THE KENOTIC DECISION OF THE SON AND THE FILIAL OBEDIENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN

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"Christ in his kenosis is not simply an example to follow; he is the Son, whose filial attitude is given through communion with those who believe in him."

Kenosis means a self-emptying, an abandonment by an individual of his own substance. This idea is not specific to the New Testament: we find it already in a text of Deutero-Isaiah that played a central role in early Christian preaching, the fourth song of the Suffering Servant (Is 52:13–53:12). When Jesus opened the scriptures for the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:13–33), we do not know which passages he referred to for his demonstration, but there is a good chance that he linked the experience of the Cross, which was crushing to the disciples' faith, with the tribulations of the Servant. This likelihood becomes certainty when we turn to an episode that is, in many ways, the ecclesial transposition of Emmaus: Acts 8:26–39.

In this well-known text, Philip meets Queen Candace's eunuch on the road to Gaza, while the latter is sitting in his chariot reading the fourth song of the Suffering Servant: "Like a

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sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth" (Acts 8:32–33; cf. Is 53:7–8). It is remarkable that these verses of the fourth song are among those that insist most on the apparent total *passivity* of the Servant. The word "passion" connotes passivity, and in fact the Servant seems in no way to be an actor in what happens to him. In this respect, the eunuch's question to Philip—"About whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (Acts 8:34)—is somewhat incongruous. How could someone prophesy about his own *intention* to enter into total passivity? Unless, of course, he were to prophesy about a disaster that would inevitably befall him, in which he would be unable to play any other role than to submit to it.

But in fact, when Philip announces the "good news of Jesus" to the eunuch (Acts 8:35), it is nothing other than an inevitable disaster that he unveils for him. And if he can announce this good news "*starting* with this scripture" (Acts 8:35), it is because the fourth song does not end with the Servant's passivity. While the first part of Isaiah 53:10 ("it was the will of the Lord to crush him with suffering") spells absolute scandal—not only does God not intervene to save his Servant, but he even seems to enjoy the suffering that he endures!—the second part of this same verse suggests an incredible reversal: "But if his soul makes an *asham* sacrifice,[1] he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper." This verse shows us, with its use of the conditional tense, that *the entirety of God's plan hangs on the Servant's free decision*. And this is the case even though we have been told beforehand, not only that he had

1. To simplify somewhat, the *asham* sacrifice can be identified with the sacrifice for sin, which is the second great category of sacrifice in the Old Testament, next to the sacrifice "of communion." It is remarkable that this sacrifice should be offered by the *soul* of the Servant: what can a soul offer, if not its *body*? As the Letter to the Hebrews says, "we are sanctified by the oblation that Jesus Christ made of his body, once and for all" (10:10). This difficult passage of Isaiah has given rise to an abundant literature full of diverging opinions. See, e.g., Anne-Marie Pelletier, *Le livre d'Isaïe ou l'histoire au prisme de la prophétie* (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 129–38. What is clear is that "in his death, the [Servant] is offering a sacrifice of reparation for the very crime which is perpetrated against him."

suffered passively, but that he had died: "For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich" (Is 53:8–9).

But things do not stop there. The protagonists of the drama who, at the moment, understand nothing,[2] leave it to God himself to spell out the meaning of the Servant's action, which he does in the following terms: "Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured himself out to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Is 53:12).

In this way, the "sight of the sin that disfigures the servant becomes, for the onlookers, the sight of their own healing and justification. . . . The prophecy speaks, in other words, of a double rehabilitation: the rehabilitation of the one condemned, and the rehabilitation of those who have condemned him."[3]

1. THE CHRIST OF THE PHILIPPIAN HYMN AND THE QUESTION OF HIS IMITATION

He "emptied himself unto death": kenosis is already present in Isaiah in the form of a *decision*, that is to say, in the way that the New Testament presents it in the famous Philippian Hymn (Phil 2:5–11). This hymn is set in the two-fold perspective of the *contemplation of the humbling of Jesus Christ* and the *imitation of this humbling*, not first through actions (which are not mentioned until 2:12: "work out your own salvation"), but through an interior disposition similar to his. Whether we attribute this hymn to Paul himself or whether we date it before him, the key to the Philippian Hymn is the initial invitation to have in us "the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" (2:5). This disposition is summarized in the word "obedience" (2:8, 12), which governs the hymn as a whole.

2. The "yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted" of Isaiah 53:4 already announces, in an inverted reflection, the "and we had hoped he would be the one who would deliver Israel" of Luke 24:21.

3. Pelletier, *Le livre d'Isaïe*, 135.

Let us note some characteristics of this humbling of obedience:

1. It is wholly *voluntary*.

2. It is accomplished in a context of widespread denial of God, which makes Christ someone to be eliminated because of his very intimacy with God.[4]

3. It consists in the abandonment, not of what one has, but of one's very *being* (the "form of God" is not a superadded garment, but Christ's own mode of existence).

4. Its result is not only the glorification of Christ by the Father, but also the recognition of Christ as Lord by *all* ("every knee should bend," "all tongues should confess": 2:10–11), including those whose design was to eliminate him forever.

This mystery, before which all rational exposition fails (in Isaiah, the writer confesses that the figure in question is beyond his knowledge; in Philippians, the exhortative style of the letter cedes to the lyricism of the christological hymn), is the mystery of kenosis.

Who is the Jesus Christ of whom the Philippian Hymn speaks? Without entering into a detailed theological demonstration, let us say at the outset that it would be wrong, based on a convenient partition of the divine and the human elements in Christ, to see here only what Christ experienced in his humanity, with his divine nature remaining indifferent to his humbling and its consequences. This would be to cheapen the communication of idioms, in virtue of which what Jesus Christ experiences is experienced by *the incarnate Person of the Word of God*. It is really and truly the second Person of the Holy Trinity who takes on the condition of a slave, who is born in the likeness of men, who humbles himself through obedience unto death, even death on a cross.[5] If, then, we speak of the Christian's *imitatio Christi*, this imitation must have a trinitarian depth. Christ in his kenosis is not simply an example to follow;

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4. See the sapiential reading of the just man's destiny in Wisdom 2:12–20. In the Hymn to the Philippians, this universal conspiracy against the just one is only implied.

5. "Kenosis, properly speaking, affects divinity in some way. A kenosis that would only affect humanity would only be, in the received theological sense, a kenosis improperly speaking" (Paul Henry, "Kenosis," in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, vol. 5 [Paris: Letouzey & Aney, 1957], col. 13).

he is the Son, whose filial attitude is given through communion with those who believe in him.

Supposing, however, that the characteristics of Christ's kenosis are found in his disciple, still the third and fourth characteristics pose a problem. In what way can we speak of self-emptying in regard to a humanity which is itself nothing but "dust and ashes" (Gn 18:27), or of a final glorification comparable to that of Christ and bearing the same hope of cosmic salvation? To understand this, we must first remember that the Philippian Hymn is not concerned, at least not directly, with the mystery of the Incarnation. Rather, it is concerned with the human itinerary of Jesus,[6] who, having emptied himself to take the condition of a slave, "being found in human form (2:7b), succeeds in humbling himself even beyond that humbling,[7] through his obedience unto death, even death on a cross."

When we transpose the kenosis of the Master onto the disciple, we must include in some way this second humbling, an abasement that can lead even to a sub-human position: "so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance" (Is 52:14); "but I am a worm, and no man, scorned by men, and despised by the people" (Ps 22:7). It is at this price that cooperation in a cosmic salvation becomes possible: "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him" (Ps 22:28).

2. THE HUMBLING OF THE DISCIPLE IN ITS RELATION TO TRINITARIAN KENOSIS

To fruitfully investigate the possibility of such an itinerary of descent and ascent similar to that of Christ, let us specify where the parenetic dimension of the passage lies. Paul Henry locates it in three dimensions which, he insists, are not exclusive of one another:

6. See J. Liébaert, *L'Incarnation, des origines au concile de Chalcédoine* (Paris: Cerf, 1966), 19: "It is not the Word, but Christ who is here meant and described."

7. Whence the expression "even more," which many translators use spontaneously, when the text simply says "he humbled himself, obedient unto death" rather than "he humbled himself even more" (the two phases of the humbling are one and the same motion).

1. Humility

2. Obedience, which is "implicitly contrasted with Adam's disobedience."[8]

3. "Selflessness, abnegation, the desire of the good of another rather than one's own."

The third dimension is the one closest, analogically, to the heart of christological kenosis. In the same way that Christ's obedience and humiliation flowed from an interior disposition that led him to prefer our good to his own, and our life to his own, the disciple's obedience will consist in considering "others superior to himself" (Phil 2:3) and in preferring the "interests of others" to his own (2:4).

This Pauline injunction might seem relatively banal, more in the order of *savoir-vivre* than of supernatural wisdom. It ceases to be so when we confront it with the reason for laying down one's life given by Jesus himself, in the famous Johannine passage following the Last Supper: "Greater love has no man than this, to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). This statement echoes the opening line of John 13: Jesus, "having loved his own who were in the world, . . . loved them to the end" (13:1).

Let us take a step further. This love, like all love, is based on *preference*. To love someone or something is to prefer this one to someone or something else. We have an illustration of this preference in the "breakdown in discourse" that marks the end of Romans 8. After having set forth in eight chapters the logic of sin and of redemption in Christ, which leads to the gift of the Spirit, the apostle reaches, as it were, the limits of speech, which cannot but fail to express the inexpressible: "What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us?" (8:31).

But what is "this"? Nothing other than the mystery of Christ's death, through which God (the Father) declared himself "for us"—"for us" and, in a certain sense, against himself, since he did not "spare his own Son but delivered him up for us" (8:32). By demanding of himself what he had not demanded of Abraham—the sacrifice of his own son—God *preferred* us to this Son who is of his own substance, that is to say, to himself. If kenosis is the preferring of the other to oneself, then *the first kenosis is that of the Father.*

8. Henry, "Kenosis," col. 12.

But the second kenosis is that of the Son. After having spoken of the Father, Romans 8 continues to speak of Christ: "who will separate us from the love of *Christ*?" (8:35). If the Father preferred us to his Son by handing him over for us, the Son preferred us to himself, to his own life, which he abandoned in our favor. Thus this extraordinary Pauline passage can conclude in the interweaving of these two loves: nothing "will be able to separate us from the love *of God* made manifest in *Christ Jesus* our Lord" (8:39).

Thus the disciple's kenosis, insofar as we can use this term, will be the echo of two kenoses: that manifested by the filial attitude of Christ, who preferred the lives of his brothers to his own, and that of which we are given a glimpse in the choice of the Father, who preferred sinners to the life of his Son. This is a double kenosis which, before taking place within our history, begins in the trinitarian life itself, according to Balthasar:

> We shall never know how to express the abyss-like depths of the Father's self-giving, that Father who, in an eternal "super-kenosis," makes himself "destitute" of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity, the Son. Everything that can be thought and imagined where God is concerned is, in advance, included and transcended in this self-destitution which constitutes the person of the Father, and, at the same time, those of the Son and the Spirit.[9]

But how can such an abyss be translated into an intention, a decision, a logic shaping *human* life? This intention, this decision, and this existential logic would have to be carried beyond themselves by being grafted onto the *human* existence of the divine Word. This is what we must now try to approach, like Moses, stepping aside to contemplate the burning bush. Ignatius of Loyola will be our guide.

2.1. Jesus' invitation to enter into his kenosis, according to Saint Ignatius

Jesus' teaching in the gospels is a preparation for understanding the Paschal Mystery. In the three synoptic gospels (Mt 16, Mk 9,

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9. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), viii.

and Lk 9), right before the Transfiguration, Jesus announces his Passion, without yet making explicit its ultimate foundation. It is right after this announcement, as a consequence of what he has just said, that he enumerates the necessary conditions for following him. By this very fact, we learn that we are not condemned to contemplate him from afar, but are invited to follow right behind him; while the "how" is not yet revealed to us, we know that the conditions are within our reach.

These conditions really come down to one condition, an interior one, from which there follows a whole way of being: "if anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24, emphasis added). One of the meanings of *arneomai* is to forget one's own views, no longer to look after one's own interest but that of others—one is reminded here of Philippians 2:3–4. And although the preceding passage does not make it explicit, it is evident that it is this same interior disposition of self-denial that is at the source, for Jesus, of the Passion and the Cross. The *dei* ("must") of the Paschal Mystery has nothing to do with an inevitable tragedy, but with a free *decision*. An analogous decision is required of the disciple.

At the beginning of the second week of his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola masterfully represents to the retreatant the necessity of making this decision. This is the famous meditation on the call of a "temporal king," intended to bring us to the contemplation of the "life of the eternal King." Ignatius invites us to call to mind a "human king chosen by the hand of God," who is preparing to "conquer all the land of unbelievers," and who calls his "faithful subjects" to fight at his side. This conquest will no doubt come at a very high price, but the comparison between the result hoped for and the sacrifices required will win the decision: "anyone who did not accept the appeal of such a King would deserve to be censured by all the world." There follows an *a fortiori* argument for the transposition to "Christ our Lord":

> If such a call made by an earthly king to his subjects is worthy of our consideration, how much more is it worthy of consideration to see Christ our Lord, the eternal King, and before Him the entire human race, as to all and to each one in particular His call goes out, "My will is to conquer the whole world and every enemy, and so enter into the glory of my Father! Therefore all those who want to come

> with me will have to labor with me, so that by following me in my suffering, they may also follow me into glory."[10]

The analogy is based on the enthusiasm aroused by a beautiful model to follow. But its insufficiency is immediately apparent: it still remains on the rational plane ("all who have judgment and reason will offer themselves completely for the task").[11] When it comes to the work of human salvation to which Christ devoted his life, there must be a qualitative leap into the folly of the Cross (1 Cor 1:18), a leap that translates into the decision to make a much more radical offering:

> Those who will want to respond in a spirit of love, and to distinguish themselves by the thoroughness of their commitment to their eternal King and universal Lord, will not only offer themselves bodily for the task, but rather by going against their sensuality and their carnal and worldly love will offer greater and more important sacrifices, saying, "Eternal Lord of all things, I make my offering, with your favor and help, before your infinite Goodness, and before your glorious Mother and all the saintly men and women of the court of heaven! My resolute wish and desire, and my considered determination—on the sole condition that this be for your greater service and praise—is to imitate you in enduring every outrage and all contempt, and utter poverty, both actual and spiritual, if your most holy Majesty wants to choose me and receive me into that life and state."[12]

Ignatius has thus led his retreatant by the hand, as it were, to the decision of *imitatio* properly speaking, in which it is a matter not only of suffering the painful consequences of service to the Lord, but of sharing in his very kenosis. This is the passage from a very chivalric but very human zeal to a desire for identification. To speak in scriptural terms, it is the passage from the status of *servant* to that of *friend*. "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you

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10. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), 304.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

everything that I have heard from my Father" (Jn 15:15). Like Jesus himself, the friend is introduced into the very secret of the decisions of the Father: he is given understanding concerning the salvation of the world, and the choices that this salvation implies for the human freedoms called to cooperate in its realization.

The essential question remains, however: how will this sublime decision translate into reality? The answer to this question cannot be based on the example Christ gives us, but must itself be christological. Ignatius, as a true Christian, does not propose an ideal to us, but puts us in the presence of a person.

2.2. The eucharistic decision: precondition for entering into the Easter kenosis

The first confidante of the Father's secrets is the Son: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt 11:27). But this knowledge must be translated, on the part of the Son, into an explicit ratification: to the Father's decision to hand over his Son must correspond the Son's decision to hand himself over. Where should we locate this decision in the life of Jesus? At the very beginning: the baptism in the river Jordan already signifies Jesus' free choice to be numbered among sinners and engulfed with them in the waters of death, in order to emerge into paschal life. We could say the same about the prayer on the mountain of the Transfiguration. The effect of this prayer of consent to the Father's will is the anticipated gift of the glory of the Resurrection, which shines forth on the Lord's body.

The Son's entire life, then, is a ratification of the Father's plan. And yet, nothing has been accomplished until the effects of this ratification are communicable to others. For this, it is necessary for Christ to give to those who believe in him the grace of the possibility of *sharing in his decision*. This is what takes place in the Eucharist.

The words pronounced during the Last Supper express a *decision*. "If his soul offers an *asham* sacrifice," the prophet declares (Is 53:10)—but the only thing a soul can offer is its body. "When Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you

have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God," as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.' . . . And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb 10:5–7, 10).

Holy Thursday crowns Christ's kenosis with the offering of his body. He who made himself flesh, like us, makes himself bread, handed over for us. It is still only a decision, since the event to which it corresponds is yet to come. Yet this decision is already efficacious, so that the disciples present at the last meal participate, by anticipation, in the reality that it announces. How is this possible? Quite simply, if we can put it thus, it is thanks to the absence of any separation in Christ between his decision and its realization. This is so in spite of the temporal interval.

This clashes with our everyday experience. There is not only a temporal gap between our decisions and their execution; the gap is above all qualitative. The promises we make, even the most solemn, are more or less hypothetical, and if we do not end up entirely denying them, we never fully fulfill them. It is completely different for Christ: his decision is of such a nature that he can already, before the actual event, share in its fruits. This is so in spite of the bitter agony of Gethsemane, which shows how much it cost him to go to the very end of his kenosis, without in any way questioning the decision itself, of which the kenosis is the fruit: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again" (Jn 10:17–18).

If Jesus has the power to give his life (no one takes it from him), it is not by virtue of some magical ability, but by virtue of his love for the Father and for his brothers, which brings his filial obedience to perfection. And if he has the power to take it up again (that is, in the Resurrection), it is not by virtue of a Docetism that would have him appear dead when he is really not, but because the way in which he died was fatal to death. If the Father resurrected him, "it is not his death that pleased the Father, but the *will* of the one who freely died."[13]

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13. Bernard of Clairvaux, *De erroribus Petri Abaelardi*, 8, 21 (*PL* 182, 1070).

The disciple, in turn, by sharing sacramentally in Jesus' decision, can draw the necessary strength to live his own decision to the end. The decision to which Ignatius invites us (repeating Jesus' own invitation) is eucharistic in its very nature, drawing from the Eucharist the condition of its possibility. It is there and nowhere else that my decision "finds its foundation and its universal reach. Like Christ, I have said: this (the resolution) is my body (my freedom no longer has any reality other than this resolution and the sacrifice it implies), which is given up for you (the decision brings the person out of his narrow limits and introduces him into the universal, into a community for which he sacrifices himself. Hence the ecclesial dimension of every choice)."[14]

2.3. The paschal experience of the disciple, or Harpagon's salvation

Like Jesus and through him, the disciple is called to a paschal decision. He must die, and the death in question will involve two dimensions:

1. The sense of a conversion and "death to sin."
2. The sense of an irrevocable filial offering to God.

These two dimensions are linked to Christ's own offering. We will sketch each briefly, before showing their reciprocal relationship with the help of a famous passage from the New Testament.

1. At first glance, "death to sin" may not appear to fall under the *imitatio Christi*, insofar as Christ is without sin. And yet the Apostle speaks of such a death in regard to Christ: "The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God" (Rom 6:10).

Solidarity with the sin of Adam is indeed part of the Son's kenosis: he was "made to be sin" (2 Cor 5:21), whatever the meaning one might give this difficult expression. In the degree of extreme humbling we see at Gethsemane, Jesus experiences his Father's will as opposed to his personal flourishing, and even to his life, that same will which he once saw as the very source of his life ("my food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" [Jn 4:34]). In this moment, he feels our

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14. Édouard Pousset, *Foi et liberté* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 108.

own temptation to oppose the God who gives to the God who demands, and to declare the will to salvation through death to be incompatible with right reason. In this most dramatic of moments, in other words, "Christ experiences all our resistance to God as his very own, but he only experiences this resistance in the act of putting it to death through his obedience."[15]

In the footsteps of their Lord, all the great saints have known Gethsemane, a Gethsemane that always followed the great decision of their life, and which forced them to reiterate this decision *sub contrario*, at the height of spiritual solidarity with the whole of humanity, including those who are furthest from God.

To cite only one famous example, this was the case for St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus in the last weeks of her life. We recall her certainty that she was now invited to "the table of sinners," and her determined refusal to "rise from this table filled with bitterness, at which poor sinners are eating until the day set by [God]."[16] Spiritual darkness is one of the most characteristic forms of kenosis: it forces one to live, in pure faith, a total dispossession, in favor of those who are furthest from God and his mercy.

2. Self-offering is at the heart of *imitatio*. Whatever the libertarian individualism in the midst of which we live might think, the desire to offer one's self is a general law of humanity. Beginning from a purely psychological point of view, a disciple of Freud did not hesitate to declare its necessity:

> The only way out of human conflict is full renunciation, to give one's life as a gift to the highest powers. . . . In other words, the true heroic validation of one's life lies beyond sex, beyond the other, beyond private religion—all these are makeshifts. . . . And in order to get such centering, man has to look beyond the "thou," beyond the consolation of others and of the things of this world.[17]

But the reference to the Word of God is much more probing. In a famous passage of the letter to the Romans, Paul

15. Ibid., 112.

16. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clark (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 212.

17. Otto Rank (1884–1939), cited in E. Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 173–74.

evokes spiritual sacrifice in eucharistic terms: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1). Here, as elsewhere, the exhortation flows from the contemplation of Christ in his filial oblation.

How are the two dimensions of death to sin and filial offering related to one another? We can get an idea of the connection by returning to the figure of the first Adam, to whom the new Adam is opposed, not only insofar as he obeys to the very end, but more deeply in his way of relating to the Father and his gifts. It is in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32) that we find the most pronounced illustration of the contrast between the two Adams.

The story of the prodigal son is that of a kenosis, but of a sinful kenosis: after he has appropriated to himself his part of the inheritance, this kenosis brings the son to descend into what Augustine has so aptly called the "country of dissemblance" (*regio dissimilitudinis*).

The central figure of the parable is not the youngest son, nor his older brother, but the Father—a Father who *is* everything but *has* nothing. The deadly mistake of the first Adam consisted precisely in imagining that the gifts of the Father could continue to exist abstracted from the giver. In the same way, the youngest son, like those who seek to entrap light and only succeed in entrapping darkness, takes his bounty, separating life from its source, and finds himself destitute and a slave to death. He makes himself a prisoner of the prince of darkness, whose kingdom lies outside the Promised Land. He goes and "join[s] himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sen[ds] him into his fields to feed swine" (Lk 15:15).

This ungrateful son is the figure of the sinner. But he is just as much the figure of Christ, who freely places himself in the company of sinners and goes searching for the sinner in his exile. Having found him there, and "being found like [him] in appearance" (Phil 2:7), he can finally speak to his heart, there to awaken the memory of the Father's house: "but when he came to himself he said . . . " (Lk 15:17). Thus, in the depths of kenosis, the two Adams meet to become one: an anticipation of the descent of Jesus among the dead when, holding the Cross, the weapon of his victory, he offers his hand to the first Adam to lift him up and bring him to the light.

In other words, the parable of the prodigal son is Harpagon saved by Christ. We all remember the character of Harpagon from Molière's *The Miser*. But we do not always divine the theological relation between his name (Harpagon means "the harpoon") and the christological hymn of Philippians 2. The Greek text specifies that Christ did not regard his equality with God "something to be grasped at" (Phil 2:6); the corresponding Greek expression, *ouk harpagmon hègèsato*, evokes an unduly kept good, such as the fruit of plunder.[18] What is the "good" in question here? Equality with God, i.e., the filiation that makes Christ one God with the Father. For Christ, as for the creature, this filiation is only lawful insofar as it is *received*. It would cease to be such if (by an impossible hypothesis) it were *grasped*, taken by force or demanded as something owed to him.

But this taking by force was the attitude of the first Adam, who used the life received from the Father as a *harpagmos*, becoming the prototype of all the Harpagons of history. Harpagon's disposition is thus pure anti-kenosis, because kenosis is nothing other than the act of emptying oneself in order to receive.

From the moment Christ appears in the world, our existence is measured in light of this abyssal mystery. We can therefore say that, strictly speaking, original sin exists only beginning with Christ, when the Son unmasks its whole dimension of usurpation and imposture. In other words, original sin exists only insofar as it is redeemed. Henceforth man no longer has any choice except between the kenosis into nothingness of self-affirmation and the kenosis of Christ. Or, to put it positively, from this moment he can finally choose to be by becoming a son, by being associated with the paschal offering of the Son.

CONCLUSION: WHERE HARPAGON FALLS TO HIS KNEES

The preceding reflections have shown, I hope, to what extent the kenosis of the Son of God not only concerns us, but also delivers us from the "ascetic ideal" to which we try to sculpt ourselves, thinking we are thereby glorifying God. The filial obedience that sums up eternal kenosis is

18. On the different meanings of *harpagmos*, see Henry, "Kenosis," col. 23–27.

> not an abstract principle ('the inferior must submit himself to the superior'), but an event: it is not founded on a 'natural order'; it is founded on a new order. It does not rest on reason (*recta ratio*) but on the kerygma. And the foundation is as follows: "Christ became obedient unto death" (Phil 2:8). . . . For the New Testament, Christ's obedience is not only the most sublime example of obedience, but its very foundation. It is the "charter" of the kingdom of heaven.[19]

This is why Christian obedience consists less in submission than in resemblance. It is less a virtue than a gift. It is less a loss of self than a reception of self. It is less law than grace. "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).

This is also why the itinerary of filial kenosis is not different from that of the Beatitudes, which, let us remember, are first and foremost a self-portrait of Christ. This itinerary goes from *poverty*, which is a guarantee of entry into the life of the kingdom, to *persecution*, which is the guarantee of the reception of the same kingdom in recompense. Those who follow this itinerary of configuration to Christ distance themselves from asceticism in order to enter into the blessings of the new covenant.

Harpagon, who wanted to grasp and possess, can now enter into poverty. The great seekers of God found him one day, having made himself poor among the poor, and they became poor with him. They fell on their knees, together with all the living in heaven, in earth and under the earth, before the Poor One of the manger and the cross. This was the case, among so many others, for Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz in 1943:

> Etty tries to kneel in a silent prayer and does not succeed. Kneeling, after all, is a figure of submission so decried today in the Christian posture. One day she is able to kneel. . . . "The girl who could not kneel"[20] learns to do so. She who fought with or against men finds at last a worthy adversary. In this time of persecution, she does not kneel

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19. Raniero Cantalamessa, "L'obéissance," in *Aimer autrement* (Paris: Éditions des Béatitudes, 2004), 90–91.

20. *Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum*, trans. Arno Pomerans (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), November 22, 1941.

> before the Nazis. "Our sole human dignity" is "to kneel down before God."[21] To kneel is, perhaps, to rediscover the right measure after the anguish of the narcissistic abyss. . . . The wounded God is a God before whom one kneels daily. Quite simply, on the bathroom mat. One kneels, in a sense, in front of the Most Lowly, in a posture of kenosis which accompanies the kenosis of God.[22]

In a beautiful book of dialogues with Muslim historian Mohamed Talbi, Olivier Clément replies as follows to the accusation that Christians deny God's transcendence when they profess his kenosis: "God is so transcendent that he transcended his transcendence in order to come to us."[23] This is a modern echo of Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (known as "the epitaph of St. Ignatius of Loyola"): "*non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum*: not to be encompassed by the greatest, but to let oneself be encompassed by the smallest—that is divine."[24]

God cannot "lift himself up," since nothing exists above him: he can only lower himself. This is why the entire history of the world is that of God's condescension. The human being, consequently, if he seeks to make himself greater, will only succeed in aping God. It is only by humbling himself that he can imitate God. For this, it is enough to look to Christ and learn from him the humility of God; to receive in the sacrament the grace of kenosis, and, having lowered himself, to be lifted up by

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21. Ibid., July 23, 1942.

22. Jacques Arènes, "La réalité catastrophique et l'éthique du singulier," in *Un cœur universel: Regards croisés sur Etty Hillesum*, ed. Cécilia Dutter (Paris: Salvator, 2014), 137–38. In the same way at the end of the Wager, the interlocutor, won over by Pascal, cries: "Ah! This discourse transports me, charms me, etc." Pascal replies, "If this discourse pleases you and seems impressive, know that it is made by a man who has knelt, both before and after it, in prayer to that Being, infinite and without parts, before whom he lays all he has, for you also to lay before Him all you have for your own good and for His glory, that so strength may be given to lowliness" (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter [New York: Collier & Sons, 1910], 233).

23. Mohamed Talbi and Olivier Clément, *Un respect têtu* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1989), 115. He adds, "God transcends our concept of transcendence so much; he is so inaccessible to our concept (or non-concept) of inaccessibility, that he can truly make himself capable of participation" (127).

24. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969), 146.

the Father. We must picture the man who grasps, finally having become a beggar. We must imagine Harpagon on his knees.—*Translated by Annie Hounsokou*. □

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