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Empty Spaces of the Word

Jesus Christ & the Pattern of Christian Manhood

by *Leon J. Podles*

Samuel Johnson calls envy the most malignant of vices, because it diminishes another's good without increasing one's own. A thief at least gets some goods as the result of his theft, but the envious man in attacking another only wounds and does not profit. The spiritual being whom Christians call the Adversary knows that he cannot win against God in a direct contest, but he can attack God's glory, that is, the perception of God's goodness and wisdom by men and angels. In an unfallen world, God would be transparent in all creation. No one could doubt his existence or his goodness. But in a fallen world, the chief source of disquiet about the very existence of God, or whether he can be called good in any human sense, is the evil in human history and in creation.

The strength of this difficulty should not be underestimated. Even men of great and unshakable faith, like Cardinal Ratzinger, say that the evil in the world gives them pause. The past century has been a horror story come to life. Children have had their brains sucked out; Jews were buried alive so that the ground moved for days; concentration camp inmates were thrown alive into pits of burning bodies or drowned in pools of excrement; planes were crashed into towers that crumbled into shards and dust—why have not the heavens darkened? Nor is this past century unique. History was a slaughterhouse even before it was written down.

Nor is history the only spectacle that could cause us to doubt the goodness of the Creator. The animal world is full of horrors. Some insects digest their victims alive; human beings are attacked by flesh-eating bacteria or viruses that cause them to bleed from every orifice.

Is this a design of darkness, to appall?

Even the evidences of design are puzzling. The human eye is far too complex to have occurred by accident, but it has what look like design flaws. Why do we age? Why do the innocent suffer?

Philosophical theodicies flounder when confronted with evil. Is this really the best of all possible worlds? Is our sense of goodness so different from God's that there is nothing in common between the two terms except the mere sound? Or is there another explanation, one not attainable by theodicy?

Neither a lack of goodness or wisdom in the Creator, nor the intractability of matter, nor the inability of man to see the divine plan, is the source of the dark clouds that obscure God's glory, but rather the envy of the devil. He could not wound his Creator, but he could try to destroy God's reputation, God's glory, among men.

Why God allows his glory to be attacked cannot be understood by philosophy, but only by the Cross, the Incarnation of God in a fallen universe. The only justification of the ways of God to man is the Cross. In the mysterious participation of the Creator in the sufferings of his own creation, he vindicates his glory in a way beyond all human and angelic expectation. Nothing greater than what God has done in history can be imagined or conceived. The Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Christ is the total, full, complete, and final revelation of God; there is nothing beyond it.

This doctrine (contested by theologians who want to reduce Christ to one of many avatars of the divine) is the key to understanding the mystery of evil. In his envious attempt to destroy the glory of God, the devil has pulled the heavens down upon his head, and the whole creation is irradiated (for a time in a hidden way) by the Shekinah, the uncreated glory of God. By attempting to ruin man, the devil provoked the Creator to rescue man in the most glorious fashion, by using a Divine Man to defeat the spiritual forces of evil. Humanity, instead of being condemned forever to hell, is forever seated at the right hand of God, and all humanity is called to participation in the divinity, to theosis, to becoming gods. Such is the end of the attempt of envy to ruin God's glory.

But the history of this attempt is still being played out. By greater and greater evils, the devil tries to lead into despair, if possible, even the elect. But the greater evils provoke God into further displays of his glory. The twentieth century was the age of martyrs, who outnumbered the martyrs of all previous centuries. Hidden for the most part in the concentration camps and gulags, their blood will be the unseen and fruitful seed of the Church. This glorious robe of witnesses is already seen by angels and, one day, will be seen by all. Newspapers may not tell their stories, but when all things that are now hidden are at last revealed, the glory of God will be visible above all in their faithful witness.

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