

**April 10, 2005**  
**Fourth Sunday of Lent**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the pagan Celsus, late in the second century, wrote the first formal treatise against the Christian faith, he cited the agony in the garden in order to assault the doctrine of Jesus' divinity: "Why does he shriek and lament and pray to escape the fear of destruction, speaking thus: 'Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me'?"

Refuting Celsus in the following century, Origen remarked that the Gospels do not claim that Jesus "lamented" (*oduretai*) His coming death. Also, Origen continued, Celsus failed to note that the foregoing prayer of Jesus was immediately followed by the words, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done," a sentiment demonstrating our Lord's "piety and greatness of soul," His "firmness," and His "willingness to suffer" (*Contra Celsum* 2.24).

Needless to say, Christians are at one with Origen's critique of Celsus on this point, but they should also consider the force of the latter's attack. Although the "malice" (*kakourgon*) of Celsus denied him access to the true meaning of the agony in the garden, he at least discerned Jesus' full humanity. Indeed, reasoned Celsus, Jesus in the garden was so utterly human that He could not possibly have been divine.

Even as we reject that conclusion, let us recognize that the fullness of Jesus' humanity was most manifest in that event described by the Epistle to the Hebrews as "the days of His flesh" (5:7). In the Lord's agony, we perceive the most profound inferences of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Jesus in the garden subjected to the Father, not only the assent of His will, but also the disposition of His flesh. In this regard, the author of Hebrews places on the lips of the Son, "when He came into the world," the words of the Psalmist, "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, But a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come--in the volume of the book it is written of Me--To do Your will, O God'" (10:5-7; Psalms 40 [39]:6-8).

"A body You have prepared for Me," says the incarnate Word to His Father. We may contrast this to the Hebrew text of Psalm 40:6, which reads, "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; My ears You have opened." Perhaps relying on the Septuagint (as reflected in its three earliest extant manuscripts), the author of Hebrews changes "ears" to "body." He thereby asserts that Jesus in his very body, and not simply in the assent of His will, accomplished our redemption.

This assertion must not be disregarded nor be given inadequate attention, lest we fall into serious doctrinal error. It has sometimes been alleged that our redemption was really wrought, not on Golgotha, but in Gethsemani, when Jesus explicitly submitted

His will in obedience to the will of the Father. Some Eastern theologians, in particular, overreacting to a Western juridical soteriology, have attempted to spiritualize redemption, to moralize it, even to disembodify it. They advanced the theory that Jesus purchased our redemption, not by the immolation of His body on the Cross, but by His internal, spiritual sufferings in the garden. According to this view, redemption was accomplished by the deliberate submission of Christ's human will to the divine will. Indeed, some have attempted to bolster this thesis through the biblical assertion that the true sacrifice acceptable to God consists in an internal immolation of the heart (Psalms 51 [50]:16-17).

This exaggerated theory, it must be said, does not correspond to biblical soteriology, according to which "we have been sanctified through the offering of *the body* of Jesus Christ" (Hebrews 10:10). A full Christian view of redemption will insist that it happens *in the body*. To separate the suffering and death of Christ in the body from the internal obedience of His will to the Father does violence to the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, it does violence to the Incarnation itself, whereby "He Himself likewise shared in [flesh and blood] that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (2:14).

The submission of Jesus' will led directly to the immolation of His body and the libation of His blood. His agony in the garden pertains, thus, to a single purpose, extending from His assumption of our flesh all the way to its ascent, finally, into heaven. The Church knows of no redemption apart from what God's Son accomplished in the body.

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