

**The Cross as the Locus of Truth:
Joseph Ratzinger's Meditations
on the Way of the Cross**

The great theologians of the Tradition, on whose shoulders we stand today, were not only men of learning but also men of prayer. The obvious example is Augustine, who arranged his *Confessions* as a dramatic dialogue with God, but even Thomas Aquinas, with all his sobriety and fine distinctions, left hymns and prayers that reveal the affective undercurrent of his theology. In twentieth-century Catholicism it was above all Romano Guardini, Karl Rahner, and Hans Urs von Balthasar who bridged the gap between theology and sanctity with a steady stream of spiritual writings. They knew that theological speech about God threatens to become academic game-playing if not grounded in conversation with God.

From the beginning Joseph Ratzinger, too, has written prayers and biblical reflections alongside his theological work. A particularly good reflection of his spirituality may be found in the recently published *Good Friday, 2005, meditations on the Way of the Cross*, which the then-Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith presented at the Coliseum in place of John Paul II during his last illness. Here his essay towards spiritual Christology, which he published in 1984 as *Behold the Pierced One*, becomes concrete devotion, so to speak. The Way of the Cross is a unique form of devotion, which sweeps up those praying it into the *memoria* of

the Passion, following a dramaturgy of fourteen “stations” leading from Jesus’ condemnation by Pilate through his death and burial. Ratzinger provides a meditation and a prayer for each of the stations, which are accompanied in the book by images from the Cathedral of Padua.

Now, meditations, and particularly prayers, form a literary genre which cannot simply be talked *about*. Meditations are to be contemplated, prayers are to be spoken—and refusal of this performative aspect can easily occlude their meaning. This is probably also why Ratzinger introduces the basic theme of the Way of the Cross thus: it reveals a God who suffers with men, whose love does not remain, impassive, at a distant remove, but descends instead to death on the Cross. The point in praying the Stations is to be taken up into this movement of love and compassion and to allow one’s “heart of stone” to be transformed into a “heart of flesh.”

There is a sort of natural tendency of the ego, though, that spontaneously contradicts the logic of self-gift. The desire for more life, thirst for recognition, greed for possessions—all force the needs of others into the background. The Way of the Cross shatters this self-centeredness, forcing us to look at the wounded face of Jesus, and so the suffering of others we have tried not to see. Contemplation of the Passion brings with it the rejection of a culture of disregard, apathy, and cynicism.

Already with the first station Ratzinger makes it clear that Pilate

was not an utterly evil man, but one whose heart was divided. He recognized Jesus’ innocence, but yielded to the pressure of the mob instead of letting this recognition prevail. In order to avoid endangering his own position he betrayed the Truth and bargained with another’s death. Ratzinger invites us to reflect on how often the blood of innocents clings to the trappings of power, but he is not content with sterile moralism. He insists on individual self-examination: everyone is in danger of suppressing the quiet voice of conscience, either out of fear of possible ridicule, for the sake of some advantage, or simply because it is more comfortable. Insight into this weakness is the first means of healing it.

Besides, as Ratzinger underscores in his interpretation of Jesus’ fall under the weight of the Cross, God has drawn near to man’s weakness in order to save him. Jesus, collapsed on the ground, shows fallen man, who falls because he revolts against truth in the hybrid attempt to arrogate to himself the place of God by presuming to be his own creator and judge. Man who exalts himself encounters, in the Crucified, the God who abases himself. Ratzinger adds to the Augustinian motif of *superbia*, overcome from within on the Cross, a critical gloss on contemporary civilization: “The arrogance that makes us think that we ourselves can create human beings has turned man into a kind of merchandise, to be bought and sold, or stored to provide parts for experimentation. In doing this, we hope to

conquer death by our own efforts, yet in reality we are profoundly debasing human dignity.” Whether bio-political hubris can be restrained through the contemplation of the Crucified remains to be seen. For the current Pope, a “resurrection technology” [*Auferstehungstechnologie*] that destroys the life of one in order to prolong that of another is not simply a pseudo-metamorphosis of faith in life without death; it is rather an appalling index of modern man’s desire to be God.

But the faithful, too, are confronted with unsettling truths. Ratzinger links Jesus’ third fall to the failures of the Church. Ratzinger does not spare carelessness with the Eucharist, nor the tendency toward self-celebration, nor the twisting of the Gospel for the sake of appealing to modern tastes. “What little faith is present behind so many theories, so many empty words! How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him!” But here, too, Ratzinger does not stop at cheap accusations but instead invites the faithful towards a critical self-scrutiny, which need not end in despair because we can count on the Savior’s restoring help.

To follow the Way of the Cross—as each Station makes evident in its own way—means to leave behind a sentimental piety that seeks only self-gratification without entering onto the path of conversion. The Cross is a school of faith that must become effective in praxis. The Way of the Cross holds up a mirror, into which

we do not wish to look but into which we must, to enter into the truth. “Before the face of the suffering Lord, the banalization of evil comes to an end.” And with it the widespread delusion of guiltlessness. The questionable art of “not having been the one,” which always ends up framing someone else, comes to a halt. The individual can perceive his guilt without excuses only in light of the redemption. On the Cross—thus the soteriological heart of Ratzinger’s meditations—God himself has sought out the godlessness of fallen man in order to bear his burdens and to raise him up. Putting it as a riposte to secular dogmas of salvation: “The man who lets himself be saved is freed from the necessity of having to save himself.”—*Translated by Emily Rielley.** □

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