

The Mystery of Redemption

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

There are some confused and incorrect ideas regarding the salvific work of Christ on the Cross. These ideas are dangerous because they disfigure the image of God and make Him like fallen and sinful man, instead of elucidating the real image of God in man and man's calling to pursue God's likeness.

These ideas go back to the teaching of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), which spread in the West but was refused by the Eastern Church. However, after the fall of Constantinople (1453), Anselm's teaching crept back into the Eastern Church. Anselm's hypothesis says that the "Original" sin (from Adam and Eve) insulted God a great deal and brought His anger against mankind. Therefore, there was a need to compensate and to offer a suitable "ransom" that bears people's sins, pleases God the Almighty, releases us from God's anger, and satisfies divine justice. All of that, according to Anselm, made God offer His Son (Christ) to be the victim.

This hypothesis reflects the legal understanding of the Western mind, which was prominent in Roman culture. In addition, this hypothesis reflects the Medieval understanding of the issues of honor and compensation. After the Great Schism between the two churches, theology in the West separated from the Divine Theoria and replaced it with philosophical thinking in an attempt to explain the divinity. This, in turn, caused many aberrations, of which this hypothesis was considered the most dangerous. Anselm's hypothesis, which was maintained by the Catholic and Protestant churches for 600 years, played a major role in the decline of Christianity in the West (according to some modern Western historians).

The effect of this hypothesis is still present in Western piety, literature, and sermons. The fact that the influence of this teaching for six centuries has impacted behavior, piety, theological thinking, and sentiment cannot be erased with mere official repudiation (the Catholic Church rejected this teaching after Vatican II in 1966). I remember one question in a 12th-grade public-school religion book that asks, "How did the Cross help in decreasing God's anger?" We also encounter some confusing statements in many Protestants' writings about Christ, such as "appeasing God's anger" and "His revenge was accomplished."

This teaching completely and radically contradicts what the Gospel teaches: “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). His image is Christ, and Christ is great love, the healer of the sick, the feeder of the hungry, the friend of the poor and the marginalized, the deliverer of those who are vexed with unclean spirits, the consoler of those who mourn, and the one who is merciful toward sinners.

The Eastern Church Fathers rejected Anselm’s teaching, holding a great council in Constantinople in 1157 to reaffirm that Christ was not a ransom to the Father alone but (as man) offered His sacrifice to the Father and Himself (as the Son of God) and the Holy Spirit, together. The Holy Trinity thus participated in the salvific sacrifice of Christ, which in turn makes it a sacrifice of Divine Love out of love, not for recompense or appeasement.

Many of the early writers of the Church have avoided the use of the word “ransom” to avoid any confusion. They talked about redemption as a manifestation of God’s love. The words of the Gospel of John support this teaching: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

It was not the anger of God the Father that pushed the Son to die on the Cross, but the Father’s love. Can love work unlove? God is the Almighty, but His might is the might of love, because love is His essence.

God took upon Himself the consequences of the sin of Adam, through His Incarnation, to show solidarity with fallen human beings. “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ has saved us through a living experience.

In a fallen world enslaved to sin, this love must go, beyond the Incarnation, to the Cross—which in this context means that the divine *kenosis* (“emptying”; see 2 Cor. 5:21) has reached its destination. The incarnate God has entered and participated in all the aspects of our life and experiences, even in our death: “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Is. 53:4). Christ, the incarnate God, has shared with us our humanity and passed through all kinds of pain, reaching the ultimate suffering—I mean the divine forsaking. Through His cry on the Cross, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46), Christ participated, out of love, in the climax of our pain.

Through Christ, we know God as one who does not accept that human beings will remain captive to evil and sin and their consequences and who does not want human beings to be led by compulsion and devoid of their freedom to obtain salvation. This God led by His love, participating in all human sufferings except for sin. This participation reached the ultimate end, which is death. But Christ, who “loved them to the end” (John 13:1), has said about us: “I lay down My life for the sheep... but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (John 10:15, 18).

After Christ was lifted up on the Cross and arose from the dead, the message of the Cross to each one of us is this: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me” (Psalm 22:4). I am not alone at all. I have a friend—more than a friend—this friend is not just a human like me but truly God. A Russian priest experienced the presence of God with him during his incarceration in one of the camps. After his release, he said, “Suffering has destroyed everything, only one remains: Love.”

Christ has done for us what we could not have done without Him. We must say that Christ has suffered, not “on our behalf,” but for our sake. He went through His Passion not to free us from pain but, rather, to identify our suffering with His suffering. Christ offers us not a way to avoid pain but a way to go through it, to encounter it, and to deal with it. Christ does not act for us, nor take our part, but rather accompanies us toward salvation (as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says).

What a huge difference between Early Church teaching and the Western Medieval teaching. As St. Athanasius of Alexandria (fourth century) once said: “On the Cross alone, a man dies with his arms spread and open. Therefore, it was fitting that the Lord die in such a way that He opens to us His arms. By one arm He brought to Himself the Jews and with the other He brought to Himself the Gentiles.” He united both to one another in Himself and said: “If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:32).