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“I HAVE COME TO CAST FIRE ON THE EARTH . . . ”

TOWARDS the end of his public ministry, and very likely during the course of a journey through Judaea in the intimate companionship of his disciples, Jesus revealed in brief but mysterious words the inmost sentiments of his Sacred Heart. His words, recorded for us only by St. Luke, the careful historian and patient enquirer, have no apparent connection with what precedes, but rather form a compact “saying” consisting of two “members,” nicely balanced one against the other. The Greek may be rendered as follows:—

“Fire it is that I have come to put on the earth—

And how I wish it were already kindled !¹

Yet there is a Baptism wherewith I must needs be baptized—

And how am I in anguish till this be accomplished !”

(Luke xii, 49-50.)

There follows the passage, “Think ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, no: but separation,” also recorded in substance by St. Matthew (x, 34).

What is this mysterious “fire” that Jesus has come to cast or put on the earth? Many have been the explanations advanced down through the centuries by Father and theologian, saint and scholar, believer and rationalist. The eminent Père Lagrange, in his commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel, wrote that he preferred to leave this saying of Christ’s in its “prophetic obscurity” (*Evangile selon S. Luc*, p. 372). May we not be deemed rash for attempting to shed a little light on this obscurity!

First, let us examine the rest of the saying. The introductory expression, “I am come,” is frequently used by our Lord in connection with the purpose of his mission on earth, in reference to something that is an important part, or, at least, an important consequence, of the saving work which, as the Incarnate Redeemer, he came down from heaven to accomplish. For example, Jesus has come to preach the Kingdom of God to the Galilean cities (Mark i, 38), “not to call the just, but sinners to repentance” (Luke v, 32), “not to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to bring them to perfection” (Matt. v, 17), “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke xix, 10), “to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. xx, 28); he has come “that men may have life and have it more abundantly” (John x, 10); he has come “not to give peace but the sword—to separate a man against his father, etc.”

¹ τί θέλω εἰ ἤδη ἀνήφθη, literally, “What will I if it be already kindled,” a rendering that makes poor sense in the context. The tenor of the parallel clause, “How am I in anguish . . .” and the existence of instances in the New Testament where τί renders the Hebrew “mah” (how) and εἰ has the sense of οὐκ, favour the accepted rendering as given above.

(Matt. x, 34 ; Luke xii, 51), that is to say, his teaching will be the occasion of strife and dissension among men, and even among those of the same household, on account of the opposite reactions—whether of belief or of hatred and enmity—to which it will give rise. The Son of God, consequently, has come from the bosom of his Father as Redeemer of mankind to “put fire on the earth”—it follows that the “earth” is not, either in a literal or a metaphorical sense, as many of the Fathers suggested, the actual land or soil, on to which the seed of the parable is cast or upon which the thorns, briars and tares of vice and sin grow. It is rather of the world, dwelling place of man, as contrasted with heaven, seat of God and his angels, that Jesus is speaking ; it is in or among men that he means to cast his fire, just as it is to be among men that strife and dissension, which he has come to send “on the earth” (rather than peace and harmony), will be rampant.

Nor must we imagine our Lord’s work as that of some irate deity, some Jupiter or Titan hurling his fiery thunderbolts on to the earth : the Greek word βαλεῖν (literally, “cast”) has here the more general sense of “put” or “spread,” hence “kindle”—the very same word is used to express the idea of sending, causing or establishing on earth peace or dissension (Matt. x, 34).

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that Jesus earnestly desires that the fire of which he speaks may be speedily kindled, may quickly burn, glow and be aflame, while yet he realizes that there is something which prevents this blessed event taking place, some necessary condition that has still to be fulfilled. This is none other than that “Baptism” with which he is to be baptized, that Baptism of blood he must endure, that bitter “chalice” he must drink if he is to accomplish the work his Father has given him to do. Of this “Baptism” Jesus spoke again not so very long after, when the ambitious brethren, James and John, came to him looking for the first thrones in his Kingdom, and he put to them the question, “Can you drink the chalice that I am to drink, or be baptized with the baptism wherewith I am to be baptized ?” (Mark x, 38). After the Baptism, then, after Calvary, the fire will effectively be kindled.

What, once again, is this “fire” ? Does Scripture offer us any solution ?

“Fire” in the sacred writings is generally to be taken in the obvious literal sense ; instances most to the point in the present connection are the references to fire descending miraculously from heaven, whether to consume the holocaust on the altar of the Tabernacle or the Temple, or to destroy the murmurers and rebels in the desert of Sinai or the troops of the king of Israel, sent to arrest Elias (Lev. ix, 24 ; III Kings xviii, 38 ; Numbers xi, 1 ; IV Kings i, 10). Few would seriously maintain that our Lord meant his words to be taken in this literal sense. He had

consistently refused to have anything to do with fiery signs from heaven, such as many of his contemporaries associated with the coming of the Messiah, and when asked by the Pharisees to furnish such a sign, he had refused (Matt. xvi, 1 ss.). He, the gentle Master, had rebuked James and John, the "Sons of Thunder," when they wanted to call down fire from heaven on the inhospitable Samaritan villages (Luke ix, 58).

In a figurative sense, "fire," when referred to God in the Scriptures, describes his fierce anger against the sinner, fruit of his infinite righteousness and zeal for justice, expressing itself in stern and terrible judgement and chastisement. "In the fire of my zeal," he declares through the prophet Sophonias, "all the earth shall be devoured" (iii, 8). He is, as Moses warned the Chosen People, a jealous God, "a consuming fire" (Deut. iv, 24). The word of God, threatening judgement and chastisement through his prophet, is also a "fire" (cf. Jer. xxiii, 29). This signification is scarcely appropriate for our text—at his first coming Jesus appeared as a Saviour, not a Judge, he came in mercy, not in wrath, "to seek and to save that which was lost," in fact, "to give his life a ransom for many." Yet might we not interpret the "fire" as denoting the word of God (not necessarily a word of Judgement), and consequently the doctrine of Christ that was to be preached all over the earth by the apostles and their successors after his death and resurrection, the saving message of the Gospel that was to be announced to all nations? This interpretation is that advanced by St. Cyril of Alexandria in his commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke: "That henceforth not in Judaea only should the saving message of the Gospel be proclaimed—comparing which to fire he said, 'I am come to cast fire on the earth'—but that now it should be published even to the whole world . . . Behold therefore, yea, see, that throughout all nations was that sacred and divine fire spread abroad by means of the holy preachers" (*Commentary*, II, 94. trans. from Syriac by R. Payne-Smith, pp. 437-8). This explanation squares well with the context, but I am inclined to reject it for two reasons. In the first place, Christ, following the broad trend of Scriptural terminology, prefers the metaphor of the light that shines rather than the fire that burns when alluding to his own teaching and that of his apostles: both he and they are the "light of the world" in this capacity (cf. Matt. v, 14; John viii, 12 and *passim*). In the second place, this fire is something Jesus wishes to see enkindled and aglow for its own sake, we may say, not simply an external instrument, a doctrine or teaching, whereby men's minds are led to embrace the truth and their hearts to love it.

What of the Scriptural application of the metaphor of fire to man? "Fire" and its compounds frequently denote the various human passions and their manifestations: anger and indignation, envy and jealousy, concupiscence and sometimes human affection. The tongue,

chief outlet for man's inward feelings, is called by St. James "a fire, the very world of iniquity" (iii, 6). The very next words of Jesus refer to that stirring up of human passion to which his preaching will give occasion ("Think ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, no: but separation"). Not a few commentators, consequently, think that Jesus was speaking of the fire of human strife and dissension, the flame of discord, even in the bosom of the same family, that the preaching of him who was the "sign of contradiction" (Luke ii, 34) would lead to. "Igitur et ignem eversionis intendit, qui pacem negavit,"¹ declared Tertullian centuries ago (*Adv. Marc.* iv, 29). Granted it could truly be said, in accordance with Hebrew usage, which does not employ a different form of words to distinguish direct and merely occasional causality, that Jesus had come to spread strife and dissension in the world, it could hardly be maintained that he ardently longed to see that fire ablaze.

"Fire" is also employed as a metaphor to denote those trials or afflictions whereby the Almighty tests, purifies and strengthens in virtue the souls of the just, as silver or gold is tested and purified in the furnace. In this way was the devout Psalmist proved—"if thou shalt prove me by fire, thou shalt not find iniquity in me" (Ps. xvi, 3)—in this manner, also, the faithful "remnant" of the Jewish people was purified by the sufferings of the Babylonian captivity—"And I will bring a third part through the fire and refine them as silver is refined: and I will try them as gold is tried" (Zach. xiii, 9). It was very likely in the same strain that Malachy spoke of the Messiah as "like a refining fire and like the fuller's herb—And he shall sit refining and cleansing the silver, and he shall purify the sons of Levi and shall refine them as gold and as silver" (iii, 2-3). Did Jesus then, as many modern exegetes hold, mean to speak of those providential afflictions his servants would have to undergo on account of their belief in him, for example, the persecution and contradictions of their own kith and kin, such as is implied in the next few verses? This explanation does not seem adequate to me, for there is no suggestion in the text—as is usual when the metaphor of "fire" is used in this sense—of God or of Christ using the fire to test or purify, of their proving, testing, trying or "baptizing" the faithful believer with the same refining agency. What Jesus has come to put on earth, what he earnestly longs to see taking shape is not anything external, but an inward spiritual energy, ardent and living, so to speak, as corporeal fire, a worthy object of desire and achievement in itself—not merely an instrument of cleansing or purgation with a view to preparing the way for spiritual realities of a positive and lasting order. Many of the Fathers do indeed interpret this fire in terms of a

¹ "Wherefore he meaneth the fire of turmoil and upheaval—he who refused (to give) peace."

purifying agency, but it is clearly an inward, spiritual energy they have in mind, the real nature of which—as distinct from its effects—they describe elsewhere.

Scripture does not, I believe, afford direct examples of what I consider the true meaning of the "fire" our Lord speaks of, but there is a definite suggestion in the right direction to be found in the narrative of the descent of the Holy Ghost on the apostles on the first Pentecost day, under the visible form of flames of fire (Acts ii, 3). Several of the Fathers, notably SS. Jerome, Augustine, Cyril of Jerusalem and Gregory the Great, regarded the "fire" as a direct appellation of the Holy Ghost; our Lord, they said, spoke of the sending down of the Spirit upon the Infant Church after his death and resurrection, as a fire that was never to be quenched and that would burn with ever-increasing ardour till the day of his Second Coming on earth.

Strictly speaking, however, the "fire" denotes the chief effect of the Holy Ghost's mission rather than the Spirit himself, it signifies the most blessed fruit of his descent into man's heart, a living energy he produces and sustains there—none other than the fervour of charity, a vital and active love of God that is the mainspring and motive-power of the Christian life and the life of perfection, the source of zeal for souls, the very antithesis of, in fact, the very destroyer of, the impure flame of concupiscence that rages in the heart of unregenerate man, and a conflagration that not all the floods of tribulation can extinguish (cf. Cant. viii, 7, in the mystical sense). "We must be animated with exceeding fervour, exceeding zeal," writes St. John Chrysostom, "otherwise we cannot obtain the promised inheritance. It is in this sense that Christ said on one occasion, 'He that taketh not up his cross and followeth me, is not worthy of me,' and on another, 'I am come to cast fire on the earth.' By both of which he declares to us that his disciple must be fervent and aflame with love and ready to undergo any and every trial" (*In Joannem*, hom. xxxiv) "What does this fire signify," says St. Gregory the Great, "but the ardour of the Holy Ghost, who consumes the hearts he has filled" (*In Ezech.* I, hom viii, 26). From the time of this same holy Pontiff this interpretation of our text became commonly accepted, and it was no doubt due to his influence that we have in our liturgy today petitions to God, and more precisely to God the Holy Ghost, to enkindle in our hearts the fire of his love:—

"Come, O Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful, and kindle in them the fire of thy love." (Alleluia verse of Pentecost Octave.)

"May God enkindle in our hearts the fire of his love." (Third blessing of the second nocturn of the Divine Office.)

"May the Holy Spirit, O Lord, inflame us with that fire which our Lord Jesus Christ sent upon earth and which he vehemently desired should be enkindled." (Second collect, Ember Saturday in Pentecost Week.)

Yet our Lord knew full well that only through his Sacred Passion, his "Baptism," would that blessed fire, fruit of supernatural grace, be merited for men, only through the example of the sufferings of the Master would the disciples be enflamed with a love of God and zeal for his glory that death itself would not extinguish. No wonder, then, that Jesus truly willed and yearned for the accomplishment of that "Baptism"—had he not already sharply rebuked the prince of the apostles for trying to turn him away from it (Matt. xvi, 23), had he not, as he himself said, "come to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. xx, 28)? Yet, man as he was, Jesus naturally recoiled before that awful chalice. The result, the outcome of this clash, if one may use the term, of desire and feeling in Jesus, must have been a continual and cruel agony of mind and heart, an agony he patiently endured in silence during these last few months of his public ministry, save when he drew aside the veil for an instant with his exclamation, "How am I in anguish till it be accomplished?"¹ Not until those last dramatic days in Jerusalem does Jesus again, for a brief moment, make known—this time before the multitude of the Jews—the intense sorrow that fills his soul: "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say?—Father, save me from this hour? And yet I came unto this hour" (John xii, 27). Yet it is only in that last terrible and lonely scene in the Garden of Gethsemane that we can catch a true glimpse of the depth of bitterness and anguish that went to make up the inner sufferings of Our Saviour: "My soul is sorrowful even unto death . . . My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt" (Matt. xxvi, 38-9).

How much did that sacred "fire" mean to Jesus, how much it cost him to cast it upon the earth! And yet, what consolation it must have been for him to think of all those faithful souls who, till the end of time, would be enflamed and consumed with his love: brave martyrs who would "drink of his chalice" and defy the most diabolical hatred and refined cruelty of their persecutors, zealous missionaries who would traverse the world to make him known to those that "sit in darkness and the shadow of death," countless monks and nuns who would leave all things to take up their crosses and follow him, and thousands of other Christian heroes of every walk of life whose names, albeit forgotten by men, are inscribed for ever on his Sacred Heart.

What nobler response to the desire of the Sacred Heart could we find in our own days than that of the little Carmelite of Lisieux, whose

¹ *συνέχομαι* the word used here, is used in the New Testament, with the indirect object, to describe the condition of a person smitten with a burning fever, e.g.; Luke iv, 38. Without an object, it is used in Phil. i, 23 to describe the state of St. Paul's soul—torn between the desire of labouring on in the Apostolate and being "dissolved and with Christ."

“sound,” like that of the apostles, “has truly gone forth to the ends of the earth” (Ps. xviii, 5):—

Rappelle-toi cette très douce flamme
 Que tu voulais allumer dans les coeurs :
 Ce feu du ciel, tu l'as mis en mon ame,
 Je veux aussi répandre ses ardeurs.
 Une faible étincelle, O mystère de vie !
 Suffit pour allumer un immense incendie.
 Que je veux, O mon Dieu,
 Porter au loin ton feu,
 Rappelle-toi !

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THE TOTAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

PIUS XII has recently reminded us that the interpreter of Scripture must discover and set forth the literal sense of the words, which the sacred writer intended to convey and did in fact express, as well as the spiritual sense, provided that it is certainly intended by God. The recent revival of Biblical studies is characterized by this search for the total sense of the sacred text.

Paul Claudel protests, with justice, against an exposition of Scripture which deals inadequately with its spiritual meaning¹; and without embarking on scientific argument, he defends his thesis in the name of his faith and with all his deep sense of Catholic tradition: “There is,” he says, “another text of the New Testament . . . of even wider scope (or, as one would say in English, ‘more sweeping’). It is the well-known verse of I Corinthians x, 11: ‘Now all these things happened to them in figure.’ Rightly has he written ‘all’ and likewise ‘figure.’”

It is, in fact, impossible to read the Old Testament without seeing that its whole orientation is towards Christ. God, who inspires it, has Christ and his Church always in mind: all the great Biblical facts (persons, events, institutions) are referred to them. If the literal explanation of the text failed to take account of this, and confined itself to philology, or archæology, it would be deceiving us. “One must explain the ‘realities’ after explaining the texts. Holy Scripture is not merely a book, but a witness to a history.”²

But how is one to discover this total sense, or *sensus plenior*, as it is officially known? In a series of articles, recently published in book

¹ Two letters of Paul Claudel, in *Dieu Vivant*. No. 14 (1949), pp. 76–81.

² Jean Daniélou, S.J.; *Exégèse et Dogme*, in *Dieu Vivant*, No. 14, pp. 90–4.