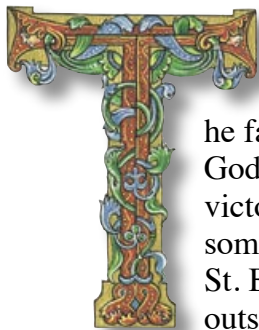


## PARADISE LOST and the Long Road Home

Dear Friend of Clear Creek Abbey,

Lent 2011



he fact is inescapable: if there is something right with human existence, if God's creation is filled with wonders both natural and supernatural, if Christ's victory over sin and death stands quite complete and definitive, there is also something awry in the universe, something terribly wrong in the world.

St. Benedict takes it for granted and never loses sight of this reality. From the outset of his *Rule* for monks, he makes it clear in what kind of place we live:

Hearken, O my son, to the precept of your master, and incline the ear of your heart: willingly receive and faithfully fulfill the admonition of your loving father, that you may return by the labor of obedience to Him *from whom you had departed through the sloth of disobedience.* (Prologue)

It is sad but true that we are all somehow involved in the rebellion that started among the Angels and spilled over into the history of mankind. This is why St. Benedict makes so bold as to point out our sloth of disobedience.

At the other end of the historical spectrum, the Magisterium of the Church, both in the late twentieth century and in our own brave new millennium, frequently refers to the alarming perspective of a general secularization and de-Christianization of almost all the more developed societies — especially Europe and the United States. This is no small threat. Soon-to-be-Blessed Pope John Paul II said this repeatedly with as much eloquence and forcefulness as any man could muster.

The attempt to set freedom in opposition to truth, and indeed to separate them radically, is the consequence, manifestation, and consummation of *another more serious and destructive dichotomy, that which separates faith from morality.*

This separation represents one of the most acute pastoral concerns of the Church amid today's growing secularism, wherein many, indeed too many, people think and live "as if God did not exist." We are speaking of a mentality which affects, often in a profound, extensive and all-embracing way, even the

attitudes and behavior of Christians, whose faith is weakened and loses its character as a new and original criterion for thinking and acting in personal, family and social life. (Veritatis Splendor, n. 88)

As the same Pope further explains, this type of decadence goes back to the original fault itself.

[O]bedience is not always easy. As a result of that mysterious original sin, committed at the prompting of Satan, the one who is “a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44), man is constantly tempted to turn his gaze away from the living and true God in order to direct it towards idols (cf. 1 Thes 1:9), exchanging “the truth about God for a lie.” (Rom 1:25) Man’s capacity to know the truth is also darkened, and his will to submit to it is weakened. Thus, giving himself over to relativism and skepticism (cf. Jn 18:38), he goes off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself. (Ency. Veritatis Splendor n. 1)

There is a painting by a French artist of the 19th or early 20th century, that depicts Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It is an impressive canvas, artfully anachronistic. In the foreground we contemplate the Garden itself, where the lion lies down



with the lamb, where all is harmony and peace. A little further back, perched atop the two pillars that flank the gateway, stand the Cherubim keeping watch with flaming sword, guarding the entrance lest fallen Man attempt to reenter the Paradise he lost.

What is interesting about this particular painting is the fact that the two sad figures of Adam and Eve, going off into the outside world far in the background, instead of being clothed in animal skins (as the Bible indicates) are dressed as a man and a woman of modern times: Adam with his bowler hat and overcoat, Eve in her respectably *bourgeoise* attire.

The artist’s idea is clear enough: we are still Adam and Eve, banished from Paradise, living in exile on the highways and byways of the modern — or now postmodern — world. After the many centuries that separate us from the fatal day of the Fall, we are still taking stock of all we lost.

So the story is rather bleak. There is no turning back to an earthly Paradise, and the future appears ever more menacing. However, a ray of light does illuminate this dismal landscape where lives fallen Man, that is to say — each one of us. Before showing Adam and Eve, as it were, “the way to the door,” the Lord God spoke these most remarkable words:

And the Lord God said to the serpent: Because thou hast done this thing, thou art cursed among all cattle and beasts of the earth: upon thy breast shalt thou go, and earth shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. I will put enmities

between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel. (Gen. 3:14-15)

The mysterious promise contained in this text (sometimes referred to as the Protoevangelium) — as it outlines the first contours of the Good News of Salvation — determines, in fact, the history of the world from the moment our first parents set their feet outside the original Paradise until the end of time.

It has not escaped the more enlightened minds of the Church (those of the great Fathers and Doctors in particular) that something very marvelous occurs here. Whereas Adam and Eve lost so much in sinning, whereas their sin led to their banishment from Paradise and the disruption of the whole harmony of Creation, God, in his infinite



Wisdom, found a means of remedying the fault that potentially brings us into a more intimate relationship with Him than would have existed if Adam and Eve had never sinned. This is marvelously summed up in the *Exsultet* chant (*Praeconium Paschale*) that is part of the liturgy of the Paschal Vigil. In one of the better-known passages of this sublime liturgical poem Holy Mother Church says this extraordinary thing:

O felix culpa . . . O happy fault [original sin, you see], that merited such and so great a Redeemer!

The expression, *O felix culpa* is fairly well known among the older generations of Catholics, but even those who are familiar with this liturgical masterpiece fail perhaps to seize the full wealth of meaning.

The idea is that God could have prevented evil from entering the world; He could have prevented the sin of Adam and Eve. The fact that He permitted this tragedy to occur means that it could only be for some higher purpose. He could only permit such a thing, very bad in itself, in order to bring about a good that exceeds the evil done. Now what greater good, one might wonder, could come from the sin that brought death and evil into our world, with all the disastrous consequences? The answer here (as much as we can understand such deep things) is that, had Adam and Eve not sinned, the Son of God would not have been born in Bethlehem: Christ, as least as we know Him, would not have come into the world. In permitting Man to sin, God opened the history of the world to the most sublime adventure, the most beautiful story possible, the story of the Incarnation of the Son of God and of His redemptive sacrifice on the Cross. In the end the cure is so great that it dwarfs the whole history of evil and the principdom of Satan.

In his great poem *The Divine Comedy*, Dante represents the world as a globe, where the inhabited regions of land are situated in the northern hemisphere, while the southern hemisphere is composed entirely of water, with the exception of a single island. On that island rises the mountain of Purgatory, where God's holy angel brings the souls of the faithful departed

(those who do not have to descend into Hell), in order that they might purge themselves of the debt they still owe in terms of punishment for sin, before they can be admitted into Heaven and into the beatific vision of God.

At the summit of this holy mountain of Purgatory, interestingly enough, is found the earthly Paradise from which Adam and Eve were exiled after their sin. All of this is symbolic, of course, but quite enthralling once we understand how to read it as a powerful poetic illustration of the dogma of Purgatory. Dante thus envisages the necessary process of the purification of souls as a painful climb up the slopes of this mountain, until they reach the earthly Paradise that was lost in the beginning and are lifted from there into the everlasting and perfect Paradise in Heaven, as represented in the book of *Revelation*.

The process of our moral purification here below (before we depart for the life hereafter) can be pictured in similar fashion, as a kind of climb. This is our life during Lent: a struggle against our weaknesses, a strenuous but happy climb toward better things. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*.

So we see that, even if there is something terribly wrong in the world — all is not lost. We may have lost Paradise, but we have not lost our free will. We have not lost the possibility of doing penance and straightening out our lives — or rather allowing Divine grace to do so for us, with our cooperation. Above all, as baptized Christians, we have a most precious inheritance of supernatural life, including that most precious light along the way — Hope. In this valley of tears and struggles, we learn little by little to appreciate this incomparable source of Hope which is Divine Mercy.

If soon-to-be-Blessed Pope John Paul II is remembered for many things, it seems likely that the foremost of his accomplishments — in which his life is linked to that other Polish saint, Faustina Kowalska — will have been his role in instituting the Feast of Divine Mercy, upon which day he is to be beatified. Believing in Divine Mercy is perhaps the very hardest thing for many human beings, especially adults, but in the face of the incalculable weight of hatred and cruelty that marked the twentieth century and continues to mark our own century, there is surely nothing Man needs more urgently than this balm that cures the wounds of his heart. It is Divine Mercy that places limits on the expansion of evil, both in the world at large and inside us. It is Divine Mercy that most effectively makes us capable of living again in Paradise. This is also how St. Benedict views the universe; this is the rugged, upward road of the Beatitudes; this is the road home.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the generous help we have received with the ongoing construction. It is truly wonderful to see the church beginning to take shape, something akin to Jacob's vision near Bethel. *Terribilis est locus iste*: Terrible is this place: it is the house of God, and the gate of Heaven. (*Introit for Mass of the Dedication of a church*) The Holy Angels surely look forward to the day when they can assist for the first time at the Holy Sacrifice of Mass within the walls of the Abbatial Church.

May God bless you during this holy season of Lent, and may Our Lady of the Annunciation smile upon you and yours,

+ br. Philip Anderson, abbot

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