

All theology springs from the fact that man, faced with a revelation that makes certain demands upon him, finds that at the same time he must accept the demands of his own humanity and of his life in the world. The reason is that man cannot accept revealed truth without submitting it to interpretation by his reason, in terms of truths he knows as a rational thinker. A man finds that he cannot be true to revelation *unless* he is true to himself as a man in the world.

And revelation is a very wide concept. Some revealed truths are not immediately concerned with matters of ordinary human experience. Of such a kind is the revelation of the Trinity. There is no particular rational factor that would automatically make us tend to interpret this truth in one way rather than in another. Other revealed truths however are concerned with matters of ordinary experience, and so experience itself provides a framework for a rational interpretation of the revealed truth, enabling us to accept the revealed truth as running parallel, so to speak, with the truth we have learned for ourselves. Where revelation concerns death, for instance, we have an example of this kind of 'ready-made' interpretation being used. Because death in our human experience means that particular event which is the termination of life in the world, we are inclined to think of death, where the word occurs in statements of revealed truth, as that event. Because death, in human experience, means the loss of contact with others in the world, we are inclined to transfer this idea too into the revelational context.

It is true that the theological discussion of death must be primarily a discussion of revealed truth, which we hold by faith. And this does mean that our first need in the theology of death is to determine as precisely as possible what the revealed data are that have bearing on death, and in what relation these data stand to other truths of faith. But the problem is that revelation tells us practically nothing about death as such, by which I here mean the *termination* of this life.

Perhaps the only point at which revelation touches on death in this defined sense concerns the universality of death. This universality however is not quite a certainty, for the biblical texts leave open the question of those who are alive at the end of time (1 Cor. 15: 15), and faith is therefore not necessarily an obstruction to the efforts of scientists who might find a definitive cure for old age. All the rest of the data of revelation

which refer to death do so obliquely. They concern the antecedent causes of death such as sin, or concomitant purposes such as punishment, or subsequent states such as heaven or hell, or else they refer to death as the vehicle or embodiment of something beyond itself, such as sacrifice. This being so, the theological attitude to death must derive very largely from a rational understanding of the kind of being man is. Father Schillebeeckx has remarked, in discussing the theology of death, that the only thing that will keep us from composing mere fantasies on themes of faith is a sound anthropology. Hypotheses must be drawn from the field of rational anthropology which will bring out the intelligibility of those articles of faith which concern death in some way.

The Council of Trent pointed out that our understanding of the faith proceeds by analogies according to our understanding of the facts of this life (*analogia fidei cum rebus naturaliter cognitis*), but this is always subject to the harmony of the mysteries of faith themselves (*nexus mysteriorum inter se*). However, by this very fact we are deeply involved in an *usus philosophiae*, that is, in the use of secular sciences, because the basis of all that we are considering is the redemption of *man*. This means that we cannot do without a philosophical insight into the reality of man. And this is a field in which remarkable progress has been made in recent times.

It would be interesting to follow the history of the theology of death alongside the development of anthropology. The Christians of the first centuries were not for the most part noted philosophers, and in the early Church there was a certain tense awaiting of the Last Day ('Come, Lord Jesus'), because for men on earth only the visible return of Christ would bring about the completeness of their redemption. The middle ages saw the development of a philosophy that could explain the subsistence of immortal souls in heaven. The tense expectancy is no longer evident, and the age produced the famous treatises on the Last Things, in which the separation of body and soul and their ultimate reunion were considered in great detail. At the same time, as an essential part of the apostolate of the Church, the expression 'saving *souls*' became firmly established (Nicea had said, 'for us *men* and for our salvation'). A characteristic of philosophical thought was its concern with immutable essences, leading in many cases to a static notion of reality, including the reality of man. Man was a body-soul, composite in substance, and his activity was subordinate to this. Death was the separation of body and soul, and could therefore refer *only* to the termination of the life-union of body and soul.

St Thomas was unique among the medievals in that he was in some respects closer to moderns in his anthropology than to his contemporaries. St Thomas's view of man was much more personalist and dynamic than essentialist and static. This comes out very clearly in his

view of intellect and will. These act, and are able to act, only in and through the body. Moreover, the incarnate-intellectual-will, man, is according to St Thomas the only material being that constructs its own end, and achieves its personal perfection in the means to that end (thus one may compare his teaching on redemption through the passion of Christ, on Christ's knowledge, on the freedom of will, on the function of sense in intelligence, etc.). Moreover, he states explicitly that a human being is a person *only in* the dynamic unity of body and soul.

'... the soul is *part* of the human composite, and therefore even if it exists separately (from the body) it cannot be called an individual substance which is independent or a substance strictly speaking, and in this it is just like a hand or any other part of man. And so the definition of a person does not apply to a soul, and you cannot call it one' (I, 29, 1 ad 5).

For some reason St Thomas does not seem to have found any followers in this matter until our own day. For St Thomas, a man is a bodily-spiritual existence, with the subsisting ability to (a) choose its own end freely, and (b) come to realize or actualize itself in the attainment of that end. And this is precisely what many modern philosophers are bringing out in their discussions on man.

As long as man was regarded as an essentially static being, established in the fulness of his personality from birth and his activity only an accidental accretion, the significance of death could be no more than that of an unrealized 'future', a momentary event still to come, consequently having no essential bearing on the *life* of man. Now, however, we become more conscious of man as a personal 'becoming'. Moreover, this *becoming* is something that must necessarily take place in community; a man cannot live in isolation and be fully human. Each person is a centre of activity within a community, and each person achieves his own personality by achieving for his spirit an embodiment in the community.

By the 'embodiment of a human spirit' we no longer mean the physical body of a man exclusively, for a man is an intellectual being: 'meaning in matter'. The meaning of my personal presence is conveyed, primarily it is true, by the presence of the flesh and blood covered by my clothes, but it is really conveyed by the things I have done, too; by the lasting effect my actions have on other persons and on things. The body of a man is something that can be measured with a tape only as far as tailors are concerned; for the philosopher the body of man extends in many ways that cannot be weighed or measured. Father Karl Rahner touches on this point when he discusses the question of disembodied souls. He says the soul cannot be disembodied, strictly speaking, because it *exists* precisely as the *soul of a body*. Father Rahner says that, while in life, a soul exists in an immediate relationship with the material world through its own particular body, the cosmic relationship being therefore limited in a

spatial sense. But, when separated from the body, the soul does not become a-cosmic, but pan-cosmic, the spatial limitation being removed. It seems clear that he implies, especially in his discussion of redemption, that this pan-cosmic relationship is an active one. Using a very different terminology, St Thomas implies the soul's pan-cosmic relationship too, but his interpretation seems to be the opposite of Rahner's.

For St Thomas, the soul exists in a transcendental relationship to matter. This means that it cannot exist except in relationship to matter. And all material beings are substantially *one*, since the individuation of parts of matter into a table, a cat, a man, a moon, is a question of quantity, an 'accident', therefore, which does not affect the substantial reality as such. St Thomas therefore sees the pan-cosmic relationship of the soul as an active relationship during life, since life is the active incarnation of the soul in matter, but as a negative, inactive relationship in death.

Although the soul is transcendently related to matter as such (to all matter), it is the particular nature of a human spirit to be embodied in an active, personal sense in this particular part of matter, quantitatively determined by human generation, and not in matter as a whole indiscriminately. Other parts of the material quantum, the totality of matter, can convey the presence of a man, can embody his spirit, only insofar as he has acted on them through the medium of his own flesh and bones. This is what we mean when we call a human person a 'centre of activity'. The living, active relationship of the soul to matter is 'centred' in, and active through, this spot of the material whole which is its 'own body'. If this is so, man's need for community is not merely something that arises on the social level, but is a metaphysical fact.

The notion of man as an embodiment in a community is further developed by the notion of the self as openness to other selves. I am a centre of activity in my community, not a centre of gravity. As a personal self I exist as able to perfect myself in a community of others who in *their* ability are equal to myself. This necessarily means that I can achieve myself only in openness, only in the service of others, for as soon as I try to 'use' another person, to make him serve me, I reduce him to the impersonal level and can no longer come into contact with him as a person. This means that I limit my own ability to be personal, since this ability exists only in a community of persons.

If this is a true picture of personal existence, it means that, even on the natural level, the achievement of self consists in the gift of self to others. In order to be truly human, I must be available to the community, which means that I must not possess myself by holding on to my activity, turning it to my own ends, but rather find myself in the service of others.

Theology is now in a position to broaden our understanding of Christian death considerably, because of our deepened understanding of the

kind of being that man is. Perhaps it is necessary to add that contemporary theology in this, as in any other context, is the work of theologians, and therefore subject to open discussion, unless and until such time as its conclusions are taken up authoritatively by the Church.

Because we know, through a philosophical enquiry, that man is a unity, and a unity indeed in the sense that the exclusion of the physical or sense side of man makes spiritual activity impossible, then, naturally speaking, death involves man in a puzzle he cannot solve if left to himself. Because philosophy goes further and provides strong arguments for immortality, it must follow, still on the natural level, that the disembodied souls of the dead exist only in a lethargic, inactive condition, isolated by inactivity from all contact. Because the Church's dogmatic teaching tells us that 'separated souls' enjoy the vision of God in heaven supernaturally, we see that this enjoyment must be inferior to that which is possible after the resurrection, and that the condition in which these souls exist must at least in some sense be an 'embodiment', for without this any activity on their part is unthinkable. And so we see that the theology of death is inseparable from the theology of resurrection. For present purposes it will perhaps be sufficient to say that the theology of death aims at an interpretation of death and an approach to it that will lead to resurrection.

Faith presents us with the fact that not only will we rise from the dead, but that our resurrection is established by the resurrection of Christ. 'Each must rise in his own rank; Christ is the first fruits, and after him follow those who belong to him' (1 Cor. 15: 23). The end we are to choose for ourselves, fulfilling the call inherent in our natural being to choose an end, is the resurrection in Christ, so that in working towards that end we may make ourselves. But Christ's resurrection is the *result* of his death. '... He accepted an obedience which brought him to death. ... *That is why* God has raised him up ...' (Phil. 2: 8, 9). The road to resurrection is the same for us. '... You, by baptism, have been united with his burial' (Col. 2: 12); and frequently St Paul talks about faith in Christ or baptism as death to sin. Perhaps this is the central truth of the revelation concerning death: that as Christ's death was the way to resurrection, ours must be the same. This is of course not a new idea, but we can perhaps say without exaggeration that its interpretation was for a long time more a matter of devotional piety than of theology.

If we examine the death of Christ in the gospels, we see very clearly two levels of reality. On the one hand there is the physical torment and the termination of life in time. This is not specifically human death, for it is identical in kind with the end of any animal organism. But on the other hand, because this is the death of a man, we see that the physical destruction of life is the embodiment of a death of the spirit. Spirits however do not die, and so the death of Christ, as an essentially human

death, gives death a new meaning. The human soul of Christ, like every human soul, loses its native ability to enact itself when it is separated from his body. This comes from the punitive character of death as a result of sin. Sin is the turning of personal activity away from community, and therefore away from God, towards self, and death is a stricture upon the very ability out of which the activity was misdirected. Christ 'was made sin', 'took on the body of sin'. The 'sinner' becomes impersonalized because sinful activity is retreat from authentic personality. This is however not the only human aspect of death.

Whereas in life Christ established himself in and through his own personal activity, giving himself in and through this activity to the community of others, in death he gives up freely the very ability to act. 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit', which is to say, he hands over his essential self, as a centre of activity, into the care of Another. If we go further into this human aspect of Christ's death, we see that the death itself is an action, a self-giving, and that the motive for this action is the same as the motive for all his previous life-activity. He gives himself in community. He gives himself, in all his personal action, to others, for their sake. This is the 'horizontal' motivation of Christ's activity, the giving of himself for the sake of his fellow men. In every act there is at the same time a 'vertical' motivation; he gives himself to his fellow men out of obedience to God.

These two motives, the horizontal and the vertical, are identified at the point of action, for man, the being-in-community, is made by God to be precisely what he is. God's will which is to be obeyed is manifested in the fact of my own creation. Because both motives meet in each act, Christ's life at the disposal of others is at the same time his life at the disposal of The Other. Now, his self-giving to his fellow men does not come to an end with his death; on the contrary. If we take together the revelational statements (a) he rose because he died, (b) he lived and died for us, and (c) he is personally and humanly in contact with us now in a sacramental way, we can see that his death in time is the root of his ability to continue giving himself to men in the world. He gives himself in the same way as he gave himself to his contemporaries in Palestine, but without the limitations of a personal contact which is centred in this world. That is, he continues to meet us and to be open to us in embodiment, but this embodiment is not primarily so centred as to convey his presence primarily in one place only.

Further, if we turn to consider the case of the saints in heaven and if we take together the revelational statements about (a) their union with Christ and (b) the community aspects of the Body of Christ, we can see that their natural isolation, lethargy and inactivity are overcome because of their vital relationship to Christ's physical body. This does not mean a concurrence of more than one person in one centre of activity, for as

St Thomas has said, these saints are not persons.

Keeping in mind the two levels of reality in the death of Christ, we see that 'death' of the spirit, the ceasing of personal activity, cannot be part of death as a personal action. That death in this limited sense means the cessation of activity is a fact which lies wholly outside the scope of free choice, in the same way as birth does. Birth is the creative act of God terminating in human generation. Since there is no compelling factor in matter resulting in this particular sperm uniting with this particular ovum, God is the only satisfactory reason we can give for the birth of this particular person. In a like way, there is no compelling factor in matter which makes this particular set of circumstances result in the termination of this particular life; death is the same creative act of God sustained in human degeneration. On the side of human personal activity, this means that all authentic human actions are identical in kind, and that one of a man's actions is a self-giving that results in an inability to act does not change the kind of action it is. Human personality is the potential towards free action, not towards the impossibility of action; only God can bring this about.

Theologically we can say that physical death is outside the scope of man's personal activity, and exists for man merely as a negative, not even as a possible, object of will. To complete the theological view of this level of death, we would have to go into the whole matter of the divine specification of good, of sin, justice and retribution. It cannot be willed authentically by man because it means the deprivation of the ability to will, and since man is immortal, authentic will must be permanent. Similarly, it cannot be understood, and so will always be feared. However, it can and must be faced, since it is implicit in all the positive and authentic activity of personal life in the service of others.

The faith, then, reveals specifically human death to be identical with personal life. We have already seen that this paradox is not a new idea introduced by revelation: 'He who loses his life will find it'. The paradox is already apparent on the purely rational level. The human being creates the perfection of his own being by being open to others. The positive significance of human death is the perfection of self-giving. But, since human life is the substantial opportunity to embody self in the service of community, every authentically human act is an act of self-giving.

Where a personal act of self-giving accompanies physical death, an immutable finality is given (from without) to the perfection of self-giving achieved (from within) in the act, since, on the natural level, no further acts are possible. Since all authentically human acts are of the same kind, including the final one, every single authentically human act is an act of dying. The Dominican breviary makes much use of the prayer: 'In the midst of life we are in death'. It is not difficult to see that this has for centuries been implicit in the Church's moral teaching, often



interpreted to mean that we should live as though every human act were the last.

The theology of death, then, is basically an extension of the theology of the incarnation. Being wholly from God, like Christ, our goal, even on the natural level, is to embody this dependence in a life which is wholly to God. But human life is a continuity in time, and as long as the continuity lasts, any act of giving retains the ability for further acts, of giving or not giving as the case may be. It is only when God enters into a special way into the act of giving (or non-giving) and terminates the continuity by suspending the very ability to act, that this act becomes *whole* self-giving (or refusal to give).

One further truth of revelation must be mentioned, and one not directly concerned with death though intimately connected with it. 'While they were at table, Jesus took bread and wine . . . and said, This is my body, this is my blood shed for you to the remission of sins. You are to do this as a reminder of me.' The bodily shedding of blood is a sign of death, and the Church takes care that this sign of death is experienced often during life. Those words, 'you are to do this', are the secret. Often they are taken to mean that we re-present the shedding of Christ's blood, make Christ give himself in death in some way. But this is only a skeleton of the truth. Christ says: I personally am dying for you, now you do the same. You personally die now, for each other and for me, frequently, throughout your life and throughout history, until I come.

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