

GOD'S PROVIDENCE FOR JESUS: COMFORT OR NO COMFORT

Louis Roy, O.P., Assistant Professor of Theology at Boston College, presented a thirty-five minute paper on this topic to which John Galvin, Associate Professor of Theology at Catholic University responded. The following are digests of the paper and the response.

Roy posed two questions as the focus for his paper: (1) How should our idea of God's providence be reshaped as we ponder the last events of the life of Jesus? and (2) During his final hours, did Jesus find any comfort in a providential God?

Inconsistencies among the biblical texts preclude conclusive answers to the questions. Yet, believers through the centuries have tried to understand Jesus' thoughts and feelings, raising a question which is an intelligent one and, therefore, in Roy's judgment, a legitimate question for systematic theology. One cannot establish the precise character of Jesus' sentiments, but systematic theology should aim at delineating a general perspective in which the various elements make sense to one another. In this paper, he attempts to follow this systematic method as he develops his topic in three parts.

I. JESUS: ONE WITH HUMANKIND

Roy looks to Mark and Luke for clues to Jesus' thoughts and feelings as he approaches his death. In Mark, he finds clues in the narrative of the passover celebration; in the conversation on the way to the Mount of Olives; in the "must" of both the passion (8:31) and eschatological judgment (13:7); and in the use of the word "hour," reminiscent of the Septuagint version of Isaiah 53:6 and 12.

All the New Testament narratives, Roy points out, seem to portray Jesus as less courageous than the Jewish and Christian martyrs. Feuillet, upon whom Roy relies, ascribes the weakness of Jesus to three factors: fear of physical suffering and death, experience of death as sinful separation from God, and seeing his own defeat as part of the awful consequences of sin affecting the human race.

Roy uses texts from Luke as a basis for his reflection on the injustice and the utter banality of Jesus' death (see Lk 24:19, 15:40, 15:34). Reflection on these texts leads him to conclude that Jesus must have felt humiliated to suffocate slowly in full view of his friends. In Roy's words, "The easy victory of the forces of evil must have given rise to an overall sense of futility in the soul of Jesus. His doubts could have been well rendered by the question: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Lk 15:34)

On the question of God's presence-absence to Jesus during his passion, according to both Mark and Luke, no help comes to Jesus directly or indirectly. As

during his life Jesus did not give extraordinary signs, so he dies without giving a sign himself and without being given "a sign from heaven." This fact, in Roy's judgment, tells us much about God's providence for Jesus.

II. JESUS: ONE WITH GOD

Before examining Jesus' relationship to God in his passion, Roy discusses Jesus' identity and main intention. According to Hans Frei, a person's identity manifests itself as self-continuity from past to present, and no separation exists between one's identity and responsible behavior. Frei finds that, powerless against historical forces, Jesus retains his intention and remains active by opening himself to the initiative of the power he called Father. Frei emphasizes the significance of Jesus' obedience to his mission through which Jesus becomes who he is. Roy concludes that God identifies himself with the powerlessness of Jesus, a process that reaches its climax in the resurrection. Yet, in the resurrection as in the passion, God's action remains hidden. An invisible divine power vindicates the life and death of Jesus, a fact that tells us much about God's providence.

Moltmann gives a hint about the relationship between Jesus and the Father—the dereliction of Jesus is most significant because it affected a human being who was extremely intimate with God. To understand the mystery of this communion, two analogies are useful: the human desire to know and to love, and mystical experience. These analogies are brought together by Aquinas in his understanding of faith as a light given to the human spirit, not essentially different from the light of glory. Can we, Roy asks, attribute to Jesus a mystical communion with God or even the beatific vision? The belief that Jesus possessed the beatific vision is based not so much on New Testament texts as on an apprehension of Jesus as authoritative teacher. (This is Frederick Crowe's argument, with which Roy seems to agree.) If the beatific vision is conceived of as immediate knowledge of God that is compatible with suffering in the whole of one's soul (as Aquinas taught), it can be reconciled with Jesus' humanity.

III. GOD AND HUMANITY: ONE IN JESUS

In considering what could have happened in the *human* consciousness of Jesus, Roy rejects Moltmann's projection of Jesus' experience of abandonment into the inner life of the Trinity, but he accepts Moltmann's view of Jesus' abandonment as a unique form of dereliction. It can be said that God let Jesus fall into an abyss of suffering and that Jesus both felt abandoned and believed that he was abandoned, in the sense of being delivered up to the powers of evil. Moltmann's insight that Jesus suffered absolute anguish at being plunged into the dark night of sinfulness and immersed in the great ordeal afflicting humanity is close to an insight found in Aquinas.

Roy concludes from his research that it is possible to see Jesus as one with humankind tormented by evil and one with the Father thanks to their immediate union because these two experiences are not on the same level. Furthermore, when Jesus lost his life and his ego, but humanly grew in love and into his divine self, the providential presence of God manifested itself paradoxically, both by letting

historical forces play their role and by sustaining Jesus' self-gift. Thus in granting no comfort to Jesus, God's providence accomplished its highest design.

RESPONSE BY JOHN GALVIN

First, limiting the biblical material considered to the synoptic accounts of Gethsemane and Jesus' final words on the cross is too narrow a focus. The biblical study should incorporate more consideration of the Last Supper tradition and of Mark 14:25.

Second, the insight that Aquinas did not attribute the beatific vision, as beatific, to Jesus is instructive, but Aquinas' position on other aspects of the issue is more distant from what is acceptable to modern exegetes and theologians than one would infer from Roy's treatment.

Third, the category of providence may be insufficient to bring the major issues into proper perspective. He questions identifying providence and presence and suggests that the more pressing question for consideration is that of God's will for Jesus. Also, the phrasing of the christological question seems to identify too closely providence and comfort and to impose on the texts a concern their authors did not have.

Fourth, reflection on what could or might have happened remains unsatisfying and, finally, some passages in Roy's study pursue psychological reasoning further than the limited sources permit. Theological interpretation must refer to significant public fact.

Considerable discussion took place on many aspects of the topic.

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