6

Trampling Down Death by Death

We live today in a death-denying culture. This is clearly seen in the unobtrusive appearance of the ordinary funeral home, in its attempt to look like all other houses. Inside, the "funeral director" tries to take care of things in such a way that one will not notice that one is sad; and a parlor ritual is designed to transform a funeral into a semi-pleasant experience. There is a strange conspiracy of silence concerning the blunt fact of death, and the corpse itself is "beautified" so as to disguise its deadness. But there existed in the past and there still exist—even within our life-affirming modern world—"death-centered" cultures, in which death is the one great all-embracing preoccupation, and life itself is conceived as being mainly preparation for death. If to some the funeral home itself seems to divert thoughts from death, to some others even the "utilities" such as a bed or a table become symbols, reminders of death. A bed is seen as the image of the grave, the casket is put on the table.

Where is Christianity in all this? There can be no doubt, on the one hand, that the "problem of death" is central and essential in its message, which announces Christ's victory over death, and that Christianity has its source in that victory. Yet, on the other hand, one has the strange feeling that although this message has certainly been heard, it has

had no real impact on the basic human attitudes toward death. It is rather Christianity that has "adjusted" itself to these attitudes, accepted them as its own. It is not difficult to dedicate to God—in a nice Christian sermon—new skyscrapers and world's fairs, to join—if not to lead—the great progressive and life-affirming forces of our "atomic age," to make Christianity appear as the very source of all this hectic and life-centered activity. And it is equally easy, when preaching at a funeral or a retreat, to present life as a valley of suffering and vanity, and to present death as a liberation.

A Christian minister, representative in this of the whole Church, must today use *both languages,* espouse both attitudes. But if he is sincere he must inescapably feel that "something is missing" in both, and that this is in fact *the Christian element itself.* For it falsifies the Christian message to present and to preach Christianity as essentially life-affirming—without referring this affirmation to the death of Christ and therefore to the very fact of death; to pass over in silence the fact that for Christianity death is not only the end, but indeed the very reality of *this world.* But to "comfort" people and reconcile them with death by making this world a meaningless scene of an individual preparation for death is also to falsify it. For Christianity proclaims that Christ died for the life of the world, and not for an "eternal rest" from it. This "falsification" makes the very success of Christianity (according to official data church building and per capita contributions to churches have reached an all time high!) into a profound tragedy. The worldly man wants the minister to be an optimistic fellow, sanctioning faith in an optimistic and progressive world. And the religious man sees him as an utterly serious, sadly solemn and dignified denouncer of the world's vanity and futility. The world does not want religion and religion does not want Christianity. The one rejects death, the other, life. Hence the immense frustration either with the secularistic tendencies of the life-affirming world or with the morbid religiosity of those who oppose it.

This frustration will last as long as Christians continue

to understand Christianity as a religion whose purpose is to *help,* as long as they continue to keep the "utilitarian" self-consciousness typical of the "old religion." For this was, indeed, one of the main functions of religions: to help, and especially to help people to die. For this reason religion has always been an attempt to *explain* death, and by explaining it, to reconcile man with it. What pains Plato took in his *Phaedo* to make death desirable and even good, and how often he has since been echoed in the history of human belief when confronted with the prospect of release from this world of change and suffering! Men have consoled themselves with the rationalization that God made death and that it is therefore right, or with the fact that death belongs to the pattern of life; they have found various meanings in death, or assured themselves that death is preferable to decrepit old age; they have formulated doctrines of the immortality of the soul—that if a man dies, at least a part of him survives. All this has been one long attempt to take the awful uniqueness out of the experience of death.

Christianity, because it is a *religion,* had to accept this fundamental function of religion: to "justify" death and thus to *help.* In doing so, moreover, it more or less assimilated the old and classical explanations of death, common to virtually all religions. For neither the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, based on the opposition between the spiritual and the material, nor that of death as liberation, nor of death as punishment, are, in fact, Christian doctrines. And their integration into the Christian world view vitiated rather than clarified Christian theology and piety. They "worked" as long as Christianity lived in a "religious" (i.e., death-centered) world. But they ceased to work as soon as the world outgrew this old death-centered religion and became "secular." Yet the world has become secular not because it has become "irreligious," "materialistic," "superficial," not because it has "lost religion"—as so many Christians still think—but because old explanations do not really explain. Christians often do not realize that they themselves, or rather Christianity, has been a

major factor in this liberation from the old religion. Christianity, with its message offering fullness of life, has contributed more than anything else to the liberation of man from the fears and the pessimism of religion. Secularism, in this sense, is a phenomenon within the Christian world, a phenomenon impossible without Christianity. Secularism rejects Christianity insofar as Christianity has identified itself with the "old religion" and is forcing upon the world those "explanations" and "doctrines" of death and life which Christianity has itself destroyed.

It would be a great mistake, however, to think of secularism as simply an "absence of religion." It is, in fact, itself a religion, and as such, an explanation of death and a reconciliation with it. It is the religion of those who are tired of having the world explained in terms of an "other world" of which no one knows anything, and life explained in terms of a "survival" about which no one has the slightest idea; tired of having, in other words, life given "value" in terms of death. Secularism is an "explanation" of death in terms of life. The only world we know is this world, the only life given to us is this life—so thinks a secularist—and it is up to us men to make it as meaningful, as rich, as happy as possible. Life ends with death. This is unpleasant, but since it is natural, since death is a universal phenomenon, the best thing man can do about it is simply to accept it as something natural. As long as he lives, however, he need not think about it, but should live as though death did not exist. The best way to forget about death is to be busy, to be useful, to be dedicated to great and noble things, to build an always better world. If God exists (and a great many secularists firmly believe in God and the usefulness of religion for their corporate and individual enterprises) and if He, in His love and mercy (for we all have our shortcomings) wants to reward us for our busy, useful and righteous life with eternal vacations, traditionally called "immortality," it is strictly His gracious business. But immortality is an appendix (however eternal) to this life, in which all real interests, all true values are to be found. The American "funeral home" is indeed the very symbol

of secularist religion, for it expresses both the quiet acceptance of death as something natural (a house among other houses with nothing typical about it) and the denial of death's *presence* in life.

Secularism is a religion because it has a faith, it has its own eschatology and its own ethics. And it "works" and it "helps." Quite frankly, if "help" were the criterion, one would have to admit that life-centered secularism *helps* actually more than religion. To compete with it, religion has to present itself as "adjustment to life," "counselling," "enrichment," it has to be publicized in subways and buses as a valuable addition to "your friendly bank" and all other "friendly dealers": try it, it *helps!* And the religious success of secularism is so great that it leads some Christian theologians to "give up" the very category of "transcendence," or in much simpler words, the very idea of "God." This is the price we must pay if we want to be "understood" and "accepted" by modern man, proclaim the Gnostics of the twentieth century.

But it is here that we reach the heart of the matter. For Christianity *help* is not the criterion. Truth is the criterion. The purpose of Christianity is not to help people by reconciling them with death, but to reveal the Truth about life and death in order that people may be saved by this Truth. Salvation, however, is not only not identical with help, but is, in fact, opposed to it. Christianity quarrels with religion and secularism not because they offer "insufficient help," but precisely because they "suffice," because they "satisfy" the needs of men. If the purpose of Christianity were to take away from man the fear of death, to reconcile him with death, there would be no need for Christianity, for other religions have done this, indeed, better than Christianity. And secularism is about to produce men who will gladly and corporately die—and not just live—for the triumph of the Cause, whatever it may be.

Christianity is not reconciliation with death. It is the revelation of death, and it reveals death because it is the revelation of Life. Christ is this Life. And only if Christ is Life is death what Christianity proclaims it to be, namely

the enemy to be destroyed, and not a "mystery" to be explained. Religion and secularism, by explaining death, give it a "status," a rationale, make it "normal." Only Christianity proclaims it to be *abnormal* and, therefore, truly horrible. At the grave of Lazarus Christ wept, and when His own hour to die approached, "he began to be sore amazed and very heavy." In the light of Christ, *this* world, this *life* are lost and are beyond mere "help," not because there is fear of death in them, but because they have accepted and normalized death. To accept God's world as a cosmic cemetery which is to be abolished and replaced by an "other world" which looks like a cemetery ("eternal rest") and to call this religion, to live in a cosmic cemetery and to "dispose" every day of thousands of corpses and to get excited about a "just society" and to be happy!—this is the fall of man. It is not the immorality or the crimes of man that reveal him as a fallen being; it is his "positive ideal"—religious or secular—and his satisfaction with this ideal. This fall, however, can be truly revealed only by Christ, because only in Christ is the *fullness of life* revealed to us, and death, therefore, becomes "awful," the very fall from life, the enemy. It is *this world* (and not any "other world"), it is *this life* (and not some "other life") that were given to man to be a sacrament of the divine presence, given as communion with God, and it is only through this world, this life, by "transforming" them into communion with God that man *was to be.* The horror of death is, therefore, not in its being the "end" and not in physical destruction. By being separation from the world and life, it is *separation from God.* The dead cannot glorify God. It is, in other words, when Christ reveals Life to us that we can hear the Christian message about death as the enemy of God. It is when Life weeps at the grave of the friend, when it contemplates the horror of death, that the victory over death begins.

2

Before death, however, there is *dying*: the growth of death

in us by physical decay and illness. Here again the Christian approach cannot be simply identified either with that of the modern world, or with the one that characterizes "religion." For the modern secular world, health is the only *normal* state of man; disease therefore is to be fought, and the modern world fights it very well indeed. Hospitals and medicine are among its best achievements. Yet health has a limit, and it is death. There comes a time when the "resources of science" are exhausted—and this the modern world accepts as simply, as lucidly as it accepts death itself. There comes a moment when the patient is to be surrendered to death, to be removed from the ward, and this is done quietly, properly, hygienically—as part of the general routine. As long as a man is alive everything is to be done to keep him alive, and even if his case is hopeless, it must not be revealed to him. Death must never be part of life. And although everyone knows that people die in hospitals, their general tone and ethos are those of cheerful optimism. The object of modern medicine's efficient care is life, and not mortal life.

The religious outlook considers disease rather than health to be the "normal" state of man. In this world of mortal and changing matter suffering, sickness and sorrow are the normal conditions of life. Hospitals and medical care must be supplied, but as a religious duty and not because of any real interest in health as such. Health and healing are always thought of as the mercy of God, from the religious point of view, and real healing is "miraculous." And this miracle is performed by God, again not because health is good, but because it "proves" the power of God and brings men back to God.

In their ultimate implications these two approaches are incompatible, and nothing reveals better the confusion of Christians on this issue than the fact that today Christians accept both of them as equally valid and true. The problem of a secular hospital is solved by establishing a Christian chaplaincy in it, and the problem of a Christian hospital by making it as modern and scientific—that is, as "secular"—as possible. In fact, however, there is a progressive surrender

of the religious approach to the secular, for reasons which we have already analyzed above. The modern minister tends to become not only an "assistant" to the medical doctor, but a "therapist" in his own right. All kinds of techniques of pastoral therapy, hospital visiting, care of the sick—which fill the catalogues of theological seminaries—are a good indication of this. But is this *the Christian* approach—and if it is not, are we simply to return to the old—the "religious" one?

The answer is no, it is not; but we are not simply to "return." We must discover the unchanging, yet always contemporary, *sacramental* vision of man's life, and therefore of his suffering and disease—the vision that has been the Church's, even if we Christians have forgotten or misunderstood it.

The Church considers *healing* as a sacrament. But such was its misunderstanding during the long centuries of the total identification of the Church with "religion" (a misunderstanding from which all sacraments suffered, and the whole doctrine of sacraments) that the *sacrament of oil* became in fact the sacrament of death, one of the "last rites" opening to man a more or less safe passage into eternity. There is a danger that today, with the growing interest in healing among Christians, it will be understood as a sacrament of health, a useful "complement" to secular medicine. And both views are wrong, because both miss precisely the sacramental nature of this act.

A sacrament—as we already know—is always a *passage,* a *transformation.* Yet it is not a "passage" into "supernature," but into the Kingdom of God, the world to come, into the very reality of this world and its life as redeemed and restored by Christ. It is the transformation not of "nature" into "supernature," but of the *old* into the *new.* A sacrament therefore is not a "miracle" by which God breaks, so to speak, the "laws of nature," but the manifestation of the ultimate Truth about the world and life, man and nature, the Truth which is Christ.

And healing is a sacrament because its purpose or end is not *health* as such, the restoration of physical health, but

the *entrance* of man into the life of the Kingdom, into the "joy and peace" of the Holy Spirit. In Christ everything in this world, and this means health and disease, joy and suffering, has become an ascension to, and entrance into this new life, its expectation and anticipation.

In this world suffering and disease are indeed "normal," but their very "normalcy" is abnormal. They reveal the ultimate and permanent defeat of man and of life, a defeat which no partial victories of medicine, however wonderful and truly miraculous, can ultimately overcome. But in Christ suffering is not "removed"; it is transformed into victory. The defeat *itself* becomes victory, a way, an entrance into the Kingdom, and this is the only true *healing*.

Here is a man suffering on his bed of pain and the Church comes to him to perform the sacrament of healing. For this man, as for every man in the whole world, suffering can be defeat, the way of complete surrender to darkness, despair and solitude. It can be *dying* in the very real sense of the word. And yet it can be also the ultimate victory of Man and of Life in him. The Church does not come to restore *health* in this man, simply to replace medicine when medicine has exhausted its own possibilities. The Church comes to take this man into the Love, the Light and the Life of Christ. It comes not merely to "comfort" him in his sufferings, not to "help" him, but to make him a *martyr*, a *witness* to Christ in his very sufferings. A martyr is one who beholds "the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). A martyr is one for whom God is not another—and the last—chance to stop the awful pain; God is his very life, and thus everything in his life comes to God, and ascends to the fullness of Love.

In *this world* there shall be tribulation. Whether reduced to a minimum by man himself, or given some relief by the religious promise of a reward in the "other world," suffering remains here, it remains awfully "normal." And yet Christ says, "be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33). Through His own suffering, not only has all suffering acquired a meaning but it has been given the power to

become itself the sign, the sacrament, the proclamation, the "coming" of that victory; the defeat of man, his very *dying* has become a way of Life.

3

The beginning of this victory is Christ's death. Such is the eternal gospel, and it remains "foolishness" not only for *this world,* but also for *religion* as long as it is the religion of this world ("lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect"—1 Cor. 1:17). The liturgy of Christian death does not begin when a man has come to the inescapable end and his corpse lies in church for the last rites while we stand around, the sad yet resigned witnesses of the dignified removal of a man from the world of the living. It begins every Sunday as the Church, ascending into heaven, "puts aside all earthly care"; it begins every feast day; it begins especially in the joy of Easter. The whole life of the Church is in a way the sacrament of our death, because all of it is the proclamation of the Lord's death, the confession of His resurrection. And yet Christianity is not a death-centered religion; it is not a "mystery cult" in which an "objective" doctrine of salvation from death is offered to me in beautiful ceremonies and requires that I believe in it and thus profit from its "benefits."

To be Christian, to believe in Christ, means and has always meant this: to know in a transrational and yet absolutely certain way called faith, that Christ is the Life of all life, that He is Life itself and, therefore, *my* life. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men." All Christian doctrines—those of the incarnation, redemption, atonement—are explanations, consequences, but not the "cause" of that faith. Only when we believe in Christ do all these affirmations become "valid" and "consistent." But faith itself is the acceptance not of this or that "proposition" about Christ, but of Christ Himself as the Life and the light of life. "For the life was manifested and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was

with the Father, and was manifested unto us" (1 Jn. 1:2). In this sense Christian faith is radically different from "religious belief." Its starting point is not "belief" but love. In itself and by itself all belief is partial, fragmentary, fragile. "For we know in part, and we prophesy in part . . . whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." Only *love never faileth* (1 Cor. 13). And if to love someone means that I have my life in him, or rather that he has become the "content" of my life, to love Christ is to know and to possess Him as the Life of my life.

Only this possession of Christ as Life, the "joy and peace" of communion with Him, the certitude of His presence, makes meaningful the proclamation of Christ's death and the confession of His resurrection. In *this world* Christ's resurrection can never be made an "objective fact." The risen Lord appeared to Mary and "she saw him standing and knew not it was Jesus." He stood on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias "but the disciples knew not it was Jesus." And on the way to Emmaus the eyes of the disciples "were holden that they should not know him." The preaching of the resurrection remains foolishness to this world, and no wonder even Christians themselves somehow "explain it away" by virtually reducing it to the old pre-Christian doctrines of immortality and survival. And indeed, if the doctrine of resurrection is just a "doctrine," if it is to be believed in as an event of the "future," as a mystery of the "other world," it is not substantially different from the other doctrines concerning the "other world" and can be easily confused with them. Whether it is the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body—I know nothing of them and all discussion here is mere "speculation." Death remains the same mysterious passage into a mysterious future. The *great joy* that the disciples felt when they saw the risen Lord, that "burning of heart" that they experienced on the way to Emmaus were not because the mysteries of an "other world" were revealed to them, but because they saw the Lord. And He sent them to preach and to proclaim not the resurrection of the dead—not a doctrine of

death—but repentance and remission of sins, the new life, the Kingdom. They announced what they knew, that in Christ the *new life* has already begun, that He is Life Eternal, the Fulfillment, the Resurrection and the Joy of the world.

The Church is the entrance into the risen life of Christ; it is communion in life eternal, "joy and peace in the Holy Spirit." And it is the expectation of the "day without evening" of the Kingdom; not of any "other world," but of the fulfillment of all things and all life in Christ. In Him death itself has become an act of life, for He has filled it with Himself, with His love and light. In Him "all things are yours; whether . . . the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:21—23). And if I make this *new life* mine, mine this hunger and thirst for the Kingdom, mine this expectation of Christ, mine the certitude that Christ is Life, then my very death will be an act of communion with Life. For neither life nor death can separate us from the love of Christ. I do not know when and how the fulfillment will come. I do not know when all things will be consummated in Christ. I know nothing about the "whens" and "hows." But I know that in Christ this great Passage, the *Pascha* of the world has begun, that the light of the "world to come" comes to us in the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit, for *Christ is risen and Life reigneth.*

Finally I know that it is this faith and this certitude that fill with a joyful meaning the words of St. Paul which we read each time we celebrate the "passage" of a brother, his falling asleep in Christ:

> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord (I Thess. 4: 16-17).