

In September of 2004, Pope John Paul II gave an address during a general audience in which he reflected on the canticle that appears in the First Letter of St. Peter (Chapter 2, verses 21-24). I include this text because the Holy Father wanted to focus on the "Suffering Face of Christ." In the pre-Vatican II calendars, July was traditionally identified as the "Month of the Precious Blood" as the month began with a feast of the Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. We also need to recall that there are religious communities dedicated to this aspect of the life of Christ (e.g., the Congregation of the Precious Blood who conduct St. Joseph's College in Indiana). This address of the Holy Father is an excellent example of the kinds of thoughts that can come from serious *lectio divina*. – Fr. David

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1. Today, when hearing the hymn that appears in Chapter 2 of the First Letter of St. Peter, we have had outlined vividly before our eyes the suffering face of Christ. This is how it was for the readers of that Letter in the early times of Christianity, and so it has been for centuries during the liturgical proclamation of the Word of God and in personal meditation.

Set within the Letter, this song presents a liturgical tone and seems to reflect the atmosphere of prayer of the early Church (see Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:6-11; 1 Timothy 3:16). It is characterized also by an imaginary dialogue between the author and the readers, springing from the alternation of the personal pronouns "we" and "you": "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps. ... He himself bore our sins in his body ... so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:21,24-25).

2. But the pronoun most insisted upon in the Greek original, "hos," almost nailed to the start of the main verses (see 2:22,23,24) is "He," the patient Christ, He who has not committed sin, He who, insulted, did not react by calling for vengeance, He who on the cross bore the weight of the sins of humanity to cancel them.

Peter's thought, just like that of the faithful who recite this hymn, in particular during the liturgy of vespers of the Lenten period, is directed to the Servant of Yahweh described in the Book of the prophet Isaiah. It is a mysterious personage, interpreted by Christianity in a messianic and Christological vein, because it anticipates some details and the meaning of the passion of Christ: "Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured ... he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins ... by his stripes we were healed ... He was harshly treated ... he was silent and opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:4,5,7).

Also, the description of sinful humanity, with the image of a scattered flock in a verse that is not taken up in the liturgy of vespers (see Peter 2:25), stems from that ancient prophetic song: "We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

3. Two figures cross one another in the Petrine hymn. First of all is he, Christ, who undertakes the harsh road of the passion, without opposing the injustice and violence, without recriminations and outbursts, but entrusting himself and his painful undertaking "to the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). A pure and absolute act of trust that will be sealed on the cross with the famous last words, cried out in a loud voice in an act of extreme abandonment to the work of the Father: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!" (Luke 23:46; see Psalm 30:6).

Therefore, it is not a blind and passive resignation, but a courageous act of trust, destined to be an example to all the disciples who will journey on the dark path of trial and persecution.

4. Christ is presented as the Savior, in solidarity with us in his human "body." He, being born of the Virgin Mary, made himself our brother. He can therefore be by our side, to share our pain, to bear our evil, "our sins" (1 Peter 2:24). But he is also and always the Son of God and his solidarity with us becomes radically transforming, liberating, expiating, saving (ibid.).

Thus our poor humanity is snatched from the straying and perverse ways of evil and returned to "justice," namely, to the beautiful plan of God. The last phrase of the hymn is particularly moving. It says: "By his wounds you have been healed" (verse 25). Here we see what a dear price Christ paid to heal us!

5. Let us conclude by ceding the word to the Fathers of the Church, namely, to Christian tradition which has meditated and prayed with this hymn of St. Peter.

Interlacing an expression of the hymn with other biblical reminiscences, St. Irenaeus of Lyon thus summarizes the figure of Christ the Savior, in a passage of his treatise "Against the Heresies": "There is only one Jesus Christ, Son of God, who through his Passion has reconciled us with God and, risen from the dead, is at the right hand of the Father and is perfect in all things: he was buffeted but did not return the blows, 'while suffering he did not threaten,' and while suffering tyrannical violence, he prayed to the Father to forgive those who had crucified him. We have really been saved by Him, who is the Word of God, the Only Begotten of the Father, Christ Jesus Our Lord" (III, 16,9, Milan, 1997, p. 270).