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Reflection on the Beginning Of the Passion of Christ

by

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Theologians have long recognized that the whole life of Jesus Christ, beginning with His earliest infancy, was a Passion. Saint Jerome, Saint Bernard, the monk John of Ford, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Bridget of Sweden, and Brother Gabriel Biel are among those who have shared with the world their insight that the Passion of Christ consists not just in His death on Calvary, but in everything leading up to that death, in short, His whole life.

Our popular devotions today sometimes tend to obscure this important, long-recognized truth that the whole life of Jesus was a Passion. Our mental habit of dividing the life of Christ into the "joyful" early days and the "sorrowful" final days, while a convenient and useful device to aid one in remembering the events of the life of Christ, no doubt causes us often to lose sight of the deeper truth that Christ's entire life was a continual Passion offered up for the salvation of His beloved people.

Both at the beginning and at the end of life, the human organism is more vulnerable to distress. Although lacking the detailed knowledge of the baby in the womb which is available today, the saints and theologians of times gone by nevertheless possessed a keen sense of the distress normally experienced by babies in the womb. It should cause us to wonder, then, that in our culture today, possessed as we are with considerably more knowledge of life in the womb, so many of us are thoughtlessly accustomed to think of the time in the womb as an untroubled paradisaical state for the baby, a blissful prelude to life after birth. But nothing could be more untrue.

It has been discovered in recent years, for example, that the newborn baby has many more pain receptors than an adult, while at the same time it as yet lacks the neurological mechanism which modulates the sensation of pain in an adult. This multiplicity of unmodulated pain receptors has a survival value in the womb in that it ensures an adequate blood circulation to the extremities and also to ensure that the child pulls itself away when its delicate body comes into contact with the umbilical cord or with the wall of the womb.

This multiplicity of pain receptors is necessary to the survival of the child in the womb. Consider an analogy: when one is swimming in a pool, one is cushioned by the water, but one must still avoid too forceful a contact with the floor and sides of the pool. While the walls of the womb are not as hard as the walls of a swimming pool, the body of a child in the womb, on the other hand, is much more fragile than the body of an adult. When one thumps on the belly of an expectant mother, the child within her womb invariably thrashes its limbs and shows other signs of agitation as it attempts to escape the disturbance of its environment.

A physician who was a pioneer in the field of fetology discovered some decades ago that just as babies after birth weep when they feel distress, so too do babies yet in the womb weep when they feel distress and for many of the same reasons. They may weep in reaction to a frighteningly loud noise or to fatigue accompanied by an inability to fall asleep. What is distressing to an adult, such as muscle cramps, hiccups, colic, or insomnia, is many more times distressing to a baby in the womb because of the multiplicity of unmodulated pain receptors necessary for its survival.

As has often been observed by those who study babies in the womb, these very young human beings suck their thumbs to comfort themselves. It is because they feel discomfort that they comfort themselves. Those who closely observe babies in the days and weeks after birth, too, notice that after an interval of intense activity on the part of a baby, a whimpering spell or a crying jag soon follows. Babies both before and after birth as yet lack the impulse to stop an activity before it causes them to become overtired.

In addition to fatigue, babies in the womb experience the discomfort of thirst, sipping the amniotic fluid at different rates related to the amount and timing of their physical activity. But since they have little or no sense of time, it may seem like an eternity to them from the time they experience thirst till they relieve it by sipping the amniotic fluid a mere moment later.

We sometimes speak of Jesus as "entering this world" at the moment of His birth. But in actuality, Jesus did not enter this world at the moment of His birth. Rather, He entered this world at the moment of His conception. He was, says the Apostle, "like us in all things except sin."

Therefore, "He did not abhor the Virgin's womb," as the great hymn of the Church phrases it. He did not avoid the pain of the human condition even in the womb.

In the Middle Ages some held to a pious, but ill-considered, belief that the Mother of God was spared the birth pangs which other women experience at the end of pregnancy. This belief was a fanciful, unwarranted expansion of the standard Church-Council-approved doctrine that Mary's virginity was miraculously preserved during childbirth. But the pious belief that she was spared the pangs of birth does Mary little honor, for it makes her less a follower of Jesus on the long road to Calvary. Like Jesus, she was like us in all things except sin. Although preserved from sin by the Passion of her Son, applied to her in advance, she was not exempted from the pain of the human condition any more than her Son was. Had she been exempted from such pain she could not have participated in the Passion of her Son so fully.

By reflecting on the words of the scripture and on the ponderings of the saints and theologians of the past, one may arrive at a restored sense of the Passion which underlies the events of the conception and womb-life of the Redeemer. Two remarks of the Apostle Paul make it clear that the conception of Christ involved a sacrificial abasement on His part. "Said Christ as He came into the world, 'I come to do Thy will, O God,'" says Paul. He adds somberly that Christ "emptied Himself and took the form of a slave." The conception and gestation of Christ as well as His subsequent life were a kind of enslavement in which He sacrificed His divine prerogatives by subjecting Himself to the restrictions of human nature.

On the foundation of such scriptural passages the saints and theologians based their own musings. As early as the fourth century, we find Saint Jerome commenting in his blunt fashion on the abasement suffered by Christ in the womb and during the birth process: "The Son of God, for our salvation, became the Son of Man. He waits nine months to be born, He endures discomforts. Bloodied, He comes forth." How different this picture is from the saccharine images of the Infant Christ to be found on so many of our Christmas cards.

Many centuries later we find that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux likewise alludes to the abasement suffered by Christ during the birth process. Says Bernard: "The infirmities to which He submitted for our sakes, such as to be born, to be suckled, to die, to be buried, belong to the humanity which He borrowed from us." Bernard appears to recognize the anguish which is suffered by a baby during birth contractions that are so powerful they compress its skull and squeeze the amniotic fluid from its small lungs in preparation for its breathing air for the first time. In his recognition of this birth-anguish of the baby, Bernard draws a clear parallel between the suffering endured by Christ as an infant and that endured by

Christ at the end of His earthly life. "Mine is the mortality of the Infant, mine the helplessness of the Child, mine also the death upon the cross, and mine the sleep of the tomb," proclaims Bernard. The beginning and the end of Christ's earthly life are in this fashion singled out by Bernard for special comment.

An obscure English Cistercian monk, John of Ford, drew the parallel between the womb and the cross even more explicitly than had Bernard. John asserts that, "From the moment the Word was made flesh, the Lord Jesus carried His cross." John then goes on to reinforce this vivid image by explaining that, "Yes, in His mother's womb, the Lamb of God was already taking away the sins of the world, doing penance for our crimes, enduring the weariness of nine months and constantly interceding for us to the Father."

But meanwhile, in Western theology a momentous development had taken place which unhappily deflected attention away from these trenchant insights of Bernard of Clairvaux and John of Ford. Subsequent Western theology came to be dominated by the exclusive emphasis that brilliant and intellectually provocative Saint Anselm of Canterbury placed upon the crucifixion and the death of Christ. In his influential and attention-attracting formulation, the crucifixion came to be seen in virtual isolation as the single act of atonement which reconciled God and His people.

It was not until the thirteenth century that Saint Thomas Aquinas, with his gift for circumspection and his ability to reconcile apparent contradictions, challenged the pervasive death-oriented theology of Anselm and steered Western culture once again towards a more humane and life-oriented theology, in which the crucifixion of the Savior was to be viewed as the culmination of an entire lifetime of salvific activity. "From the beginning of His conception Christ merited our eternal salvation," declares Saint Thomas with forceful clarity, restoring to the Incarnation its deserved emphasis, while adding the qualifying explanation, "but on our side there were some obstacles, whereby we were hindered from securing the effects of His preceding merits, thus making the crucifixion necessary."

His incarnational understanding of salvation may have been Thomas' most culture-changing achievement. In one stroke he re-affirmed the value of the whole human life span. The influence on Western culture of his doctrine of the salvific conception of Christ was incalculable as, with the spread of Thomistic ideas through sermons preached in pulpits across Europe, Christians became, in the centuries that followed, increasingly appreciative of the value of the human journey through life, as well as of its final end. As a result of these Thomistic ideas, scholars came to see the worth of studying the natural sciences, whether anatomy and medicine at the University of Padua or botany in the monasteries of central Europe. And in painting there was a new attention given to accurately depicting the innumerable species of plants to be seen in the world. In literature, the

pilgrimage of life was deemed worthy of attention by Geoffrey Chaucer. In the moral universe of that late medieval poet the cockles are allowed to grow along with the wheat until the harvest. His slyly understated portrait of the physician who is in collusion with the Apothecary still rings with contemporaneity today.

Even the fifteenth-century Nominalist theologians who took issue with key aspects of Saint Thomas' thought stuck with him in his doctrine of the salvific life of Christ in the Womb. Writes the Nominalist Brother Gabriel Biel, "'In all the sufferings of His life, the suffering of the Lord was maximal... consider the stretch of time spent as a baby within the cramped confines of the womb.'" And as late as the seventeenth century one finds the eclectic Anglican theologian and preacher John Donne declaiming from his London pulpit: "The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr." The London congregation who heard Donne preach that day left Saint Paul's with Saint Thomas' incarnational vision still intact. Christ was still seen as already the Redeemer even in His earliest infancy.

In the intervening centuries between John Donne and the present, however, several strands of thought have contributed to the contemporary dehumanization and reification of the child in the womb. A mechanistic physical theory inherited from the eighteenth century undoubtedly laid the ground work for the prevalent modern misconception that the child in the womb is a minimally sensate being more acted upon than acting. At the same time, a Rousseauistic sentimentality has idealized the child in his womb as an innocent, blissful sprite whose troubles begin only after birth when it encounters the deleterious social constructs which supposedly are the source of all human woes. So entrenched in our culture are these views that, no matter how much they have been disproven by recent scientific discoveries, their validity is rarely questioned.

The words of the saints and theologians of the past, however, can happily supply what is lacking in our usual modern perspective and provide an added dimension appropriate to our particular times. Through such a fuller and more humane appreciation of how the Passion encompasses the whole span of Christ's human life from His conception in Nazareth to His death on Calvary, we are better able to see how Christ walks with us, not only through our last days as death approaches, but also throughout our whole earthly journey. By supplementing the conventional Lenten focus on the last hours of the Passion with a broader focus in the manner of the great saints and theologians of the past, we allow ourselves to understand the redemptive meaning of the Passion in the deeper, fuller way envisioned by Vatican II as affecting and potentially consecrating the whole of life, even in its most mundane aspects.