.

Others, hearing the invitation to penance, refuse outright to listen, deliberately plunge into sin, and even boast of it: "Let every man of you return from his evil way, and make ye your ways and your doings good. And they said: We have no hopes; for we will go after our own thoughts, and we will do every one according to the perverseness of his evil

temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it" (I Cor. 10:13).

¹⁰⁷ Jer. 3:21, 22, 25. ¹⁰⁸ Osee 6:1, 3. ¹⁰⁹ Osee 6:4.

¹¹⁰ Jer. 8:6. Cf. also Christ's parable of the sower and his seed (Matt. 13:3-9, 19-23).

heart."¹¹¹ "For it is a people that provoketh to wrath, and lying children, children that will not hear the law of God."¹¹²

But worst of all are the sinners who harbor evil in their hearts while proclaiming their good intentions. God denounces their faults and shows that He cannot be deceived. The worst hypocrisy is this sham contrition. "How canst thou say: I am not polluted, I have not walked after Baalim? See thy ways in the valley, know what thou hast done. . . . And thou hast said: I am without sin and am innocent; and therefore let Thy anger be turned away from me. Behold, I will contend with thee in judgment, because thou hast said: I have not sinned."¹¹³ "Therefore at the least from this time call to me: Thou art my Father, the guide of my virginity; wilt Thou be angry forever, or wilt Thou continue until the end? Behold, thou hast spoken, and hast done evil things, and hast been able."¹¹⁴

These hypocritical penances and sacrifices that are mere vain pretense constitute the hateful pharisaism which Jesus Himself unremittently condemned.¹¹⁵ "Do not fast as you have done until this day, to make your cry heard on high. Is this such a fast as I have chosen?"¹¹⁶ "Thy habitation is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they have refused to know Me, saith the Lord."¹¹⁷

Such deceit seems to halt the Father in His eager hunt for His children. Will He abandon them when He sees them in

¹¹¹ Jer. 18:11-12. ¹¹² Isa. 30:9. ¹¹³ Jer. 2:23, 35.

¹¹⁴ Jer. 3:4-5.

¹¹⁵ "For they say, and do not. . . . You serpents, generation of vipers, how will you flee from the judgment of hell?" (Matt. 23:3, 33).

¹¹⁶ Isa. 58:4-5. ¹¹⁷ Jer. 9:6.

such a wretched state? Whether they failed to understand what the Father expected of them or limited themselves to short-lived good intentions or yielded to weakness or, despite many divine appeals and aid, reverted to evil,¹¹⁸ nevertheless the Father still could not exhaust the treasure of patience and mercy contained in His heart.

What is man and what is his grace? And what is his good or what is his evil? . . . Therefore God is patient in them, and poureth forth His mercy upon them. He hath seen the presumption of their heart that it is wicked, and hath known their end that it is evil. Therefore hath He filled up His mercy in their favor, and hath shown them the way of justice.¹¹⁹

But if God's children abuse this boundless mercy, become obstinate in evil, remain in a permanent state of falsehood and bad faith, let them beware. Mercy is not weakness.¹²⁰ As a true educator, the Father knows that to close His eyes and always to forgive would only lead sinners to greater evil; He wills not their loss, but their salvation. He wills it with all the energy of His love, and because He loves, He decides to punish.¹²¹ The Father does not hesitate to punish,

¹¹⁸ "In all these things they sinned still; and they believed not for His wondrous works" (Ps. 77:32).

¹¹⁹ *Ecclus.* 18:7–11.

¹²⁰ "And that servant who knew the will of his lord, and prepared not himself, and did not according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. And unto whomsoever much is given, of him much shall be required; and to whom they have committed much, of him they will demand the more" (Luke 12:47–48).

¹²¹ St. Paul, on warning the Corinthians that he will no longer be so indulgent toward sinners among them, justified his attitude by the example of Christ. "Do you seek a proof of Christ that speaketh in me, who toward you is not weak, but is mighty in you? For al-

though it pains His paternal heart. Eager to win His children's hearts at any price, His jealous love prompts the decision. But before decreeing punishment, He makes a last attempt to "turn the heart of the children to their fathers"¹²²—a phrase occurring among the last words of one of the last books of the Old Testament. God shows His children how much it pains Him to punish them.¹²³ He speaks in tones of hurt love to His children who pain Him and oblige Him to be severe:

I have brought up children, and exalted them; but they have despised Me. . . . Woe to the sinful nations, a people laden with iniquity, a wicked seed, ungracious children; they have forsaken the Lord, they have blasphemed the Holy One of Israel, they are gone away backward. For what shall I strike you any more, you that increase transgression? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is sad. From the sole of the foot unto the top of the head, there is no soundness therein.¹²⁴

More sadness than anger appears in God's suffering and, like all who love, He reminds His children of His infinite benefits. What had He not done for them? How it pains Him to receive in return nothing but ingratitude.

I have taken thee from the ends of the earth, and from the remote parts thereof have called thee.¹²⁵

though He was crucified through weakness, yet He liveth by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him; but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you" (II Cor. 13:3–4). And he warned the Galatians: "Be not deceived, God is not mocked" (Gal. 6:7).

¹²² *Mal.* 4:6.

¹²³ So also Christ's heart overflowed with suffering at the prospect of Jerusalem soon to be destroyed (Luke 19:41).

¹²⁴ *Isa.* 1:2–6. ¹²⁵ *Isa.* 41:9.

Because Israel was a child, and I loved him; and I called My son out of Egypt. As they called them, they went away from before their face; they offered victims to Baalim, and sacrificed to idols. And I was like a foster father to Ephraim, I carried them in my arms; and they knew not that I healed them. I will draw them with the cords of Adam, with the bands of love; and I will be to them as one that taketh off the yoke on their jaws; and I put his meat to him that he might eat.¹²⁶

After comparing Israel to an infant, Scripture uses a new image, that of the vineyard carefully tended by the master: "Yet I planted thee a chosen vineyard, all true seed; how then art thou turned unto Me into that which is good for nothing, O strange vineyard? Though thou wash thyself with nitre, and multiply to thyself the herb borith, thou art stained in thy iniquity before Me, saith the Lord God."¹²⁷ Countless memories are evoked contrasting the sinners' state with the high hopes placed on the pampered children of former days. "I found Israel like grapes in the desert, I saw their fathers like the firstfruits of the fig tree in the top thereof."¹²⁸

Alas, this final revelation of the paternal heart is fruitless and the history of Israel reflects that of so many other souls deaf to tender divine pleading. The souls who reject God their Father force Him in turn to withdraw from them. St. Augustine was to explain this divine attitude later by saying that God never casts off any who have not first cast Him off. The prophets had made this evident: "But your iniquities have divided between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you that He should not hear."¹²⁹

In the days preceding Israel's deportation this double and

¹²⁶ Osee 11:1-4.

¹²⁷ Jer. 11:21.

¹²⁸ Osee 9:10.

¹²⁹ Isa. 59:2.

painful estrangement was apparent. Sinners are responsible for their separation from God, even though they may not have wished it. The separation prevents their realizing their own wretched state. But in the blindness resulting from sin,¹³⁰ there can be detected signs of God's fatherly love. God hides His face for the double reason of mercy and the necessity of safeguarding respect for divine things. By depriving the sinners of the faculty of vision, by not allowing "pearls to be given to swine,"¹³¹ God attenuates their guilt and reserves for Himself a way to reach them again, to lead them back to Himself, to cure them. This perspective of merciful punishment explains the prophetic references to the blindness of sinners.¹³² Particularly the leaders of the people are subjected to punishment, because their responsibility is greater. Micheas signals out the magistrates and false prophets who misused their influence to corrupt the people. But the people themselves are not entirely spared.

He will hide His face from them at that time, as they have behaved wickedly in their devices. . . . Therefore night shall be to you instead of vision, and darkness to you instead of divination. . . . And they shall all cover their faces, because there is no answer of God.¹³³

Go, and thou shalt say to this people: Hearing, hear, and understand not; and see the vision, and know it not. Blind the heart of this people, and make their eyes heavy, and shut their eyes.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Cf. Matt. 13:12-18; John 9:35; Acts 28:26.

¹³¹ Matt. 7:6.

¹³² In the Gospel, on the other hand, divine punishment more often appears as a definitive condemnation, as all that could be done had then been attempted, especially in the case of the sin against the Holy Ghost.

¹³³ Mich. 3:4, 6, 7.

¹³⁴ Isa. 6:9-10.

Be astonished, and wonder, waver and stagger; be drunk, and not with wine; stagger, and not with drunkenness. For the Lord hath mingled for you the spirit of a deep sleep, He will shut up your eyes, He will cover your prophets and princes, that see visions. And the vision of all shall be unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which when they shall deliver to one that is learned, they shall say: Read this; and he shall answer: I cannot, for it is sealed. And the book shall be given to one that knoweth no letters, and it shall be said to him: Read; and he shall answer: I know no letters. And the Lord said: Forasmuch as this people draw near Me with their mouth, and with their lips glorify Me, but their heart is far from Me and they have feared Me with the commandment and doctrines of men. Therefore behold I will proceed to cause an admiration in this people, by a great and wonderful miracle; for wisdom shall perish from their wise men, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.¹³⁵

Thus God uses remedies which are both severe and paternal. When He strikes the sinner He speaks to their hearts, striving to rouse them to true penance and conversion. But the most tragic result of their straying and their rejection of God is that these men, though not conscious of it, have cut the bonds linking them to God and live in frightful solitude. Their viewpoint becomes henceforth merely human; to them God's language is closed; His book is sealed. They have lost the capacity for spiritual things.¹³⁶ Though the Father does not renounce all effort to bring help to these sinful prodigals, the more to be pitied as they are lost and ignore their own misery, yet He has to seek a new meet-

¹³⁵ Isa. 29:9-14.

¹³⁶ "Woe to you lawyers, for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves have not entered in, and those that were entering in, you have hindered" (Luke 11:52).

ing ground, another way of approach, long and less directly effective, because entirely external. But one possibility is left for men whose malice and blindness have suppressed their spirituality, who live entirely on the carnal level. If sinners do not return to God and find conversion by penance, the principle of interior renewal, then God must substitute for penance the hard trial of suffering. True, much time must elapse before suffering penetrates to the heart of the prodigal child, but once there, it arouses the memory of the Father's love, as in the parable.¹³⁷ Then the sinner is torn from his sin; his feet are set on the homeward path; he is guided to the meeting place, to the moment of pardon.

In their affliction they will rise early to Me; come, and let us return to the Lord.¹³⁸

Now I beseech those that shall read this book, that they be not shocked at these calamities, but that they consider the things that happened, not as being for the destruction, but for the correction of our nation. For it is a token of great goodness when sinners are not suffered to go on in their ways for a long time, but are presently punished. For, not as with other nations (whom the Lord patiently expecteth, that when the day of judgment shall come, He may punish them in the fullness of their sins) doth He also deal with us, so as to suffer our sins to come to their height and then take vengeance on us. And therefore He never with-

¹³⁷ "And after he had spent all, there came a mighty famine in that country; and he began to be in want. And he went and cleaved to one of the citizens. . . . And he sent him into his farm to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him. And returning to himself, he said: How many hired servants in my father's house abound with bread, and I here perish with hunger? I will arise, and will go to my father" (Luke 15:14-18).

¹³⁸ Osee 6:1.

draweth His mercy from us; but though He chastise His people with adversity, He forsaketh them not.¹³⁹

The Old Testament was orientated toward the reign of mercy and considered suffering as a means of converting sinners and preparing the way for the coming of Christ. The New Testament, which brings us Christ, the author and the source of mercy, seems orientated more toward a reign of justice and judgment. It is true that the cockle is to burn in the eternal fire, that the bad will be separated from the good permanently, that punishment and suffering both have a final, eschatological quality, admitting no appeal. But the New Testament likewise continues to show the value of suffering on the temporal level, a value derived now from its link with the sufferings of Christ. The cross, heavy on the disciple's shoulders, becomes fruitful because it is carried in the path tread by Christ. If the disciple is persecuted, it is for the sake of the Master and in His name. "And they indeed went from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus."¹⁴⁰ "I Paul . . . now rejoice in my sufferings . . . and fill those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh."¹⁴¹

Now Christ gives meaning and fruitfulness to all suffering. He was substituted for sinners to suffer in their place the punishments they had deserved. The sign of the suffering Christ rises before their eyes as a sign of salvation and mercy. Moreover, God has not changed, since the coming of Christ, His merciful and psychologically valuable method of converting souls by sending them sufferings. Indeed not only the parable but life itself constantly teaches us that God

¹³⁹ II Mach. 6:12-16.

¹⁴⁰ Acts 5:41.

¹⁴¹ Col. 1:24.

continues to attract souls to Himself by means of the burden which they want to deposit at the feet of His Son: "Come to Me, all you that labor, and are burdened, and I will refresh you."¹⁴²

But to return to the Old Testament role of punishment, it was decreed as a just penalty for His children whom He had carried "as a father is wont to carry his little son,"¹⁴³ whose Savior He was and would continue to be. Only by declaring war on them could He save them. But how could a father wage war against his children? What a surprising idea! But we can understand the tender mercy underlying this action. "For whom the Lord loveth, He chastiseth; and as a father in the son, He pleaseth himself."¹⁴⁴ God had long predicted a hard punishment for Israel; at length, moved by jealous love, He undertook this "holy war" against sin for the purpose of saving sinners.

Truth hath been forgotten, . . . and the Lord saw, and it appeared evil in His eyes, because there is no judgment. . . . And His own arm brought salvation to Him, and His own justice supported Him. He put on justice as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon His head; He put on the garments of vengeance, and was clad with zeal as with a cloak.¹⁴⁵

The souls whom God is impelled to call "dearly beloved" are indeed loved dearly and they must realize that God defends a just cause in fighting against them; their sins account for the divine conduct.

What is the meaning that My beloved hath wrought much wickedness in My house? . . . The Lord called thy name, a

¹⁴² Matt. 11:28.

¹⁴³ Deut. 1:31.

¹⁴⁴ Prov. 3:12.

¹⁴⁵ Isa. 59:15-17.

plentiful olive tree, fair, fruitful, and beautiful; at the noise of a word, a great fire was kindled in it, and the branches thereof are burnt. And the Lord of hosts that planted thee, hath pronounced evil against thee; for the evils of the house of Israel, and of the house of Juda, which they have done to themselves, to provoke Me.¹⁴⁶

But when God crushes sinners, He also tries to save the particle of pure gold He had placed in them. "Thus saith the Lord of hosts: Behold I will melt, and try them; for what else shall I do before the daughter of My people?"¹⁴⁷ The rebels must be brought to unconditional surrender.

And now I will show you what I will do to My vineyard. I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be wasted; I will break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down. And I will make it desolate; it shall not be pruned, and it shall not be digged; but briars and thorns shall come up; and I will command the clouds to rain no rain upon it.¹⁴⁸

No matter how terrible the punishment may be, it will be a remedy for the soul which had willed evil, sought it avidly, rushed headlong. As the Father's efforts could not prevent the soul from seeking self-destruction, He proceeds in His mercy to multiply the obstacles on the path of damnation. "Behold I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and I will stop it up with a wall, and she shall not find her paths."¹⁴⁹ For Israel these obstacles were the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. Obstacles appear for every unfaithful soul in the form of trials that afflict it providentially. Everything can be an instrument in the hands of the Father.

¹⁴⁶ Jer. 11:15-17.

¹⁴⁷ Jer. 9:7.

¹⁴⁸ Isa. 5:5-6.

¹⁴⁹ Osee 2:6.

"For thus saith the Lord of hosts the God of Israel: Take the cup of wine of this fury¹⁵⁰ at My hand; and thou shalt make all the nations to drink thereof, unto which I shall send thee. And they shall drink, and be troubled, and be mad because of the sword, which I shall send among them."¹⁵¹

The soul, of course, tries to push away this cup of bitterness, to break the barriers that cut off access to the objects of its sinful lusts. In vain does it strive and persist; it will never attain such goals again. "And she shall follow after her lovers, and shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, and shall not find."¹⁵²

If this imperfect suffering caused by losing the quarry so hotly pursued is not sufficient to bring the soul back, if the affliction that oppresses and overwhelms her fails to reveal the Father's hand outstretched to save her, then God takes the drastic step of silencing His heart's love; He abandons His children so that they may realize their own misery. "I will go and return to My place, until you are consumed, and seek My face. In their affliction they will rise early to Me: Come, and let us return to the Lord."¹⁵³ He leaves them deprived of all exterior help, face to face with themselves. They have to take the measure of their weakness, their evil

¹⁵⁰ The apostles and St. Paul often refer to this divine anger, the terrifying wrath which sinners have provoked. The best explanation of these terms is the commentary by St. Ambrose, found in the Roman Breviary for Sexagesima Sunday: "Now God does not think as man thinks. He does not form new opinions nor become angry like a being that is mutable. These expressions are used in order to set forth the bitterness of that sin which merited divine wrath. To such a degree had man's guilt increased that God, who from His own nature is not moved to anger or hatred or any other passion, appeared moved to wrath."

¹⁵¹ Jer. 25:15-16.

¹⁵² Osee 2:7.

¹⁵³ Osee 5:15; 6:1.

appetites, their essential destitution, their inability to ward off pain. If this withdrawal, designed to bring them begging to their Father, does not succeed, He finally permits them to fall into the hands of the enemy and even, if necessary, hands them over Himself. Thus the Bible shows that after Yahweh was expelled from the temple in ruins, He surrendered His beloved but guilty people into the hands of the invaders.

I have forsaken My house, I have left My inheritance; I have given My dear soul into the hand of her enemies. My inheritance is become to Me as a lion in the wood; it hath cried out against Me, therefore have I hated it. Is My inheritance to Me as a speckled bird? Is it as a bird dyed throughout? Come ye, assemble yourselves, all ye beasts of the earth, make haste to devour. Many pastors have destroyed My vineyard, they have trodden My portion under foot; they have changed My delightful portion into a desolate wilderness. They have laid it waste, and it hath mourned for Me. With desolation is all the land made desolate; because there is none that considereth in the heart. The spoilers are come upon all the ways of the wilderness, for the sword of the Lord shall devour from one end of the land to the other end thereof; there is no peace for all flesh. They have sown wheat, and reaped thorns; they have received an inheritance, and it shall not profit them; you shall be ashamed of your fruits, because of the fierce wrath of the Lord.¹⁵⁴

The soul in captivity then experiences great anguish and desolation. Its separation from the Father causes it heartache and intense pain. But God's desolation is ever deeper; the children's thirst for happiness is nothing compared to the Father's yearning to obtain it for them. The cries and lamentations rising from the depths of distress pierce His

¹⁵⁴ Jer. 12:7-13.

paternal heart.¹⁵⁵ He notices the bruises more than the stains; suffering arouses His pity. The lamentations of Jeremias rise in the name of Jerusalem, the guilty city which had been laid waste:

From above He hath sent fire into my bones, and hath chastised me; He hath spread a net for my feet, He hath turned me back; He hath made me desolate, wasted with sorrow all the day long. The yoke of my iniquities hath watched; they are folded together in His hand, and put upon my neck; my strength is weakened; the Lord hath delivered me into a hand out of which I am not able to rise. The Lord hath taken away all my mighty men out of the midst of me; He hath called against me the time, to destroy my chosen men; the Lord hath trodden the winepress for the virgin daughter of Juda. Therefore do I weep, and my eyes run down with water; because the comforter, the relief of my soul, is far from me; my children are desolate because the enemy hath prevailed. Sion hath spread forth her hands, there is none to comfort her; the Lord hath commanded against Jacob, his enemies are round about him; Jerusalem is as a menstruous woman among them. The Lord is just, for I have provoked His mouth to wrath; hear, I pray you, all ye people, and see my sorrow; my virgins and my young men are gone into captivity. . . . Behold, O Lord, for I am in distress, my bowels are troubled; my heart is turned within me, for I am full of bitterness; abroad the sword destroyeth and at home there is death alike. They have heard that I sigh, and there is none to comfort me;

¹⁵⁵ The Gospel gives many examples of Christ's compassion for human suffering. His heart is moved with pity at the sight of disease, death, and especially the shepherdless crowds (John 11:34; Matt. 9:36). He yearns to feed, to instruct and to save the people (Matt. 14:32; Mark 8:2), but yearns even more fervently to cure sinners. Was it not for their sake that He came? "For I am not come to call the just, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13).

all my enemies have heard of my evil, they have rejoiced that Thou hast done it.¹⁵⁶

The Lord hath cast down headlong, and hath not spared, all that was beautiful in Jacob. . . . He hath broken in His fierce anger all the horn of Israel; He hath drawn back His right hand from before the enemy; and He hath kindled in Jacob as it were a flaming fire devouring round about.¹⁵⁷

God refuses to intervene,¹⁵⁸ but gives free rein to the trials that afflict the soul, while He waits for punishment to bear fruit. "I have forgotten good things. And I said: My end and my hope is perished from the Lord."¹⁵⁹ But are the depression and despair that have replaced rebellion intended by God and accomplished by Him? How blind we are and how slight is our ability to judge God's conduct! What a petty attitude ours is! The punishment which seemed to cast the soul into an abyss of despair becomes the beginning of its retrieval. Although the soul is still overwhelmed and so close to the point of rebellion that it calls God an enemy, His severity contains the revelation of His tender love. The sacred author in no way tempers the bitterness of his lament, but the single word "as" changes everything and shows that he has discovered the secret of the divine pedagogy: "He hath bent His bow *as* an enemy, He hath fixed His right hand *as* an adversary. . . . The Lord is become *as* an enemy."¹⁶⁰ Again the dawn of hope glimmers for the soul crushed by suffering and apparently lost in darkness. The divine proportions of God's treatment become evident, as men under-

¹⁵⁶ Lam. 1:13-21. ¹⁵⁷ Lam. 2:2-3.

¹⁵⁸ Like Jesus in the boat, who seemed to abandon His disciples at the moment of danger, but only to increase their confidence when they would see the miracle He was planning (Matt. 8:23-25).

¹⁵⁹ Lam. 3:16-17. ¹⁶⁰ Lam. 2:4-5.

stand that the most severe punishment always goes hand in hand with constant support. God lets souls reach the frontiers of despair, but never quite cross them. "The mercies of the Lord that we are not consumed; because His commiserations have not failed. They are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness."¹⁶¹ Faith in the punisher never wavers, but rather increases. The chant that opens on notes of revolt and despair ends in a cry of trust: "The Lord is my portion, said my soul; therefore will I wait for Him. The Lord is good to them that hope in Him, to the soul that seeketh Him. . . . For the Lord will not cast off forever. For if He hath cast off, He will also have mercy, according to the multitude of His mercies. For He hath not willingly afflicted nor cast off the children of men."¹⁶² The souls that had been subjected to suffering become softened and purified by trials; then they can turn to God, admit their sins and utter a prayer:

Remember, O Lord, what is come upon us; consider and behold our reproach. . . . The joy of our heart is ceased, our dancing is turned into mourning. The crown is fallen from our head; woe to us, because we have sinned. Therefore is our heart sorrowful, therefore are our eyes become dim. For Mount Sion, because it is destroyed, foxes have walked upon it. But Thou, O Lord, shalt remain forever, Thy throne from generation to generation. Why wilt Thou forget us forever? Why wilt Thou forsake us for a long time? Convert us, O Lord, to Thee, and we shall be converted; renew our days, as from the beginning.¹⁶³

Prayer revives divine grace in the soul; its first effect is to arouse sentiments of true compunction and humility. The

¹⁶¹ Lam. 3:22-23. ¹⁶² Lam. 3:24-25, 31-33.

¹⁶³ Lam. 5:1, 15-21.

soul honestly admits its sin, no longer seeking excuses as formerly.¹⁶⁴ The Bible frequently sounds this note of contrition:

For we have sinned, and committed iniquity, departing from Thee; and we have trespassed in all things. And we have not hearkened to Thy commandments, nor have we observed nor done as Thou hadst commanded us, that it might go well with us.¹⁶⁵ Wherefore all that Thou hast brought upon us, and everything that Thou hast done to us, Thou hast done in true judgment.¹⁶⁶

In this state of renewal many souls are inspired to repeat the *Miserere*, the psalm of the great penitent, King David. The Father's heart is touched by such depths of contrition accompanied by great trust. "Surely Ephraim is an honorable son to Me, surely he is a tender child; for since I spoke of him, I will still remember him. Therefore are My bowels troubled for him; pitying I will pity him, saith the Lord."¹⁶⁷

But God waits until the children's hearts are strengthened in these new desires and they reach a deeper understanding of His truth. When this is accomplished, the soul, understanding that it has deserved punishment and that punishment is a principle of interior transformation, turns spontaneously to God.¹⁶⁸ "I know, O Lord, that the way of a man

¹⁶⁴ The qualities of contrition, as the Gospel depicts it in Mary Magdalen, Peter and the woman taken in adultery, are silence and hopeful waiting. The publican whom Christ signaled out as an example made no excuses, but accused himself and admitted his unworthiness: "O God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

¹⁶⁵ This is an evident reference to Deut. 4:40; 5:30.

¹⁶⁶ Dan. 3:29-31. ¹⁶⁷ Jer. 31:20.

¹⁶⁸ "I will arise and will go to my father, and say to him: Father,

is not his; neither is it in a man to walk and to direct his steps. Correct me, O Lord, but yet with judgment; and not in Thy fury, lest Thou bring me to nothing."¹⁶⁹ Such a confession proves that the soul considers God as an educator and father; it has again discovered the blessing of His presence; it appreciates His saving power, His love and, of course, His mercy.

But Thou hast mercy upon all, because Thou canst do all things, and overlookest the sins of men for the sake of repentance. For Thou lovest all things that are, and hatest none of the things which Thou hast made; for Thou didst not appoint or make anything hating it. And how could anything endure, if Thou wouldst not? Or be preserved, if not called by Thee. But Thou sparest all; because they are thine, O Lord, who lovest souls. O how good and sweet is Thy spirit, O Lord in all things! And therefore Thou chastisest them that err, by little and little; and admonishest them, and speakest to them concerning the things wherein they offend; that leaving their wickedness they may believe in Thee, O Lord.¹⁷⁰

This trusting appeal for mercy may not receive an immediate answer, but the soul need not be surprised by that; God's good time is not man's.¹⁷¹ But let the certainty of belief

I have sinned against heaven and before thee. I am not worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15:18-19).

¹⁶⁹ Jer. 10:23-24. ¹⁷⁰ Wisd. 11:24-27; 12:1-2.

¹⁷¹ "For you have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin" (Heb. 12:4). "Now I am glad; not because you were made sorrowful; but because you were sorrowful unto penance. For you were made sorrowful according to God. . . . For the sorrow that is according to God worketh penance, steadfast unto salvation; . . . how great carefulness it worketh in you" (II Cor. 7:9-11).

in God's Fatherhood take deeper root and be expressed in loving repetition of Isaias:

And now, O Lord, Thou art our Father, and we are clay; and Thou art our Maker, and we all are the works of Thy hands. Be not very angry, O Lord, and remember no longer our iniquity; behold, see we are all Thy people. . . . Wilt Thou refrain thyself, O Lord, upon these things, wilt Thou hold Thy peace, and afflict us vehemently? ¹⁷²

Look down from heaven and behold from Thy holy habitation and the place of Thy glory; where is Thy zeal and Thy strength, the multitude of Thy bowels and of Thy mercies? They have held back themselves from me. For Thou art our Father. . . . O Lord, Thou art our Father, our Redeemer, from everlasting is Thy name. Why hast Thou made us to err, O Lord, from Thy ways; why hast Thou hardened our heart, that we should not fear Thee? Return for the sake of Thy servants, the tribes of Thy inheritance. ¹⁷³

Sinners remind God that they belong to Him as sons and that even sin has not broken this bond. "For if we sin, we are Thine." ¹⁷⁴ The hour of mercy is sure to sound ¹⁷⁵ if humility and trust abide in the soul. But if God imposes a delay, it is as Educator and as Father, for He wishes to be sure that the return and the conversion are deep and sincere. "Ye that fear the Lord, wait for His mercy; and go not aside

¹⁷² Isa. 64:8-9, 12. ¹⁷³ Isa. 63:15-17. ¹⁷⁴ Wisd. 15:2.

¹⁷⁵ What a valuable example the Gospel shows us in Peter! It seems that his true conversion took place only after his threefold lapse, his silence and his tears on the night of Holy Thursday. And how insistently Jesus afterward made sure, by His threefold question, that humility had permanently taken root in Peter's soul: "Simon, son of John, lovest thou Me?" (John 21:6). It is as if humility were the only gauge of love.

from Him, lest ye fall. Ye that fear the Lord, believe Him; and your reward shall not be made void. Ye that fear the Lord, hope in Him; and mercy shall come to you for your delight." ¹⁷⁶

There need be neither rebellion nor anxiety, but silent and invincible trust. "For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: If you return and be quiet, you shall be saved; in silence and in hope shall your strength be." ¹⁷⁷ This time of waiting brings about a tremendous transformation by the recovery of the awareness of God's greatness and of the offense against His great love. The love which was never deserved had been squandered and then rejected. Souls must admit that they do not deserve pardon, that they owe everything to the Father's gratuitous love. ¹⁷⁸ They should appeal to the Father with the inner certainty of being heard, saying:

We have no right to Thy pardon, O Lord, but grant it to us for Thy name's sake alone.

If our iniquities have testified against us, O Lord, do Thou it for Thy name's sake; for our rebellions are many, we have sinned against Thee. . . . But Thou, O Lord, art among us, and Thy name is called upon by us, forsake us not. ¹⁷⁹

Deliver us not up forever, we beseech Thee, for Thy name's sake. ¹⁸⁰

Another invocation is found in the Book of Baruch:

For it is not for the justices of our fathers that we pour out our prayers, and beg mercy in Thy sight, O Lord our God. . . .

¹⁷⁶ Eccclus. 2:7-9. ¹⁷⁷ Isa. 30:15.

¹⁷⁸ "Not by the works of justice, which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us, by the laver of regeneration, and renovation of the Holy Ghost" (Tit. 3:5).

¹⁷⁹ Jer. 14:7, 9. ¹⁸⁰ Dan. 3:34.

Hear, O Lord, and have mercy, for Thou art a merciful God. . . . Remember not the iniquities of our fathers, but think upon Thy hand and upon Thy name at this time. For Thou art the Lord our God, and we will praise Thee, O Lord; because for this end Thou hast put Thy fear in our hearts, to the intent that we should call upon Thy name, and praise Thee in our captivity.¹⁸¹

Thus, by the combined effects of suffering and divine grace, souls recover their true vocation: utter dependence upon God's will. This attitude elicits from Him the longed-for response. Isaias' sublime voice describes God's utterly gratuitous mercy:

For My name's sake, for My own sake will I do it, that I may not be blasphemed; and I will not give My glory to another. Hearken to Me, O Jacob, and thou Israel whom I call: I am he, I am the first, and I am the last. My hand also hath founded the earth, and My right hand hath measured the heavens.¹⁸²

Be of good heart, son, thy sins are forgiven thee.¹⁸³

Once the sinful and prodigal child has been purified by trials and has recovered the filial attitude as a gift of sheer love, he then searches for the route back home. The paternal voice which whispered in his heart and called him still sounds in his ear, speaking so mercifully of pardon that it confers new strength. "Return, O ye revolting children, saith the Lord: . . . I will bring you into Sion. And I will give you pastors according to My own heart. . . . Return, O virgin of Israel, return to these thy cities. How long wilt thou be dissolute in deliciousness, O wandering daughter?"¹⁸⁴

Countless words of encouragement are heard:

¹⁸¹ Bar. 2:19; 3:2-7. ¹⁸² Isa. 48:11-13. ¹⁸³ Matt. 9:2.

¹⁸⁴ Jer. 3:14-15; 31:21-22.

Return, O Israel, to the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen down by thy iniquity. Take with you words, and return to the Lord, and say to Him: Take away all iniquity, and receive the good, and we will render the calves of our lips. . . . For Thou wilt have mercy on the fatherless.¹⁸⁵

Be of good comfort, my children, cry to the Lord, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the princes your enemies. . . . For as it was your mind to go astray from God; so when you return again you shall seek Him ten times as much. For He that hath brought evils upon you, shall bring you everlasting joy again with your salvation.¹⁸⁶

Sinners remember the words spoken of old and, knowing that God is true, they confidently await the accomplishment of His promises. "And My people, upon whom My name is called, being converted, shall make supplication to Me, and seek out My face, and do penance for their most wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and will heal their land."¹⁸⁷

But God, in His great mercy, is not content merely to keep His promise by pardoning His penitent sons. Although their faults, ingratitude and infidelity pained Him, yet He thought only of how He could reinstate them as His children and restore to them the benefits and joy that had been lost by sin. His method of leading children home is punishment, true, but He punishes, as St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus once said, "with His head turned away."¹⁸⁸ Punishment by itself does not reveal the inner depths and true reality of the heart of God. He yearns to show Himself as He really is. Though

¹⁸⁵ Osee 14:2-4. ¹⁸⁶ Bar. 4:21, 28-29. ¹⁸⁷ II Par. 7:14.

¹⁸⁸ She wished to teach, by this expression, that it pains God to use this means and also that He considers it a sad necessity which we force upon him.

He punishes, He does not depend on this way only to bring light to the soul; punishment can only be a preparation for the light.¹⁸⁹ To enlighten His children, to touch, transform and attract their hearts, God depends upon the revelation of His paternal love. Jeremias describes it magnificently: "But I said: How shall I put thee among the children, and give thee a lovely land? . . . Thou shalt call Me Father."¹⁹⁰

Our Lord gives the same instructions: "Thus therefore shall you pray: Our Father. . . ." ¹⁹¹ These words on the child's lips and penetrating to the depths of his heart form a shaft of light, bring about a final surrender. As soon as he glimpses, guesses, understands that God is His Father, all distances and obstacles disappear. Whatever his sins and his strayings, he runs to God trustfully and, bowing at His feet, says: "Behold we come to Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God. . . . We have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers from our youth, even to this day."¹⁹² And the prodigal of the parable echoes Jeremias: "I shall arise and go to my father." However prodigal the son may be in sin, the father is still more prodigal in mercy. Paternal pardon is offered with boundless generosity and wonderful tenderness—not conditional but immediate pardon. As in the parable, the first sign of real repentance suffices to send the Father forth to meet and pardon the sinner.

Therefore the Lord waiteth that He may have mercy on you. . . . At the voice of thy cry, as soon as He shall hear, He will

¹⁸⁹ In His discourse at the Last Supper, Christ affirmed that He came to manifest His Father's name to men and that He glorified the Father by finishing the work given Him to do (John 17:4-7). While the fruit of Christ's passion was the salvation of the world, an equally important result was the revelation of the Father's immense love.

¹⁹⁰ Jer. 3:19.

¹⁹¹ Matt. 6:9.

¹⁹² Jer. 3:22-25.

answer thee. And the Lord will give you spare bread and short water; and will not cause thy teacher to flee away from thee anymore, and thy eyes shall see thy teacher. And thy ears shall hear the word of one admonishing thee behind thy back: This is the way, walk ye in it.¹⁹³

This pardon is total and final:

If your sins be as scarlet they shall be made as white as snow; and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool. . . . Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back. . . . I will not remember thy sins.¹⁹⁴

He will cast all our sins into the bottom of the sea.¹⁹⁵

The effects of this pardon are freedom and joy:

And now they that are redeemed by the Lord, shall return, and shall come into Sion singing praises, and joy everlasting shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning shall flee away. I, I myself shall comfort you. . . . Arise, arise, put on thy strength, O Sion, put on the garments of thy glory. . . . Shake thyself from the dust, arise, sit up, O Jerusalem; loose the bonds from off thy neck, O captive daughter of Sion.¹⁹⁶

The Father feels immense joy in granting His child this pardon.¹⁹⁷ He is even happier to pardon than the soul is to receive the pardon: "And I will rejoice over them, when I shall do them good."¹⁹⁸ God takes pleasure in practicing mercy. His Son was to reveal that His delight is to be with the children of men, but even in the Old Testament He made

¹⁹³ Isa. 30:18, 20.

¹⁹⁴ Isa. 1:18; 38:17; 43:25.

¹⁹⁵ Mich. 7:19.

¹⁹⁶ Isa. 51:11; 52:1-2.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Luke, chap. 15: "So I say to you, there shall be joy before the angels of God upon one sinner doing penance, more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance."

¹⁹⁸ Jer. 32:41.

known His joy in pouring forth love and pardon. "He delighteth in mercy."¹⁹⁹

Mercy is a luxury of which God will never deprive Himself. Toward His children whom He has found again, the Father can show the tenderness which for a time He had been forced to hide. At length He can show His love for the sheep restored to the fold.²⁰⁰ The child may have thought himself abandoned but now he knows that his Father's eyes were constantly upon him and that human love is nothing compared to divine love.

And I will set My eyes upon them to be pacified, and I will bring them again into this land; and I will build them up, and not pull them down; and I will plant them and not pluck them up. And I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God; because they shall return to Me with all their heart.²⁰¹

And Sion said: The Lord hath forsaken me, and the Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? and if she should forget, yet will not I forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee in My hands.²⁰²

In a tender and beautiful image the prophet Isaias extols the motherly care bestowed by God: "As one whom the mother caresseth, so will I comfort you, and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see and your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like an herb, and the hand of the Lord shall be known to His servants."²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Mich. 7:18.

²⁰⁰ Christ Himself said: "And when he hath found it he lays it upon his shoulders rejoicing" (Luke 15:5). He also described the father of the prodigal son, preparing a banquet and adorning his son with the finest clothing (Luke 15:23).

²⁰¹ Jer. 24:6-7. ²⁰² Isa. 49:14-16. ²⁰³ Isa. 66:13-14.

But children who have experienced a father's wonderful attentions know that here, more than in other situation, words are inadequate to express reality. Isaias himself must have experienced this divine love which he depicts in another equally beautiful image: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; He shall gather together the lambs with His arm and shall take them up in His bosom, and He himself shall carry them that are with young."²⁰⁴ The Psalmist too admires God's tender protection of His children: "He will overshadow thee with His shoulders; and under His wings thou shalt trust."²⁰⁵

This protection will never fail and the soul has nothing to fear; divine care is wonderfully dependable and extends throughout the whole course of life. "Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob, . . . who are borne up by My womb. Even to your old age I will carry you; I have made you, and I will bear; I will carry and will save."²⁰⁶ Wrapped in a garment of gentle care, carried along by divine predilection, the child can cast itself with utter trust into the arms of its Father, finding there a constant refuge, knowing that even if "my father and mother have left me, . . . the Lord hath taken me up."²⁰⁷ This invincible trust which is chanted particularly in the psalms is based on a certainty implanted in Israel's heart.

How then did it happen that this nation did not recognize God's merciful love when it appeared in its fullness in the person of His Son? This is a mystery. Only God knows the secret of Israel's return to the Father's house. But at least He permitted that the treasure confided to His people

²⁰⁴ Isa. 40:11. ²⁰⁵ Ps. 90:4. ²⁰⁶ Isa. 46:3-4.

²⁰⁷ Ps. 26:10.

might be passed on to us as a light by which henceforth all wanderers are guided toward the paths of life.

THE FATHER'S WILL AND TESTAMENT

Blessed be the God . . . who hath predestinated us unto the adoption of children through Jesus Christ unto Himself, according to the purpose of His will.²⁰⁸

Can it be said that the child's return and the pardon bestowed on him fully satisfy the Father's ambitions and desires? Has the Father attained His goal? By no means, for He intends much more. We need only recall that Jeremias said that God finds His joy in doing good to men; in such words we behold a vista where love extends far beyond forgiveness and caresses. The Father has hoarded a unique treasure which we may venture to estimate by the fact that Isaac and Jacob were so eager to receive the paternal blessing. Throughout the Bible recurs the theme of the promise; the Bible is indeed the Father's will and testament. Far from dividing His inheritance equally among many sons as human custom decrees, He guarantees its fullness to each of them: the kingdom and the king, with the joy and freedom of God's children.

In the New Testament the story of the prodigal son does not end with the child's return. Another son is there to whom the father addresses these tremendously significant words which express God's ardent desire to communicate His life, His whole life, to all those born of Him, whether they be sinners or not: "Son, thou art always with me, and all I have is thine."²⁰⁹ The Old Testament clarifies the parable. Again and again it foretells a day of happiness for

²⁰⁸ Eph. 1:3, 5. ²⁰⁹ Luke 15:31.

the reinstated child as well as for the ever-faithful son—a happiness far surpassing even the priceless blessings already conferred. "And they shall be My special possession, saith the Lord of hosts, in the day that I do judgment; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his son that serveth him."²¹⁰

"The day that I do judgment," that is to say, only then will the children come into possession of the special treasure which they formerly possessed only in hope. What is promised here is not only love or even increased protection, but truly an ocean of life proceeding from the Father's heart, a total union, a complete gift. This gift is mysteriously foretold by Isaias: "As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts protect Jerusalem, protecting and delivering, passing over and saving."²¹¹ Long ago Moses had been initiated into the secret of this divine life, of God's activity uplifting and caressing, raising souls to lead them toward union. "You have seen . . . how I have carried you upon the wings of eagles, and have taken you to Myself."²¹²

Protected, supported and carried upward, the soul will experience wonderful ascents and endless growth. "I will love them freely. . . . I will be as the dew, Israel shall spring as the lily, and his root shall shoot forth as that of Libanus."²¹³ Like Israel in former times, the soul receives from the Father a continuous flow of life.

His branches shall spread, and his glory shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as that of Libanus. They shall be converted that sit under his shadow: they shall live upon wheat, and they shall blossom as a vine; his memorial shall be as the wine of Libanus. Ephraim . . . from Me is thy fruit found.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Mal. 3:17. ²¹¹ Isa. 31:5. ²¹² Exod. 19:4.

²¹³ Osee 14:5-6. ²¹⁴ Osee 14:7-9.

The divine promise is a promise of life: "All I have is thine." The Old Testament truly is nothing but one long promise, a road leading toward a total gift. But because it was revealed at the beginning that God had placed man in an earthly paradise, Israel long considered that the wonderful inheritance promised to Abraham and his posterity would be a new paradise, immortal this time, but still earthly.

And the Lord of hosts shall make unto all people in this mountain, a feast of fat things, a feast of wine, of fat things full of marrow, of wine purified from the lees. And He shall destroy in this mountain the face of the bond with which all people were tied, and the web that He began over all nations, He shall cast death down headlong forever; and the Lord God shall wipe away tears from every face, and the reproach of His people He shall take away, from all the whole earth; for the Lord hath spoken it. And they shall say in that day: Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him, and He will save us; this is the Lord, we have patiently waited for Him, we shall rejoice and be joyful in His salvation. For the hand of the Lord shall rest in this mountain.²¹⁵

This passage indeed refers to an immortal inheritance, but it is the inheritance of God's own kingdom, a purely spiritual kingdom of eternal life, the legacy of the coming Messiah, Prince of peace, foretold by Jacob.²¹⁶

But obstacles hinder the possession of this eternal kingdom. Sin and death must be conquered; the redemption must take place before God can give the full, overflowing meas-

²¹⁵ Isa. 25:6-10.

²¹⁶ "Giving thanks to God the Father, who hath made us worthy to be partakers of the lot of the saints in light; who hath delivered us from the power of darkness and hath translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the remission of sins" (Col. 1:12-14).

ure of His mercy. But then, not only will death and sin be abolished, but God will give Himself and surrender Himself to us, by giving and surrendering His Son.

The coming of the Son of God as Redeemer constitutes the supreme climax of paternal love, as well as the fulfillment of the promise which the Father had made by the voice of the prophets. For instance, in Ezechiel we find a prophecy in which God, in the guise of a shepherd, notes how His helpless sheep are subjected to looting and ill treatment. He decides to come Himself to help them, to rescue them from the hands of the wicked shepherds and to lead them into eternal pastures. First He announces that He Himself will come, but then He declares that He will raise up a shepherd for them. "I myself will seek My sheep, and will visit them. . . . I will save My flock, and it shall be no more a spoil, and I will judge between cattle and cattle. And I will set up one Shepherd over them, and He shall feed them, even My servant David; He shall feed them, and He shall be their Shepherd."²¹⁷

Under the mask of this apparent contradiction is concealed nothing less than one of the prophecies of the mystery of the Incarnation. By sending His own Son, who is like Him in every way, the Father can truly say that He Himself comes to His sheep. Moreover, in this prophecy the features of the Father superimposed upon those of the Son identified with David give a hint of the mystery of the equality of the divine persons. And finally, the text casts full light on the love of a Father who does not hesitate to save His sinful and unhappy children by giving His only Son as ransom for them. St. John was to say: "For God so loved the world, as

²¹⁷ Ezech. 34:11, 22-23.

to give His only-begotten Son.”²¹⁸ But the prophet had already hinted how salvation would be achieved and how the Father’s love would enable men to become once more His children:

Son of man, prophesy concerning the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to the shepherds: Thus saith the Lord God: Woe to the shepherds of Israel, that fed themselves; should not the flocks be fed by the shepherds? You ate the milk and you clothed yourselves with the wool and you killed that which was fat; but My flock you did not feed. The weak you have not strengthened, and that which was sick you have not healed, that which was broken you have not bound up, and that which was driven away you have not brought again, neither have you sought that which was lost, but you ruled over them with rigor and with a high hand. And My sheep were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became the prey of all the beasts of the field, and were scattered. My sheep have wandered in every mountain, and in every high hill; and My flocks were scattered upon the face of the earth, and there was none that sought them, there was none, I say, that sought them. Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As I live, saith the Lord God, forasmuch as My flocks have been made a spoil and My sheep are become a prey to all the beasts of the field, because there was no shepherd; for My shepherds did not seek after My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and fed not my flocks. Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of the Lord; thus saith the Lord God: Behold I Myself come upon the shepherds, I will require My flock at their hand, and I will cause them to cease from feeding the flock any more, neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; and I will deliver My flock from their mouth, and it shall no more be meat for them. For thus saith the Lord God:

²¹⁸ John 3:16.

Behold I myself will seek My sheep, and will visit them. As the shepherd visiteth his flock in the day when he shall be in the midst of his sheep that were scattered, so will I visit my sheep, and will deliver them out of all the places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and will gather them out of the countries, and will bring them to their own land; and I will feed them in the mountains of Israel, by the rivers, and in all the habitations of the land. I will feed them in the most fruitful pastures, and their pastures shall be in the high mountains of Israel; there shall they rest on the green grass and be fed in fat pastures upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed My sheep, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and that which was driven away, I will bring again, and I will bind up that which was broken, and I will strengthen that which was weak. . . . I will save My flock, and it shall be no more a spoil, and I will judge between cattle and cattle. And I will set up one Shepherd over them, and He shall feed them, even my servant David; He shall feed them and He shall be their Shepherd. And I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David the prince in the midst of them; I the Lord have spoken it. . . . And they shall know that I the Lord their God am with them, and that they are My people, the house of Israel, saith the Lord God. And you My flocks, the flocks of My pasture are men; and I am the Lord your God, saith the Lord God.²¹⁹

This, then, is the Father’s envoy: the Good Shepherd, who seeks out the sheep and leads them to the sheepfold. In order that He may love them as He is loved by His Father, He will give Himself up to death for their sake.

The mechanism of the divine plan—the Son guiding the children back to the fold and uniting them to His Father

²¹⁹ Ezech. 34:2–16, 22–24, 30–31.

in love—is depicted in the Old Testament by another image which is found in the Book of Ezechiel. The vision is both humble and magnificent, showing how the tree of the Cross is mysteriously linked to the universal victory of Christ and of His mystical body, the Church:

Thus saith the Lord God: I myself will take of the marrow of the high cedar, and will set it; I will crop off a tender twig from the top of the branches thereof, and I will plant it on a mountain high and eminent. On the high mountains of Israel will I plant it, and it shall shoot forth into branches, and shall bear fruit, and it shall become a great cedar, and all birds shall dwell under it, and every fowl shall make its nest under the shadow of the branches thereof. And all the trees of the country shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, and have dried up the green tree and have caused the dry tree to flourish. I the Lord have spoken and have done it.²²⁰

²²⁰ Ezech. 17:22–24.

Chapter 2

GOD AS SAVIOR

For God so loved the world, as to give His only-begotten Son.¹
We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.²

St. John says that the Son of God revealed the fullness of His love by coming into the world as a Savior.

God is charity. By this hath the charity of God appeared toward us, because God hath sent His only-begotten Son into the world, that we may live by Him. In this is charity; not as though we had loved God, but because He hath first loved us, and sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins. . . . And we have seen, and do testify, that the Father hath sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. . . . And we have known, and have believed the charity, which God hath to us.³

But God did not wait until New Testament days to claim the title of Savior. “Thou shalt know no God but Me, and

¹ John 3:16. ² John 4:42. ³ I John 4:8–16.

there is no Savior beside Me.”⁴ Although He does not yet appear in the Old Testament as Savior of the world, at least He grants aid and help to the people He has chosen and with whom He concluded a covenant. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.”⁵

Whenever the oppressed nation calls on Him, God intervenes; by Moses He delivered the people from the hand of the Egyptians; all subsequent biblical history proves that He never ceases to be “the Deliverer and Savior.”⁶ It is true that they frequently required extraordinary help, because of defeat in war, captivity and exile. At least this constant intervention developed in Israel absolute trust in a God who so faithfully granted to His people the material help and temporal salvation for which they pleaded. Yet in the mind of God this material help was but a preparation, continuously reminding souls that Yahweh is the only Savior. This helped Israel to attain the notion of spiritual salvation. Captivity of soul is indeed far more painful than physical captivity, as the need for release also is more urgent and serious.

History shows that all humanity had at least a vague awareness of the captivity caused by sin. But Israel held a privileged place in this regard, for the Scriptures underlined the notion of sin; nothing is more striking than the Old Testament’s constant preoccupation with it. The Bible opens with the story of a sin which, in its consequences, determined the outcome of the whole story. The corruption caused by this sin increased and spread by degrees. Evil caused general havoc, as proved by the constant increase of punishments on the one hand, and of expiatory sacrifices on the other.

⁴ Osee 13:4. ⁵ Amos 3:2. ⁶ Dan. 6:27.

In this regard the Bible does not present a very optimistic view of the world.

Not only is the human race afflicted with an ever-open wound which cannot be healed, but a mortal enemy has sworn to destroy it, an enemy that has kept humanity bowed beneath his yoke from the very first day. Souls are not only wounded but are captives of the devil. “Such as sat in darkness and in the shadow of death; bound in want and in iron.”⁷

Thanks to the Scriptures, Israel, better than other nations, preserved the memory of human origins and the yearning for the lost paradise. Israel could gauge the depth of man’s fall and his powerlessness to set himself free. Yet something prevented men from losing heart in the face of their wretchedness or sinking into despair: the promise of salvation, or rather, of redemption. For the first fall had been followed immediately by a divine promise which God often confirmed afterward. Numerous marvels kept green in Israel the hope of seeing the promise fulfilled. This salvation that Israel yearned for so confidently was not a mere abstract concept but was identified with a person, a savior: the Messiah. Guided by revelation, the noblest and most fervent souls in Israel had a presentiment that what a man had destroyed, another man would restore. A concrete event, a personal act overshadowed human destiny; Israel likewise gave a personal form to salvation, which would be incarnate in a man. God would not merely give signs of His saving love, but He would send a Savior, and in this Savior He would reveal Himself in person. Regarding this Messiah, the Jews maintained to the very end certain hopes or illusions that some

⁷ Ps. 106:10.

of the prophecies seemed to justify: they expected, as did the apostles themselves, that He would "again restore the kingdom to Israel."⁸

Only a few would rise to the notion of a spiritual salvation, expecting a Redeemer who would rescue them from sin. But at least there was never any doubt cast on the principle of a Messiah to be born of Israel's stock. The promise of His coming was a beacon in the darkness, a hope amidst tribulation, an ineffaceable certainty. The figure of this Messiah was constantly being enriched with new features in order that He might be recognizable when He came; gradually His place in the Bible became more central. The scriptural view of history and of humanity is, therefore, essentially religious, being based on the importance of sin as the reason for the Messiah's coming and the determining factor of the whole plan of redemption. As time went on, the Messiah appeared as the center and the pole star of the universe.

Sin and the Redeemer formed the axis on which revolved the history of Israel and of all humanity. But though the prophets gradually brought out the idea of a redeeming Messiah, their predictions did not on that account cancel the hopes for a glorious kingdom. In the course of time God Himself raised up saviors who crystallized and encouraged this hope. Who, then could reproach the people for seeing figures of the coming Messiah in Moses, Josue and David, and for thinking that He would bring a day of victory for the nation? The Old Testament and Israel itself are orientated toward a Messiah who would some day redeem the world's sin and reinstate humanity in its primitive

⁸ Acts 1:6.

happiness. Besides His importance in this double mission, the Messiah also confers on the biblical writings their unique orientation and meaning, as well as their full significance. Charles Péguy has said that the Roman legions marched for the sake of Christ, but the events of the history of Israel were even more completely determined by Him. The Messiah illuminates the entire Old Testament, for He is the fulfillment of all preparations, the reality of all figures.

The Old Testament viewed the coming of the Savior as a temporal and material salvation; the Jews themselves could not transcend this fleshly level. But the texts also afford glimpses of the higher plane of spiritual salvation, of redemption from sin. In this perspective the entire Old Testament represented a preparation for the coming of a Savior-God. In this context the Messiah's triumph is postponed to a mysterious future, practically to the end of time. Of course, only when men could stand before the cross of Christ were they able to say with the apostle: "We have known and have believed the charity which God hath to us."⁹ But so magnificent are the inspired texts which predict and prepare salvation, so mighty and wonderful is the path they trace for the Redeemer's steps, that they constitute a royal road to the discovery of the Savior and of His love for us.

SAVIOR OF ISRAEL

As the Lord liveth who is the Savior of Israel.¹⁰

The history of Israel displays an immense tableau of suffering, exile, deportation and war. Palestine's geographical position made it the natural route for invaders from the

⁹ I John 4:16.

¹⁰ I Kings 14:39.

North, as well as the passageway of the armies of Egypt and Assyria, when these came to conflict. Frequent famine and the poverty of jealous tribes, greedy for conquests, aggravated the conflicts which became further embittered by political rivalry. Hence Israel often experienced slavery and devastation. Humanly speaking, it was easy to see the causes of this state of misery and subjection which the Hebrews bore so impatiently. But the principal and more essential cause of their misery lay in the divine will. In no other aspect of the nation's history does the divine intention appear so clearly and continuously. The reason for it is evident: the people had to be trained in the habit of instinctive and constant recourse to God as the only Liberator, the only Savior. The difficulties had to be so insoluble and the prospect of relief so hopeless that God's protection and help would be overwhelmingly evident.

God sent this help either directly or through men whom all acclaimed as saviors. At the very beginning of Israel's history, even before it became a nation, the tribe of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was saved from famine only by Joseph who, as provider of all Egypt, had received from the Pharaoh the symbolic name of *Tsaphnath Paneach*, that is, "he who gives the food of life" or "savior of the world." He himself told his brothers: "God sent me before you into Egypt for your preservation."¹¹ The same words could be repeated also by Moses, raised up by God as the only one who could liberate Israel from slavery and bring the people out of Egypt to journey toward the Promised Land. To give even more striking proof of divine intervention, at times the role of savior was actually assigned to women. They themselves realized why. Thus Judith and Esther declare:

¹¹ Gen. 45:5.

Assist, I beseech Thee, O Lord God, me a widow. For Thou hast done the things of old. . . . Look upon the camp of the Assyrians now, as Thou wast pleased to look upon the camp of the Egyptians, when they pursued armed after Thy servants, trusting in their chariots, and in their horsemen, and in a multitude of warriors. . . . So may it be with these also, O Lord, who trust in their multitude, . . . and know not that Thou art our God, who destroyest wars from the beginning, and the Lord is Thy name. . . . Bring to pass, O Lord, that his pride may be cut off with his own sword. . . . For this will be a glorious monument for Thy name, when he shall fall by the hand of a woman. . . . Remember, O Lord, Thy covenant, and put Thou words in my mouth and strengthen the resolution in my heart, that Thy house may continue in Thy holiness, and all nations may acknowledge that Thou art God and there is no other besides Thee.¹²

Queen Esther . . . prayed to the Lord the God of Israel, saying: O my Lord, who alone art our king, help me a desolate woman, and who have no other helper but Thee. . . . I have heard of my father that Thou, O Lord, didst take Israel from among all the nations, and our fathers from all their predecessors, to possess them as an everlasting inheritance, and Thou hast done to them as Thou hast promised. . . . Remember, O Lord, and show Thyself to us in the time of our tribulation. . . . Deliver us by Thy hand, and help me, who have no other helper, but Thee, O Lord. . . . O God, who art mighty above all, hear the voice of them that have no other hope, and deliver us from the hand of the wicked, and deliver me from my fear.¹³

At times of crisis in Israel's history, judges and kings were placed providentially at the head of the people and charged with the mission of saving them. One of these had the revealing and significant name of *Josue*, that is, *God saves*. In-

¹² Judith, chap. 9.

¹³ Esther, chap. 14.

deed God saves; even when He uses intermediaries, it is always God who saves, God the only Savior. Moses, with wonderfully unselfish humility, kept repeating this to Israel and refused to attribute to himself the merit that belonged to God alone. The Psalmist too chanted: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us; but to Thy name give glory."¹⁴

Besides raising up saviors, God also made sure that none should ignore Him by accomplishing, before the eyes of all, wonders which effected the salvation of His people: the crossing of the Red Sea, the provision of food in the desert, the entrance into the Promised Land, victory achieved by the sheer power of the Ark's presence. Because of all these wonders, Israel proclaimed Yahweh the only Savior and Liberator, as Moses and the assembled people chanted in their hymn of thanksgiving: "The Lord . . . is become salvation to me; He is my God and I will glorify Him. . . . In Thy mercy Thou hast been a leader to the people which Thou hast redeemed; and in Thy strength Thou hast carried them to Thy holy habitation."¹⁵

Throughout the Bible Yahweh kept this title of Savior and Liberator. Thus did David invoke Him, to obtain victory in a combat on which depended the future of Israel. "Blessed be the Lord my God, . . . my mercy and my refuge; my support, and my deliverer."¹⁶ Jeremias recalled the help granted in the past and cried out: "O expectation of Israel, the Savior thereof in time of trouble!"¹⁷ King Darius, himself a pagan, after the miracle accomplished in favor of the prophet Daniel, was forced to confess that Yahweh is "the living and eternal God forever, . . . the Deliverer and

¹⁴ Ps. 113:9. ¹⁵ Exod. 15:2, 13. ¹⁶ Ps. 143:1-2.

¹⁷ Jer. 14:8.

Savior, doing signs and wonders in heaven, and in earth; who hath delivered Daniel out of the lions' den."¹⁸

Truly the Israelites knew that in time of distress they never invoked in vain the one whose omnipotence was employed to liberate and save the people of the covenant. But when God stretched forth His arm and showed His power by helping and saving Israel, it could not be merely in order to transfer a little tribe from one country to another nor to secure material supremacy for it. He indeed took care to shed light upon the true motives of His assistance by proportioning His salvation to the Jews' fidelity. If they disobey Him and turn to other gods, Yahweh then deserts them, leaving them to their own misery, to defeat, even to captivity and exile. Esther well knew this and humbly acknowledged: "We have sinned in Thy sight, and therefore Thou hast delivered us into the hands of our enemies; for we have worshipped their gods. Thou art just, O Lord."¹⁹

It is surprising that even the pagans were aware of this law and declared, when God's people were unfaithful: "All that found them, have devoured them; and their enemies said: We have not sinned in so doing; because they have sinned against the Lord, the beauty of justice, and against the Lord, the hope of their fathers."²⁰ It is a great credit to the prophets that they emphasized the connection between prosperity and fidelity and that they succeeded in teaching hard-hearted, sensual men that sin entails suffering, bondage and slavery.

Even this lesson represented but a halfway point in Israel's development, because the people had to cast off childish ideas and learn to expect a Savior who would bring, not

¹⁸ Dan. 6:26-27. ¹⁹ Esther 14:6-7. ²⁰ Jer. 50:7.

material liberation and prosperity, but spiritual freedom and welfare. Instead of hoping for material advantages as a reward to their fidelity, they were to substitute little by little the hope of interior liberation. Israel had to understand that not only does sin *entail* slavery, but it *is* slavery. The greatest glory of the inspired authors, especially the Psalmist, lay in their efforts to express this truth; even in their requests for material help, they maintain the primacy of the spiritual reality.

In Thee, O Lord, have I hoped, let me never be confounded; deliver me in Thy justice.²¹

Hear me, O Lord. . . . Attend to my soul, and deliver it; save me because of my enemies.²²

I met with trouble and sorrow, and I called upon the name of the Lord. O Lord deliver my soul.²³

The inspired writers were always aware of sin, either individual or collective, and they helped to develop the general sense of sin, so that souls became more conscious of the slavery in which they lived. The penitent King David did more than anyone else to lead the people in this direction. So beautiful was the sound of his voice when he cried out to God after his sin that one is inclined to apply here the words, *felix culpa*.

Have mercy on me, O God according to Thy great mercy. And according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my iniquity. Wash me yet more from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my iniquity and my sin is always before me. To Thee only have I sinned, and have done evil before Thee. . . . Create a clean heart in me, O God, and renew a right spirit within my bowels. . . . Restore unto me the joy of

Thy salvation, and strengthen me with a perfect spirit. I will teach the unjust Thy ways; and the wicked shall be converted to Thee. Deliver me from blood, O God, Thou God of my salvation; and my tongue shall extol Thy justice.²⁴

Never has there been a more sublime expression of the sinner's feelings of distress, solitude and affliction, along with his fervent and humble appeal to the saving God. Only in Psalm 129 is a similar note struck:

Out of the depths I have cried to Thee, O Lord; Lord hear my voice. . . . If Thou, O Lord, wilt mark iniquities; Lord, who shall stand it? For with Thee there is merciful forgiveness; and by reason of Thy law, I have waited for Thee, O Lord. My soul hath relied on His word; my soul hath hoped in the Lord. From the morning watch even until night, let Israel hope in the Lord. Because with the Lord there is mercy; and with Him plentiful redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.²⁵

These wonderful pleas which Christians were to repeat throughout the centuries begged first of all for freedom from sin. Israel had finally become attuned to the divine purpose which was to raise up not merely a Liberator but a Redeemer. When salvation finally dawned, old Zachary proved that Israel had clung steadfast to that truth:

And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways; to give knowledge of salvation to His people, unto the remission of their sins; through the bowels of the mercy of our God, in which the Orient from on high hath visited us; to enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death; to direct our feet into the way of peace.²⁶

²¹ Ps. 30:1. ²² Ps. 68:17, 19. ²³ Ps. 114:4.

²⁴ Ps. 50. ²⁵ Ps. 129.

²⁶ Luke 1:76-79.

Truly the people of the promise had formed a cradle for the Redeemer.

ISRAEL, CRADLE OF THE REDEEMER

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; because He hath visited and wrought the redemption of His people. . . . As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who are from the beginning.²⁷

The anguish of humanity, enslaved to sin and its results, was so deep and heart-rending that from the very beginning God willed to let a glimmer of light appear in the darkness. The frequently renewed promises of a Redeemer were bright gems in the treasury of the sacred books, a glorious legacy preserved by Israel. The first prediction was made to the world at the time of the first sin. "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel."²⁸

This promise or *proto-evangelium* opened the series of Messianic prophecies, prophecies which Israel jealously preserved as the pledge of the covenant ratified between the patriarchs and God. Though there often were long intervals between the prophecies, they emphasize the constancy of God's plan to give humanity a Redeemer through the chosen race: "The blessings of thy father are strengthened with the blessings of his fathers, until the desire of the everlasting hills should come." The prophecies preserved among men the sense of sin and of hope.

But God did more than simply reiterate His promises; He embodied the promises in men who appeared as figures of the coming Redeemer—figures glimpsed from afar, it is true, but already remarkably eloquent. God invited Israel to

²⁷ Luke 1:68, 70. ²⁸ Gen. 3:15.

ponder upon the scene where Isaac, the tenderly loved only son, was about to be sacrificed by his father, Abraham. This mystery of pain and relief, of love and mercy, foreshadowed prophetically the mystery of Calvary and was marked beforehand by the sign of the Cross. God's mercy was equally apparent in the figure of Moses, spokesman of God and agent of His will to liberate and save the people. Was it not Israel's captivity and distress that prompted God to raise up the leader and liberator of the people? "The children of Israel groaning, cried out because of the works; and their cry went up unto God from the works. . . . And the Lord looked upon the children of Israel, and He knew them."²⁹

In the course of time other saviors were to rise in Israel. Despite appearances and by contrast with the slight import of the events in which they took part, their religious role was momentous; their mission was the formation of a gradually emerging portrait of the expected Redeemer. Joseph's greatest glory, for instance, was to permit a glimpse of some of the Messiah's salient features. Doubtless that is why the inspired authors so insistently reminded men of Joseph and proposed him as a spiritual model. Few tales in the Bible occupy such an important place, reach us in such abundant detail, or make as deep an impression. Today, as of old, no one who has once heard it can ever forget the story of Joseph, sold by his brothers and responding to their cruelty by generous pardon. Even in childhood he was visibly favored by God as the most handsome, most innocent and most beloved of the twelve sons of Jacob. And yet soon he aroused the envy, then the hatred, of his brothers, who took

²⁹ Exod. 2:23, 25.

advantage of favorable circumstances to consult together and plot his death. Joseph owed his escape only to the intervention of Ruben, who was less perverted, or perhaps less cowardly, than the others. In the selling of Joseph by his brothers, the staining of his long robe in the blood of a goat, his consignment as a slave on the markets of Egypt, his betrayal because of his beauty and innocence which put evil-doers to shame and roused their hatred: in all this we can see in prophetic outline the divine story of the Savior who was to suffer unjustly but lovingly through us and for us. The figure of Joseph certainly was never forgotten by Israel; the length of the story proves it.

A magnificent text of the Book of Wisdom³⁰ projects a bright light upon the figure of the Messiah. Shall we posit mere coincidence in the fact that this admirable poem can be applied in every word (as it will be later) to the plotting of Christ's enemies, as well as to the conversation of Jacob's sons planning the death of their brother? But the lesson derived from the story in Genesis applies beyond this. It seems to tell complacently of Joseph's increasing fortune in Egypt, of his outstanding qualities, of the services he rendered the country distressed by famine. All trace of the crime committed long ago in the desert has apparently disappeared. But the brothers of Joseph knew no peace after their sin. Anguish seized them; remorse pursued them; trouble and famine overwhelmed them. All this was not in vain or meaningless because all these misfortunes gradually softened and refined their hard and brutal hearts. They learned humility; then repentance brought forth in them a warm affection for this favorite son of Jacob and Rachel

³⁰ Wisd. 2:12-20.

whom they had once hated. Then it was that Joseph, at the height of his power and honor, intervened to save his brothers from death by pouring the balm of his gentle words into their hearts and by consoling them with gestures of the most merciful love.

You thought evil against me; but God turned it into good, that He might exalt me, as at present you see, and might save many people. Fear not; I will feed you and your children. And he comforted them, and spoke gently and mildly.³¹

Thanks to Joseph, Israel regained strength and was able, much later, to recover its inheritance and experience the fulfillment of God's promises. Thus the fruitful suffering of one of Jacob's sons enabled the twelve predestined tribes to take possession of the Promised Land. Joseph became famous not only as savior of Egypt but more particularly as savior of his own people who had wished to destroy him.

The types who reflected one or more of the spiritual features of the coming Messiah helped Israel to acquire gradually the mentality of the redemption. From these men emanate bright beams illuminating the very Person of the Redeemer and the achievement of His glorious reign.

Besides prophecy and figures, God also gave His promises. When Yahweh renewed His covenant with Isaac and Jacob, the sacred author foretold: "The sceptre shall not be taken away from Juda, nor a ruler from his thigh, till He come that is to be sent, and He shall be the expectation of nations. Tying His foal to the vineyard, and His ass, O my son, to the vine. He shall wash His robe in wine, and His garment in the blood of the grape. His eyes are more beautiful than

³¹ Gen. 50:20-21.

wine, and His teeth whiter than milk.”³² In David’s day the mysterious visitation was delineated more closely and clearly:

The Lord hath sworn truth to David, and He will not make it void; of the fruit of thy womb I will set upon thy throne. . . . For the Lord hath chosen Sion; He hath chosen it for His dwelling. This is My rest for ever and ever; here will I dwell, for I have chosen it. . . . There will I bring forth a horn to David; I have prepared a lamp for My anointed. His enemies I will clothe with confusion; but upon Him shall my sanctification flourish.³³

Thus, the one promised in Scripture was to be a son of David, sustained by divine benefits, a true child of Israel, cherished by God. “And when thy days shall be fulfilled, . . . I will raise up thy seed after thee, . . . and I will establish His kingdom. . . . I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son.”³⁴

Even the place of the Messiah’s birth was foretold.

And thou Bethlehem, Ephrate, art a little one among the thousands of Juda; out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be the ruler in Israel;³⁵ and His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity. Therefore will He give them up even till the time wherein she that travaileth shall bring forth; and the remnant of His brethren shall be converted to the chil-

³² Gen. 49:10–12. ³³ Ps. 131:11, 13–14, 17–18.

³⁴ II Kings 7:12, 14.

³⁵ Cf. Matt. 2:6. As the accomplishment of this prophecy had remained hidden, it was recalled by St. John (7:42). Most of the texts quoted here and in the following chapters are also found in the Epistles and in the Acts of the Apostles. They constitute a key to the iconography of the Middle Ages and enable us to recognize the Old Testament characters represented in Gothic cathedrals.

dren of Israel. And He shall stand, and feed in the strength of the Lord, in the height of the name of the Lord His God; and they shall be converted, for now shall He be magnified even to the ends of the earth.³⁶

The prophets recall the ancient promises and the psalms sing of them; thenceforth none in Israel could ignore the one who was expected: “Let him who has ears to hear, listen!”

He will render vengeance to their enemies, and He will be merciful to the land of His people.³⁷

And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.³⁸

All these [patriarchs] died according to faith, not having received the promises, but beholding them afar off, and saluting them, and confessing that they are pilgrims and strangers on the earth.³⁹

Of what use, however, were all these figures and promises contained in the sacred books and reiterated from generation to generation, if souls were not filled with the desire and expectation of the Messiah? Because the secrets of souls, then as now, are hidden from us, we cannot know to what extent God’s people truly longed and prayed for the Messiah. But the pages of the Old Testament afford irrefutable proof of ardent desire, at least among the best of the Israelites. Christ Himself affirmed that this desire was in the hearts of the patriarchs: “Abraham, your father rejoiced that he might see My day; he saw it, and was glad.”⁴⁰ The appeals uttered in the psalms and the prophetic books show that these

³⁶ Mich. 5:2–4.

³⁷ Deut. 32:43.

³⁸ Isa. 11:1–2.

³⁹ Heb. 11:13.

⁴⁰ John 8:56.

authors too were consumed with the same longing. The intense feeling in their words could not be mere literary invention, but could rise only in souls straining their every wish toward light and freedom. As oppression and suffering weighed more heavily and the time for relief grew near, Israel seemed to aspire with increased ardor toward the Savior.

During the exile, careful pondering yielded the secret treasure of Scripture as pious men scrutinized the pages, acknowledging their perversion and their spiritual poverty that was even worse than their material poverty. With the intensity of real anguish they felt a thirst for the promised salvation which would free them from sin and from all discord.⁴¹ The psalms intone a note of keener supplication, where we seem to hear in advance the words of Simeon, Zachary, Anna and Mary herself: "May God have mercy on us, and bless us; may He cause the light of His countenance to shine upon us, and may He have mercy on us. That we may know Thy way upon earth; Thy salvation in all nations."⁴²

Ecclesiasticus asks God, respectfully but most insistently, to hurry: "Hasten the time, and remember the end, that they may declare Thy wonderful works."⁴³

The Psalmist even dares to complain to God, in the name of the chosen people, about the delays in His coming to Israel's help: "How long, O Lord, turnest Thou away unto the end? Shall Thy anger burn like fire? . . . Lord, where

⁴¹ This anguished expectation of a Savior is found likewise in St. John the Baptist: "Art Thou He that art to come, or look we for another?" (Matt. 11:3). Cf. also Luke 2:25, 38.

⁴² Ps. 66:2-3. ⁴³ Eccles. 36:10.

are Thy ancient mercies, according to what Thou didst swear to David in Thy truth? Be mindful, O Lord, of the reproach of Thy servants (which I have held in my bosom) of many nations; wherewith Thy enemies have reproached, O Lord; wherewith they have reproached the change of Thy anointed."⁴⁴

The appeals for a Savior are multiplied throughout the psalms and the expectation of His coming becomes more and more eager:

Stir up Thy might, and come to save us. . . . Look down from heaven, and see, and visit this vineyard. . . . O Lord God of hosts, convert us; and show Thy face, and we shall be saved.⁴⁵

Who shall give out of Sion the salvation of Israel? When the Lord shall have turned away the captivity of His people, Jacob shall rejoice and Israel shall be glad.⁴⁶

Arise, O Lord, help us and redeem us for Thy name's sake.⁴⁷

Let Thy mercies speedily prevent us, for we are become exceeding poor. Help us, O God, our Savior; and for the glory of Thy name, O Lord, deliver us; and forgive us our sins for Thy name's sake.⁴⁸

Ecclesiasticus begs God to come with mercy and light for all nations:

Have mercy upon us, O God of all, and behold us, and show us the light of Thy mercies; and send Thy fear upon the nations, that have not sought after Thee; that they may know that there is no God beside Thee, and that they may show forth Thy wonders. . . . Hasten the time, and remember the end, that they may declare Thy wonderful works. . . . Fill Sion with Thy unspeakable words, and Thy people with Thy glory.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ps. 88:47, 50-52. Cf. also Ps. 129. ⁴⁵ Ps. 79:3, 15, 20.

⁴⁶ Ps. 13:7. ⁴⁷ Ps. 43:26. ⁴⁸ Ps. 78:8-9.

⁴⁹ Eccles. 36:1-2, 10, 16.

An even more vehement appeal which was uttered by the prophet Isaias is repeated each year by the Church as Christmas approaches: "Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just; let the earth be opened, and bud forth a Savior; and let justice spring up together; I the Lord have created Him."⁵⁰

In other passages, Isaias' pleas are equally urgent:

O that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and wouldst come down; the mountains would melt away at Thy presence. . . . From the beginning of the world they have not heard, nor perceived with the ears; the eye hath not seen, O God, beside Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee. Thou hast met him that rejoiceth and doth justice; in Thy ways they shall remember Thee; behold Thou art angry, and we have sinned; in them we have been always, and we shall be saved. . . . Thou hast hid Thy face from us and hast crushed us in the hand of our iniquity. . . . Be not very angry, O Lord, and remember no longer our iniquity; behold see we are all Thy people. The city of Thy sanctuary is become a desert, Sion is made a desert, Jerusalem is desolate. The house of our holiness and of our glory, where our fathers praised Thee, is burnt with fire, and all our lovely things are turned into ruins. Wilt Thou refrain Thyself, O Lord, upon these things, wilt Thou hold Thy peace, and afflict us vehemently?⁵¹

Israel's ardent desire encountered a response in the longing of God, who was even more eager for redemption than His people. The biblical authors took care, indeed, to show us the sentiments of God's own heart in texts which show perhaps the most touching beauty of the Old Testament and which become on our lips a never-outdated prayer. For these

⁵⁰ Isa. 45:8. ⁵¹ Isa. 64:1-12.

pages show the eternal, omnipotent, infinite God tenderly stooping toward sinful humanity and constantly calling men to Himself, desiring complete union with them by means of the Incarnation and the Redemption. The prophets voice the very words of the Redeemer, whose inmost heart seems to throb in the paltry human words:

Thou hast not called upon Me, O Jacob, neither hast thou labored about Me, O Israel. . . . I am, I am He that blot out thy iniquities for My own sake, and I will not remember thy sins. . . . And now hear, O Jacob, My servant, and Israel whom I have chosen. Thus saith the Lord that made and formed thee, thy helper from the womb: Fear not, O My servant Jacob, and thou most righteous whom I have chosen. For I will pour out waters upon the thirsty ground, and streams upon the dry land; I will pour out My spirit upon thy seed, and My blessing upon thy stock. And they shall spring up among the herbs, as willows beside the running waters.⁵²

Thus, even if men lose sight of their own destitution and, letting their longing for a Savior grow cool, cease to call Him, nevertheless God, who is ever faithful, was sure to come to them, so great was His desire to bring them the blessings His heart had prepared. Before such a miracle of love all previous miracles fade and are forgotten. Men would no longer look backward; the future was too richly laden with divine gifts.

Remember not former things, and look not on things of old. Behold I do new things, and now they shall spring forth, verily you shall know them; I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The beast of the field shall glorify Me, the dragons and the ostriches; because I have given waters in the

⁵² Isa. 43:22, 25; 44:1-4.

wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to My people, to My chosen. This people have I formed for Myself, they shall show forth My praise.⁵³

Let men trust God, for He has guaranteed that the promises will be fulfilled and that the earth will be renewed:

And I will bring forth a seed out of Jacob, and out of Juda a possessor of My mountains. . . . For behold I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be in remembrance, and they shall not come upon the heart. But you shall be glad and rejoice forever in these things which I create; for behold I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and the people thereof joy.⁵⁴

The holy city will welcome the expected Messiah and will experience endless happiness:

Sing praise, and rejoice, O daughter of Sion; for behold I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord. And many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and they shall be My people, and I will dwell in the midst of thee; and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent Me to thee. And the Lord shall possess Juda His portion in the sanctified land; and He shall yet choose Jerusalem. Let all flesh be silent at the presence of the Lord; for He is risen up out of His holy habitation.⁵⁵

The woman saith to Him: I know that the Messiah cometh (who is called Christ). . . . Jesus saith to her: I am He, who am speaking with thee.⁵⁶

And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures, the things that were concerning Him.⁵⁷

⁵³ Isa. 43:18–21.

⁵⁴ Isa. 65:9, 17–18.

⁵⁵ Zach. 2:10–13.

⁵⁶ John 4:25–26.

⁵⁷ Luke 24:27.

The Jews expected the promised Messiah and fixed all their hopes on the day of His coming. But how did Israel imagine that day of His advent? The oldest texts declared that on that day a king would appear, a king consecrated by divine anointing and enjoying the royal power in full majesty:

The sceptre shall not be taken away from Juda, nor a ruler from his thigh, till He come that is to be sent, and He shall be the expectation of nations.⁵⁸

I have found David My servant; with My holy oil I have anointed him.⁵⁹

And all kings of the earth shall adore Him; all nations shall serve Him.⁶⁰

The people acclaimed the first signs of these royal traits in the kings of Juda. But particularly in David's reign there appeared a rough sketch of the future Messiah's kingdom—a universal reign, glorious above every other. “In Him shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed; all nations shall magnify Him.”⁶¹ On the strength of the promises made to their father Abraham, the people foresaw the Messiah's day as a material establishment of Israel's sovereignty over the whole world. “I have made thee a father of many nations. And I will make thee increase exceedingly; and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.”⁶²

The prophecies of Daniel stressed the absolute kingship of the Son of man; the whole nation looked forward to unequalled prosperity under a mighty king.⁶³ But the moral and religious ideal of Israel asserted itself, so that the Messiah's day appeared also as a time when the good and the bad

⁵⁸ Gen. 49:10.

⁵⁹ Ps. 88:21.

⁶⁰ Ps. 71:11.

⁶¹ Ps. 71:17.

⁶² Gen. 17:5–6.

⁶³ Cf. also Joel 2:18–27.

would be judged and would receive their proper wages. Joel announced the apocalyptic signs which would precede the Lord's day—a terrible day:

The day of the Lord is great and very terrible; and who can stand it? . . . Nations, nations in the valley of destruction; for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of destruction. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars have withdrawn their shining.⁶⁴

Amos in his turn tried to dispel the illusions of the people who were seduced by carnal desires in their longing to see the Lord's day come. "Woe, to them that desire the day of the Lord; to what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is darkness, and not light."⁶⁵ Sophonias, too, predicted stern judgment, seeming to repeat the refrain *Dies irae, dies illa*.

The great day of the Lord is near, it is near and exceeding swift; the voice of the day of the Lord is bitter, the mighty man shall there meet with tribulation. That day is a day of wrath, a day of tribulation and distress, a day of calamity and misery, a day of darkness and obscurity, a day of clouds and whirlwinds.⁶⁶

It would be a day for the showing forth of the omnipotence of the Messiah-King and also His fearful judgment. Such would be Yahweh's day. But how could Israel forget that *Messiah* meant *Savior*? The Messiah would first appear to judge the world, but then He would bring peace, justice, holiness and happiness. All the aspirations of the human heart would be satisfied because order would be restored to the earth:

For behold I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be in remembrance, and they shall

⁶⁴ Joel 2:11; 3:14. ⁶⁵ Amos 5:18. ⁶⁶ Soph. 1:14–15.

not come upon the heart. . . . Behold I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and the people thereof joy. . . . And the voice of weeping shall no more be heard in her, nor the voice of crying. There shall no more be an infant of days there, nor an old man that shall not fill up his days; for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner being a hundred years old shall be accursed. And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat; for as the days of a tree, so shall be the days of my people, and the works of their hands shall be of long continuance. My elect shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth in trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord, and their posterity with them.⁶⁷

Jeremias emphasized the return of divine benefits to the beloved people,⁶⁸ while Ezechiel was to describe at great length the holy kingdom and the restored temple where the Lord would dwell forever.⁶⁹

It is true that the prophetic perspectives overlap; for instance, in the predictions of the return from exile, the coming of a Messiah and His final triumph at the end of time, as well as in the references to the restoration of Jerusalem, the building of a spiritual Jerusalem and the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. All these prospects were not clearly differentiated in the visions of the prophets and even less in the minds of the people. But the details were all bound up in the notion of Yahweh's day that would be at one and the same time a day of an omnipotent king, a day of terrible judgment and, finally, a day inaugurating an era of peace, prosperity and happiness. This prophetic view is in con-

⁶⁷ Isa. 65:17–23. ⁶⁸ Jer., chaps. 30, 31.

⁶⁹ Ezech., chaps. 40–46.

formity with God's purpose in creating men: to reign over them and to exercise His rights as both Judge and Father. God has ordained a throne of glory for the Messiah whose reign would bring all things to an apex. This dominant idea gives coherence and orientation to Israel's hope. Later the New Testament was to fit into the same perspective: far from rendering obsolete these hopes, Christ's coming really cleared the path and prepared hearts for the day of glory.

But the messianic idea involved much more than the rousing of hopes. Not only the history of Israel but the general evolution of ideas demands that we consider another aspect of it. The reigns of David and of some of the other strong kings of Israel led men to conceive the Messiah's reign as a time of conquest and glory. Even when devastated, the free nation continued to yearn for this promised glory. The painful events that struck the people afterward proved that they had to give up their ambitions for material domination of the world. The passing centuries showed that the only domination to which they could still aspire was in the moral and spiritual sphere, where their superiority derived from the blessed light of revelation given to them. Moreover, after many centuries of positing a necessary relation between virtue and happiness, the best minds in Israel came to realize that such a theory is not ratified by the experience of life. How many good men receive no share of happiness!

The author of the Book of Job,⁷⁰ in particular, affirmed that suffering can be the lot of the innocent and is not neces-

⁷⁰ The fact that Job is often considered as a fictional character in no way invalidates what we say; on the contrary, as a creation of fiction, Job is even more representative and better translates a current idea.

sarily a punishment. That being so, might it not also happen that the good man *par excellence*, the Messiah, would also be subjected to trials? When the author of the Book of Wisdom set up a model for the just man who suffers, he said of souls persecuted for justice' sake that "afflicted in few things, in many they shall be well rewarded; because God hath tried them, and found them worthy of Himself. As gold in the furnace He hath proved them."⁷¹ It was not a new idea; the prophets, especially Isaias, had long been inviting Israel to meditate upon the mysterious "Servant of Yahweh" whose only arms for the battle God had entrusted to Him were gentleness, patience and humility. Who was this Servant of Yahweh? What was His mission? Outdistancing the popular ideas and the theology then current in Israel, Isaias hints that the Servant of Yahweh would be none other than the Messiah Himself,⁷² the Redeemer of Israel. The mission of this persecuted Holy One, therefore, would be to save His brethren by redeeming them from sin. "He hath delivered His soul unto death, and was reputed with the wicked; and He hath borne the sins of many, and hath prayed for the transgressors."⁷³

Thus Isaias concurred with what the Psalmist had also glimpsed in Psalm 21, that wonderful prayer of the just man in his suffering, a painful passion, the prayer which Christ repeated while suffering on the cross, where He shed full light on its mysterious meaning.

In view of this spiritual evolution, the events of Israel's

⁷¹ Wisd. 3:5-6.

⁷² St. Peter alluded to these prophecies of Yahweh's servant when he accused the Jews of causing Christ's death (Acts 3:13, 18; 4:27).

⁷³ Isa. 53:12.

history contain an explanation of the new image which appeared. True, the idea of a glorious Messiah still haunted men's minds and flattered the temporal longings of the multitude. The new concept was held only by the most religious souls in Israel, and even then in only a vague and transitory way. Nevertheless, the idea of a conquering, triumphant Messiah was no longer the only notion. For at least a few souls living under the Holy Spirit's impulse,⁷⁴ the Messiah was seen as a Redeemer who would save His people by suffering and sacrifice.

A reign bound up with suffering, yet a reign of glory; these two viewpoints are found in the Old Testament. In the light of Christ's words and the example of His life and death, we understand now that these two notions are not mutually exclusive but were intended to be successive. But for Jewish minds the concept of a glorious Messiah was too firmly anchored and too closely suited to their desires and hopes for them to tolerate the scandalous idea of any suffering in connection with the Messiah.⁷⁵ The mystery of the Cross no longer allows us any doubt about the Messiah's will: "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and so to enter into His glory?"⁷⁶ As disciples we know that we too must tread

⁷⁴ Belonging to this spiritual family were Simeon, Anna, the shepherds, the Magi, the good thief; in brief, all who unhesitatingly recognized the Messiah beneath the features of the humble Infant in the crib or in the face of the condemned Criminal on Calvary. They were not scandalized in Him (Luke 7:23).

⁷⁵ Even the disciples maintained this error until after the Resurrection. Significant in this regard is the scene in which James and John request a seat in the Master's glorious kingdom while He was announcing His passion (Mark 10:32-40). Cf. also Acts 8:26-37, where Philip revealed the meaning of Isaias' prophecies to a eunuch.

⁷⁶ Luke 24:26.

the same paths as the Master. But we should not lose sight of the glorious enthronement described in the Old Testament. Though it is almost as mysterious for us as for Israel, at least we are certain that the "day of Yahweh" will arrive at the end of time; this gives us the strength to walk along the road of suffering and sacrifice beside the Messiah who will make us sharers in His triumphant return and in the glory of His second coming.⁷⁷

ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS COMING

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaias.⁷⁸

Various passages of Scripture testified to the coming of a precursor, a messenger who was to precede the "day of the Lord." Indeed, the Old Testament closed on the announcement of the arrival of this great servant. "Behold I will send you Elias the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers; lest I come, and strike the earth with anathema."⁷⁹

When John the Baptist appeared, harassing the people to

⁷⁷ Even the apostles had to learn this lesson gradually. "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the ancients and scribes and chief priests, and be put to death, and the third day rise again. And Peter taking Him, began to rebuke Him saying: Lord, be it far from Thee, this shall not be unto Thee. Who, turning, said to Peter: Go behind Me, satan, thou art a scandal unto Me; because thou savorest not the things that are of God, but the things that are of men" (Matt. 16:21-23).

⁷⁸ John 1:23.

⁷⁹ Mal. 4:5-6. This prophecy was very familiar to the Jews. Cf. Luke 3:4; Matt. 3:3; 11:4; John 1:21.

incite them to repentance, the worried Jews asked: "What then? Art thou Elias?"⁸⁰ But he, instead of answering, referred them to an even older prophecy which gave a glimpse of a Savior rather than a Judge: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaias."⁸¹ While there was yet time, men were urged to heed the words of the messenger charged with preparing the way for the Redeemer and calling all to turn their hearts toward Him in penance:⁸²

The voice of one crying in the desert: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the wilderness the paths of our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough ways plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh together shall see, that the mouth of the Lord hath spoken. The voice of one, saying: Cry. And I said: What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of the field. The grass is withered, and the flower is fallen, because the spirit of the Lord hath blown upon it. The grass is withered, and the flower is fallen; but the word of our Lord endureth forever. Get thee up upon a high mountain, thou that bringest good tidings to Sion; lift up thy voice with strength, thou that bringest good tidings to Jerusalem; lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Juda: Behold your God; behold the Lord God shall come with strength, and His arm shall rule. Behold His reward is with Him and His work is before Him.⁸³

⁸⁰ John 1:21.

⁸¹ Matt. 3:3. "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47).

⁸² "John was in the desert baptizing, and preaching the baptism of penance, unto remission of sins" (Mark 1:4).

⁸³ Isa. 40:3-10.

If this voice were not heeded, how frightful would be the day when the expected Messiah would rise up as judge:

Behold I send My angel, and he shall prepare the way before My face.⁸⁴ And presently the Lord, whom you seek, and the angel of the testament, whom you desire, shall come to His temple. Behold He cometh, saith the Lord of hosts. And who shall be able to think of the day of His coming? And who shall stand to see Him? For He is like a refining fire, and like the fuller's herb. And He shall sit refining and cleansing the silver.⁸⁵

Truly the days were counted, for Daniel announced seventy-two weeks before the coming of the Savior, and Isaias cried out: "I have raised up one from the north, and he shall come. . . . To Jerusalem I will give an evangelist."⁸⁶ The prophet Nahum depicted the arrival as very imminent: "Behold upon the mountains the feet of Him that bringeth good tidings."⁸⁷ His coming no longer appears far distant as it did to Balaam long before: "I shall see Him, but not now; I shall behold Him, but not near. A star shall rise out of Jacob and a sceptre shall spring up from Israel."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Cf. Matt. 11:10. Christ declared that John the Baptist fulfilled this prophecy and that, contrary to what the Precursor himself had said (John 1:21), he was "Elias that is to come." The explanation is that these words present a dramatic prophetic curtailment in the Old Testament manner. John the Baptist is called Elias because he tried to lead the cities of Israel to penance, but as they remained unrepentant even in the face of Christ's glory, the judgment is destined to take place.

⁸⁵ Mal. 3:1-3.

⁸⁶ Isa. 41:25, 27. The prophecy referred directly to Cyrus, but is commonly applied in the liturgy to the coming of the Messiah.

⁸⁷ Nah. 1:15. ⁸⁸ Num. 24:17.

The Psalmist sees the coming as very near, or even already taking place:

Surely His salvation is near to them that fear Him, that glory may dwell in our land. Mercy and truth have met each other; justice and peace have kissed. Truth is sprung out of the earth; and justice hath looked down from heaven. For the Lord will give goodness; and our earth shall yield her fruit. Justice shall walk before Him; and shall set His steps in the way.⁸⁹

Before the Messiah, at the words of His messenger, obstacles seem to vanish; the people are ready to acknowledge His glory and to exult in the joyful salvation granted to them by the Holy One of Israel:

For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for the sake of Jerusalem, I will not rest till her Just One come forth as brightness, and her Savior be lighted as a lamp. And the Gentiles shall see thy Just One, and all kings thy Glorious One; and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. . . . Thou shalt no more be called forsaken; and thy land shall no more be called desolate; but thou shalt be called My pleasure in her, and thy land inhabited. Because the Lord hath been well pleased with thee, and thy land shall be inhabited. . . . Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people, make the road plain, pick out the stones, and lift up the standard to the people. Behold the Lord hath made it to be heard in the ends of the earth, tell the daughter of Zion: Behold thy Savior cometh; behold His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. And they shall call them the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord. But thou shalt be called a city sought after, and not forsaken.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ps. 84:10-14.

⁹⁰ Isa. 62:1-4, 10-12.

SON OF MAN AND SON OF GOD

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us.⁹¹

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the word of life.⁹²

And Jesus . . . asked His disciples, saying: Whom do men say that the Son of man is? But they said: Some John the Baptist, and other some Elias, and others Jeremias, or one of the prophets. Jesus saith to them: But whom do you say that I am? Simon Peter answered and said: Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answering, said to him: Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but My Father who is in heaven.⁹³

It is apparent from this passage of the Gospel that there was great uncertainty in Israel regarding Christ; people did not know who He was. In spite of the Scriptures, only a very few were able to recognize Him as the Messiah, the Son of God. Even those who did so, believed only because they had witnessed a miracle,⁹⁴ or received a revelation from above. This was the case with St. Peter. We must not expect, therefore, that the prophecies about Christ will shed dazzling light or convey self-evident certitude. Always the principal mystery of faith is to identify the Son of God, now in Christ, formerly in the Messiah. Thus, the Old Testament affords only a veiled and mysterious knowledge of the Savior's

⁹¹ John 1:14. ⁹² I John 1:1. ⁹³ Matt. 16:13-17.

⁹⁴ Thus the Samaritan woman told Christ: "I know that the Messiah cometh," but she did not make her profession of faith until the Savior revealed her sins to her in a wholly supernatural way: "Come, and see a man who has told me all things whatsoever I have done. Is not He the Christ?" (John 4:25, 29).

identity. Yet the biblical texts permit us to distinguish two aspects in His personality (as St. Peter implied): He was Son of Man and Son of God.

We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets did write, Jesus the son of Joseph of Nazareth.⁹⁵

And Jesus . . . being (as it was supposed) the son of Joseph . . . who was of David, . . . who was of Abraham . . . who was of Adam, who was of God.⁹⁶

The one whom everyone had expected so eagerly and whose near approach was indicated by the Precursor finally appeared before all eyes. He was a child, the child whose birth was foretold long before: "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed."⁹⁷ He was the Son of a virgin, but in all things like the children of men. "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel. He shall eat butter and honey, that he may know to refuse the evil and to choose the good."⁹⁸ He was truly a child of Israel, the heir of David, born of his blood and his land. "The earth hath yielded her fruit."⁹⁹ "Truth is sprung out of the earth, and justice hath looked down from heaven. For the Lord will give goodness, and our earth shall yield her fruit."¹⁰⁰

Thus the Messiah appeared as Son of Man. As Isaias had said, our land indeed opened and budded forth salvation; from it was born truth. Yet Scripture also declared that truth descended from above, a divine seed of happiness. The Psalmist seemed to have perceived in advance how the earth and the heavens would thrill with universal joy at the ap-

⁹⁵ John 1:45. ⁹⁶ Luke 3:23-38. ⁹⁷ Gen. 3:15.

⁹⁸ Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23. ⁹⁹ Ps. 66:6.

¹⁰⁰ Ps. 84:12-13.

proach of the Savior. "Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad, let the sea be moved, and the fullness thereof; the fields and all things that are in them shall be joyful. Then shall all the trees of the woods rejoice before the face of the Lord, because He cometh."¹⁰¹ The Psalmist also furnished the shepherds and the Magi with words to express their feelings for the Infant King whom they came to adore:

Thine are the heavens, and Thine is the earth; the world and the fullness thereof Thou hast founded; the north and the sea Thou hast created. Thabor and Hermon shall rejoice in Thy name; Thy arm is with might. Let Thy hand be strengthened, and Thy right hand exalted; justice and judgment are the preparation of Thy throne. Mercy and truth shall go before Thy face.¹⁰²

Give the king Thy judgment, O God; and to the king's son Thy justice; to judge Thy people with justice and Thy poor with judgment. . . . Before Him the Ethiopians shall fall down, and His enemies shall lick the ground. The kings of Tharsis and the islands shall offer presents; the kings of the Arabians and of Saba shall bring gifts; and all kings of the earth shall adore Him; all nations shall serve Him.¹⁰³

Daniel, finally, also saw the Son of Man, but the vast mural he sketches is placed, not above the stable of Bethlehem, but above the figure of Christ as King and Judge at the twilight time of the world:

I beheld therefore in the vision of the night, and lo, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and He came even to the Ancient of days, . . . and He gave Him power, and glory, and a kingdom; and all peoples, tribes and tongues shall

¹⁰¹ Ps. 95:11-13; cf. Luke 2:18-24. ¹⁰² Ps. 88:12-15.

¹⁰³ Ps. 71:1-2, 9-11.

serve Him; His power is an everlasting power that shall not be taken away; and His kingdom that shall not be destroyed.¹⁰⁴

No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.¹⁰⁵

The life eternal, which was with the Father, hath appeared to us.¹⁰⁶

What mystery, then, abides in this Child, this Son of Man whose glory is veiled by the flesh, who is described in Scripture as born of a woman and at the same time possessing omnipotence in heaven? This Son of Man has no Father but God, who says to him in Psalm 109: "From the womb before the day star I begot Thee."¹⁰⁷ In Psalm 88 the Son uses the name "Father" in addressing God: "Thou art My Father, my God, and the support of My salvation."¹⁰⁸

These texts held much mystery for Israel, and yet they permitted all to understand that God's messenger, the expected Messiah, besides being invested with unique dignity, would also stand in an ineffably close and intimate relationship with God Himself. In the mission of man's liberation and salvation, God used even pagans,¹⁰⁹ who would work for the

¹⁰⁴ Dan. 7:13. Many times Christ referred to Himself as "Son of Man," certainly intending the correlation with Daniel's prophecy (cf. Matt. 26:64). Although the time of His manifest glory had not yet come, yet all should have been able to recognize Him by the fulfillment of the prophecies. St. Matthew in particular has frequently quoted this title, "Son of Man," which was associated with the glory of the last days and the angelic powers (Matt. 13:41; 16:27; 24:27).

¹⁰⁵ John 1:18. ¹⁰⁶ I John 1:2.

¹⁰⁷ Ps. 109:3. The Church uses this text at the Christmas Midnight Mass and at Second Vespers.

¹⁰⁸ Ps. 88:27.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Isa., chaps. 41, 45, regarding the role assigned to Cyrus in God's plan for Israel.

honor of Israel, the glory of the chosen people. But this partial and transitory action would always be ordered toward a plan of universal scope and would be subordinate to it—a plan in which God Himself would once and for all appear as the only Redeemer, the only Shepherd, the only King. Cyrus might serve the divine cause without realizing it, but God alone is the true Savior and Redeemer:

I have declared, and have saved. I have made it heard. . . . You are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and I am God. . . . I am, I am He that blot out thy iniquities for My own sake. . . . Have I not the Lord, and there is no God else beside Me? A just God and a Savior, there is none beside Me. . . . Be converted to Me, and you shall be saved, all ye ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.¹¹⁰

The shepherd depicted by Ezechiel bore the name of David, but his visage was but a mask for that of Christ, the one Shepherd, the true King. "For thus saith the Lord God: Behold I Myself will seek My sheep, and will visit them. As the shepherd visiteth his flock . . . so will I visit My sheep. . . . And I will set up one Shepherd over them, and He shall feed them, even My servant David; He shall feed them, and He shall be their Shepherd."¹¹¹

God promised a glorious reign for David and his line, but the prophecy was to be fulfilled only in one mysterious descendant who would be acclaimed by the people under the title, "Son of David."¹¹² To Him alone was reserved the

¹¹⁰ Isa. 43:12, 14, 25; 45:21–22. ¹¹¹ Ezech. 34:11–12, 23.

¹¹² "And the multitudes that went before and that followed, cried, saying: Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 21:9). "Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that cometh; Hosanna in the highest" (Mark 10:11).

endless kingdom and the eternal leadership. "And when thy days shall be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will raise up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish His kingdom. He shall build a house to My name, and I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever. I will be to Him a father and He shall be to me a Son."¹¹³ In spite of certain obscurities which would be gradually cleared up, all these texts place this "Son of Man" on a level that is more than human, thus preparing Israel to recognize the Son of God Himself in the one who would fulfill the prophecies and who would claim the title of Messiah.

But to reveal so great and profound a mystery as the Incarnation it was necessary to show one by one the unheard-of prerogatives of Him who shares God's power and glory. These can be discovered in Scripture by eyes that read by the light of faith. The power of God's Son is glimpsed first: "The Lord said to my Lord: Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thy enemies My footstool."¹¹⁴ The Lord will send forth the sceptre of Thy power out of Zion; rule Thou in the midst of Thy enemies. With Thee is the principality in the day of Thy strength, in the brightness of the saints."¹¹⁵

The power granted to Him is boundless; His reign is in the likeness of the divine reign—universal, peaceful, transcend-

¹¹³ II Kings 7:12-13. "Brethren . . . the patriarch David . . . whereas he was a prophet, and knew that God hath sworn to him with an oath that of the fruit of his loins one should sit upon his throne. Foreseeing this, he spoke of the resurrection of Christ" (Acts 2:29-31).

¹¹⁴ Christ quoted this prophecy to refute the Pharisees, and St. Peter explained it to the people (Matt. 22:44; Acts 2:34).

¹¹⁵ Ps. 109:1-4.

ing every other kingdom in majesty and limitless range. It is an eternal reign of the mightiest of the world's kings.

Behold I have given Him for a witness to the people, for a Leader and a Master to the Gentiles. Behold Thou shalt call a nation which Thou knowest not; and the nations that knew not Thee shall run to Thee, because of the Lord Thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel, for He hath glorified thee.¹¹⁶

And a King shall reign, and shall be wise; and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.¹¹⁷

Behold a King shall reign in justice, and princes shall rule in judgment. . . . The eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken diligently. And the heart of fools shall understand knowledge, and the tongue of stammerers shall speak readily and plain.¹¹⁸

For now shall He be magnified even to the ends of the earth. And this Man shall be our peace.¹¹⁹

God said of this great King: "I will make Him My First-born, high above the kings of the earth. . . . And I will make His seed to endure for evermore; and His throne as the days of heaven."¹²⁰ Absolute power of divine kingship would belong to Him: "He cometh to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with justice, and the people with His

¹¹⁶ Isa. 55:4-5.

¹¹⁷ Jer. 23:5. The scribes and Pharisees accused Christ of blasphemy because as Son of God He claimed, by divine right, this power to condemn and to absolve (cf. Luke 5:20-25). In actual fact, Christ's reign of justice, which will be manifested at the end of time, began with His first coming in mercy, to be followed by the judgment (cf. Matt. 16:27; chap. 18). Christ Himself affirmed that all judgment belongs to Him: "For neither doth the Father judge any man, but hath given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22).

¹¹⁸ Isa. 32:1, 3-4.

¹¹⁹ Mich. 5:4-5.

¹²⁰ Ps. 88:28, 30.

truth.”¹²¹ “The Lord hath made known His salvation; He hath revealed His justice in the sight of the Gentiles. . . . All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.”¹²²

That was not all, for as God did not merely administer power and justice, but was Himself the embodiment of them, so also Christ would not only *appear* in glory, but He would Himself *be* the light of glory. Balaam hailed Him as a “star,” and Isaias called Him “light of the Gentiles,”¹²³ declaring that those approaching Him would come to the light which would dissipate all darkness throughout the world.

Give ear, ye islands, and hearken, ye people from afar. The Lord hath called Me from the womb, from the bowels of My mother He hath been mindful of My name. And He hath made My mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of His hand He hath protected Me, and hath made Me as a chosen arrow; in His quiver He hath hidden Me. And He said to Me: Thou art My servant Israel,¹²⁴ for in Thee will I glory. . . . And He said: It is a small thing that Thou shouldst be My servant to raise up the

¹²¹ Ps. 95:13. ¹²² Ps. 97:2-3.

¹²³ The words *star* and *light* must, of course, be understood in a purely biblical and evangelical sense, referring to “the Light of truth” which is God, and His Son, Christ. Certain scholars have sought to discover in these expressions a revival of the ancient myths of the Assyrian or Babylonian sun-worship. This is completely contrary to the unbroken teaching of the Bible and of Christ who explained: “As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the world” (John 9:5). Christ does the work of His Father, who is “Father of lights” (Jas. 1:17). He also said: “God is light and in Him there is no darkness” (I John 1:5). He is the light because He is the truth and the life (cf. Acts 13:46-47).

¹²⁴ The word *Israel* seems to have been added here by error, for it is the opinion of the best commentators that the word *servant* designates the Messiah, not Israel.

tribes of Jacob, and to convert the dregs of Israel. Behold I have given Thee to be the light of the Gentiles, that Thou mayest be My salvation even to the farthest part of the earth. Thus saith the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, His Holy One.¹²⁵

Isaias declared that the Messiah would bring light to all those living in darkness:¹²⁶

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and hast not increased the joy. They shall rejoice before Thee, as they that rejoice in the harvest, as conquerors rejoice after taking a prey, when they divide the spoils.¹²⁷

The inmost temple of this dazzling light which shines from a divine source is the soul of the Son of God, upon whom the spirit of Yahweh rests:

The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him; the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness. And He shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord. . . . The spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because the Lord hath anointed Me.¹²⁸

God, therefore, delights to contemplate the divine seed planted in the soil of human nature and destined to make

¹²⁵ Isa. 49:1-7.

¹²⁶ Isa. 49:9. “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. . . . That was the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world” (John 1:4-5, 9).

¹²⁷ Isa. 9:2-3.

¹²⁸ Isa. 11:2; 61:1. When Christ read the latter passage in the synagogue, He declared: “This day is fulfilled this Scripture in your ears” (Luke 4:21).

the whole earth fruitful. "In that day the Bud of the Lord shall be in magnificence and glory, and the fruit of the earth shall be high."¹²⁹ "I will raise up to David a just branch."¹³⁰

The Son of God appears as God of Gods, Light of lights, springing forth from the depths of divine glory to radiate to the ends of the earth and fulfill His mission:

He hath set His tabernacle in the sun; and He, as a bridegroom coming out of his bride chamber, hath rejoiced as a giant to run the way; His going out is from the end of heaven, and His circuit even to the end thereof; and there is no one that can hide himself from His heat.¹³¹

The Messiah Himself exulted as His reign approached:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, and My soul shall be joyful in My God; for He hath clothed Me with the garments of salvation, and with the robe of justice He hath covered Me, as a bridegroom decked with a crown, and as a bride adorned with her jewels. For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth her seed to shoot forth, so shall the Lord God make justice to spring forth, and praise before all the nations.¹³²

Truly He would be charged with a royal mission, for it was written of Him:

Thou art beautiful above the sons of men; grace is poured abroad in Thy lips; therefore hath God blessed Thee for ever. Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Thou most mighty. With Thy comeliness and Thy beauty set out, proceed prosperously, and reign. Because of truth and meekness and justice, and Thy right hand shall conduct Thee wonderfully.¹³³

¹²⁹ Isa. 4:2. ¹³⁰ Jer. 23:5. ¹³¹ Ps. 18:6-7.

¹³² Isa. 61:10-11. ¹³³ Ps. 44:3-5.

Thus we see Scripture reveal that in the person of the Savior there would be an indissoluble link and union between the God who speaks of Himself and the man whose origin is earthly. This great truth was apparent to the humble men whose eyes were guided by the light of faith and came to adore the Person of the Savior in the manger at Bethlehem:¹³⁴

For a Child is born to us, and a Son is given to us, and the government is upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of peace. His empire shall be multiplied, and there shall be no end of peace; He shall sit upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom; to establish it and strengthen it with judgment and with justice, from henceforth and forever.¹³⁵

THE MEDIATOR

Now this is the will of the Father who sent Me; that of all that He hath given Me, I should lose nothing; but should raise it up again in the last day.¹³⁶

For the Son of Man is come to save that which was lost.¹³⁷

Man and God: the Messiah, who united these two natures in His person, brought the answer to men's anguished pleas. Nothing is more tragic than to see how men yearned for centuries toward the one from whom they were separated, never reaching Him, yet unable to find fulfillment without Him. Men appointed the best of their race to serve God. God, coming half way toward them, directed their efforts,

¹³⁴ "When the goodness and kindness of God our Savior appeared, not by works of justice, which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us" (Tit. 3:4-5).

¹³⁵ Isa. 9:6-7. ¹³⁶ John 6:39. ¹³⁷ Matt. 18:11.

consecrated their ceremonies and gave them a real power of mediation, though it was very imperfect.

At the very beginning of biblical times, a great and mysterious figure stole across the stage of Israel's history: Melchisedech,¹³⁸ the highpriest whose priesthood had certain divine characteristics. He was "without father or mother," that is to say, without a known genealogy; he was king of *Salem* which means *peace*; he blessed Abraham, who acknowledged his spiritual authority and paid tithes to him. Brief though the account was, the episode was never forgotten. The Psalmist greeted the Messiah as priest according to the order of Melchisedech.¹³⁹ It seemed that from earliest times Israel's greatest servants never ceased to hope for the glorious perfection of a priesthood that would be both royal and divine.

The patriarchs had priestly functions as leaders of the tribe, e.g., Noe as well as Abraham and his descendants. Later God raised these private duties to the dignity of a necessary and official institution by establishing the levitical priesthood within the framework of the Mosaic law. So high a value did God place upon the priesthood that He gave it a sacred and inviolable sanction derived from His own sanctity. But though the priesthood of the order of Aaron, as an enormous edifice of sacrificial and ritual prescriptions, suc-

¹³⁸ "But Melchisedech, the king of Salem, bringing forth bread and wine, for he was the priest of the most high God, blessed him and said: Blessed be Abram by the most high God, by whose protection the enemies are in thy hands. And he gave him the tithes of all" (Gen. 14:18).

¹³⁹ Ps. 109:5. The Epistle to the Hebrews, especially chapter 7 has an impressive description of Melchisedech as type of the Messiah.

ceeded in forming a link between God and His people, it could exercise only an imperfect mediation. There still remained an infinite disproportion between the reparations offered for sinners and the God they had offended. "No brother can redeem, nor shall man redeem; he shall not give to God his ransom. Nor the price of the redemption for his soul; and shall labor forever."¹⁴⁰

But insufficient though they were, God accepted men's first efforts to trace out a path toward Him, preparing the way for the steps of Christ in the future. God would not go back on His word; the priesthood would persist forever among men. Even when the one Highpriest had offered the perfect oblation, God would still rely upon priests to insure that the one sacrifice would be constantly renewed among us.

God allowed men to walk along a path leading to Him, but on the other hand He also required that they prepare another path: the one He would take to come to them. At every period God used men to speak to other men in His name. God revealed Himself to His chosen servants and entrusted them with the mission of proclaiming the truth and propagating it. These servants were removed from their humble daily occupations to become heralds of the divine word, first as mediators of truth, but afterward as intercessors. The very nature of their duties placed them on the path that linked God to men and men to God. The greatest representative of these prophets and intercessors is Moses, who both revealed the divine law of Israel and saved the people by his outstretched arm. Samuel, Elias and many others rose up to instruct and to plead, thus testifying to the omnipotent reality of the living God. The prophets played

¹⁴⁰ Ps. 48:8-9.

the role of mediator. They appeared as men of the Spirit under whose impulse they moved, which at times seized them so violently that the divine force became apparent to everyone. Their fiery words showed proof of inspiration. They besought and pleaded for the coming of peace to which they dedicated their every effort. Their labor was not in vain, but remained partially sterile because the prophetic mediation—like the sacerdotal mediation—was imperfect. But it prepared the way for the perfect mediation which would show the same pattern—the mediation of Christ, Prophet of prophets.

Often there is but scant attention paid to His role as prophet, but it is extremely important. St. Paul, heir of the whole Jewish tradition, makes an implied reference to it.¹⁴¹ It was likewise a conviction of the entire Hebrew nation.¹⁴² But in this order as in others, Christ's role as mediator could appear clearly and perfectly only so far as the rough-hewn figures preceding Him had revealed the requirements and the purpose of that function. As the time of fulfillment gradually approached, the need for mediation was more urgently

¹⁴¹ "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days has spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1). By reason of His transcendence, the Son's position in relation to the prophets is less one of contrast than of perfection.

¹⁴² "Of that multitude, therefore, when they had heard these words of His, some said: This is the prophet indeed" (John 7:40). "And there came a fear on them all, and they glorified God, saying: A great prophet is risen up amongst us, and God hath visited His people" (Luke 7:16). "The whole city was moved, saying: Who is this? And the people said: This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth of Galilee" (Matt. 21:11).

felt. Shadows obscure the types as the priesthood, which demanded such great sanctity, was profaned and worship was defiled by foul idolatry. While this corruption was infecting the whole nation, the prophetic voices fell silent and there was no longer any man whose prayer was accepted by the Lord. The intercession needed was that of God's own Son. "Therefore do not thou pray for this people, nor take to thee praise and supplication for them; and do not withstand Me; for I will not hear thee. . . . And the Lord said to me: If Moses and Samuel shall stand before Me, My soul is not toward this people."¹⁴³

The earth seemed emptied of the mediation once exercised by men of God: "And I sought among them for a man that might set up a hedge, and stand in the gap before Me in favor of the land, that I might not destroy it; and I found none."¹⁴⁴ The prophets had ceased to utter their vehement appeals to men and their anguished cries to God. And why? In order that the vast emptiness and heavy silence would better receive the voice of Him who was so long announced and anticipated. "I will raise them up a prophet out of the midst of their brethren like to thee; and I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I shall command Him. And he that will not hear His words, which He shall speak in My name, I will be the revenger."¹⁴⁵

The Messiah, then, was God and man, the Holy One of Israel, the son of David, possessing all the qualities of the expected Mediator. Did He not come in order to fulfill the

¹⁴³ Jer. 7:16; 15:1. ¹⁴⁴ Ezech. 22:30.

¹⁴⁵ Deut. 18:18–19. The New Testament declares that Christ fulfilled this prophecy (John 1:45–47; Acts 3:22; 7:37).

ancient promise? "Thus saith the Lord the Redeemer of Israel, His Holy One. . . . I have given Thee to be a covenant of the people."¹⁴⁶

The psalm which greeted the Messiah as a priest¹⁴⁷ reached the very heart of the reality which He brought to perfection. His priesthood is based on His double nature: human and divine. As God and as man, the Messiah is the Mediator *par excellence*, by Himself and in Himself, by virtue of His own inner mystery. God anointed Him for this function: "I have found David My servant; with My holy oil I have anointed Him. For My hand shall help Him, and My arm shall strengthen Him."¹⁴⁸

Everything which had previously been imperfect and isolated was to become perfect and united in Him. Christ is a King because He has received the consecration of divine royalty in order to accomplish the work of salvation. In the Old Testament the functions of the priesthood and the kingship were separated, but in Christ they were lawfully united and exercised with full authority and efficacy. Though it is true that the royalty He inherited from His father David was not to be made manifest on the human plane, Psalm 88 testified that it gave Him royal rights and placed Him above His subjects, making Him responsible for them. When Christ spoke to His Father of "the men whom Thou hast given me,"¹⁴⁹ He spoke both as Son of God, to whom all things belong, and as Head of humanity, for which He is respon-

¹⁴⁶ Isa. 49:8.

¹⁴⁷ "Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchisedech" (Ps. 109:4).

¹⁴⁸ Ps. 88:21-22. ¹⁴⁹ John 17:6.

sible by reason of His title of King. Similarly, while He obeyed the law as man, yet He did not assume the functions of the priesthood according to the Mosaic rite, but only as Son of the Most High. That is His authority for offering bread and wine, as Melchisedech, the priest-king, had sacrificed long before. The work that Christ came to accomplish was of such a nature that it necessitated His concealing the titles which He possessed and were the authority for His action. As King and as Priest, He united in His person all that constitutes the perfect Mediator. As Prophet also He was the unequalled Mediator of the divine word of truth. On Him descended the fullness of Yahweh's Spirit, which in ancient times had momentarily seized the prophets.¹⁵⁰ The same Spirit would be communicated fully to men by Christ: "I have given My spirit upon Him, He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles."¹⁵¹

Isaias conveyed an idea of how powerfully the Spirit would act through Christ. "He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. And justice shall be the girdle of His loins; and faith the girdle of His reins."¹⁵²

The same prophet also represented Christ as testifying to the power dwelling within Him and giving unique efficacy to His work: "And He hath made My mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of His hand He hath protected Me,

¹⁵⁰ Each Gospel testified to the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Christ, particularly at the time of His baptism. But the Gospel of St. John describes especially how completely God's Spirit dwells in Christ: "For He whom God hath sent, speaketh the words of God, for God doth not give the Spirit by measure" (John 3:34).

¹⁵¹ Isa. 42:1. ¹⁵² Isa. 11:4-5.

and hath made Me as a chosen arrow; in His quiver He hath hidden Me. And He said to Me: Thou art My servant Israel, for in Thee will I glory.”¹⁵³

The most that the prophets could do was to appeal for and to look forward to true peace in the world: “Until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high, . . . and the work of justice shall be peace,”¹⁵⁴ but Christ had only to appear for peace to be present in the world because He is the Mediator of peace. “And this man shall be our peace.”¹⁵⁵ Thenceforth all who listened to His living word would not be confounded; they would not be building on the sands of anxiety, confusion and uncertainty, but on the rock of absolute stability in endless peace. “Behold I will lay a stone in the foundations of Sion, a tried stone, a cornerstone,¹⁵⁶ a precious stone, founded in the foundation. “He that believeth, let him not hasten. And I will set judgment in weight, and justice in measure.”¹⁵⁷

All these titles to mediation are present in Christ, simultaneously present, but nevertheless distinct. Each is realized in Him in a way that infinitely surpasses the types and faint delineations encountered before His time. What, then, can we say of their union in His Person? The mind cannot conceive nor words translate the richness and the depth of this perfect mediation.¹⁵⁸ But the expression *highpriest*, by which

¹⁵³ Isa. 49:2-3. ¹⁵⁴ Isa. 32:15, 17. ¹⁵⁵ Mich. 5:5.

¹⁵⁶ St. Peter was to treat at length of Christ's function of Mediator, suggested by this image of the cornerstone or the keystone, that is, the stone joining two parts of a building, supporting the rest of the structure and assuring its strength. He quotes this very chapter of Isaiah (I Pet. 2:4-8).

¹⁵⁷ Isa. 28:16-17.

¹⁵⁸ Until the very end, the disciples were bewildered by Christ's plenitude, which they perceived only in fragmentary images: “Have

St. Paul refers to Christ, magnificently expresses His mediating role and the mission He came to accomplish. The title suggests the perfect work of a perfect builder,¹⁵⁹ and guarantees the truth of Scripture:

Wherefore it behoved Him in all things to be made like unto His brethren, that He might become a merciful and faithful highpriest before God. . . . Having therefore a great highpriest that hath passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. . . . Christ did not glorify Himself, that He might be made a highpriest, but He that said unto Him: Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee. As he saith also in another place: Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchisedech. Who in the days of His flesh, with a strong cry and tears, offering up prayers and supplications to Him that was able to save Him from death, was heard for His reverence. And whereas indeed He was the Son of God, He learned obedience by the things which He suffered; and being consummated, He became, to all that obey Him, the cause of eternal salvation. Called by God a highpriest according to the order of Melchisedech.¹⁶⁰

Christ truly stands at the confluence of humanity and divinity, belonging to both worlds, the “pontifex” who Himself is the bridge erected between the two shores. He is a living bridge between God and men, the source and the way of divine intercourse, the bond of union, allaying all conflict, resolving all discord. He is the pledge of the covenant,

“I been so long a time with you, and have you not known Me, Philip?” (John 14:9). Speaking to Thomas, Jesus declared Himself to be the Mediator: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father, but by Me” (John 14:6).

¹⁵⁹ The Vulgate here uses the word *pontifex*, meaning *pontiff*, derived from *bridge-builder*.

¹⁶⁰ Heb. 2:17; 4:14; 5:5-10.

the golden ring purified by fire, which somehow encircles all mankind evermore united to God. "Thus saith the Lord: In an acceptable time I have heard Thee, and in the day of salvation I have helped Thee; and I have preserved Thee, and given Thee to be a covenant of the people."¹⁶¹

He possesses all the qualities and all the power required for a fully efficacious mediation and priesthood.

For it was fitting that we should have such a highpriest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily (as the other priests) to offer sacrifices first for His own sins, and then for the people's; for this He did once, in offering Himself.¹⁶²

But what price is demanded for the renewal of the covenant and the grace of reconciliation? What victim would be chosen for expiation as worthy of God? Holy Writ hints that the foundation of the edifice of salvation would be the same "stone" which Isaias saw as the foundation of Sion and which Zacharias and the Psalmist described as chiseled by God, an object of men's scorn and yet ever steadfast:

For behold the stone that I have laid before Jesus, upon one stone there are seven eyes; behold I will grave the graving thereof, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will take away the iniquity of that land in one day.¹⁶³

The stone which the builders rejected; the same is become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing, and it is wonderful in our eyes.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Isa. 49:8. ¹⁶² Heb. 7:26-27. ¹⁶³ Zach. 3:9.

¹⁶⁴ Ps. 117:22-23. This prophecy was recalled and its fulfillment pointed out by Christ (Matt. 21:42; Luke 20:17) and also in the Acts of the Apostles (4:11).

What a marvel! How is it conceivable that the highpriest would also be the victim, that the Just One, the supremely Holy One would Himself be the oblation sacrificed to God in expiation? The meaning of these prophecies certainly remained hidden until the time of Christ. Even His disciples did not know it, since they rejected the announcement of His death and were scandalized by it, in utter amazement. And yet a mediator fully devoted to his mission of atonement would not have sufficed by himself. The victim offered also had to show the marks of such sanctity and perfection that not only would the debt of justice be paid, but love too would be satisfied.

Sacrifice and oblation Thou didst not desire; but Thou hast pierced ears for Me. Burnt offering and sin offering Thou didst not require; then said I: Behold I come, in the head of the book it is written of Me that I should do Thy will, O My God.¹⁶⁵

In former times, to expiate the sins of the people, the highpriest once a year entered the Holy of Holies, separated from the rest of the sanctuary by a thick veil. What happened there while the people waited outside was a particularly sacred mystery. What occurs in "the greater and more perfect tabernacle"¹⁶⁶ of which the first was merely a figure, will likewise be veiled from us until the dawn of eternity. Then we shall know that Christ "entered once into the holies having obtained eternal redemption,"¹⁶⁷ at the price of terrible suffering of which the sacred texts give merely an

¹⁶⁵ Ps. 39:7-9, quoted in Heb. 10:6-10, where the Psalmist's words are attributed to Christ entering the world. The author adds: "In the which will, we are sanctified by the oblation of the body of Jesus Christ once."

¹⁶⁶ Heb. 9:11. ¹⁶⁷ Heb. 9:12.

inking. We shall know that the sacrifice offered was so great that in it are included and united all the ancient sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving and propitiation which thus are fulfilled and carried to the highest point of perfection.

What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that He hath rendered to Me? I will take the chalice of salvation and I will call upon the name of the Lord. I will pay My vows to the Lord before all His people; precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.¹⁶⁸

As Priest and Victim, the Messiah was to drink the chalice and He Himself would be the oblation. He would offer to His Father redeemed humanity with Himself as its Head, thus fully accomplishing the work of mediation and expiation. This achievement would bring the dawn of triumph for the Conqueror and for those associated with His victory. The Savior appears in the Book of Zacharias as a symbol of the peace and reconciliation of God and man. He is represented with all the ornaments of royal dignity and the holy priesthood: "Yea, He shall build a temple to the Lord, and He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon His throne; and He shall be a priest upon His throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both."¹⁶⁹

Before that triumph would appear before the eyes of all nations, much time was to pass, the time between the sorrow-

¹⁶⁸ Ps. 115:3-5.

¹⁶⁹ Zach. 6:13. A wonderful parallel of this text is found in the Apocalypse, though the problem there is considered from a different angle. St. John contemplates the Victor, not as Priest but as the glorified Victim, the Lamb worthy of all honor and praise, "who hast redeemed us to God, in Thy blood, out of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation. And hast made us to our God a kingdom and priests" (Apoc. 5:9-10).

ful coming and the glorious coming. But the spiritual edifice which the Scripture keeps announcing is already in process of construction. Already there is growing the body of mankind freed from sin,¹⁷⁰ united in its Head, Christ, whose offspring will adorn the house of the Lord.

And I will make His seed to endure forevermore; and His throne as the days of heaven. . . . Neither will I profane My covenant; and the word that proceeds from My mouth I will not make void. . . . And His throne as the sun before Me, and as the moon perfect forever, and a faithful witness in heaven.¹⁷¹

Moreover, the glory of the supreme Priest dazzles the eyes of those who believe in Him, so that Isaias' words are fulfilled:

In that day the Bud of the Lord shall be in magnificence and glory, and the fruit of the earth shall be high, and a great joy to them that shall have escaped of Israel. . . . Everyone that shall be left in Sion, and that shall remain in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, everyone that is written in life in Jerusalem. If the Lord shall wash away the filth of the daughters of Sion, and shall wash away the blood of Jerusalem out of the midst thereof. . . . And the Lord will create upon every place of Mount Sion . . . a cloud by day, and a smoke and the brightness of a flaming fire in the night; for over all the glory shall be a protection. And there shall be a tabernacle for a shade in the daytime from the heat.¹⁷²

The whole assembly of the people, by living in intimate communion with Christ and sharing His privileges, will likewise share His priesthood, as it is written: "You shall be to

¹⁷⁰ "The Church which is His body, and the fullness of Him who is filled all in all" (Eph. 1:23).

¹⁷¹ Ps. 88:30, 35, 38. ¹⁷² Isa. 4:2-6.

Me a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation.”¹⁷³ St. Peter echoes these words in his Epistle: “But you are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people; that you may declare His virtues, who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.”¹⁷⁴ St. John also recalls the same idea when he dedicates the book of his visions to the one “who hath loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us a kingdom, and priests to God and His Father.”¹⁷⁵

Thus we begin to perceive the infinite perspectives opened by Scripture on the reign of God and the holy city. Christ is mankind’s supreme Priest, Pontiff and Mediator. He is likewise the beginning of human immortality.¹⁷⁶

SERVANT OF YAHWEH

For the Son of Man also is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life, a redemption for many.¹⁷⁷

If it is our duty to acknowledge Christ as the “one Mediator of God and man,”¹⁷⁸ and if we need to discern His functions as high and supreme Pontiff, as King, as the Priest who is also the Victim, it is equally important to understand His spirit and His sentiments as He accomplished the task

¹⁷³ Exod. 19:6. ¹⁷⁴ I Pet. 2:9. ¹⁷⁵ Apoc. 1:5–6.

¹⁷⁶ “And He is the Head of the body, the Church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He may hold the primacy; because in Him it hath well pleased the Father, that all fullness should dwell; and through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself, making peace through the blood of His cross. . . . For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally; and you are filled in Him, who is the head of all principality and power” (Col. 1:18–20; 2:9).

¹⁷⁷ Mark 10:45. ¹⁷⁸ I Tim. 2:5.

assigned to Him. It is essential to know the Savior’s soul.¹⁷⁹ For salvation depended upon the Redeemer’s fundamental attitude toward His Father. This attitude likewise determined His way of showing Himself to men, and His way of speaking to them. The texts of the Old Testament abound in references to these points, for they prove that Christ was revealed with the status of a servant.¹⁸⁰ God bestowed His Spirit upon Him and filled His soul with the choicest gifts: “And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him; the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness. And He shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord.”¹⁸¹

Yet at the same time the Messiah was placed in a state of humility and lowliness; divine favor was given to a servant.¹⁸² “Behold My servant, I will uphold Him, My elect; My soul delighteth in him. . . . And He said to Me: Thou art my servant Israel, for in Thee will I glory.”¹⁸³

Adam’s refusal to obey had caused the first fault, the source of the flood of iniquity that submerged the world. The new Adam was to come to make reparation by becoming obedient, by becoming a servant even in the depths of His nature.

¹⁷⁹ This was the opinion of St. Paul who stated clearly: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5).

¹⁸⁰ Isaias used this word to designate the suffering Messiah, thus presenting the most significant prophetic portrait of Christ, not only in His passion, which crowned His work, but also in the state of life which He chose for His mission. Cf. also Acts 3:26; 4:27.

¹⁸¹ Isa. 11:2–3.

¹⁸² But it was His *Son* that God glorified three times during Christ’s earthly life when the mask of lowliness was removed momentarily (Matt. 3:17; 17:6; John 12:28).

¹⁸³ Isa. 42:1; 49:3.

Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.¹⁸⁴

The light of the Old and the New Testaments converges on this point. The Psalmist had said: "Behold I come . . . that I should do Thy will, O My God."¹⁸⁵ For the servant, God's will would be His pleasure, His only food, the purpose which He would serve wholeheartedly.¹⁸⁶ The inspired writers keep predicting the coming of this Servant, striving to make us realize all that is implied by the term: humble submission, persevering attention, dependence, total self-commitment into God's hands. "Behold as the eyes of servants are on the hands of their masters. As the eyes of the handmaid are on the hands of her mistress; so are our eyes on the Lord our God."¹⁸⁷

The Servant depends upon a Master to whom He had cried out: "Thou art My Father, My God, and the support of My salvation."¹⁸⁸ He speaks, too, of "the Lord that formed Me from the womb to be His Servant."¹⁸⁹ The Servant was not jealous, but abdicated His equality with God to embrace the condition of slave¹⁹⁰ and to repeat to His Father in the words of the Psalmist: "O how have I loved Thy law, O Lord!"¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁴ Phil. 2:6-8. ¹⁸⁵ Ps. 39:8.

¹⁸⁶ "For I have given you an example. . . . The servant is not greater than his lord" (John 13:15-16).

¹⁸⁷ Ps. 122:2. ¹⁸⁸ Ps. 88:27. ¹⁸⁹ Isa. 49:5.

¹⁹⁰ Christ showed this condition by serving the apostles in a last act of humility: "I have given an example. . . . The servant is not greater than his lord" (John 13:15-16).

¹⁹¹ Ps. 118:97.

Long before, others had thrilled with the same joy, for souls completely surrendered to God instinctively have recourse in prayer to this title of servant. Abraham said: "Lord, if I have found favor in Thy sight, pass not away from Thy servant."¹⁹² Jacob acknowledged: "I am not worthy of the least of all Thy mercies, and of Thy truth which Thou hast fulfilled to Thy servant."¹⁹³ The Savior, the well-loved Son who contemplates God's marvels and, more than all others, burns with divine zeal, did not will to pay homage to His Father in any other way than that of the humble creatures who acknowledge that they are His servants. Indeed, He was to be the only true Servant, the only one who lovingly accomplished all God's will. "In the head of the book is it written of Me that I should do Thy will; O My God, I have desired it, and Thy law in the midst of My heart."¹⁹⁴ To do the divine will was the whole reason why Yahweh's Servant came down and became obedient:

And as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return no more thither, but soak the earth, and water it, and make it to spring, and give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater, so shall My word be, which shall go forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall do whatsoever I please, and shall prosper in the things for which I sent it.¹⁹⁵

Scripture, therefore, jealously claims the name of Servant for Him. "O Lord, for I am Thy Servant; I am Thy Servant, and the Son of Thy handmaid."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Gen. 18:3. ¹⁹³ Gen. 32:10.

¹⁹⁴ Ps. 39:8-9. "But that the world may know, that I love the Father: and as the Father hath given me commandment, so do I" (John 14:31).

¹⁹⁵ Isa. 55:10-11. Cf. II Cor. 1:19-20.

¹⁹⁶ Ps. 115:6. A double prophecy, as Mary answered the angel by saying: "Behold the handmaid" (Luke 1:38).

The testimony of love offered to God by the Holy One of Israel was already a humble and fervent submission. But when Yahweh's Servant, strong with divine authority and sanctity, became docile to His Father, this taught men to love the Father as the Son loves Him. The world admires wealth and is motivated by pride; Christ would prove His origin and His spirit by being all that the world is not. Humility, gentleness, patience would be the divine seal on the work of Yahweh's Servant, the sign by which He would be recognized. These hidden virtues, practiced so sublimely by God's Son, would not only testify to His divine origin, but would also present an example to men. "Learn of Me, because I am meek, and humble of heart."¹⁹⁷

Although it was not ordained that the Old Testament would reveal specifically how the Redeemer would act, His gentle, tender and humble features were sketched by Isaias: "He shall not cry, nor have respect to person, neither shall His voice be heard abroad. The bruised reed He shall not break, and smoking flax He shall not quench."¹⁹⁸ Zacharias, too, foretold an incident that would one day enable men to recognize the Servant: "Behold thy King will come to thee, the Just and Savior; He is poor, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass."¹⁹⁹

The people had once seen great King David humiliating himself before all, and wishing to become vile in his own

¹⁹⁷ Matt. 11:29.

¹⁹⁸ Isa. 42:2-3. St. Matthew recalled this prophecy in connection with Christ's injunction: "He charged them that they should not make Him known" (Matt. 12:16-21).

¹⁹⁹ Zach. 9:9. St. Matthew quotes this verse, saying, "All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet" (Matt. 21:4).

eyes; a proper attitude before the face of God. But here the King of kings Himself consents to call Himself a servant, not only of God, but of men. He appears as the light of all nations by this fervent homage of love rendered to God in the name of all men, as well as by the lesson He gave them. Seeing His humility, men would understand the dark depths of their own pride; their darkness would be illuminated.

I the Lord have called Thee in justice, and taken Thee by the hand, and preserved Thee. And I have given Thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; that Thou mightest open the eyes of the blind, and bring forth the prisoner out of prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.²⁰⁰

He would teach the afflicted, the prisoners, all sufferers to accept the divine will lovingly, as He would accept it, "because He hath broken gates of brass, and burst iron bars."²⁰¹

The spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because the Lord hath anointed Me; He hath sent Me to preach to the meek, to heal the contrite of heart and to preach a release to the captives, and deliverance to them that are shut up. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn.²⁰²

An impulse of divine condescendence moved the Son to become man among men, similar to them. His love for His brethren became so great that He did not judge them in a human way but with the infinite mercy of His divine heart. "He shall not judge according to the sight of the eyes, nor

²⁰⁰ Isa. 42:6-7. ²⁰¹ Ps. 106:16.

²⁰² Isa. 61:1-2. The word *vengeance* here means the divine justice which Christ would establish. Christ read this passage in the synagogue, then declared: "This day is fulfilled this Scripture in your ears" (Luke, chap. 4).

reprove according to the hearing of the ears.²⁰³ But He shall judge the poor with justice, and shall reprove with equity for the meek of the earth.”²⁰⁴

When men would understand His divine testimony and follow His way of truth, then the kingdom of God for which all men yearn would be restored; peace would reign on earth.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb; and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion, and the sheep shall abide together, and a little child shall lead them. The calf and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall eat straw like the ox. And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp; and the weaned child shall thrust his hand into the den of the basilisk.²⁰⁵

In His kingdom everyone will practice virtue; everyone will know Yahweh: “They shall not hurt, nor shall they kill in all My holy mountains, for the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the covering waters of the sea.”²⁰⁶

The message addressed to Jacob applies through him to the whole world:

And he said: It is a small thing that Thou shouldst be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to convert the dregs of Israel. Behold I have given Thee to be the light of the Gentiles, that Thou mayest be My salvation even to the farthest part of the earth.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ He Himself was to say: “Judge not according to the appearances, but judge just judgment” (John 7:24).

²⁰⁴ Isa. 11:3–4.

²⁰⁵ Isa. 11:6–8. Jeremiah had told the people, at a time of drought and poor harvests: “Your iniquities have turned these things away, and your sins have withholden good things from you” (Jer. 5:25). While the strong imagery used by the prophets should not be taken literally, it describes very well the era of peace and happiness which would come with Christ’s reign if His words were heeded.

²⁰⁶ Isa. 11:9.

²⁰⁷ Isa. 49:6.

The redemption of the world depended on the underlying attitude in the soul of God’s servant. It is easy to understand that such an attitude of gentleness, humility and submission on the part of God’s very Son would superabundantly compensate for human sins. But it would likewise determine the teaching addressed by Christ to the nations. The words of the New Testament prove that the Incarnate Word preached as a servant sent by His Master. “I cannot of Myself do anything. . . . My doctrine is not Mine, but His that sent Me.”²⁰⁸

St. John of the Cross has said that “in giving us His Son, which is the Word, God spoke to us altogether once and for all in this single word.”²⁰⁹ Yet the Son wished only to illuminate and to bring out the divine meaning of His Father’s veiled teaching that kings and prophets had already transmitted as God’s message.

For I have not spoken of Myself; but the Father who sent Me, He gave Me commandment what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that His commandment is life everlasting.²¹⁰

Do not think that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.²¹¹

In the same spirit Psalm 118 chants the praises of God’s law and expresses the joy of those who observe it faithfully:

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed are they that search His testimonies; that seek Him with their whole heart. . . . I meditated on Thy commandments, which I loved. . . . I have purchased Thy testimonies for an inheritance forever; because they are the joy

²⁰⁸ John 5:30; 7:16.

²⁰⁹ *Op. cit.*, I, p. 163.

²¹⁰ John 12:49–50.

²¹¹ Matt. 5:17.

of my heart. . . . I opened my mouth, and panted, because I longed for Thy commandments.²¹²

When He who is Himself the Word, the Word of God, spoke to His Father, expressing His love of the divine will and His eagerness to do that will, He found in human language no better words than those of this same Psalm 118. And we, too, were to learn from Him that only by service and true humility could we receive that key word which He came to carve in our hearts: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thy neighbor as thyself."

Christ's whole teaching was a gift of God's word. We know, too, that most of God's servants suffered persecution because of the divine word, for it is a scandal to the world which it condemns. More than all others, Christ, as God's Servant, defended His Master's possessions. Some day He will come as Judge to confront men with their sin. But until then He is the Redeemer. Only by being a servant, humble, gentle, poor and obscure, will He convict men of sin and as a result draw down their anger upon Himself.²¹³ Christ's miracles were of no avail against the scandal of what He was: Love Incarnate. It was necessary that Scripture be totally fulfilled.

And He shall be a sanctification for you. But for a stone of stumbling, and for a rock of offence to the two houses of Israel, for a snare and a ruin to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.²¹⁴

²¹² Ps. 118:1-2, 47, 111, 131.

²¹³ His very innocence irritated His enemies. "Which of you shall convince Me of sin?" (John 8:46). Men made fun of Him (Matt. 9:24); even His friends thought Him mad (Mark 3:22); and the Scribes accused Him of being possessed by an evil spirit (Mark 3:23).

²¹⁴ Isa. 8:14. "And they were scandalized in His regard" (Matt.

God permitted the ultimate humiliation and the supreme immolation, as the prophets had predicted, because only the Servant could redeem men from sin as supreme proof of His love; that is why He came to the world.

THE REDEEMER AND HIS SACRIFICE

As the perfect Mediator, the Savior came to accomplish the purpose for which His Father sent him. "Behold I come . . . that I should do Thy will, O My God."²¹⁵ He fulfilled His mission in a spirit of love and humility, the spirit of Yahweh's Servant. His whole life was orientated toward the redeeming Passion and Cross. The portrait of this Servant as outlined in the Scriptures illuminates very vividly the redeeming role of the Savior and, therefore, before urging us to accompany Him along His sorrowful way, the Bible gives us a notion of the nature and form of the sacrifice He was to accept for the sake of love. To prepare souls for the perfect sacrifice of the New Law, Scripture led them toward it by means of other gestures and rites, even of other sacrifices which in certain features at least are prototypes of it. These "types" play an important role in the Old Testament, enabling souls to purify by gradual stages their idea of sacrifice and redemption. The figure which most directly suggests the sacrifice of the New Law and is most closely connected with it is the Passover. The Old Testament foretold the Paschal or Easter mystery and prepared for it with constantly increasing

13:57). Isaias had said also: "They have blasphemed the Holy One of Israel" (Isa. 1:4). "For it is a people that provoketh to wrath, . . . who say: . . . Let the Holy One of Israel cease from before us" (Isa. 30:9-11).

²¹⁵ Ps. 39:8-9.

clarity. It is a mystery of death and life, a mystery of deliverance; it is a sacrifice and a sacrament of the body and blood becoming a victim, a nourishment and, finally, a viaticum to fortify us for the voyage to the shore of eternity. So rich and complex is the Paschal mystery that in revealing it God had to keep retouching the picture in successive stages. Numerous sketches depicted this essential reality from many different angles, highlighting now one detail, now another. In many instances certain rites or images or prophecies of the Bible have been recorded less for their own value than for their figurative meaning. Therein also lies the true interest of these figures for us.

The author of the Book of Genesis, in describing the earthly paradise, spoke of a tree whose fruits would confer life upon man. Tradition has often viewed this tree as an image of the tree on which would hang the true divine fruit, the Redeemer. On a tree Christ, by His obedience ("He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross")²¹⁶ would redeem what was lost by the disobedience of the first man. The Cross bears a fruit of eternal life.

Bloodshed is another subject encountered throughout the biblical stories and closely connected with sacrifices. The Old Testament makes it a sign of expiation, pardon and alliance. It was shed so profusely and used so abundantly that it seems disconcerting to our view of religious matters. Yet in this as in other features that characterized humanity's tremendous aspiration toward God, was revealed the strong need to be cleansed and thus attain union. It is needless to repeat in detail what has already been said about the in-

²¹⁶ Phil. 2:8.

finitely rich and complex meaning Israel gave to bloody sacrifices. God Himself confirmed this meaning in His words to Moses. By means of varied forms and rites, sacrifice was destined to establish the ultimate covenant between God and men. Blood ratified the covenant; it *was* the covenant. "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you."²¹⁷ The only value of these sacrifices came from the fact that by shedding blood, Old Testament men were conscious of offering to God that which was most precious, life itself. "Because the life of the flesh is in the blood."²¹⁸ No effusion of blood could be in vain, therefore, because in the blood the soul offered itself in a supreme homage of love, submission and propitiation.

How moving, then, it is to see the Hebrew people, imbued with that belief, obey the divine precept by offering countless unblemished animals. A ceaseless and enormous holocaust was associated with the whole of Israel's history. Yet the holocaust could not be proportionate to the majesty of the God who had been offended nor to the gravity of the sin committed. It might, perhaps, be thought that the sacrifice would have increased in value if human victims had been chosen. Left to themselves, the men of the Old Testament would doubtless have reached this conclusion and practice, as we can infer from certain episodes of Israel's history. But another divine law formally forbade such sacrifices: "Thou shalt not kill [men]." Israel, therefore, used substitute sacrifices. But the immolation of animals devoid of reason, which were offered as propitiatory victims in the place of sinners themselves, never could achieve the goal men sought. The multiplication of such sacrifices amply proves the fact. Thus,

²¹⁷ Exod. 24:8.

²¹⁸ Lev. 17:11.

the Old Testament awaits the accomplishment of a sacrifice which would constitute a real expiation of sin and would seal a new covenant. When God spoke, no illusion was left concerning the radical insufficiency of the bloody sacrifices.

To what purpose do you offer Me the multitude of your victims, saith the Lord? I am full, I desire not holocausts of rams, and fat of fatlings, and blood of calves, and lambs, and buck goats.²¹⁹

Such a text casts light on the deeper and sublimely prophetic meaning of Abraham's sacrifice. The divine will banned human sacrifices; God, therefore, restrained Abraham's raised arm, but the gesture which impelled the patriarch to immolate "his own flesh" sprang from a law that could not be annulled. Another law was that of substitution, which likewise occurs in the Genesis account where Abraham offered, "instead of his son,"²²⁰ a ram caught by its horns in a bush. This notion of substitution was to recur and God would give it a truly redeeming value by allowing His own Son to offer Himself for sinful humanity. Thus the sacrifice of Isaac is to a great extent the prophetic figure of the sacrifice of the Lamb who bore our sins and saved us by offering Himself for us. However great was the faith which inspired Abraham's gesture,²²¹ it did not suffice to make his sacrifice a redeeming act. The soul of sacrifice should be love. The God-Man paid the homage of this love to His Father by commending His soul into the Father's hands and by shedding His blood for us. There the mysterious law of bloodshed proved its efficacy in a complete and final way.

²¹⁹ Isa. 1:11. ²²⁰ Gen. 22:13.

²²¹ "Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not spared thy only-begotten son for My sake; I will bless Thee" (Gen. 22:16-17).

What was almost a dogma of the Old Covenant—"And almost all things, according to the law, are cleansed with blood; and without shedding of blood there is no remission"²²²—was applied and confirmed by Christ. The blood that was shed was that of a God and thanks to its infinite worth, the covenant would be sealed and sin would be effaced.

An essential element of sacrifice is that it should terminate in a banquet and be completed by a communion. The victim offered receives special power through the divine blessing and then becomes food. This partaking of a sacred banquet was found in most ancient religions. In Israel, over and above the act of expiation, it signified the homage received and accepted, the renewal of the covenant, the full communion of God and men.

The entire Old Testament testified that men were obliged to offer tithes of their possessions—the firstborn son, the first fruits of the flocks and fields—offerings which had to be perfect in their kind. Abel offered God the best of what he had. The showbread was placed in the Tabernacle on a table made of incorruptible wood, and was perpetually exposed as an offering to the Lord. Such an offering was found in the hands of Melchisedech, and like the offering on our altars, it consisted of bread and wine. "But Melchisedech, the king of Salem, bringing forth bread and wine, for he was the priest of the most high God, blessed him. . . . [And Abraham] gave him the tithes of all."²²³ The offering acquired its highest value so far as it became the matter of a sacrifice. Then it reverted to men laden with blessings and was transformed into heavenly nourishment. The Bible often told

²²² Heb. 9:22, quoting Lev. 17:11. ²²³ Gen. 14:18-20.

how this heavenly food enabling men to sustain their steps on the journey and to overcome the obstacles of life was bestowed by God either on the whole nation or on an individual who had special need of it.

The special figure of this food was the manna which the Hebrews always remembered and which was always associated with the glorious history of the Exodus. It strengthened the people to face the long and wearisome wandering across the desert. This miraculous bread bestowed daily by God on His people and containing every good taste was the transparent figure of another food that would be not only miraculous, but truly divine. The Book of Exodus emphasized the mysterious quality of the manna: "And they measured by the measure of a gomor; neither had he more that had gathered more; nor did he find less that had provided less; but every one had gathered, according to what they were able to eat."²²⁴ This was an evident prophecy of the divine measure, the divine superabundance of heavenly bread which supports life and at the same time allows the soul to grow to its full stature. How paltry a boon the manna was, compared to the bread of eternal life which Christ would bring! "Your fathers did eat manna in the desert, and are dead."²²⁵ But Israel found strength in it and enjoyed its sweet taste.

Thou didst feed Thy people with the food of angels, and gavest them bread from heaven prepared without labor; having in it all that is delicious, and the sweetness of every taste. For Thy sustenance showed Thy sweetness to Thy children.²²⁶

How much more welcome would be the true bread from heaven of which the manna was a mere figure! And how

²²⁴ Exod. 16:18.

²²⁵ John 6:49.

²²⁶ Wisd. 16:20.

incomparably more generous God showed Himself in this new gift to men! "All you that thirst, come to the waters: and you that have no money make haste, buy, and eat; come ye, buy wine and milk without money and without any price."²²⁷

Mysterious bread was also brought to Elias the prophet in his sleep. It conferred miraculous strength for his weakness and was a viaticum for the long journey still ahead of him. Discouraged and exhausted, he had lain down under a juniper tree at the edge of the desert, expecting to die. But he was told to rise and to eat.

He looked, and behold there was at his head a hearth cake, and a vessel of water: and he ate and drank, and he fell asleep again. And the angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said to him: Arise, and eat: for thou hast yet a great way to go. And he arose, and ate, and drank, and walked in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights, unto the Mount of God, Horeb.²²⁸

Thus the Old Testament gives glimpses of all the principal elements of the Eucharistic sacrifice: voluntary offerings given to God with free consent and offered in holocaust, the immolation of victims, bloodshed, sacrifices terminating in banquets where the victim was consumed, men's need for heavenly food that can supply the divine strength needed on the earthly journey toward the homeland.

The Bible also foretells the fecundity of the sacrifice of the Cross. Thus, when the people found only bitter water at Mara, they complained to Moses, who "cried to the Lord, and He showed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, they were turned into sweetness."²²⁹

²²⁷ Isa. 55:1.

²²⁸ III Kings 19:6-8.

²²⁹ Exod. 15:25.

On another occasion the people were saved when "Moses made a brazen serpent, and set it up for a sign; which when they that were bitten [by serpents] looked upon, they were healed."²³⁰ But the custom that foretold the mystery of the Redemption more directly than any other was the Passover; the sign that displays the figure of the Redeemer Himself is the paschal lamb.

It is significant that Christ willed to be greeted as "Lamb of God" by the Precursor, whose mission was to make the Savior known to His disciples and to the world. St. Paul later was to stress the close connection between the Jewish Passover and Christ's sacrifice: "For Christ our Pasch is sacrificed."²³¹ Moreover, the central place of the Easter mystery in Christianity corresponds to that of the Passover in Israel. The whole religious life of Israel depended upon the Passover, celebrated in the Holy City by enormous crowds: Christ Himself emphasized its importance, as He never failed to attend it. While the priests alone offered the other sacrifices, the entire nation was called to celebrate the Passover, the head of each family filling the role of priest and sacrificer.

Strictly speaking, Christ was not obliged to conform to the figures that foretold His coming, as it sufficed for Him to *be* in order to fulfill them. He Himself was the fulfillment of the figures that referred to Him. But it is noteworthy that He willed to observe the Passover in every detail. Did He not offer Himself at the hour of the ritual immolation of the Passover victims, thus emphasizing the close relation between the two Passovers? Of course, the Jews were not conscious of it at the time, but we need only re-read the text of the

²³⁰ Num. 21:9.

²³¹ I Cor. 5:7.

institution of the ancient Passover to realize not only its beauty and its meaning, but also its prophetic references to the sacrifice of the Redemption.

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron. . . . On the tenth day of this month let every man take a lamb by their families and houses. . . . And it shall be a lamb without blemish, a male, of one year, . . . and the whole multitude of the children of Israel shall sacrifice it in the evening. And they shall take of the blood thereof, and put it upon both the side posts, and on the upper door posts of the houses, wherein they shall eat it. And they shall eat the flesh that night roasted at the fire, and unleavened bread with wild lettuce. . . . Neither shall there remain anything of it until morning. If there be anything left, you shall burn it with fire. And thus you shall eat it: You shall gird your reins, and you shall have shoes on your feet, holding staves in your hands, and you shall eat in haste; for it is the Phase (that is the Passage) of the Lord. And I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and will kill every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. . . . And the blood shall be unto you for a sign in the houses where you shall be; and I shall see the blood, and shall pass over you; and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I shall strike the land of Egypt. And this day shall be for a memorial to you; and you shall keep it a feast to the Lord in your generations with an everlasting observance.²³²

The text first specifies an unblemished, male lamb which "the whole multitude of the children of Israel shall sacrifice in the evening." While the Jewish people as such cannot be held guilty of the death of Christ, yet the most influential members of the nation were responsible for it; those who

²³² Exod. 12:2-14.

“by the sword of their tongue” (as St. Augustine said) persuaded Pilate to crucify Him.²³³ The marking of the door posts with the blood of the lamb insured the people’s escape from the plague striking Egypt. When Christ was teaching in the synagogue at Capharnaum, He declared: “He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath everlasting life; and I will raise him up in the last day.”²³⁴ In another reference to this power inherent in the blood of the Lamb, St. John wrote in the Apocalypse: “After this I saw a great multitude, . . . standing before the throne, and in sight of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands. . . . Who are they? . . . These are they who are come out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”²³⁵

The people were instructed to take the blood of the lamb and to eat its flesh at night. Christ likewise, “when it was evening, sat down with His twelve disciples. . . . And whilst they were at supper, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke, and gave to His disciples, and said: Take ye, and eat. This is My body. And taking the chalice, He gave thanks, and gave to them, saying: Drink ye all of this. For this is My blood of the New Testament, which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins.”²³⁶

The paschal lamb was to be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, symbols of the purity and compunction of heart required in those who approach the Lamb of God.

²³³ St. Luke mentioned that Pilate called together “the chief priests, and the magistrates, and the people.” Though not very numerous, this group constituted at least an approximation of “the whole multitude of Israel” noted in the Book of Exodus (cf. Luke 23:13).

²³⁴ John 6:55.

²³⁵ Apoc. 7:9–14.

²³⁶ Matt. 26:20–28.

Thus, Christ purified His disciples before they shared the Last Supper with Him: “After that, He putteth water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of the disciples. . . . He cometh therefore to Simon Peter. And Peter saith to Him: Lord, dost Thou wash my feet? Jesus answered, and said to him: What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith to Him: Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him: If I wash thee not, thou shalt have no part with Me. Simon Peter said to him: Lord, not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.”²³⁷ And St. Paul seemed to continue the passage by saying: “Whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord. But let a man prove himself.”²³⁸

The Israelites roasted the lamb in the fire and ate it in haste, prepared for their journey. The Savior’s flesh endured the fires of immolation, was offered in holocaust, then was given to travellers—*cibus viatorum*. As Christians advance to receive the body of the Lamb, they repeat: “Give us this day our daily bread, . . . lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The journey from the land of sin to our heavenly home is even longer and harder than the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

The final instruction regarding the Passover was that it should be celebrated from generation to generation as a perpetual institution. This is a point that Moses frequently stresses. He states also that there should be a sacrifice of “two lambs of a year old every day *continually*.”²³⁹ And Ezechiel, in speaking of the oil and flour offered along with the daily sacrifice, said that these rites were “by ordinance continual

²³⁷ John 13:5–9.

²³⁸ I Cor. 11:27.

²³⁹ Exod. 29:38.

and everlasting.”²⁴⁰ In these prophetic words we can foresee the sacrifice of the true Lamb to be offered throughout the whole world each day until the end of time. “For from the rising of the sun even to the going down, My name is great among the Gentiles, and in every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered to My name a clean oblation.”²⁴¹

Thus it becomes evident that the Lord fulfilled all the signs and “consummated” the Passover. He did so, first, to open the eyes of His own people, but also for all men of all times.

The sacrificial rites found in the Old Testament, and the Passover itself, were signs, but we should see something more in them. Several times Christ said that He came to fulfill the Scriptures.²⁴² These words meant something more profound than the mere realization of what had been foretold by types. Without doubt they mean that Christ perfected and realized the figures and prophecies referring to Him, but they also mean that the words and gestures of the Old Testament, however relative they may have been, are valid of themselves and in themselves. They prepare the way for messianic times by guiding souls, enlightening minds and warming hearts—as the Church indicates by continuing to use them in her prayers and liturgy. The rites and figures of the Old Law helped the Jews to understand the necessity of sacrifice and safeguard it in all its purity in the midst of so many other gross deformations. But that is not all. As the prophets, in gradually outlining the figure of Yahweh’s Servant, helped and still help souls to adopt the mind of Christ Jesus,²⁴³ the Old Testament sacrifices, especially the

²⁴⁰ Ezech. 46:14. ²⁴¹ Mal. 1:11.

²⁴² Matt. 26:56; John 13:18. ²⁴³ Cf. Phil. 2:5.

Passover, fixed a true evaluation and shed clear light on the essential features of perfect sacrifice.

Thus the religious institutions of Israel gave the people the elements of spiritual preparation for the coming of the Messiah and formed souls in a way that would smooth their path toward the mystery of the Redemption.

As son of David and heir of His race, Christ experienced the sentiments of Israel in the depths of His soul in a unique and eminent way. As man, He felt, more than anyone else, humanity’s eager expectation, the outrage to God which is sin, the radical insufficiency of all sacrifices and, consequently, the unavoidable necessity of one perfect and efficacious sacrifice. So it was not by mere chance that He quoted the words of the psalm which took on full meaning only when uttered by His voice: “Sacrifice and oblation Thou didst not desire. . . . Burnt offering and sin offering Thou didst not require: then said I, Behold I come. In the head of the book it is written of Me that I should do Thy will, O My God.”²⁴⁴

But being God, Christ knew also that the human nature assumed by His divinity thereby acquired the ability to save and the power to mediate, so that His sacrifice became a redemption. He could, therefore, become the victim offered for all humanity, representing, saving and feeding all men. He was pre-eminently God’s sacrament and God’s gift. And so He did not hesitate for an instant. On entering the world He cried out: “Behold I come to do Thy will, O God.” He gathered together and fulfilled in His Person all the figures of the Old Law, shedding the light of His divinity on those shadows which He thenceforth illuminated and transfigured.

²⁴⁴ Ps. 39:7–9.

Scripture referred to a lamb offered in expiation and also added that the lamb would have to follow a path of suffering and pain on being led to the slaughter.²⁴⁵ We shall now see how the Old Testament resembles a mirror reflecting the Redeemer on His way to His passion and cross.²⁴⁶

MIRROR OF THE PASSION ²⁴⁷

The prophets have inquired and diligently searched, who prophesied of the grace to come in you. Searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ in them did signify, when it foretold those sufferings that are in Christ, and the glories that should follow.²⁴⁸

The Redeemer advances along the path leading to the supreme sacrifice.²⁴⁹ His oppressors stand there accusing

²⁴⁵ Cf. Isa. 53:7.

²⁴⁶ Pius X declared that love of the Redeemer is aroused in those who see His image in Scripture and who, like St. Augustine, hear His voice in all the psalms, either singing or moaning, rejoicing in hope or sighing in trouble (*Divino Afflatu*, A.A.S., III, pp. 633-38).

²⁴⁷ St. Augustine used an even stronger expression. When speaking of Psalm 21, he said that the Passion was "described" in the Old Testament. When collecting and arranging the Old Testament texts relating to Christ's passion, we noticed that they have all been used by the Church in the liturgy of Passiontide or Holy Week. We have, therefore, noted the liturgical use and references of the texts quoted. We have done so only in this one section, for while it would have been instructive to apply the same method to the whole work, we refrained from doing so because of limitations of space.

²⁴⁸ I Pet. 1:10-11.

²⁴⁹ Although chapter 63 of Isaias does not refer directly to the Savior, the Church has used it freely in the Office of the Feast of the Precious Blood and that of Wednesday of Holy Week. Isaias tells of a savior who crushes his enemies, spills their blood, tramples

Him as the prophets listen. An unjust sentence is passed, crushing the Savior under a wicked condemnation.

Let us oppress the poor Just Man. . . . Let our strength be the law of justice; for that which is feeble, is found to be nothing worth. Let us therefore lie in wait for the Just, because He is not for our turn, and braideth with us transgressions of the law, and divulgeth against us the sins of our way of life. He boasteth that He hath the knowledge of God, and calleth Himself the Son of God.²⁵⁰ He is become a censurer of our thoughts. He is grievous unto us, even to behold; for His life is not like other men's, and His ways are very different. We are esteemed by Him as triflers, and He abstaineth from our ways as from filthiness, and He preferreth the latter end of the just, and glorieth that He hath God for His Father. Let us see then if His words be true, and let us prove what shall happen to Him, and we shall know what His end shall be. For if He be the true Son of God, He will defend Him, and will deliver Him from the hands of His enemies. Let us examine Him by outrages and tortures, that we may know His meekness and try His patience. Let us condemn

on them in the winepress of his anger. Christ saved the people by the shedding of His own Blood. But the Church does not hesitate to extol the benefits of the redeeming Blood in the words of this passage of Isaias: "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosra, this beautiful one in His robe, walking in the greatness of His strength. I, that speak justice, and am a Defender to save. Why then is Thy apparel red, and Thy garments like theirs that tread in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the Gentiles there is not a man with Me. . . . For the day of vengeance is in My heart, the year of My redemption is come. I looked about, and there was none to help; I sought, and there was none to give aid; and My own arm hath saved for Me" (Isa. 63:1-5).

²⁵⁰ Christ was indeed condemned by the Jews for having made Himself equal to God (cf. Luke 22:71; Mark 14:64).

Him to a most shameful death; for there shall be respect and unto Him by His words.²⁵¹

Christ on the cross was to hear these words uttered by His enemies, that is, those who stood to lose everything in the reign of justice and charity. For this reason they decided on His condemnation. "The kings of the earth stood up, and the princes met together, against the Lord, and against His Christ. Let us break Their bonds asunder; and let us cast away Their yoke from us."²⁵²

Thus began the drama of the Passion. First came the treason which delivered the Savior to His enemies. We even hear the very words of the traitor: "And I said to them: If it be good in your eyes, bring hither my wages; and if not, be quiet. And they weighed for my wages thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me: Cast it to the statuary, a handsome price, that I was prized at by them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and I cast them into the house of the Lord to the statuary."²⁵³

Jeremias records the feelings of the Holy One who has been betrayed: "And I was as a meek lamb that is carried to be a victim; and I knew not that they had devised counsels

²⁵¹ Wisd. 2:10–20. Cf. Roman Breviary, Monday of Holy Week, First Response at Matins; Tuesday of Holy Week, Antiphons of Lauds; Good Friday, Lessons of Second Nocturn. In spite of its liturgical use, this text of the Book of Wisdom is not literally a prophecy of the Passion of Christ, but is a striking evocation of some episodes of it.

²⁵² Ps. 2:2–3. The apostles realized that this prediction had been realized (Acts 4:26). See Good Friday, First Nocturn; Feast of the Precious Blood, First Nocturn; Exaltation of the Holy Cross, First Nocturn.

²⁵³ Zach. 11:12–13. Cf. Matt. 27:3–10. Monday of Holy Week, Antiphon at Lauds.

against Me, saying: Let us put wood on His bread, and cut Him off from the land of the living, and let His name be remembered no more."²⁵⁴

Psalm 40 refers to the bread handed to the man about to betray his Master: "All My enemies whispered together against Me; they devised evils against Me. . . . For even the man of My peace, in whom I trusted, who ate My bread, hath greatly supplanted Me."²⁵⁵

The Savior knew and accepted the fact that His days were numbered and His death decided. But He became "sorrowful even unto death"²⁵⁶ and crushed by anguish at the thought of the hatred stemming from man's sin and of the physical and spiritual passion facing Him. Psalm 68 conveys the agony of Gethsemane, perhaps even more vividly than the Gospels themselves.²⁵⁷

Save me, O God, for the waters are come in even unto My soul. I stick fast in the mire of the deep, and there is no sure standing. I am come into the depth of the sea, and a tempest hath overwhelmed Me. I have labored with crying; My jaws are become hoarse; My eyes have failed, whilst I hope in My God. They are multiplied above the hairs of My head, who hate Me without cause. My enemies are grown strong who have wrongfully persecuted Me; then did I pay that which I took not away. . . . Because for Thy sake I have borne reproach; shame hath

²⁵⁴ Jer. 11:19. Tuesday of Holy Week, Lessons at Matins; Holy Thursday, Response; Passiontide, Chapter at Lauds; Epistle for the Mass of Tuesday in Holy Week.

²⁵⁵ Ps. 40:8, 10. Feast of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, Second Nocturn.

²⁵⁶ Mark 14:34.

²⁵⁷ "Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour. But for this cause I came unto this hour" (John 12:27).

covered My face. I am become a stranger to My brethren, and an alien to the sons of My mother. For the zeal of Thy house hath eaten Me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached Thee are fallen upon Me. . . . In the multitude of Thy mercy hear Me, in the truth of Thy salvation. Draw Me out of the mire, that I may not stick fast; deliver Me from them that hate Me, and out of the deep waters. Let not the tempest of water drown Me, nor the deep swallow Me up; and let not the pit shut her mouth upon Me. Hear Me, O Lord, for Thy mercy is kind; look upon Me according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies. And turn not away Thy face from Thy Servant. . . . Attend to My soul, and deliver it.²⁵⁸

In vain did the Savior in His agony look for a little understanding and compassion from those for whom He was offering Himself: "My heart hath expected reproach and misery. And I looked for one that would grieve together with Me, but there was none; and for one that would comfort Me, and I found none. And they gave Me gall for My food, and in My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink."²⁵⁹ Love set His feet on the path; by love He was able to face suffering and torture without faltering; through love He gave Himself up with the utmost gentleness. "The Lord God hath opened My ear, and I do not resist; I have not gone back. I have given My body to the strikers, and My cheeks to them that plucked them; I have not turned away My face from them that rebuked Me and spit upon Me."²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Ps. 68 : 2-5, 8-10, 14-19. Holy Thursday, First Nocturn; Passion Sunday, Palm Sunday, Tuesday of Holy Week, Response; Palm Sunday, Offertory of the Mass; Gradual in Votive Mass of the Passion and Mass of Wednesday of Holy Week.

²⁵⁹ Ps. 68 : 21-22. Cf. Mark 25:36.

²⁶⁰ Isa. 50:5-6. Monday of Holy Week, Lauds, Epistle.

But at the same time, how perturbed He was in His flesh and blood at the prospect of the death awaiting Him:

For My soul is filled with evils, and My life has drawn nigh to hell. I am counted among them that go down to the pit; I am become as a man without help, free among the dead. Like the slain sleeping in the sepulchres whom Thou rememberest no more; and they are cast off from Thy hand. They have laid Me in the lower pit, in the dark places, and in the shadow of death. Thy wrath is strong over Me; and all Thy waves thou hast brought in upon Me. Thou hast put away My acquaintance far from Me; they have set Me an abomination to themselves. I was delivered up, and came not forth; My eyes languished through poverty. All the day I cried to Thee, O Lord; I stretched out My hands to Thee. Wilt Thou show wonders to the dead?²⁶¹

After a whole life spent in abasement and suffering, the limit was reached and the cup overflowed. Why was He so bitterly chastised, He who always did His Father's will with greatest love? "I am poor, and in labors from My youth; and being exalted have been humbled and troubled. Thy wrath hath come upon Me and Thy terrors have troubled Me."²⁶²

Men's fury was unleashed; all His disciples had abandoned Him; heaven was closed and silent. Death clutched Him ever closer, ready to consume its prey. But He did not merely allow His life to be taken from Him, but rather offered it lovingly. "No man taketh it away from Me; but I lay it down of Myself, and I have power."²⁶³ In the mys-

²⁶¹ Ps. 87:4-11. Good Friday, Third Nocturn; Feast of the Precious Blood, Third Nocturn; Lenten Feast of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, Third Nocturn.

²⁶² Ps. 87:16-17. Monday of Holy Week, Antiphon at Lauds; Monday of Holy Week, Epistle.

²⁶³ John 10:18.

terious dereliction of His heart, in the unfathomable suffering overwhelming His body and soul, He offered Himself, withholding nothing—with a total surrender of His whole being, stretched on the cross to the fullest dimensions of love. At this supreme moment the words rising to the lips of the Lamb of God were those of Psalm 21: ²⁶⁴

O God, my God, look upon Me; why hast Thou forsaken Me? Far from My salvation are the words of My sins. O My God, I shall cry by day, and Thou wilt not hear; and by night, and it shall not be reputed as folly in Me. But Thou dwellest in the holy place, the praise of Israel. In Thee have our fathers hoped; they have hoped, and Thou hast delivered them. They cried to Thee, and they were saved; they trusted in Thee, and were not confounded. But I am a worm, and no man; the reproach of men, and the outcast of the people. All they that saw Me have laughed Me to scorn; they have spoken with the lips, and wagged the head: He hoped in the Lord, let Him deliver Him; let Him save Him, seeing He delighteth in Him. For Thou art He that hast drawn Me out of the womb; My hope from the breasts of My mother. I was cast upon Thee from the womb. From My mother's womb Thou art My God, depart not from Me. For tribulation is very near; for there is none to help Me. Many calves have surrounded Me; fat bulls have besieged Me. They have opened their mouths against Me, as a lion ravening and roaring. I am poured out like water; and all My bones are scattered. My heart is become like wax melting in the midst of My bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue hath cleaved to My jaws; and Thou hast brought Me down into the dust of death. For many dogs have encompassed Me; the council of the malignant hath besieged Me. They have dug My hands and feet.²⁶⁵ They have numbered all My bones.

²⁶⁴ Cf. Mark, chap. 15, retracing the predicting scene.

²⁶⁵ "Pilate delivered Him to them to be crucified" (Matt. 26:27).

And they have looked and stared upon Me. They parted My garments amongst them; and upon My vesture they cast lots.²⁶⁶

Thus, long before it actually took place before our eyes, the whole drama of the Passion was presented to our view and, what is more important, proposed for our meditation. We even find in Scripture the words uttered by the Crucified just before the final *Consummatum est*. Was it not ordained that all the Scriptures should be fulfilled? Our Lord, therefore, spoke a phrase of a psalm at the moment of His death: "Into Thy hands I commend My spirit."²⁶⁷

By failing to treat the body of Christ Crucified in the usual way, the centurion followed the ancient Paschal rule, which he, of course, knew not, thus at length clarifying its mysterious meaning.

In the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, they shall eat it with unleavened bread and wild lettuce; they shall not leave anything thereof until morning, nor break a bone thereof.²⁶⁸

In one house shall it be eaten, . . . neither shall you break a bone thereof.²⁶⁹

Christ was raised high on His cross, like the brass serpent that Moses held up in ancient times to the children of Israel. "And the Lord said to him: Make a brazen serpent, and set it up for a sign: which when they that were bitten looked upon, they were healed."²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Ps. 21:1–19. Tract from the Mass of Palm Sunday; Holy Thursday, stripping of the altar; Good Friday, First Nocturn.

²⁶⁷ Ps. 30:6. Psalm used during Passiontide.

²⁶⁸ Num. 9:11–12. ²⁶⁹ Exod. 12:46.

²⁷⁰ Num. 21:8. In the early days of His teaching, Christ used this figure in predicting His passion (John 3:14). See First Nocturn of

From that time sinners were to look similarly “upon Him whom they have pierced,” as St. John said, quoting the prophet Zacharias in a passage that continued as follows: “And they shall mourn for Him as one mourneth for an only son, and they shall grieve over Him, as the manner is to grieve for the death of the firstborn.”²⁷¹

The prophets, and especially Isaias, reveal the inner mystery of the Passion even more impressively than they depict the spectacle of the Cross. With sublime wisdom Isaias predicted that the very elements that Israel rejected in the promised Messiah would be the proof of His love and the effective cause of salvation: His humility, suffering and abjection. The Church, too, each year, repeats the same lesson to us who constantly run the risk of forgetting it. Although the sentiments of Jesus and the drama of the Redemption remain tremendous mysteries, yet these prophetic texts give us the best insight into the meaning of the mysteries and show the very heart of the reality of Jesus.

From the sole of the foot unto the top of the head, there is no soundness therein; wounds and bruises and swelling sores; they are not bound up, nor dressed, nor fomented with oil. . . . As many have been astonished at Thee, so shall His visage be inglorious among men, and His form among the sons of men. He shall sprinkle many nations, kings shall shut their mouth at Him; for they to whom it was not told of Him, have seen; and they that heard not, have beheld. . . . And He shall grow up as a tender plant before Him, and as a root out of a thirsty ground;

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross for the liturgical use of this image.

²⁷¹ Zach. 12:10. Holy Saturday, Antiphon at Lauds; Epistle of the Votive Mass of the Passion.

there is no beauty in Him, nor comeliness; and we have seen Him, and there was no sightliness,²⁷² that we should be desirous of Him; despised, and the most abject of men, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity; and His look was as it were hidden and despised, whereupon we esteemed Him not. Surely He hath borne our infirmities²⁷³ and carried our sorrows; and we have thought Him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our iniquities, He was bruised for our sins;²⁷⁴ the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His bruises we are healed.²⁷⁵ All we like sheep have gone astray, every one hath turned aside into his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of all. He was offered because it was His own will, and He opened not His mouth;²⁷⁶ He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter,²⁷⁷ and shall be dumb as a lamb before his shearer, and He shall not open His mouth. He was taken away from distress, and from judgment; who shall declare His generation? because He is cut off out of the land of the living; for the wickedness of My people have I struck Him. And He shall give the ungodly for His burial, and the rich for His death,²⁷⁸ because He hath done no iniquity, neither was there deceit in His mouth. And the Lord was pleased to bruise Him in infirmity; if He shall lay down His life for sin, He shall see a long-lived seed, and the will of the Lord shall be prosperous in His hand. Because His soul hath labored, He shall see and be filled; by His knowledge

²⁷² Feast of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, Antiphon at Vespers.

²⁷³ Matt. 8:17.

²⁷⁴ “Him who knew no sin, He hath made sin for us, that we might be made the justice of God in Him” (II Cor. 5:21).

²⁷⁵ Holy Thursday, Response of First Nocturn.

²⁷⁶ All the evangelists mention the silence of Jesus at the trial and during His passion.

²⁷⁷ Holy Thursday, Antiphon at Lauds; Holy Saturday, Response in First and Second nocturns.

²⁷⁸ Cf. John 19:41.

shall this My just Servant justify many, and He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I distribute to Him very many,²⁷⁹ and He shall divide the spoils of the strong, because He hath delivered His soul unto death, and was reputed with the wicked;²⁸⁰ and he hath borne the sins of many,²⁸¹ and hath prayed for the transgressors.²⁸²

THE VICTORY OF REDEEMING LOVE

Love is strong as death; . . . many waters cannot quench charity.²⁸³

The Old Testament, which foretells the passion and death of Christ, also conveys the suggestion that the redeeming sacrifice would be a victory over death itself and the inauguration of the Savior's glorious reign. In the very chapter which Isaias consecrated to the suffering and humiliated Messiah, he also said: "If He shall lay down His life for sin, He shall see a long-lived seed, and the will of the Lord shall be prosperous in His hand. Because His soul hath labored, He shall see and be filled; by His knowledge shall this My just Servant justify many. . . . Therefore will I distribute to Him very many, and He shall divide the spoils of the strong."²⁸⁴ Thus did God, by His prophet, declare the fecundity of the sacrifice.

It is true that the texts of the Old Testament predicting the resurrection of the Lord are few and wrapped in obscurity.

²⁷⁹ Epistle of the Mass of Wednesday in Holy Week.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Mark 15:28.

²⁸¹ "For this is My blood of the New Testament, which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28).

²⁸² Isa. 1:6; 52:14-15; 53:2-12. ²⁸³ Cant. 8:6, 7.

²⁸⁴ Isa. 53:10-12.

But one of them, Psalm 15, was cited by St. Peter on the day of Pentecost in support of the prime event which he had witnessed:

Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man approved of God . . . you by the hands of wicked men have crucified and slain. Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the sorrows of hell, as it was impossible that He should be holden by it. For David saith concerning Him: I foresaw the Lord before my face; because He is at my right hand, that I may not be moved. For this my heart hath been glad, and my tongue hath rejoiced; moreover my flesh also shall rest in hope. Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, nor suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.²⁸⁵

Ye men, brethren, let me freely speak to you of the patriarch David; that he died, and was buried; and his sepulchre is with us to this present day. Whereas therefore he was a prophet . . . and he spoke of the resurrection of Christ. For neither was He left in hell, neither did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus, God raised again, whereof all we are witnesses.²⁸⁶

Christ Himself presented to the disciples and to the people of Israel another figure of the Resurrection, also found in the Old Testament.²⁸⁷ "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh a sign; and a sign shall not be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. For as Jonas was in the whale's belly three days and three nights, so shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights."²⁸⁸

The prophet Ezechiel had predicted victory over death; a manifestation of power would occur when the Author of

²⁸⁵ Ps. 15:8-10. ²⁸⁶ Acts 2:22-32. ²⁸⁷ Jonas 2:1-11.

²⁸⁸ Matt. 12:39-40.

life would hang on the tree of death. "And all the trees of the country shall know that I the Lord . . . have dried up the green tree, and have caused the dry tree to flourish."²⁸⁹

Isaias also, in agreement with the promise made to David long before, announced not only the Savior's victory over death, but also His glorious reign. "I will make an everlasting covenant with you, the faithful mercies of David."²⁹⁰

In another vision Ezechiel saw a field covered with dried bones which came together and recovered life under the breath of the life-giving Spirit. Did not this foretell a spiritual resurrection of humanity which had been buried in death by sin? Moreover, while yet stirred by the impression of this overwhelming vision, the prophet was told by Yahweh that the renewed life would flourish for all men who would one day be happy in the endless reign of a unique and glorious king:

Behold, I will take the children of Israel from the midst of the nations whither they are gone; and I will gather them on every side, and will bring them to their own land. And I will make them one nation . . . and one king shall be king over them all. . . . I will save them out of all the places in which they have sinned, and I will cleanse them and they shall be My people, and I will be their God. And My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall have one shepherd. . . . And they shall dwell in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob. . . . They and their children, and their children's children, forever; and David My servant shall be their prince forever. And I will make a covenant of peace with them, it shall be an everlasting covenant with them . . . and I will set My sanctuary in the midst of them forever.²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Ezech. 17:24.

²⁹⁰ Isa. 55:3.

²⁹¹ Ezech. 37:21-26.

Victory over death, resurrection by the power of the Spirit, glorious reign of the true David: all this is glimpsed in the Old Testament passages regarding the Messiah. The Bible actually predicted less clearly the specific event of the Resurrection than the liberation and new life which the Redeemer's victory would bring to the world. It is true that what the prophets usually perceived and yearned for when they spoke of liberation and a glorious victory was the return from exile, so ardently desired and expected. But it is nevertheless true that over and above this liberation they also announced in a mysterious way the liberation from another real captivity, that is, the victory over evil and the glorious and unending reign of the Messiah who, as Ezechiel said, would be the prince forever, who would bring a new spirit to renew all things. The same prophet emphasized particularly that this spiritual principle will regenerate the world. God was to put His own spirit into men's hearts, a spirit that the Redeemer would leave us as a pledge and fruit of His victory.²⁹² For indeed, the salvation brought by Christ was primarily a spiritual salvation, a renewal completely transforming humanity. Nothing else can give men true joy or permit them to harvest the fruits of the victory obtained by redeeming love. "And the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and shall come into Sion with praise, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and mourning shall flee away."²⁹³

In the cry of trust and hope which Isaias uttered to the captives in Babylon it is easy to find the prediction of another liberation and another victory, this time unending, and permitting men to build up the heavenly Jerusalem:

²⁹² Ezech., chap. 36.

²⁹³ Isa. 35:10.

Arise, arise, put on thy strength, O Sion, put on the garments of thy glory, O Jerusalem, the city of the Holy One. . . . Shake thyself from the dust, arise, sit up, O Jerusalem; loose the bonds from off thy neck, O captive daughter of Sion. For thus saith the Lord: You were sold gratis, and you shall be redeemed without money. . . . The voice of thy watchmen, they have lifted up their voice, they shall praise together, for they shall see eye to eye when the Lord shall convert Sion. Rejoice and give praise together, O ye deserts of Jerusalem, for the Lord hath comforted His people; He hath redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord hath prepared His holy arm in the sight of all the Gentiles; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.²⁹⁴

Without distinguishing the two liberations, Israel nevertheless derived from these magnificent texts the firm hope that the Savior's mission would be crowned by triumph for Yahweh's ransomed captives.

Though the prediction of redeeming and saving love is one of the main ideas of the Bible, yet it does not stop there as at an ultimate goal. The redeeming sacrifice never is represented as God's ultimate purpose. On the cross there ripened a fruit which humanity was to pluck, the fruit of union, the love union, once more made possible between God and His creatures. That is the final goal to which the whole Old Testament points. This mystery of an incarnate God who was wedded to our nature and sought personal union with His sinful and redeemed creatures is not only hinted in the Old Testament but is proclaimed in songs of exultant tones. The victory of redeeming love finds its full meaning and dazzling glory only in the mystery of the Lover inviting His bride to an eternal marriage feast, the bride being each and

²⁹⁴ Isa. 52:1-10.

every soul among God's people, the old and the new Jerusalem, that is, the Church. Moreover, this mystery alone fully displays the infinite charity of God who first reconciled His children by the blood of His Son and then sought union with them in love.

Chapter 3

GOD AS LOVER

For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and mourning in spirit, and as a wife cast off from her youth, said thy God.¹

Can the children of the bridegroom mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?²

Call them . . . to the marriage.³

God, who planned to make men His own children according to the Spirit, showed His paternal love by creating them in His image and likeness. Though sin destroyed this divine likeness and placed an obstacle in the way, God still pursued His plan and sent a Savior. The Incarnation mended the broken links; what had been torn apart was again and forever united in the Person of Christ. The new and eternal covenant was sealed by His blood, so that if man responds to the divine wooing, he can be united to his God. Union

¹ Isa. 54:6. ² Matt. 9:15. ³ Matt. 22:3.

with God is truly the divine plan which Christ alone stated clearly, but which the prophets had long before foreseen and predicted. "For the Lord hath called thee . . . as a wife," said Isaias, thus assuring Israel that God indeed wished to "wed" His creatures, asking in return only their fidelity. This union—or, to use the biblical expressions, this alliance, covenant or testament—summarizes God's plan of love for us.⁴ It is so important that the Bible itself is divided into the record of the first alliance or Old Testament and that of the "new and eternal Testament."⁵ What is the real meaning of this alliance? What underlying spiritual reality does it designate?

THE MYSTERY OF THE COVENANT

Now we have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit that is of God; that we may know the things that are given us from God.⁶

For He is faithful that hath promised.⁷

Is the biblical covenant or alliance to be understood merely as a juridical contract between God and His people? Or are we to believe that the alliance meant a really vital union as of two persons—like partners joined in marriage with a unity that is symbolized and sealed by the exchange

⁴ At the Last Supper Christ clearly stated that His real purpose in coming to men was this work of union, of unity, of espousal: "That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee; that they also may be one in Us" (John 17:21).

⁵ In this chapter some of the significant overtones are lost in translation, as they depend upon the interplay of the fourfold meaning of the French word *alliance*: alliance, marriage, covenant, marriage ring. (Tr. note.)

⁶ I Cor. 2:12. ⁷ Heb. 10:23.

of golden rings? The covenant in the Old Testament is indeed a contract in the strict sense of the word, but it is also a promise which cannot be confined within the limits of a mere legal formality,⁸ for it is an entirely gratuitous act of mercy. It is a real contract, an alliance characterized by all the formality of a juridical act; this is evident from the scene in Genesis describing at length the covenant between God and Abraham. The latter, at God's request, prepared a sacrifice, cut open the victim, then fell into a deep sleep during which there appeared to him "a smoking furnace and a lamp of fire passing between those divisions."⁹ What mysterious acts and visions!

The incident is partially explained by our knowledge of ancient Semitic customs. When two men made a pact they ratified it symbolically by dividing into two parts a victim offered in sacrifice and walking between the parts of it. God and Abraham followed the customary rite, thus recording their agreement in the annals of tradition. No one would question the validity of a contract drawn up in terms of such unassailable legal formality. But the covenant with Abraham had not yet reached its final version, which was reserved "for his seed." The clauses guaranteeing permanent peace were not yet definitely settled. Not until the time of Moses and the marvels of Sinai would they be carved on the tablets

⁸ St. Paul affirms both the contract and the promise: "Brethren (I speak after the manner of man) yet a man's testament, if it be confirmed, no man despiseth, nor addeth to it. To Abraham were the promises made and to his seed. He saith not, 'And to his seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'and to thy seed,' which is Christ. Now this I say, that the testament which was confirmed by God, the law which was made after four hundred and thirty years, doth not disannul, to make the promise of no effect" (Gal. 3:15-17).

⁹ Gen. 15:17.

of the law,¹⁰ enclosed in the holy Ark, acclaimed by all Israel during the bloody sacrifices of a splendid inauguration. At that time the people undertook the obligations enumerated in the pact. Thenceforth they considered the observance of the commandments as a guarantee that God would be with them in the conquest of the promised temporal kingdom.¹¹

This period, when the covenant assumed its exact legal form as a contract, marked a step forward in social development as well as enormous moral progress, but it also involved the risk of the covenant's being dissociated from the divine promise which it sealed. For the ancient covenant was first and foremost a promise which became more and more specific in the course of the centuries. "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."¹²

What a mysterious prediction! How veiled was the meaning of the promise! Yet the covenant was purest at the moment when this promise was made to Abraham, for then it depended solely upon the faith of God's servant. And it contained the germs of reform and glorious restoration for all mankind. Although the covenant was concluded between God and one single man and, therefore, was characterized by features peculiar to that man's race, yet its ultimate object was universal. By it Yahweh declared Himself God of the whole earth—very different from the local divinities who were involved in the good or bad fortune of

¹⁰ "Why then was the law? It was set because of transgressions, until the seed should come, to whom He made the promises. . . . But the Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by the faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe" (Gal. 3:19, 22).

¹¹ Exod., chaps. 24, 34. ¹² Gen. 22:18.

their nations. The man chosen by God was but the instrument of universal conquest; all nations would be blessed in his seed. Could such a privilege be the object of a contract? The initial fact of the covenant belonged to the purely supernatural plane of faith and redeeming love, even though in process of fulfillment it later took on the legal form of a contract. The terms *lover* and *bride* designate an authentic and profound spiritual reality.

We must note, though we can never understand, the gracious condescension that characterized the conclusion of the covenant with Abraham. The initiative and the gift proceed from God alone; only consent and obedience are demanded of Abraham, who was chosen and mysteriously, even mystically, singled out. In return, the man of faith was required to be blameless before almighty God. His descendants had to love God with their whole heart and soul. The blessings they received clarified the meaning of the promise and testified to God's fidelity, while at the same time emphasizing the element of preference, of wholly gratuitous divine privilege. The law itself, the "pedagogue"¹³ of sanctity, raised the people to the dignity of their vocation as firstborn favorite. This purely spiritual side of the covenant was not the aspect which the Israelites, in their pride and hardness of heart, preferred to consider. Instead, they gloried in the pact initiated by the covenant and they depended upon their observance of the law to assure their justification before God and their right to prosperity and to special privileges.

On the other hand, they clung all too frequently to the literal sense of the divine promise: "And I will give to thee, and to thy seed, the land of thy sojournment, all the land of

¹³ Gal. 3:24.

Chanaan for a perpetual possession, and I will be their God."¹⁴ They did not see the Promised Land as a figure of a divine land, nor did they admit that the real purpose of their mission was to inaugurate a spiritual kingdom. On the contrary, the conquest of Chanaan confirmed their notion of a material alliance and a common cause with God who, in their opinion, sided with them to the point of implicating the honor of the divine name. However gross or even outrageous their error in this regard may have been, yet by a special grace the people were never without the evidence of God's jealous love for them. Jealous indeed was His love and bitter His reproaches when they proved oblivious of the spiritual fidelity He demanded of them. The disagreement was aggravated when the people, disregarding the prophets' warnings, wandered off into the darkness. At the same time they never ceased, as the whole chronicle of their history demonstrates, to take strategic advantage of God's love for the whole race of Abraham. And so it is that in spite of countless infidelities, long before the terms *lover* and *bride* appear in the inspired texts, Israel was clearly conscious of being God's particular favorite, His beloved whom He destined for closest union with Himself, the chosen one, vowed and consecrated to Yahweh.¹⁵

Thus, when Osee, in poems vibrating with ardent passion, castigated the faithless nation and called it an adulterous wife, he was merely defining a notion of the alliance which

¹⁴ Gen. 17:8.

¹⁵ The Jewish attitude envisaged God's love for them as being exclusive. Even after the time of Christ the Acts of the Apostles prove how difficult it was for the Jews to share their privileges with the Gentiles. God, therefore, graciously revealed His intentions in the vision granted to St. Peter (Acts 10:9-48).

had long been deeply rooted in Israel's soul. When Jeremias expressed God's complaint about "the covenant which they made void, and I had dominion over them,"¹⁶ the people never doubted the truth of the words, even though they did not heed the reproach.

So often does the image recur, so habitually is the union of God and His people compared to a marriage—with its obligation of fidelity, its jealous insistence on exclusive love, its promise of fecundity—that it undoubtedly corresponds to a profound and clearly defined reality. "God is faithful; by whom you are called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord."¹⁷

The inspired texts of the Old Testament are directed toward the fullness of charity which the New Testament would display in the person of Christ and affirm the sacred character of the covenant with God, condemning all violation of the bond and also any notion of a *right* to what is a purely gratuitous act of mercy. The only motive of the union is the love freely bestowed by God. The entire Old Testament strives to heed this love and to open hearts in humility that they may partake of it and be transformed. That is the purpose of the Old Testament. Was it Israel's purpose? The prophet Jeremias gives the answer. "From the day that their fathers came out of the land of Egypt, even to this day . . . I have sent to you all My servants the prophets . . . and they have not hearkened to Me, nor inclined their ear; but have hardened their neck, and have done worse than their fathers."¹⁸

¹⁶ Jer. 31:32. The verb used in the Hebrew frequently refers to the marriage relationship and other versions translate this passage: "I was a husband to them." (Tr. note.)

¹⁷ I Cor. 1:9. ¹⁸ Jer. 7:25–26.

When Jeremias predicted a new covenant,¹⁹ the promises of happiness were confused in the people's minds with messianic promises of victory over other nations. The leaders and the doctors of the law came to consider the Torah as the universal principle of salvation and justification.²⁰ Even the missionary impulse, spread by means of the Diaspora, while it was divinely inspired,²¹ in practice all too often deviated from the messianic ideal by preaching and requiring only the letter of the law. A veil concealed the Scriptures. But the spiritual progeny of Abraham had not died out; men of faith still survived. A "small remnant" still sought sustenance in the hope of God's tender mercy, as promised by the terms of the covenant.

God alone could fit such a mixture of good and evil into the design of His mercy. The time was coming when all that was decrepit would be eliminated. "That which decayeth and groweth old is near its end."²² "For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise. But God gave it to Abraham by promise."²³ The promise would be fulfilled and the covenant completed in the glory of charity. At that time God spoke by the prophets to emphasize the wholly spiritual character of the covenant and the conversion of heart which it required.²⁴ Only by grace from God Himself could souls be thus transformed. How rich in spiritual meaning is Jere-

¹⁹ Jer. 31:31.

²⁰ The first accusation against Christ was that He failed to observe the law, toward which, in the opinion of the doctors, He showed insufficient respect.

²¹ Cf. Isa., chaps. 54–60. ²² Heb. 8:13. ²³ Gal. 3:18.

²⁴ That is the new wine which requires new containers, as Christ said in the Gospel (Matt. 9:17; Luke 5:38). It is the wine of joy to welcome the bridegroom: "Can the children of the bridegroom mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?"

mias' text, which, along with Ezechiél's references, sketches the clearest picture we have of the new covenant. He suggests that the Redemption would be followed by a complete renewal of creatures and their relationship to God—an ineffable relationship of mutual intimacy and self-surrender.

Behold the days shall come, saith the Lord, and I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Juda; not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; the covenant which they made void, and I had dominion over them, saith the Lord. But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel, after those days, saith the Lord: I will give my law in their bowels, and I will write it in their heart; and I will be their God and they shall be My people.²⁵

That is the whole truth about the new covenant which would no longer be carved on stone tablets, but would be written in men's hearts. God declares Himself the Bridegroom and the alliance requires from the bride a total gift and unflinching fidelity. Nicodemus was to hear Christ affirm: "Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again . . . he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven." And in the face of the other's astonishment, Jesus insisted, saying: "Art thou a master in Israel, and knowest not these things?"²⁶ For indeed, "these things" had already been transmitted in

²⁵ Jer. 31:31-33, quoted in Heb. 8:8-12.

²⁶ John 3:5, 10. In the same spirit Christ said: "Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). He did not mean, as Nicodemus thought, that men should return to their mothers' wombs or stoop to children's foolishness, but that they should offer themselves to the life-giving breath of the Spirit, the sole agent of the spiritual birth that gives us a virgin heart, capable of receiving the words of life.

Scripture for the enlightenment of upright men. These words of Ezechiél sound like the Gospels: "And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My spirit in the midst of you."²⁷

Thus, as the old covenant approached its spiritual fulfillment, God tried to show the Jews its inner meaning. In spite of men's infidelity, He longed to keep His promise, to honor His word, to accomplish the covenant by which He had bound Himself. But alas, Israel's stubborn infidelity forced God to graft the wild branch upon the olive tree.²⁸ The Gentiles would harvest the fruits of the covenant concluded long before with the Israelites and ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

The Old Testament forms the background of these great realities; a background of such mysterious patterns that closed and hardened hearts failed to recognize Christ when He came, though for souls of good will like Zachary, Simeon and John the Baptist He was so clearly depicted that they thrilled with an eager welcome of the Bridegroom and the living covenant which He embodied.

The friend of the Bridegroom who standeth and heareth Him, rejoiceth with joy because of the Bridegroom's voice. This my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.²⁹

Because my eyes have seen Thy salvation. . . . a light to the revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel.³⁰

At first sight the Old Testament seems only to lay the foundation and prepare the scene for a union to be consum-

²⁷ Ezech. 36:26.

²⁸ Cf. Rom. 11:17.

²⁹ John 3:29-30.

³⁰ Luke 2:30, 32.

mated in the New Testament. But closer examination reveals that even in Old Testament times the covenant contained a promise and a reality. The Epistle to the Hebrews refers to "the blood of the everlasting Testament."³¹ God solemnly pledged Himself not only to a few individuals, but to their descendants in the faith. Even as He became wedded to Israel, He knew that those called to the union would soon evade it and fail in their obligations. With the whole drama of the Redemption before His eyes, He nevertheless ratified the covenant just as if it were to be respected on both sides, as if He would not have to redeem His faithless bride at a tremendous price and renew the broken compact.³² The Christian covenant, however, was not based on mutual consent and sealed by the law, but expressed an ecstasy of love reaching its climax in the Cross. It could rightly be called "new." Yet the fact remains that its roots reach back to God's first definite and irrevocable promises in the Old Testament. After long years of unfailing divine fidelity, the painful wedding of Yahweh, the faithful God, with Israel, the false bride, would ultimately produce its fruit in the birth of a new covenant:

If My covenant with the day can be made void, and My covenant with the night, that there should not be day and night in their season, also My covenant with David My servant may be made void.³³

³¹ Heb. 13:20.

³² He persisted to the end in offering salvation to His beloved people. Christ declared: "I was not sent but to the sheep that are lost of the house of Israel." He admonished the woman of Chanaan, saying: "It is not good to take the bread of the children, and to cast it to the dogs" (Matt. 15:24, 26).

³³ Jer. 33:20-21.

Thus saith the Lord: If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I also will cast away all the seed of Israel, for all that they have done, saith the Lord.³⁴

Isaias explains that God's gifts are irrevocable: "The Lord is the everlasting God, who hath created the ends of the earth; He shall not faint, nor labor."³⁵ Jeremias hears Him declare: "I am the Lord that exercise mercy, and judgment, and justice in the earth; for these things please Me."³⁶

This divine fidelity proved that from the beginning love was the principle of union and the cause of the old covenant.³⁷ When God ratified His covenant with Israel, He truly celebrated His espousals with humanity. However disappointing the alliance might prove, nevertheless it was, by His gratuitous mercy, infinitely fecund, as it gave the world Him who would be called the covenant of all nations.

The continuity of the divine plan as revealed in the Old Testament is one of God's greatest marvels. He could not yet make the final covenant, as men were not yet ready to receive what He planned to give them, but at least He willed to reveal the necessary conditions of that union. First, it would be sealed in blood.³⁸ How significant it was that "neither was the first dedicated without blood," as St. Paul recalls.³⁹

³⁴ Jer. 31:37. ³⁵ Isa. 40:28. ³⁶ Jer. 9:24.

³⁷ One of the last times Christ spoke it was to tell the women of Jerusalem how He pitied the fate in store for the dry wood, by comparison with the cruel treatment of the green wood (Luke 23:31). In the light of Ezechiel's prophecy (17:22, 24), these words prove how constantly God persisted in His merciful fidelity to Israel.

³⁸ "This is He that came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood" (I John 5:6).

³⁹ Heb. 9:18.

For when every commandment of the law had been read by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people. Saying: This is the blood of the testament, which God hath enjoined unto you. The tabernacle also and all the vessels of the ministry, in like manner, he sprinkled with blood. And almost all things, according to the law, are cleansed with blood; and without shedding of blood there is no remission.⁴⁰

The link between the two covenants and the unity of the divine plan appear here very clearly. All the ancient sacrifices converged toward one final point and symbolized the attributes of the final reality.

In the second place, the covenant was a reciprocal agreement. From the earliest times God stressed the eminently personal and mutual nature of the new alliance.⁴¹ Now and ever, both parties are confronted with a free and voluntary choice. Is it not free choice that confers on any mutual agreement its validity and solemnity? A true conscience cannot repudiate it without dishonor.⁴² "And God said to him: I am, and My covenant is with thee."⁴³

So God spoke to Abraham and we know that an element of the absolute is inherent in every divine act. But it must be noted that the formula supposed reciprocity in the personal

⁴⁰ Heb. 9:19-22.

⁴¹ While all are truly granted hope of salvation, yet individual salvation depends upon the personal response to the solicitations of divine grace.

⁴² St. Paul emphasized God's free choice: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29).

⁴³ Gen. 17:4

promise. By specifying, "*I make a covenant with thee,*" God made it clear that His agreement was with a definite person indicated by name whom He Himself had called and consulted in the first place. But in the Bible God never forms an alliance with one isolated individual separated from his environment. "And thou therefore shalt keep My covenant, and Thy seed after thee in their generations. This is My covenant which you shall observe, between Me and you, and thy seed after thee."⁴⁴

The Old Testament always views man in a state of full development, both personal and social. As a social being, the man with whom God makes a personal contract is never separated from the race to which he belongs or the physical or spiritual descendants to be born from him. Each individual is a perfectly formed ring, but his true worth is assessed only in terms of the chain of which he is an indispensable link. Thus, the Old Testament covenant includes two aspects indissolubly united: the personal and the collective. This naturally brings a question to the mind. To whom do the terms bridegroom and bride refer in the Bible?

THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE

He that hath the bride, is the bridegroom.⁴⁵

To realize better the profound meaning of the expressions *bridegroom* and *bride* in this context, we must take a general view of the whole of the Old Testament and determine what are its dominant ideas. The preceding chapters have shown God's plan and the stages on the path that leads

⁴⁴ Gen. 17:9-10.

⁴⁵ John 3:29.

divine love to the goal of union with redeemed humanity. The central theme of Old Testament revelation seems to be the prediction of a Messiah. This messianic tendency points to a glorification that implies the Messiah's union with the men He means to save.⁴⁶ That is the theme of the wedding, forming a picture of sublime vistas that complete the tableau of wounded humanity's return to the Father's home. The Old Testament sketches the outline; the New Testament finishes the picture. Christ spoke of the wedding feast and called Himself the Bridegroom.⁴⁷ St. John finally contemplates a mighty vision of the brilliant bride in the city of the Lamb.⁴⁸

Here we are confronted not by an interpretation reserved only to the mystics but by an essential ingredient of the divine plan and a major element of revelation, a truth as valid, as important, and as belief-compelling as the revelation of the fatherhood of God or of the coming of the Savior-Messiah. But this part of the divine plan is still in the process of accomplishment.⁴⁹ Only the end of time will reveal the outcome of the drama which began with man's first days. Revelation has been completed. "In giving us His Son, God spoke to us altogether once and for all in this

⁴⁶ "Father, I will that where I am, they also whom thou hast given Me may be with Me; that they may see My glory which Thou hast given Me, because Thou hast loved Me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24). Cf. also I Cor. 15:28; Eph. 1:10; II Thess. 1:10.

⁴⁷ Matt. 9:15; also chap. 22. ⁴⁸ Apoc., chap. 21.

⁴⁹ Since the coming of Christ, mankind is in exactly the same situation which Our Lord described in the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins who were waiting for the wedding festival. A cry will be heard during the night: "Behold the Bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet Him" (Matt., chap. 25).

single word," said St. John of the Cross.⁵⁰ Already we have been "saved by hope,"⁵¹ but the wedding feast is still in the course of preparation and Christ's total glorification is yet to come. The last day will bring the full accomplishment of these great realities. We cannot, therefore, be surprised that the Old Testament shows only a rough outline of the theme. But the words *bridegroom* and *bride* refer there to the same realities as in the New Testament, designating in the past as in the present God and the redeemed people, personified in the Old Testament by Israel to whom the divine promises were addressed. "And now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and formed thee, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed thee, and called thee by thy name; thou art Mine."⁵²

The difficulty in properly understanding the term *bride* is that while it is addressed to one person, it also refers to a collective body, Israel. But it is easy enough to solve the problem, for within this collective body, God's love is directed to the individuals composing it. Alike in Moses' speeches and Osee's appeals, singular and plural pronouns alternate and indicate that in speaking to His people, God speaks to the heart of each individual member of the nation. It is evident, moreover, that His message does not allude to a particular event of history, but throughout the centuries brings a constantly valid solution to human problems. All society is called to salvation, but this can proceed only from each individual's participation in divine life. But the salvation of the members demands that they be all joined together in unity. A supernatural principle of unity is necessary; without it, the salvation of the individual could not be

⁵⁰ *Loc. cit.* ⁵¹ Rom. 8:24. ⁵² Isa. 43:1.

achieved.⁵³ Thus, the Church has ever been accustomed to see in the bride of the Old Testament—especially the bride of the Canticle of Canticles—at one and the same time each faithful soul united to Christ in the course of ages,⁵⁴ and also the bride *par excellence*, the Church, who gives birth to the saints in time and will gather them together in eternity.

The word *bridegroom* designates *Yahweh* in the Old Testament, but the traits He shows also permit us to recognize the bridegroom as Christ, the predicted Redeemer. The teaching of St. Paul⁵⁵ and St. John leaves no further room for doubt in this regard.

And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne, saying: Behold the tabernacle of God with men, and He will dwell with them. And they shall be His people; and God Himself with them shall be their God.⁵⁶

Also in this union of the bride with the bridegroom, the Holy Spirit does not fail to play a vital role, as St. John shows. When the call of Christ, the Bridegroom, is answered

⁵³ All this is clarified by the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ, as developed by St. Paul, especially in I Cor., chap. 12.

⁵⁴ "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give glory to Him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath prepared herself. And it is granted to her that she should clothe herself with fine linen, glittering and white. For the fine linen are the justifications of saints" (Apoc. 19:7-8).

⁵⁵ Cf. Eph. 5:25, 32. Referring to this "great mystery" in dealing with marriage, St. Paul said: "Husbands love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered Himself up for it; that He might sanctify it, cleansing it by the laver of water in the word of life. . . . This is a great sacrament; but I speak in Christ and in the Church."

⁵⁶ Apoc. 21:2-3.

by the bride who invites Him to come, this desire proceeds from the Holy Spirit within her. "And the Spirit and the bride say: Come."⁵⁷

What aspects of the relation between the bride and the Bridegroom are shown in the Bible? What progress in union can be observed? The history of faithless Israel conveys such a painful lesson that it is hard to see it as a progress toward union. But have things greatly changed even since the Redemption, either for mankind in general or each soul in particular? The Gentiles have inherited the divine promises in their turn and, like the chosen people, they have all too often proved incapable of appreciating their worth or of realizing love's demands and responding to them.

On the other hand, Israel, like we Christians, has had its saints and martyrs; they have progressed far along the pathway of union. It must be admitted that in every century the story of souls is the "King's secret."⁵⁸ Each soul begins once more the drama of the divine wooing and the human response which is either acceptance or refusal. We should

⁵⁷ Apoc. 22:17. Note the teaching of St. John of the Cross in the *Spiritual Canticle*: "At times God grants to the bride-soul such favors that, breathing with His Divine Spirit through this her flowering garden, He opens all these buds, or virtues, and uncovers these aromatic spices which are the gifts and perfections and riches of the soul, and, by opening this inward wealth and treasure, reveals all her beauty. . . . In this breathing of the Holy Spirit through the soul, which is His visitation of her in love, the Spouse, who is the Son of God, communicates Himself to her after a lofty manner. To this end He first sends His Spirit, who is His forerunner, as He did to the apostles, to prepare for Him a dwelling for the soul, His bride, raising her up in delight, setting her garden in order, causing its flowers to open, revealing its gifts, and adorning her with the tapestry of His graces and riches" (*op. cit.*, II, pp. 135-136).

⁵⁸ Tob. 12:7.

ponder upon this mystery of love as presented long ago in the Old Testament. Divine love was offended, for Israel repudiated it, but God showed only patience and mercy toward His people, whom He wounded only to cure, whom He cured by wounding.

Another stage in Israel's history showed divine love bent on triumph, no matter how great the cost. Repudiation, oblivion, infidelity, betrayal: all this the Bridegroom accepted in order to save His love. The prophets Osee and Jeremias in particular echo this drama in anguished tones. Doubtless they themselves must have experienced the pangs and the joys of this love, so directly and personally did they express the Lover's reproaches and confessions.

But overcoming all obstacles, divine love at length persuaded the bride to return from all her strayings. The Bridegroom mercifully pardoned her faults and admitted her once again to His love, a love rendered all the greater after the pardon. The most beautiful poem on mystical love, the Song of Songs, brings us the chant of the Bridegroom, finally free to give His love to the soul which has surrendered. When the winter has passed, divine love triumphs. It is true that the final triumph will not become evident until the number of the elect is complete, but already in the eternal present, God beholds the end and the full accomplishment of His promises. The Bible portrays the union of men with God, a scene of limitless perspectives. Always Jerusalem, the holy city, was the image of the homeland where God's elect will enjoy endless happiness, where all nations called to salvation will assemble in unity and peace, where the covenant's promises will at last be fulfilled. Among the most beautiful themes of the Old Testament are the fecundity and glory of the union.

So it is that the Bible allows us to perceive the stages toward total union. From the humbly penitent soul to the bride of the glorious city a hidden link is maintained, a new hope grows, divine reality is in process of formation. In the pages that follow we shall see these great truths one by one. May they help us to understand better how God continues to treat both individuals and society among His redeemed people.

REJECTION OF LOVE

Israel is holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of His increase.⁵⁹

But I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first charity.⁶⁰

Right from its origins, Israel was solemnly committed to God's cause. And God had bound the nation to Him "with the cords of Adam, with the bands of love."⁶¹ He had accepted the humble tribe: "I spread My garment over thee, and covered thy ignominy."⁶² Ezechiel's text has shown us what wonderful treasures of mercy and tender love God was pleased to bestow upon Israel in the early days of its history, when the people responded to the divine appeals with all the fervor and enthusiasm of youth.⁶³ Prophets, psalmists and sages always looked back with nostalgia and sorrow to that distant past, for, as the same text emphasizes,

⁵⁹ Jer. 2:3. ⁶⁰ Apoc. 2:4. ⁶¹ Osee 11:4.

⁶² Ezech. 16:8.

⁶³ Although the forty years in the desert were marked by many infidelities and rebellions, yet in this period Israel, separated from pagan nations, "walked with God." It brought so many marvels and such constant proof of God's loving care that it rightly became the happiest memory in Israel's history. The first enthusiasm of this nation, marching in God's footsteps, is worthy of boundless admiration.

these favors were the pledge of greater blessings to come. God was pleased to treat Israel like a girl being prepared for her wedding, adorning her with sumptuous and charming robes enriched with gems. "Thou wast made exceeding beautiful, and wast advanced to be a queen. And thy renown went forth among the nations for thy beauty; for thou wast perfect through My beauty, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God."⁶⁴

God had every reason to hope that when His bride became a mature woman, she would respond to His love, as she had in the early days of Abraham, Moses and Josue. But she, unaware, ungrateful and unfaithful, passed by divine love without heeding it. She went searching for alien gods, selfish pleasures and shameful self-gratification; in short, she wished to take on lovers.

Hast thou seen what rebellious Israel hath done? She hath gone of herself upon very high mountains, and under every green tree, and hath played the harlot there. And when she had done all these things, I said: Return to Me, and she did not return. And her treacherous sister Juda saw that because the rebellious Israel had played the harlot, I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Juda was not afraid, but went and played the harlot also herself.⁶⁵

The two sisters (for Juda, like Israel, was descended from Jacob) did not fear to outrage God. Isaias spoke of the daughters of Sion who "made a noise as they walked with their feet and moved in a set pace."⁶⁶ Osee lamented over Israel's infidelity. "Israel, a vine full of branches, the fruit is agreeable to it; according to the multitude of his fruit he hath multiplied altars, according to the plenty of his land

he hath abounded with idols."⁶⁷ The beloved bride gave herself to lifeless idols. "She played the harlot with stones and with stocks."⁶⁸ She even stooped to the ultimate shame of selling herself to those who did not want her. "Gifts are given to all harlots; but thou hast given hire to all thy loves, and thou hast given them gifts to come to thee from every side to commit fornication with thee."⁶⁹ She seems to have rejected all the divine gifts to return to her pagan origins. "Thy root and thy nativity is of the land of Chanaan, thy father was an Amorrhite, and thy mother a Cethite. . . . Thou art thy mother's daughter, that cast off her husband and her children; and thou art the sister of thy sisters, who cast off their husbands, and their children."⁷⁰

Jerusalem, the holy city, has adopted all the vices of the surrounding nations. But was she not a daughter of Israel? This title, which should have been a glory and a delight for her, was dishonored by her shameful dealings with pagan nations and then became the most painful reproach against her. "Why did thy mother the lioness lie down among the lions, and bring up her whelps in the midst of young lions?"⁷¹ "Thy mother is like a vine in thy blood planted by the water; her fruit and her branches have grown out of many waters. . . . But she was plucked up in wrath, and cast on the ground, and the burning wind dried up her fruit. . . . And now she is transplanted into the desert."⁷²

To make Israel realize her fault, Yahweh did not hesitate to ask Osee to present the people with a living image of themselves by marrying a prostitute. "The Lord said to Osee: Go, and take thee a wife of fornications, and have

⁶⁷ Osee 10:1. ⁶⁸ Jer. 3:9. ⁶⁹ Ezech. 16:33.

⁷⁰ Ezech. 16:3, 45. ⁷¹ Ezech. 19:2. ⁷² Ezech. 19:10-13.

⁶⁴ Ezech. 16:13-14. ⁶⁵ Jer. 3:6-8. ⁶⁶ Isa. 3:16.

of her children of fornications; for the land by fornication shall depart from the Lord.”⁷³ It matters not whether this be a symbol or a reality; the Holy Spirit inspired these prophetic images in order to teach lessons by them. Israel had reached the lowest depths of depravity and God willed that the people should become conscious of their shameful infidelity and cast aside the sins that separated them from the Bridegroom.

Judge your mother, judge her; because she is not My wife, and I am not her husband. Let her put away her fornications from her face, and her adulteries from between her breasts. Lest I . . . make her a wilderness, and will set her as a land that none can pass through, and will kill her with drought. And I will not have mercy on her children; for they are the children of fornications. For their mother hath committed fornication; she that conceived them is covered with shame; for she said: I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread, and my water, my wool, and my flax, my oil, and my drink.⁷⁴

Would it not be just if Yahweh acted like an offended husband by irrevocably rejecting the faithless wife?

It is commonly said: If a man put away his wife, and she go from him and marry another man, shall he return to her any more? Shall not that woman be polluted and defiled? But thou hast prostituted thyself to many lovers; nevertheless return to Me, saith the Lord, and I will receive thee. Lift up thy eyes on high; and see where thou hast not prostituted thyself; thou didst sit in the ways, waiting for them as a robber in the wilderness; and thou hast polluted the land with thy fornications and

⁷³ Osee 1:2. It is impossible to say whether this image refers to actual fact or not.

⁷⁴ Osee. 2:2-5.

with thy wickedness. Therefore . . . thou hast a harlot's forehead, thou wouldst not blush.⁷⁵

The echoes of divine wrath resound throughout the Old Testament; terrible vengeance is predicted. First Elias and then Amos foretell the punishment in tremendously impressive language; the first in such fiery terms that he was himself called a fire from heaven, while the second expressed the whole magnitude of the offense and of the punishment it deserved in the profound lyric strains of his famous poem on the fire.⁷⁶ And yet, even when it seemed that nothing could restrain the divine anger, the prophet prayed with trembling lips: “O Lord God, be merciful, I beseech Thee. Who shall raise up Jacob, for he is very little? The Lord had pity upon this. It shall not be, saith the Lord.”⁷⁷

Twice Amos repeated his plea and twice God's compassion was stronger than His justice. But the third time things had gone too far. “And the Lord said: Behold, I will lay down the trowel in the midst of My people Israel. I will plaster them over no more. And the high places of the idol shall be thrown down, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be

⁷⁵ Jer. 3:1-3.

⁷⁶ Nor may we suppose that the New Testament is any more indulgent: “For if we sin wilfully after having the knowledge of the truth, there is now left no sacrifice for sins, but a certain dread in expectation of judgment, and the rage of a fire which shall consume the adversaries. . . . It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:26-27, 31). St. Peter said of the same sinners: “For it had been better for them not to have known the way of justice, than after they have known it, to turn back from that holy commandment which was delivered to them” (II Pet. 2:21).

⁷⁷ Amos 7:2-3.

laid waste; and I will rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”⁷⁸

The law had been rejected and mocked; nevertheless, God did not react with full rigor. He did not permit that the just perish with the sinners. “Take not away my soul, O God, with the wicked nor my life with bloody men.”⁷⁹ “For behold I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among the nations, as corn is sifted in a sieve; and there shall not a little stone fall to the ground.”⁸⁰

The Bible formally testified that a small remnant of the people were to be saved. Even this remnant in whom God put all His hope, whom He jealously preserved from all misfortune, would they be more faithful to Him than the mass of the people who had rejected Him? Would they understand better the love He showed them? The biblical texts prove that, unfortunately, divine love would be neglected and disdained even by the intimate friends to whom all had been given.⁸¹ “Thou hast not known the time of thy visitation.”⁸²

⁷⁸ Amos 7:8–9. ⁷⁹ Ps. 25:9.

⁸⁰ Amos 9:9. This passage is somewhat puzzling in the Vulgate and Douay versions. It is clarified by the following note from *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1953): “The Massoretic text makes no mention of corn, and it is probable that the comparison is to the sifting of sand by a sandscreen. The latter allows the fine sand to pass through and retains all the stones. The nations are Yahweh’s sieve. Among them Israel is shaken; the good element represented by the pure sand passes through, falls to the ground, and is preserved, while the unworthy element represented by the stones fails to pass through and is cast away.” (Tr. note.)

⁸¹ Isaias stresses this notion of the “small remnant” (chap. 10). St. Paul, in commenting on the prophet, explained that divine choice “is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that

It is absolutely amazing that God’s love should have been so utterly misunderstood by those who received such manifest proof of it. Again and again Israel was snatched from threatening dangers; again and again divine blessings were showered upon the people. But graces, blessings and even punishments were all equally useless, for nothing touched their hearts. At least the Jews had one excuse which we Christians cannot give: before the coming of the Savior, Israel could not be fully aware of the full extent of God’s love for men. By way of excuse, it is often maintained that the whole atmosphere of the Old Testament is one of fear rather than of love. We hope that we have shown that God, who declared “I am the Lord, and I change not,”⁸³ revealed from the very beginning that He was, and is, Love.

From the very first days God truly displayed His love. If later He spoke of it openly and directly as a fact disdained and neglected by men, was it not because His works had already sufficed to make it evident, at least to the chosen people? Certain it is that God directly accuses Israel. But He likewise accuses Israel’s descendants in the faith, for the texts we are about to cite have an undeniable prophetic meaning. The veil concealing the days of the Redemption seemed to be drawn aside momentarily to show what welcome awaited the Savior who would give Himself for us, and what utter lack of appreciation would face Him in His expressions of love.⁸⁴

showeth mercy” (Rom. 9:16). So it is that He “endured with much patience vessels of wrath, fitted for destruction, that He might show the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He hath prepared unto glory” (Rom. 9:22–23).

⁸² Luke 19:44. ⁸³ Mal. 3:6.

⁸⁴ Most of the texts quoted in this chapter are used by the

The Old Testament realistically shows us the cruel evidence of the divine wooing to which we, like Israel, remain deaf. But it also displays the ineffaceable hope of a God who, in spite of everything, continues to long for union with His creatures. Does all this concern only one particular nation? Is its history a symbol of each of us, or of all mankind laboriously advancing toward ultimate glory? We have mentioned the different meanings which tradition has given to the word *bride*. In any case the voice we hear in these pages is that of a rejected bridegroom. "I have loved you, saith the Lord; and you have said: Wherein hast Thou loved us?"⁸⁵

In the words of Isaias God woefully complained that His love was disdained.

I will sing to my beloved the canticle of my cousin concerning His vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a hill in a fruitful place. And He fenced it in, and picked the stones out of it, and planted it with the choicest vines, and built a tower in the midst thereof, and set up a winepress therein; and He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and ye men of Juda, judge between Me and My vineyard. What is there that I ought to do more to My vineyard, that I have not done to it?⁸⁶

In spite of everything, God cannot give up the hope of bringing about the union with His people. "And He said: Surely they are My people, children that will not deny; so He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was not

Church in the liturgy, especially during Holy Week, thus stressing their prophetic meaning and showing how profitable it is to meditate upon them.

⁸⁵ Mal. 1:2. ⁸⁶ Isa. 5:1-4.

troubled, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love, and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He carried them and lifted them up all the days of old."⁸⁷ Literally, of course, this reproach is addressed to the Jewish people who were chosen and wed by Yahweh, but it is equally applicable to every soul that, by the grace of baptism, has been admitted to divine friendship and invited to the wedding feast. And have we not, all too often, acted like Israel when the Redeemer appeared? "They are gone far from Me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain."⁸⁸ In the vista of future days which, by His sacrifice, could become days of grace, God perceived the pattern of hostility or of abysmal indifference to His coming.⁸⁹

Who is blind, but My servant; or deaf, but he to whom I have sent My messengers? Who is blind, but he that is sold? Or who is blind, but the servant of the Lord?⁹⁰ Thou that seest many things, wilt thou not observe them? Thou that hast ears open, wilt thou not hear?⁹¹

For the day of vengeance is in My heart, the year of My redemption is come. I looked about, and there was none to help; I sought, and there was none to give aid. . . . I called and there was none that would answer; I have spoken, and they heard not; and they have done evil in My eyes, and have chosen the things that displeased Me.⁹²

⁸⁷ Isa. 63:8-9. ⁸⁸ Jer. 2:5.

⁸⁹ St. John was to say: "He came unto His own and His own received Him not" (John 1:11). The Gospels also showed that Jesus was most abused in the two cities where He might have expected the best welcome: Nazareth and Jerusalem.

⁹⁰ "The servant of the Lord" here refers not to the Messiah, as in chap. 53, but to Israel.

⁹¹ Isa. 42:19-20. ⁹² Isa. 63:4-5; 66:4.

The deserted Bridegroom searched everywhere for someone who might remain true to Him but He beheld only widespread treason and evil. "Go about through the streets of Jerusalem, and see, and consider, and seek in the broad places thereof, if you can find a man that executeth judgment and seeketh faith; and I will be merciful unto it."⁹³

Even God's word, which He had bestowed upon the people as a means of union, became instead a burden. "But if you shall say: The burden of the Lord, therefore thus saith the Lord: Because you have said this word: The burden of the Lord, and I have sent to you, saying: Say not: The burden of the Lord. Therefore behold I will take you away carrying you, and will forsake you, and the city which I gave to you, and to your fathers, out of My presence."⁹⁴

In His just anger would the betrayed and neglected Bridegroom destroy this world that rejected Him? Of old, in the midst of universal corruption, Noe, the one just and honest man, arose and through him the covenant was made. "The end of all flesh is come before Me, the earth is filled with iniquity through them, and I will destroy them with the earth. . . . And I will establish My covenant with thee."⁹⁵ Noe alone has found grace with God, but such a man was not found again. But God continues to stand at the door and knock; never, alas, receiving any response. "Because I came, and there was not a man; I called, and there was none that would hear. Is My hand shortened and become little, that I cannot redeem? Or is there no strength in Me to deliver?"⁹⁶

The home which God visits belongs to those with whom

⁹³ Jer. 5:1. ⁹⁴ Jer. 23:38-39. ⁹⁵ Gen. 6:13, 18.

⁹⁶ Isa. 50:2.

He had long ago established the covenant. He is their benefactor and their whole claim to glory. How then could they forget Him?

Your generation is like a ravaging lion. See ye the word of the Lord. Am I become a wilderness to Israel, or a lateward springing land? Why then have My people said: We are revolted, we will come to Thee no more? Will a virgin forget her ornament, or a bride her stomacher? But My people hath forgotten Me days without number. Why dost thou endeavor to show thy way good to seek My love, thou who hast also taught thy malices to be thy ways?⁹⁷

What reproach can be brought against God by this nation to which He has given imperishable blessings? "Thus saith the Lord: What iniquity have your fathers found in Me, that they are gone far from Me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain? . . . Do they provoke Me to anger, saith the Lord. Is it not themselves, to the confusion of their own countenance?"⁹⁸

Micheas' tones of bitter sadness seem to translate the sentiments of the Lord on seeing His blood shed in vain, His love scorned, while no one heeds Him. "Woe is Me, for I am become as one that gleaneth in autumn the grapes of the vintage; there is no cluster to eat, My soul desired the first ripe figs. The holy man is perished out of the earth, and there is none upright among men."⁹⁹

So great is the scandal that Jeremias prophetically calls the heavens to bear witness: "Be astonished, O ye heavens,

⁹⁷ Jer. 2:30-33. "And when He drew near, seeing the city, He wept over it, saying: If thou also hadst known, and that in this thy day, the things that are to thy peace" (Luke 19:41-42).

⁹⁸ Jer. 2:5; 7:19. ⁹⁹ Mich. 7:1-2.

at this, and ye gates thereof, be very desolate, saith the Lord.”¹⁰⁰ But what most pained the heart of God was the betrayal of those who had become His allies, with whom He was on terms of friendship, whom He had charged with the protection of His house and His treasury. “For if My enemy had reviled Me, I would verily have borne with it. And if he that hated Me had spoken great things against Me, I would perhaps have hidden Myself from him. But thou a man of one mind, My guide and My familiar, who didst take sweetmeats together with Me; in the house of God we walked with consent.”¹⁰¹ It was they who delivered Him to death, responding to His love with hatred:

For behold they have caught My soul; the mighty have rushed in upon Me; neither is it My iniquity nor My sin, O Lord, without iniquity have I run. . . . I am become a stranger to My brethren, and an alien to the sons of My mother. . . . And I looked for one that would grieve together with Me, but there was none; and for one that would comfort Me, and I found none. . . . They have spoken against Me with deceitful tongues; and they have compassed Me about with words of hatred; and have fought against Me without cause. Instead of making Me a return of love, they detracted Me; but I gave Myself to prayer. And they repaid Me evil for good; and hatred for My love.¹⁰²

At times an immense weariness seemed to fill the heart of God.¹⁰³ The Psalmist spoke of how He labored in vain and Zacharias said that the flock was tired of the Shepherd, while He also was tired and “I took My rod that was called

¹⁰⁰ Jer. 2:12. ¹⁰¹ Ps. 54:13–15.

¹⁰² Ps. 58:4–5; 68:9, 21; 108:3–5.

¹⁰³ Christ was to experience the blindness of His people, the hostility of the Pharisees, betrayal, denial, the desertion of His apostles. Are we more understanding and faithful?

Beauty, and I cut it asunder to make voice My covenant, which I had made with all people.”¹⁰⁴ But because of the weakest sheep of the flock who do truly appreciate Him, the hour eventually strikes once again when love overcomes force and justice is absorbed in mercy. Before this unresponsive nation, deaf to the Bridegroom’s appeals, Jeremias protested: “To whom shall I speak? And to whom shall I testify, that he may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, and they cannot hear.”¹⁰⁵ And yet God never ceases lamenting in gentle poignant tones: “O My people, what have I done to thee, or in what have I molested thee? Answer thou Me.”¹⁰⁶ Then from the depths of the divine heart comes the answer: “The counsel of the Lord standeth forever; the thoughts of His heart to all generations.”¹⁰⁷ However bitterly He may complain when He is deserted and His love scorned, love ultimately prevails in His unalterable heart. “Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore have I drawn thee, taking pity on thee.”¹⁰⁸ “And they shall know that I have loved thee.”¹⁰⁹

Israel’s desertion in failing to acknowledge Christ as Savior and Bridegroom was but the first of a long series of denials on the part of those who began by accepting Him and giving themselves to Him, but later betrayed Him. Can it then be said that the new covenant sealed in the blood of Christ was to result in failure, as did the old covenant? Because we know that God’s gifts are never rescinded, we may hope that the compassion He showed toward Israel will

¹⁰⁴ Zach. 11:10. ¹⁰⁵ Jer. 6:10. ¹⁰⁶ Mich. 6:4.

¹⁰⁷ Ps. 32:11.

¹⁰⁸ Jer. 31:3. “Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them unto the end” (John 13:1).

¹⁰⁹ Apoc. 3:9.

encompass us also, especially since He gave Israel mere promises, while the Redeemer brought us the reality. The new covenant is truly *new* because Christ's sacrifice released inexhaustible streams of charity. The Redemption contained torrents of grace powerful enough to overcome the floods of evil which, as God well knew, would continue to submerge the world even after the time of Christ. "Where sin abounded, grace did more abound."¹¹⁰

But God's heart never changes, and the same compassion He shows us in our sin was also evident in His treatment of His faithless bride. We may say likewise that in dealing with her, He also had us in mind. He desires, therefore, that we hear the words of merciful compassion which He spoke to faithless Israel and were intended for us also.¹¹¹

God beholds His bride and her pitiful state arouses His pity. His compassionate reproaches recall the pleas of the Father striving to bring the prodigal son back home. But certain slight, though real, differences of tone permit us to distinguish the Father's voice pleading with His child from that of the Bridegroom speaking to the bride. As Ezechiel had explained, each creature is first of all God's child¹¹² and afterward, if faithful, is called to become His bride.¹¹³ Both these aspects are constantly in the mind of God.

When the Bible reports the words of compassion and

¹¹⁰ Rom. 5:20.

¹¹¹ The Gospel, which preaches forgiveness to the extent of seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:22) and asserts that publicans and harlots will precede the just in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 21:32), places no limit on the work of grace and our reliance upon it. But it also warns that the abuse of grace will be severely punished. "Go, and sin no more," said Christ each time He pardoned. St. Paul likewise stressed the same lesson (Rom. 6:12).

¹¹² Cf. Ezech., chap. 16.

¹¹³ Jerusalem, which the Old Testament often called either the

pardon uttered by God, through His prophets to Jerusalem, it is apparent that He addresses a bride, particularly in the texts depicting the infidelity of the city. God is truly a Bridegroom yearning over His beloved in her hour of trouble and pain. "For who shall have pity on thee, O Jerusalem? Or who shall bemoan thee? Or who shall go to pray for thy peace?"¹¹⁴ If the Bridegroom Himself does not come to her help, she cannot recover, for those who claimed to love her, desert her in the time of trial.

For thus saith the Lord: Thy bruise is incurable, thy wound is very grievous. There is none to judge thy judgment to bind it up; thou hast no healing medicines. All thy lovers have forgotten thee, and will not seek after thee: . . . Why criest thou for thy affliction? Thy sorrow is incurable; for the multitude of thy iniquity and for thy hardened sins I have done these things to thee. Therefore all they that devour thee, shall be devoured; and all thy enemies shall be carried into captivity; and they that waste thee shall be wasted, and all that prey upon thee will I give for a prey. For I will close up thy scar and will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the Lord. Because they have called thee, O Sion, an outcast. This is she that hath none to seek after her. Thus saith the Lord: Behold I will bring back the captivity of the pavilions of Jacob, and will have pity on his houses.¹¹⁵

Seeing the suffering of the people, Jeremias, in the name of God Himself, cries out with broken-hearted grief, expressing God's pity for His afflicted bride.

To what shall I compare thee? Or to what shall I liken thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? To what shall I equal thee, that I

virgin of Israel or *daughter of Sion*, became in the Apocalypse a symbol of both the bride and the Church.

¹¹⁴ Jer. 15:5. ¹¹⁵ Jer. 30:12-18.

may comfort thee, O virgin daughter of Sion? For great as the sea is thy destruction; who shall heal thee? ¹¹⁶

My sorrow is above sorrow, my heart mourneth within me. Behold the voice of the daughter of my people from a far country. Is not the Lord in Sion, or is not her king in her? . . . For the affliction of the daughter of my people I am afflicted, and made sorrowful, astonishment hath taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Galaad? Or is there no physician there? Why then is not the wound of the daughter of my people closed? ¹¹⁷

Guilty she was, but her suffering and trials have prepared the way for pardon, because love still survives in the Bridegroom's heart. How tactful and tender are His words, which convey His intention to erase all past faults and even to forget them. With a gesture of infinite mercy, He will give back to the soul the love which He had never ceased to keep for her, but which He had to hide in the depths of His heart.

Fear not, for thou shalt not be confounded, nor blush; for thou shalt not be put to shame, because thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and shalt remember no more the reproach of thy widowhood. For He that made thee shall rule over thee, the Lord of hosts is His name; and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, shall be called the God of all the earth. For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and mourning in spirit, and as a wife cast off from her youth, said thy God. For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a moment of indignation have I hid My face a little while from thee, but with everlasting kindness have I had mercy on thee, said the Lord thy Redeemer. This thing is to Me as in the days of Noe, to whom I swore, that I would no more

¹¹⁶ Lam. 2:13. ¹¹⁷ Jer. 8:18–22.

bring in the waters of Noe upon the earth; so have I sworn not to be angry with thee, and not to rebuke thee. For the mountains shall be moved, and the hills shall tremble; but My mercy shall not depart from thee, and the covenant of My peace shall not be moved, said the Lord that hath mercy on thee. O poor little one, tossed with tempest, without all comfort, behold I will lay thy stones in order, and will lay thy foundations with sapphires, and I will make thy bulwarks of jasper, and thy gates of graven stones, and all thy borders of desirable stones. All thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children. ¹¹⁸

The covenant, far from being repudiated, is even extended to the children of the beloved, whether they be born of the promise or of the unlawful union. In the words just quoted, "For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee" and "All thy children shall be taught of the Lord," can we not see that while God addresses Jerusalem, He also speaks, through the holy city, to all those within her walls, that is, the Church which He builds in unity, and the whole world which He mercifully promises to heal? "Therefore fear thou not. . . . For I am with thee, . . . and will heal thee of thy wounds." ¹¹⁹

With a gesture of exquisite tact, the Bridegroom chooses to recall only the days of fidelity and happiness which He enjoyed with His bride in the early period of Israel's history.

¹¹⁸ Isa. 54:4–13.

¹¹⁹ Jer. 30:10, 11, 17. Christ was to show the same care and gentleness toward all who wished to repent, who tried to be converted. Finding the proper attitude in Mary Magdalen, He praised her for it in speaking to the Pharisee (Luke 7:44–46) and elsewhere He taught by the parable of the year's grace granted to the fig tree in the hope of its bearing fruit (Luke 13:7).

"I have remembered thee, pitying thy youth, and the love of thy espousals, when thou followedst Me in the desert, in a land that is not sown."¹²⁰ This determination to search in the ashes for the spark of fidelity that still glows in the bride's heart shows that nothing can extinguish the Bridegroom's love, source of her unwavering trust. The time has come for her to cast off all fear, to live in hope.

Be comforted, be comforted, My people, saith your God. Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, and call to her; for her evil is come to an end, her iniquity is forgiven; she hath received of the hand of the Lord double for all her sins.¹²¹

Fear not, for I have redeemed thee, and called thee by thy name; thou art Mine. . . . Since thou becamest honorable in My eyes, thou art glorious; I have loved thee, and I will give men for thee, and people for thy life.¹²²

The pardon promised by His pure and merciful love is granted in advance: "I am, I am He that blot out thy iniquities for My own sake, and I will not remember thy sins. . . . O Israel, forget Me not. I have blotted out thy iniquities as a cloud, and thy sins as a mist; return to Me, for I have redeemed thee."¹²³ In her still weakened state, let her lean confidently on the arm stretched toward her, for the Savior approaching her with such love is her Bridegroom. "Fear not, for I am with thee; turn not aside, for I am thy God; I have strengthened thee and have helped thee, and the right hand of My just one hath upheld thee. . . . For I am the Lord thy God, who take thee by the hand, and say to thee: Fear not, I have helped thee."¹²⁴ He will bind and heal all her wounds.

¹²⁰ Jer. 2:2. ¹²¹ Isa. 40:1-2. ¹²² Isa. 43:1, 4.

¹²³ Isa. 43:25; 44:21-22. ¹²⁴ Isa. 41:10-13.

Behold I will close their wounds and give them health, and I will cure them; and I will reveal to them the prayer of peace and truth. And I will bring back the captivity of Juda, and the captivity of Jerusalem; and I will build them as from the beginning. And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against Me; and I will forgive all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned against Me and despised Me.¹²⁵

We know now what perfect balm God was preparing in order to cure her wounds and soothe her pain. The day was approaching when Israel, the beloved bride, could look up at her Bridegroom wounded for the sake of love and dead for the price of her ransom.

In that day man shall bow down himself to his Maker, and his eyes shall look to the Holy One of Israel.¹²⁶

And I will pour out upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of prayers; and they shall look upon Me, whom they have pierced.¹²⁷

Not only will all the divine promises of pardon be fulfilled, but love will appear still greater in the guise of mercy. Then the fountain gushing from the open, pierced heart of the Bridegroom will pour its waters into the bride's heart that has been opened and softened by the tears of contrition.

And they shall mourn for Him as one mourneth for an only son, and they shall grieve over Him as the manner is to grieve for the death of the firstborn. . . . In that day there shall be a fountain open to the house of David, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem; for the washing of the sinner, and of the unclean woman. . . . And they shall say to Him: What are these

¹²⁵ Jer. 33:6-8. ¹²⁶ Isa. 17:7.

¹²⁷ Zach. 12:10; John 19:37.

wounds in the midst of Thy hands? And He shall say: With these I was wounded in the house of them that love Me.¹²⁸

The entire Old Testament points to the great figure of Christ and hints that all forgiveness and all saving remedies will come from Him. The prophets, anticipating the day of salvation which they see as already present, invite Jerusalem and all its inhabitants to draw forth water from the torrent that flowed from the right side of the temple,¹²⁹ which is the open heart of Christ. There all stain will be washed away and all iniquity effaced. The sheep who were seeking their fold will see the gate opening on the place of their rest.¹³⁰ They gained entry over the body of Christ which they had crushed. From it gushed out a mighty stream, a torrent of grace. The bride will find her thirst quenched, her hunger satisfied, her loneliness superabundantly relieved.¹³¹ The stream from which she drinks, which "savors of eternal life,"¹³² arouses in her soul the burning desire to travel back to its source in the heart of the Bridegroom and to dwell there always. The bride should listen to Him who draws all things to Himself, who urges her to enter the sanctuary where she can be united to her Bridegroom and "abide in His love."¹³³ Let us recall Ezechiel's prediction in this connection. "And I will take away the stony heart out of their

¹²⁸ Zach. 12:10; 13:1, 6. ¹²⁹ Cf. Ezech. 47:2.

¹³⁰ Cf. Heb. 3:7, 19; 4:1-10. These texts, quoting Psalm 94, deal with the rest we will attain in the joy of Christ.

¹³¹ "And on the last and great day of the festivity, Jesus stood and cried, saying: If any man thirst, let him come to Me, and drink" (John 7:37). Cf. also John 6:35.

¹³² St. John of the Cross, *op. cit.*, III, p. 513.

¹³³ John 15:9.

flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh."¹³⁴ What a mysterious substitution!

But we all know that love yearns for such a renewal, yearns to cast off the past and forget it forever. Are not all things possible for God? And the bride's new heart which Scripture mentions is the dowry, the Bridegroom's gift to her, His own heart. At last the time for contrite tears has passed. Without waiting until Christ arrives to renew the covenant and to seal it with His blood, the Old Testament hymns the beauties and joys of the union that will be ever indissoluble. The Bible particularly stresses the fact that all sins will be forgotten and the bride totally reinstated, because its whole orientation is toward the union that God's pardon will make possible. The Old Testament, moreover, is not content merely to glimpse and desire this union, but sings its praises in eager, sweet, happy tones of perfect music never to be surpassed. The union immediately follows the pardon, almost without transition, as if God were eager to pour into the heart of His bride His love, so long spurned and neglected.¹³⁵ This clearly proves how gratuitous is divine mercy and how vast and beautiful is forgiving love.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Ezech. 11:19.

¹³⁵ The same absence of transition between pardon and union is found in the parable of the prodigal son. Is it not the father who sees the child approaching from afar, rushes to meet him, hardly giving him time to acknowledge his sin, embraces him, prepares a great welcome, shows him the tenderest love, and reinstates him as son and heir, restoring all his privileges without exception?

¹³⁶ While this viewpoint stresses the overwhelming force of divine love, it should not cause us to forget another aspect of the soul's union with God: the tremendous and progressive effort required on the part of the soul.

MYSTICAL UNION

He that abideth in charity, abideth in God, and God in him.¹³⁷

The Bible is pregnant with promised mercy, but it is also and first of all a herald of divine hope and joy. Though the sacred books give much attention to our wretched state, at the same time they keep inviting the soul to set forth on the path of absolute trust, with reliance on God's word. Scarcely have the tears been dried when the song of thanksgiving arises. Beyond all pardons, even beyond the Redemption, one great fact stands out: our vocation as children of God, created in His image, called first to union with Him on earth, afterward to eternal life with Him in a state of truth and charity. "They that are faithful in love shall rest in Him; for grace and peace is to His elect."¹³⁸

The Bible describes the triumphal procession to the marriage feast. Like glittering gems set in its pages, there shine here and there the joyful smiles and throbbing love of hearts purified by trials. They seem to have harvested in advance the merits of Christ's sacrifice and, being restored to grace, they have attained a wholly spiritual union with God.

It was necessary that the promises be fulfilled, that all stain be washed away, that we be "bought with a great price,"¹³⁹ before we could recover the dignity of divine friendship. Such a relationship between equals required an intimacy as close as that suggested by the terms *bride* and *bridegroom*. We need not stress that in our day the intimacy is even closer and more demanding than in Old Testament times, for by the Incarnation and the Redemption God has truly willed to be united to us in the closest way possible.

¹³⁷ I John 4:16.

¹³⁸ Wisd. 3:9.

¹³⁹ I Cor. 6:20.

The union is founded upon the Incarnation, for by it God has wedded our human nature in a divine marriage or, as the liturgy puts it, *admirabile commercium*.¹⁴⁰

When Christ reconciled sinners with God by His coming and by His work, He not only *formed* an alliance with mankind, but in the mystery and the fact of His two natures He *was* the alliance. Human nature truly became His bride, when He was wedded to it in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He sealed the bond of union in His flesh; He raised His bride to divine dignity by the shedding of His blood. Like a royal husband sharing with His chosen bride and with those to be born of her His titles, His wealth, His privileges, Christ, with even greater generosity, conferred on us, by His sacrifice, all that belonged to Him. The Canticle of Canticles tells us that He brought His beloved into His wine-cellar.¹⁴¹ On the other hand, the Fathers of the Church have always interpreted the story of God's creating Eve from the side of the sleeping Adam as an image of the Church, sprung from the open side of Christ. St. Augustine taught that the Bridegroom is the whole Christ—Himself as the Head and His Church as the body, the bride and the Bridegroom being two in one flesh.

Now that the full reality lies before our eyes, the promises of the Old Testament take on their true meaning. For many

¹⁴⁰ Antiphon of Vespers, Feast of the Circumcision.

¹⁴¹ Cant. 2:4. The scope of this work does not permit further development of this mystery which belongs to the New Testament, nor can we describe how the union is deepened and increased by the reception of the Blessed Eucharist. Scripture had, however, prophesied it in the figure of the manna sent down from heaven. The texts used in the liturgy of the Blessed Sacrament reveal the hidden meaning of these images.

centuries faithful souls were sustained by belief in their accomplishment and they realized that they concealed mighty mysteries. "Abraham your father rejoiced that he might see My day; he saw it, and was glad."¹⁴² The Bible also gives a glimpse of the gestures of fervent love belonging to this mysterious union with Christ who, by opening to us the doors of His sheepfold, wishes to bring us, even here on earth, into the stream of love where He lives in the heart of the Trinity. Later we shall seek out the paths followed by the soul as well as the trouble and joy of its upward journey. While the present section at times refers also to these pathways, its principal purpose is to describe the seal of love stamped on the pardoned and purified soul which possesses God.

The union is an infinitely generous and wholly gratuitous gift. Even the love of the bride can be no more than a sharing of divine love. To extol mystical union, therefore, is to extol God's love for the soul and to extol divine love in itself. This love, which gives itself and lets itself be possessed, puts a unique accent of joy and triumph in the texts where Scripture discloses something of the intimate relationship between the Bridegroom and the bride. Thus, even before He appears, the Bridegroom arouses desire in His bride. "Smelling sweet of the best ointments, Thy name is as oil poured out; therefore young maidens have loved Thee. Draw me; we will run after Thee to the odor of Thy ointments."¹⁴³ In racing toward Him, the soul seems to forget all personal concerns and leaps over all obstacles, for beyond them shines love, in the very heart of God. The chief purpose of the Canticle of Canticles is to arouse in us the thirst for the infinite love that God wishes to bestow upon us. It is true

¹⁴² John 8:56. ¹⁴³ Cant. 1:2-3.

that later we must be touched by the painful fire that must purify us before transforming us. But henceforth we shall know one thing about love: the "name which is above all names."¹⁴⁴

Here and there throughout Scripture isolated verses seem to aspire to that deep interior life hidden from men's eyes, but the best guide on the pathway of divine love is the Canticle of Canticles. While this book still seems obscure,¹⁴⁵ at least it seems certain that it is not a profane song transposed to a divine key. Well integrated with the other inspired writings and abounding in messianic and eschatological overtones, it sings of the love of Yahweh and Israel. Christian tradition has always seen in it the union of Christ with the Church or with the soul. No more beautiful poem of mystical love has ever been given to men.

St. Bernard maintains that the Canticle needs less to be known than to be lived, so that it requires fervor and experience. Its words are a song; its song rises from the heart more than the lips; it is a harmony not of voices but of wills. Elsewhere the same Saint speaks of the all-absorbing nature of love, which the Bridegroom esteems more than honor or admiration, especially since in this case the Bridegroom Himself *is* love, for "God is love."¹⁴⁶ The only theme of the canticle is love, and only those who love can understand it. A cold heart cannot receive words of fire.¹⁴⁷ "He said to him: Follow Me. And leaving all things, he rose up and followed Him."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Phil. 2:9.

¹⁴⁵ Not only in its expressions and images, but also in its general content. The name of God is mentioned only once, at the very end.

¹⁴⁶ I John 4:8.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. St. Bernard, Sermons 1, 2, *In Cantico* and Sermon 83.

¹⁴⁸ Luke 5:27-28.

The Bridegroom comes to meet the bride and He is truly the jealous God whom all Scripture portrays,¹⁴⁹ jealous because He alone is worthy of being loved by His creature; jealous because He alone loves her with an infinite love. "Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline thy ear; and forget thy people and thy father's house. And the King shall greatly desire thy beauty."¹⁵⁰

God longs to arouse in the soul a desire to love Him above all else, to prefer Him to all that is not Himself. He wants her to be drawn toward Him irresistibly, by the same attraction that brings Him to her, by the beauty which He has given her when He heaped all His gifts upon her. "All the glory of the King's daughter is within."¹⁵¹ This beauty is concealed from the soul itself, but it is evident to God who alone knows the value of all the graces by which He has saved it, redeemed it, raised it to Himself. Gradually the soul will realize this. It is well that for a time she should know only her weakness and her total inability to respond to God's desire. But Scripture shows how she is guided and

¹⁴⁹ Christ's words in the Gospel are uttered in equally jealous tones, when He demands His disciples' love. "Do not think that I came to send peace upon earth: I came not to send peace, but the sword. For I came to set a man at variance against his father. . . . He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:34-37). And St. Paul said: "I count all things to be but loss for the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ . . . for whom . . . I count them but as dung, that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). He wrote also to the Corinthians: "I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God. For I have espoused you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (II Cor. 11:2).

¹⁵⁰ Ps. 44:12-13.

¹⁵¹ Ps. 44:14 (Vulgate and Douay versions).

encouraged by the presentiment of His love. "Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth."¹⁵²

If this divine flame but touches her, she shall blaze with love. Once the Bridegroom marks her with His fiery seal, she becomes capable of responding to His love, of contemplating His dazzling beauty, of journeying in ways that were previously unattainable. "His eye shall see the King in his beauty, they shall see the land far off."¹⁵³ Truly it is a new land that opens before the soul, where all previous knowledge becomes useless, where she would not venture to set foot if she were not attracted and guided by the voice which speaks gently within the heart. "Behold I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness; and I will speak to her heart. And I will give her vinedressers out of the same place. . . . And I will espouse thee to Me for ever; and I will espouse thee to Me in justice, and judgment, and in mercy, and in commiserations. And I will espouse thee to Me in faith; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord."¹⁵⁴

We may be sure that this time of espousals and promises will be accompanied by some suffering. In its heart to heart meeting with God, the soul has to learn what He demands as He beckons to her. For He who loves is a God; His love shows the divine extremes of stern jealousy and profound tenderness, of justice and forgiveness. He crushes the soul, but also charms her, giving proof of divine mercy and bringing her to an intimacy that can never be disturbed. It is a time for prolonged waiting, a time for fidelity to be tested. "And it shall be in that day, saith the Lord, that she shall call Me: My husband."¹⁵⁵ These words were by no means

¹⁵² Cant. 1:2.

¹⁵³ Isa. 33:17.

¹⁵⁴ Osee 2:14, 19, 20.

¹⁵⁵ Osee 2:16.

futile and they constitute more than a mere hope, assuring to the bride a right over the one who gives Himself to her—the right to win His love,¹⁵⁶ which will fill her heart with joy. Is not this the whole plot of the Cantic of Canticles? Only by reading it and meditating upon it word by word, can we grasp its rhythm, as the bride constantly advances toward the Bridegroom, becoming ever more closely bound to Him, until they attain total union. While the quest is often painful, the inspired writer's keynote is love, the strength and support of the bride; love, destined to be her treasure and her perfect happiness. The last words of the Cantic emphasize that love compensates for all sufferings; to surmount them, the soul need only be conquered by love. "If a man should give all the substance of his house for love, he shall despise it as nothing."¹⁵⁷

A cry of sheer joy is uttered by the bride as she realizes how all defilement vanishes in the blessed flames of mercy. "I am black, but beautiful, O ye daughters of Jerusalem. . . . Do not consider me that I am brown, because the sun hath altered my color. . . . The voice of my Beloved, behold He cometh."¹⁵⁸

Not only is she free of shame, but she glories in God's benefits, shows them to others, and extols her Lover who has pardoned all her strayings. "My vineyard I have not kept."¹⁵⁹ Henceforth she belongs to her husband and no longer wishes to wander away from Him. She prays with gentle humility: "Show me, O Thou whom my soul loveth,

¹⁵⁶ "Not as though I had already attained, or were already perfect; but I follow after, if I may by any means apprehend, wherein I am also apprehended by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12).

¹⁵⁷ Cant. 8:7. ¹⁵⁸ Cant. 1:5–6; 2:8. ¹⁵⁹ Cant. 1:5.

where Thou feedest, where Thou liest in the midday, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of Thy companions."¹⁶⁰ She remains near Him and the delicate fragrance of her budding love rises from her heart. "While the King was at his repose, my spikenard sent forth the odor thereof. A bundle of myrrh is my Beloved to me, He shall abide between my breasts."¹⁶¹

He, in turn, contemplates her, seeing how His mercy has purified and transformed her, admiring her limpid eyes, the mirror of His own beauty. "Behold thou art fair, O My love, behold thou art fair, thy eyes are as those of doves."¹⁶² These words kindle a response in the bride's heart: "Behold Thou art fair, my Beloved, and comely. Our bed is flourishing."¹⁶³ She marvels at the sight of the dwelling into which He has led her. All barriers fall, as she sees and feels her own transformation. She is a new creature, exulting in the fresh purity that possesses her. "I am the flower of the field, and the lily of the valleys."¹⁶⁴ Her lover seems so infinitely great and beautiful that she is stirred to the very depths by His incomprehensible choice. Her assent is uttered with artless simplicity and obtains what she requests. "I sat down under His shadow, whom I desired; and His fruit was sweet to my palate. He brought me into the cellar of wine, He set in order charity in me."¹⁶⁵

But the soul that sought to drink from the cup of divine love is all too weak as yet and far from capable of bearing its effects. Scarcely has she sipped it than she faints. But even in her weakness she surrenders with perfect trust, because she knows how much she is loved. "Stay me up with

¹⁶⁰ Cant. 1:6. ¹⁶¹ Cant. 1:11–12. ¹⁶² Cant. 1:14.

¹⁶³ Cant. 1:15. ¹⁶⁴ Cant. 2:1. ¹⁶⁵ Cant. 2:3–4.

flowers, compass me about with apples; because I languish with love. His left hand is under my head, and His right hand shall embrace me.”¹⁶⁶ The bride’s desire arouses in the Bridegroom the response she yearns for. Tenderly cherished, she gives herself completely to her Lover and her Protector. She falls asleep peacefully in His arms. “I adjure you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, . . . that you stir not up, nor make the beloved to awake, till she please.”¹⁶⁷

But love’s pledges never reach a standstill; as love increases, the bride feels a vehement longing that surges within her, like the approach of springtime reviving the barren earth and covering it with flowers, like an urgent invitation to go seeking the Bridegroom.

The voice of my Beloved; behold He cometh! . . . Behold my Beloved speaketh to me: Arise, make haste, My love, My dove, My beautiful one, and come. For winter is now past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land, . . . the vines in flower yield their sweet smell. Arise, My love, My beautiful one, and come; My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall, show Me thy face, let thy voice sound in My ears; for thy voice is sweet, and thy face comely.¹⁶⁸

But a tremor sounds in the Beloved’s voice, as He sees how weak His bride still is. He wants to drive off the band of thieves that threaten to destroy their love. “Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines; for our vineyard hath flourished.”¹⁶⁹ But the bride prefers to ignore the danger, for she is absolutely confident that love will be victorious. How could her enemies prevail against the wonderful reality of, “My beloved to me, and I to Him”?¹⁷⁰ She wants love to

¹⁶⁶ Cant. 2:5, 6.¹⁶⁷ Cant. 2:7.¹⁶⁸ Cant. 2:8, 10–14.¹⁶⁹ Cant. 2:15.¹⁷⁰ Cant. 2:16.

bind her ever more closely and she urges the Bridegroom to protect and guard her and never leave her. “Till the day break, and the shadows retire, return.”¹⁷¹

She fears the night, closing in upon her from every direction. She needs to feel the presence of her love. But the Beloved wants to cure this sensual craving; He wants to strengthen His bride’s faith and to sharpen her supernatural insight in order that He may give Himself to her more fully. Suddenly she realizes that she is alone in the darkness and she gropes in every direction: “In my bed by night I sought Him whom my soul loveth; I sought Him, and found Him not.”¹⁷² Leaving her dwelling, she goes searching for the Bridegroom and inquires of the guardians of the city, that is, the faculties which in her have not yet been conquered by love. In vain does she seek. But as soon as she overcomes her doubts and wanderings, as soon as she passes beyond them, then she finds her Beloved once more and cries out in joy: “I held him; and I will not let him go.”¹⁷³ Once more the Bridegroom shows compassion in the face of these awkward efforts and impatient desires, for He knows that only thus can the bride’s faith and generosity grow stronger. He will, therefore, wait as long as may be necessary. “Stir not up, nor awake My beloved, till she please.”¹⁷⁴

A fragrance of prayer and penance, the traces of a fire that has consumed all impurity, mark the return of the beloved from the desert where she accomplished the long and laborious days of her betrothal. “Who is she that goeth up by the desert, as a pillar of smoke of aromatical spices, of myrrh, and frankincense, and of all the powders of the

¹⁷¹ Cant. 2:17.¹⁷² Cant. 3:4.¹⁷³ Cant. 3:1.¹⁷⁴ Cant. 3:5.

perfumer?"¹⁷⁵ Her Lover walks toward her, resplendent with promises of secret joys and wearing the crown, "the diadem, wherewith His mother crowned Him in the day of His espousals, in the day of the joy of His heart." He sees the beauty of His perfect bride and His enraptured heart intones her praises in an infinitely tender and respectful song:

Thou art all fair, O My love, and there is not a spot in thee. Come from Libanus, My spouse, come from Libanus, come. . . . Thou hast wounded My heart, My sister, My spouse, thou hast wounded My heart with one of thy eyes, and with one hair of thy neck. . . . Thy lips, My spouse, are as a dropping honeycomb, . . . and the smell of thy garments, as the smell of frankincense. My sister, My spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up.¹⁷⁶

She is a pure and spotless maiden preparing for her wedding. At length the final union can take place. The bride calls her Lover with a cry that reveals how love sprang up and flourished when the Spirit breathed within her heart. "Arise, O north wind, and come, O south wind, blow through my garden, and let the aromatical spices thereof flow. Let my Beloved come into His garden, and eat the fruit of His apple trees."¹⁷⁷

What a wonderful mystery of Love finding its whole delight in itself: "I am come into My garden, O My sister, My spouse, I have gathered My myrrh, with My aromatical spices; I have eaten the honeycomb with My honey, I have drunk My wine with My milk; eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated, My dearly beloved."¹⁷⁸

But what happens then? Can it be that love has not yet

¹⁷⁵ Cant. 3:6. ¹⁷⁶ Cant. 4:7-12. ¹⁷⁷ Cant. 4:16; 5:1.

¹⁷⁸ Cant. 5:1.

attained its ultimate repletion and rest? Are there more nights of anguish and absence to be endured? "I sleep, and my heart watcheth; the voice of My beloved knocking: Open to Me, My sister, My love, My dove, My undefiled."¹⁷⁹

The Lover stimulated a new desire in the Bride's heart; this time she was watching without anxiety during the night and as soon as she heard His voice, her heart was deeply moved. "I opened the bolt of my door to my Beloved; but He had turned aside, and was gone."¹⁸⁰ Even when union is attained, love must continue to increase and the bride must struggle to defend it. He has fled, but she hastens to follow His steps, strives to rejoin Him at any cost, oblivious of the suffering involved in her painful quest.¹⁸¹ "I sought Him, and found Him not; I called, and He did not answer me. The keepers that go about the city found me; they struck me; and wounded me."¹⁸²

Is this a return of the old enemies, never entirely conquered? Is she persecuted and scorned for her wild love? Only souls who have experienced such pangs to preserve their love can understand what it means. But suffering mat-

¹⁷⁹ Cant. 5:2. ¹⁸⁰ Cant. 5:6.

¹⁸¹ The love of the bride in the Canticle evokes that of Mary Magdalen. "But Mary stood at the sepulchre without, weeping. . . . And she saw two angels in white. . . . They say to her: Woman, why weepest thou? She saith to them: Because they have taken away my Lord; and I know not where they have laid Him. When she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing; and she knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith to her: Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? She, thinking that it was the gardener, saith to him: Sir, if thou hast taken Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away. Jesus saith to her: Mary. She turning, saith to Him: Rabboni (which is to say, Master)" (John 10:11-16).

¹⁸² Cant. 5:6-7.

ters little, provided love remains intact. The bride anxiously questions her companions, confesses her love. "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my Beloved, that you tell Him that I languish with love."¹⁸³ All this suffering is purifying and fruitful.

The Bridegroom comes to her in quiet solitude and rejoices her by His spiritual presence in a union of ever deeper love. "My Beloved is gone down into His garden, to the bed of aromatical spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies."¹⁸⁴ Henceforth the bride will find her joy in being plundered by the one she cherishes with true love, in surrendering all to Him, in giving without stint, in returning to Him all that she has received from Him. "I to my Beloved, and my Beloved to me."¹⁸⁵ This is the pure and disinterested love which is not content to receive, as formerly, but longs to give ever more and more. Such generous and noble love merits the Lover's homage. "Thou art beautiful, O My love, sweet and comely as Jerusalem; terrible as an army set in array."¹⁸⁶ The maidens proclaim her happiness and praise the new splendor of her beauty. "Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array? . . . Return, return, O Sulamitess, return, return that we may behold thee."¹⁸⁷

Then love rises in her, like a filling ripe fruit, while the Lover speaks with rich elaborate imagery, imbued with deep meaning, redolent of sweet fragrance. "How beautiful art thou, and how comely, My dearest, in delights! Thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes."¹⁸⁸ Love's cup is poured out for the Beloved. The bride's im-

¹⁸³ Cant. 5:8.¹⁸⁴ Cant. 6:1.¹⁸⁵ Cant. 6:2.¹⁸⁶ Cant. 6:3.¹⁸⁷ Cant. 6:9, 12.¹⁸⁸ Cant. 7:6.

pulse to possess is replaced by her gift of self which is constantly renewed by her desire for her Lover. "I to my Beloved, and His turning is toward me."¹⁸⁹ Anxiety vanishes and is replaced by a vast and peaceful rhythm, as the bride anticipates her Lover's desires. "Come, my Beloved, let us go forth into the field, let us abide in the villages. Let us get up early to the vineyards, let us see . . . if the flowers are ready to bring forth fruits, if the pomegranates flourish; there will I give Thee my breasts."¹⁹⁰

But one desire remains in her blissful heart, an infinitely pure and chaste desire, as transparent as love itself, no longer possible to conceal. "Who shall give Thee to me for my brother, . . . that I may find Thee without, . . . and bring Thee into my mother's house; there Thou shalt teach me, and I will give Thee a cup of spiced wine and new wine of my pomegranates."¹⁹¹

After a short silence the bride appears again, this time no longer solitary, but publicly accompanied by her Lover and adorned in radiant beauty. Her whole life stems from her one and only love, a divine love, a jealous love that has completely conquered her. "Who is this that cometh up from the desert?"¹⁹²

As the Canticle reaches its end, it extols mystical union and sings of God's eternal love which is infused into souls in order to ravish, possess, purify, burn and transform them. As love aroused the first desire, so too it crowns the work. It uttered the first word and the last, thus teaching us that no merit of ours can procure this love, this gift of grace and mercy, God's gratuitous bounty. "Put Me as a seal upon thy

¹⁸⁹ Cant. 7:10.¹⁹⁰ Cant. 7:11-12.¹⁹¹ Cant. 8:1-2.¹⁹² Cant. 8:5.

heart, as a seal upon thy arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy as hard as hell, the lamps thereof are fire and flames. Many waters cannot quench charity, neither can the floods drown it.”¹⁹³

FRUITS OF THE UNION

Give praise, O thou barren, that bearest not; sing forth praise, and make a joyful noise, thou that didst not travail with child; for many are the children of the desolate, more than of her that hath a husband, saith the Lord.¹⁹⁴

He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit. . . . In this is My Father glorified; that you bring forth very much fruit.¹⁹⁵

As a song of mystical love, the Canticle of Canticles is not intended to describe the fruits of the union of Yahweh and Israel. But the Bible frequently refers to the twofold effects of fertility and the glorious reign of the bride with the Bridegroom. “Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water,”¹⁹⁶ said Christ, and also: “He that abideth in Me . . . beareth much fruit.” The stem which is grafted on to the vinestock bears flowers and fruits. United to her God, the bride becomes fertile and thereby achieves glory in time and in eternity. “I will lead her into the wilderness . . . And I will give her vinedressers.”¹⁹⁷

The bride extolled in the Bible is, of course, the soul united to God, but she is also and more particularly Jerusalem, the supreme image of the Church, Christ’s glorious bride who is wonderfully fertile. By discovering in the Bible what God promises, not to the old, but to the new Jerusalem,

¹⁹³ Cant. 8:6–7.

¹⁹⁴ Isa. 54:1.

¹⁹⁵ John 15:5, 8.

¹⁹⁶ John 7:38.

¹⁹⁷ Osee 2:14–15.

that is, the Church, we can understand what fruits God develops in those who are united to Him in love and fidelity; we can see what fertility and what glory He keeps in store for the bride.

The bride, in her union with the Beloved, tastes an immense joy, but this is not all that God, in His mercy, intends for her. The grace and joy of union bring complete satisfaction, while at the same time arousing in the bride a yearning for real motherhood as well as a need to share and to diffuse the blessed life that she continually receives. She transposes to a spiritual key Rachel’s ancient cry: “Give me children, otherwise I shall die.”¹⁹⁸ The fruit of divine love for which she longs is the spiritual maternity which peoples the heavenly kingdom. For that is the city the Bible refers to in speaking of the bride’s fertility and of the total fulfillment of all promises. Have not the Scriptures constantly predicted a kingdom of God’s children to be born of faith in one Father, redemption by one Savior, and the fertility of a bride united to her God? Of old it was Jerusalem; now it is the Church that is the bride whose fertility is praised throughout the Bible in images of dazzling splendor.

Dynamic energy animates the entire Old Testament and sweeps it on to its destination. The starting point of the history it records seems unimportant and insignificant: a nomad leaves his country when urged by an inner voice. But the end of this story, predicted from the beginning and still being shaped at the present time, is out of all proportion to its obscure origin: a nation as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand of the sea, a union of all nations in the heart of God. Scripture always hails this holy kingdom by

¹⁹⁸ Gen. 30:1.

the name of *Sion*, the name of the bride who was the earthly mother of God's people and carries out the divine promises. The Psalmist contemplated a prophetic vision of Sion's increase and universality.¹⁹⁹

The foundations thereof are in the holy mountains; the Lord loveth the gates of Sion above all the tabernacles of Jacob. Glorious things are said of thee, O city of God. . . . Behold the foreigners, and Tyre, and the people of the Ethiopians, these were there. Shall not Sion say: This man and that man is born in her? And the Highest himself hath founded her. The Lord shall tell in His writings of peoples and of princes, of them that have been in her. The dwelling in thee is at it were of all rejoicing.²⁰⁰

The Gospel also speaks of this increase and describes it by means of another symbol: "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed

¹⁹⁹ The inspired authors strove to convey to the Jews the exalted notion of spiritual fertility, but only in the Christian era did this notion become associated with the practice of virginity. This involves no contradiction of the Bible's message, which remains on a different level. Israel considered the power to transmit life as the supreme sign of divine favor. It conforms with the providential plan which ordained that Israel should grow in the midst of other nations and should become the cradle of the Redeemer. But in actual fact, God's plan was carried out by means of an amazing series of miracles requiring faith and loyalty on the part of the patriarchs. The children born of them were less children of the flesh than children of the promise. The principle expressed by St. John, "Born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13) and by St. Paul: "Flesh and blood cannot possess the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50), was deeply rooted in the subsoil of biblical times. The faith and hope of the great patriarchs enabled them to carry out God's plan in the supernatural sphere.

²⁰⁰ Ps. 86.

in his field. Which is the least indeed of all seeds, but when it is grown up, it is greater than all herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and dwell in the branches thereof."²⁰¹

Jerusalem, the Church, the bride: fertility always proceeds from union with the Bridegroom. Jerusalem is the prophetic figure of the beloved bride who will multiply God's people throughout the ages. But Scripture and tradition likewise see Jerusalem as the place where earthly sufferings will be rewarded and the elect, after the painful childbirth of their temporal lives, will taste endless joy. Jerusalem embodies the firmest eschatological hopes of the Jewish people and likewise presents Christians with a true image of the Church gathering together all her children in a permanent kingdom.²⁰² Life continues to be diffused from the assembly of those who are united to God by the bonds of pure mystic love. In the Church, the holy city where God dwells, the number of the elect constantly increases and grace is diffused. And so, while awaiting the time of glory, souls should struggle bravely and rejoice over the rich estate they will inherit. They can take courage from the same words that God spoke in ancient times to His beloved bride, Jerusalem. How often, in times of trial, did He ask her to cast off the burden of temporal affliction and to rely more firmly on the hopes He has granted her and on her vocation as bride and mother. Her Bridegroom is delighted by her constancy and fidelity, which bring Him glory and honor.

²⁰¹ Matt. 13:31-32.

²⁰² "I saw a great multitude, which no man could number. . . . These are they who are come out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Apoc. 7:9, 14). Cf. also Apoc. 2:9-10; 3:10-11.

And thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. And thou shalt be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. Thou shalt no more be called forsaken, and thy land shall no more be called desolate, but thou shalt be called My pleasure in her, and thy land inhabited. Because the Lord hath been well pleased with thee; and thy land shall be inhabited. For the young man shall dwell with the virgin, and thy children shall dwell in thee. And the bridegroom shall rejoice over the bride, and thy God shall rejoice over thee.²⁰³

When the Bridegroom sees her in all her beauty, He declares His joy: "He will rejoice over thee with gladness, He will be silent in His love, He will be joyful over thee in praise."²⁰⁴ He urges her to rejoice with Him at the thought of the mysterious fertility which, throughout the centuries and until the end of time, will ever be found in her midst. "Give praise, O thou barren, that bearest not; sing forth praise, and make a joyful noise, thou that didst not travail with child; for many are the children of the desolate, more than of her that hath a husband, saith the Lord. . . . Thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall rise up at thy side."²⁰⁵ The bride united to her Beloved becomes so surprisingly fertile that they are like a growing and maturing family constantly needing more living space. The moving and living walls of God's home expand to receive and gather together all His children. "Enlarge the place of thy tent, and stretch out the skins of thy tabernacles, spare not; lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes. For thou shalt pass on to the right hand, and to the left; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and shall inhabit the desolate cities."²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Isa. 62:2-5. ²⁰⁴ Soph. 3:17.

²⁰⁵ Isa. 54:1; 60:4; Gal. 4:27. ²⁰⁶ Isa. 54:2-3.

This fertility is a surprising mystery to those without the light of faith, to those who have not received the rich seeds of union with God. Yet they too are called to address as "mother" her who is so marvellously fruitful. They are invited to become her children.

Before she was in labor, she brought forth; before her time came to be delivered, she brought forth a man child. . . . Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you that love her; rejoice for joy with her, all you that mourn for her. That you may suck, and be filled with the breasts of her consolations; that you may milk out, and flow with delights, from the abundance of her glory.²⁰⁷

It is true that since the curse on Eve, childbirth is accompanied by pain, the birth of souls involving even more suffering than that of bodies. But, as Christ Himself declared: "A woman . . . when she hath brought forth the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy."²⁰⁸ Joy, therefore, constantly throbs in the heart of God's bride, who never ceases to give birth to His chosen children. Those who work day after day, in the midst of trials and contradictions, to build up the Church on earth and prepare the eternal city of the saints, know this same joy too. God helps them and supports them with the same encouragement He offered long ago to His holy city of Jerusalem.

Look about thee, O Jerusalem, toward the east, and behold the joy that cometh to thee from God. For behold thy children come, whom thou sentest away scattered, they come gathered together from the east even to the west, at the word of the Holy One rejoicing for the honor of God. Put off, O Jerusalem, the garment of thy mourning, and affliction; and put on the

²⁰⁷ Isa. 66:7, 10-11. ²⁰⁸ John 16:21.

beauty and honor of that everlasting glory which thou hast from God. God will clothe thee with the double garment of justice, and will set a crown on thy head of everlasting honor. For God will show His brightness in thee, to every one under heaven. For thy name shall be names to thee by God forever; the peace of justice and honor of piety.²⁰⁹

For the biblical authors no expression is rich enough, no image splendid enough, to extol the glory and happiness of the fertile bride who sees the increase and development of the offspring she has given to her Bridegroom and her God. She is compared to the palm tree bending its heavy clusters of fruit along the banks of a stream, or to a rich vine with its countless grapes, and especially to the well-watered earth that buds with new life in each new springtime. The scribes' quills note the words *fertility* or *fecundity* to indicate the amazing supernatural power of grace. As sap produces new sprouts, makes them blossom, form fruit, and ripen, the union of the bride to her Bridegroom enables her to give birth to countless children and to sanctify them throughout the centuries.

Christ was to speak of rivers of living waters flowing from Him to give life to the earth. He also would tell of a fire that would consume all things in its flame. The Old Testament uses both these images, but shows a marked preference for the lovely and meaningful symbol of gushing waters, doubtless suggesting the rivers that watered the Garden of Eden. A prophecy of Ezekiel wonderfully illustrates these truths. Torrents of living waters rush in to purify the brackish waters and to fertilize their banks:²¹⁰ a magnificent picture of the

²⁰⁹ Bar. 4:36-37; 5:1-4.

²¹⁰ "And he showed me a river of water of life, clear as crystal,

mysterious births and resurrections which God's grace, by means of His Church, effects in souls, purifying them, transforming them, conferring His own life upon them and enabling them to bear abundant fruits of eternal life.

Behold waters issued out from under the threshold of the house toward the east. . . . And it was a torrent, which I could not pass over; for the waters were risen so as to make a deep torrent, which could not be passed over. . . . And when I had turned myself, behold on the bank of the torrent were very many trees on both sides. And he said to me: These waters that issue forth toward the hillock of sand to the east, and go down to the plains of the desert, shall go into the sea, and shall go out, and the waters shall be healed. And every living creature that creepeth whithersoever the torrent shall come, shall live; and there shall be fishes in abundance after these waters shall come thither, and they shall be healed, and all things shall live to which the torrent shall come. . . . And by the torrent on the banks thereof on both sides shall grow all trees that bear fruit; their leaf shall not fall off, and their fruit shall not fail. . . . And the fruits thereof shall be for food, and the leaves thereof for medicine.²¹¹

Streams of living water, flowers and fruits, wine and oil, milk and honey—no image is too beautiful, too pleasing or too rich to suggest the superabundance of divine life that God will communicate through His Church to the children she will keep giving Him throughout the centuries. At the end of time they will form a living crown around their

proceeding from the throne of God, and of the Lamb. . . . And on both sides of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruits every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Apoc. 22:1-2).

²¹¹ Ezech. 47:1, 5-12.

mother; they will be her glory, which she will present to Christ, her Beloved. Then, as St. Paul teaches, all things will be re-established in Christ.²¹² The triumph of this First-born among men will be a sign of the final achievement of unity among those whom He came to redeem and for whom the Church is a mother. The day of the Lord, the day when the Son of man will come in glory to take possession of the kingdom, will likewise be the day when the bride will sit down at the wedding feast, a crown upon her head, while all the guests assemble for the eternal banquet. "The daughters of kings have delighted thee in thy glory. The queen stood on thy right hand, in gilded clothing."²¹³ Then will begin the glorious reign of the bride and the Bridegroom, a reign that will never end: *Cujus regni non erit finis*.

We are somewhat surprised by this magnificent reign and it must be admitted that Christians do not think of it very much. But the Bible refers to it constantly and never tires of describing it. Therein lies the ultimate significance of all the divine promises and gestures, the final purpose of the Redemption itself, the accomplishment of God's inmost intentions.²¹⁴

The ancient promises and distant figures expressed the divine decree in mysterious form: as an eternal kingdom in endless peace. We find this at the beginning, when Melchisedech, King of Salem,²¹⁵ blessed the father of future nations.

²¹² Cf. Eph. 1:10. ²¹³ Ps. 44:10.

²¹⁴ Christ Himself said: "And you are they who have continued with Me in My temptations; and I dispose to you, as my Father hath disposed to Me, a kingdom; that you may eat and drink at My table, in My kingdom" (Luke 22:28-30).

²¹⁵ *Salem* means *city of peace*, as *Schiloh*, the name used in Jacob's prophecy, means *peaceful*.

Jacob in Egypt predicted supremacy for Israel at a time when it had hardly taken shape as a nation. "The sceptre shall not be taken away from Juda, nor a ruler from his thigh, till He come that is to be sent, and He shall be the expectation of nations."²¹⁶ Isaias prophesied of this prince that "His empire shall be multiplied, and there shall be no end of peace."²¹⁷

God fitted the worldly ambitions of His people into His own providential designs and instituted the messianic kingdom in which David and Solomon were the greatest rulers. The promises were so frequent and so impressive that they nourished the hope of a kingdom of endless happiness and peace ("Justice . . . and abundance of peace, till the moon be taken away").²¹⁸ "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise thy God, O Sion. . . . Who hath placed peace in thy borders, and filleth thee with the fat of corn."²¹⁹ The supreme promise of Christ, too, was peace and God's kingdom.

But why are the words *peace* and *kingdom* so often and so closely connected? Because the perfection of charity in the eternal kingdom requires the union of all the subjects in a tranquillity of permanently settled order. The kingdom is the heavenly Jerusalem, the bride with the Bridegroom, sharing all His glory and privileges, receiving eternal life from Him, lovingly bestowing it in its fullness upon her children. On the other hand, the lovely and richly suggestive word *peace* best expresses the perfection of union and indicates how stable and settled will be the happiness experienced when men pass beyond the changes and vicissitudes of human circum-

²¹⁶ Gen. 49:10.

²¹⁷ Isa. 9:7.

²¹⁸ Ps. 71:7.

²¹⁹ Ps. 147:1-3.

stances.²²⁰ It is significant that at the end of the Canticle of Canticles the bride, seeking to describe the superabundant benefits that utterly satisfy her and to indicate the state of perfection in which she is henceforth settled, adds these words: "I am become in His presence as one finding peace."²²¹

Many a time the prophets predicted, with naïve and picturesque details,²²² the concord and common joy of all creatures. The Sages could find nothing more beautiful than the wonderful order and harmony reigning in the universe submissive to the Creator. This serene and pure peace which the angels would one day proclaim as they sang in the sky, testifies to the total union of all living creatures and the living God. But before the union can be perfectly realized the redeemed people must be led into the Promised Land, which they finally reach and possess. But already everything is illuminated by the light of the divine promises, all bound together by one hidden theme: God's immutable desire to attain union with each of His children and, in so doing, to establish a kingdom "of holiness and grace . . . of love and peace."²²³ God's plans and His merciful action match man's deepest needs and most ardent aspirations. Mankind strains painfully toward its goal, ever anxious about its fate, longing to rest in eternal, living peace.

Old Testament men always tried to discover the secret of life after death, but the certainty of an afterlife, object of their hearts' inmost desires, was granted to them only at a

²²⁰ In all his Epistles St. Paul invokes peace as the seal of reconciliation with God, the indwelling of Christ with us.

²²¹ Cant. 8:10. ²²² Cf. Isa. 65:24-25.

²²³ Preface of the Mass for the Feast of Christ the King.

very late period of their history. Step by step, however, they advanced toward the light, for they had the inviolable promises of a just and faithful God whose voice they never ceased to hear, even in the midst of their misery. That voice called them to a union and a peace infinitely beyond their boldest desires, but wholly proportionate to divine mercy. "The mercies of the Lord I will sing forever."²²⁴

Thus, the great perspectives of the Old Testament stretch out through the shadows of faith and converge at a point of welcome light. Promises and figures, divine initiative and human responses all predict the union of the Bridegroom with the bride, the eternal kingdom which Israel saw as the holy city built on the hills and magnificently arranged. "Jerusalem, which is built as a city, which is compact together. For thither did the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord."²²⁵ What a triumphant procession and glorious restoration of redeemed souls who, with Christ, inherit His Father's kingdom and reign with Him. "The just shall shine, and shall run to and fro like sparks among the reeds. They shall judge nations, and rule over people, and their Lord shall reign forever."²²⁶

Several times the Old Testament refers to the mysterious powers conferred by God upon the elect. It tells how He will share and communicate His love by an act of pure mercy. But Scripture is somewhat vague about the end of time, and Daniel's visions on this theme remain shrouded in mystery.

But the saints of the most high God shall take the kingdom; and they shall possess the kingdom for ever and ever. . . . Till

²²⁴ Ps. 88:1. ²²⁵ Ps. 121:3-4. ²²⁶ Wisd. 3:7-8.

the Ancient of days came and gave judgment to the saints of the Most High, and the time came, and the saints obtained the kingdom. . . . And that the kingdom, and power, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven may be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all kings shall serve Him, and shall obey Him. . . .

But at that time shall Michael rise up, the great prince, who standeth for the children of Thy people. . . . And at that time shall Thy people be saved, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some unto life everlasting, and others unto reproach, to see it always. But they that are learned shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time appointed; many shall pass over, and knowledge shall be manifold.²²⁷

In the New Testament St. John's apocalyptic vision seems to rediscover these things on a deeper level. The same book with seven seals would be received and opened at the end of time by the sacrificed Lamb. Then only will all things be seen in the full light of day. Then only will man have perfect knowledge. "We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known."²²⁸

For a while as yet mystery remains and nourishes our faith. God gives it to us as the only light we can bear and faith suffices to lead us to the contemplation of truth in love. Moreover, for an attentive mind and a loving heart, flashes of light pierce the mystery which we accept by faith. While we work in a practical way for the coming of the day which

²²⁷ Dan. 7:18, 22, 27; 12:1-4.

²²⁸ I Cor. 13:12.

the Spirit and the bride both desire so ardently, faith allows us a foretaste of eternal joys.

The wedding of the bride to the Lamb contemplated by St. John in the Apocalypse, the nuptial feast to which Christ invites all souls, had already been extolled by Isaias. In each case the same glory surrounds the new and the old Jerusalem. In each case the holy city shines with glorious light and appears surrounded by the living crown of fecundity. And so the sacred writer trembles with joy on beholding this spectacle and hearing the Bridegroom's words to His bride. He celebrates the triumph of the heavenly Jerusalem and the eternal happiness of her children.

Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. . . . The Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall walk in thy light, and kings in the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thy eyes round about, and see; all these are gathered together, they are come to thee; thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall rise up at thy side. Then shalt thou see, and abound, and thy heart shall wonder and be enlarged. . . . And thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night. . . . The glory of Liban shall come to thee. . . . Iniquity shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction in thy borders, and salvation shall possess thy walls, and praise thy gates. Thou shalt no more have the sun for thy light by day, neither shall the brightness of the moon enlighten thee; but the Lord shall be unto thee for an everlasting light, and thy God for thy glory. Thy sun shall go down no more, and thy moon shall not decrease; for the Lord shall be unto thee for an everlasting light.²²⁹

²²⁹ Isa., chap. 60, *passim*.