

**April 03, 2005**  
**Third Sunday of Lent**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When we speak of our Lord's "agony" (*agonia*) to describe His prayer in the garden, we are borrowing the expression from St. Luke (22:44), the only New Testament writer to use this word. There are two other distinctive features in Luke's version of this event.

First, Luke omits the threefold form of Jesus' prayer found in Mark and Matthew. His version, therefore, is shorter.

Second, the traditional form of the Lukan text contains certain details not found in the other two Synoptics. To wit, "Then *an angel* appeared to Him from heaven, *strengthening Him*. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then *His sweat became like great drops of blood* falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:43-44). These particulars about the bloody sweat and the comforting angel we know only from Luke.

Because the older, reputedly more reliable manuscripts of Luke do not contain these verses, it is true, some scholars argue that they were not part of the "original form" of Luke. For two reasons, nonetheless, I believe this judgment is a bit hasty.

First, given the considerable textual differences among the Lukan manuscript traditions (in the Last Supper story, for instance), I am not convinced there really was a single "original form" of Luke's Gospel. It seems to me not unreasonable to suspect that Luke himself may have left it to us in more than one form. (This consideration, let me add, seems applicable to other New Testament authors as well. Since many writers produce more than one version of their works, why would this be off-limits to the divinely inspired writers?)

Second, this impression of more than one original Lukan text is strengthened by the fact that the passage in question (Luke 22:43-44), though not found in the earliest manuscripts, was very well known from the earliest times. In truth, these Lukan features appear so soon after his Gospel's composition that it seems downright rash to claim they were not part of the "original" text.

For instance, about halfway through the second century, Justin Martyr wrote: "According to the Memoirs [*apomnemonevmata*, Justin's common expression for the Gospels], which I say were composed by the Apostles and their followers, His sweat fell down like drops of blood while He was praying" (*Dialogue With Trypho* 103.8). This citation, as old as any extant manuscript of Luke, shows that Justin was familiar with the disputed verses. Shortly after Justin, moreover, Irenaeus of Lyons also wrote of

the bloody sweat (*Adversus Haereses* 3.22.2), as did Hippolytus of Rome, who mentioned, as well, the angel who strengthened Jesus (*Fragments on Psalms* 1 [2.7]). Later, Epiphanius of Cyprus (*Ancoratus* 31:4-5) and others followed suit.

For these reasons, and because this passage has long been received in the Church as integral to the Lukan text, my comments on these verses will presume Luke's authorship of them.

Let us consider more closely, then, the Lord's bloody sweat and the angel who strengthened Him.

First there is the sweat of blood, a condition called hematidrosis, which results from an extreme dilation of the subcutaneous capillaries, causing them to burst through the sweat glands. This symptom, mentioned as early as Aristotle (*Historia Animalium* 3.19), is well known to the history of medicine, which sometimes associates it with intense fear. It is not without interest, surely, that only the evangelist that was also a physician mentions this phenomenon.

Unlike Mark (14:34) and Matthew (26:38), Luke does not speak of Jesus' sadness in the garden scene, but of an inner struggle, an *agonia*, in which the Lord "prayed more earnestly." The theological significance of this feature in Luke is that the Jesus' internal conflict causes the first bloodshed in the Passion. His complete obedience to the Father in His prayer immediately produces this initial libation of His redemptive blood, the blood of which He had proclaimed just shortly before, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (22:20). Prior to the appearance of His betrayer, then, the Lord already begins the shedding of His blood. He pours it out in the struggle of obedience, before a single hand has been laid upon Him. In Luke the agony in the garden is not a prelude to the Passion, but its very commencement, because Jesus' stern determination to accomplish the Father's will causes His blood to flow for our redemption.

Second, there is the angel sent to strengthen the Lord during His trial. Luke, in his earlier temptation scene, had omitted the angelic ministry, of which Matthew (4:11) and Mark (1:13) spoke on that occasion. When Luke did describe that period of temptation, however, he remarked that the devil, having failed to bring about Jesus' downfall, "departed from Him until an opportune time" (4:13). Now, in the garden, that time has come, and Jesus receives the ministry of an angel to strengthen Him for the task.

This is one of those angels of which Jesus asks Peter in the Gospel of Matthew: "Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?" (26:53) This angelic ministry was ever available to Him, but now Jesus is in special need of it.

In Luke's literary structure, this ministering angel stands parallel to Gabriel at the beginning of the Gospel. In the earlier case an angel introduces the Incarnation; in the present case an angel introduces the Passion. Very shortly angels will introduce the Resurrection (24:4).

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