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The Humiliation of Crucifixion

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When Jesus sweated blood in the Garden of Gethsemane and asked his Father to let the cup of suffering pass him by he wasn't, for the most part, cringing before the prospect of brute physical suffering. He was cringing before the prospect of a very particular kind of suffering that is generally more feared than physical pain. When he asked God if it was really necessary to die in this way he was referring to more than death through capital punishment.

Crucifixion was devised and designed by the Romans with more than one thing in mind. It was designed as capital punishment, to put a criminal to death, but it aimed to do a couple of other things as well.

It was designed to inflict optimal physical pain. Thus the procedure was dragged out over a good number of hours and the amount of pain inflicted at any given moment was carefully calculated so as not to cause unconsciousness and thus ease the pain of the one being crucified. Indeed they sometimes even gave wine mixed with morphine to the person being crucified, not to ease his suffering, but to keep him from passing out from pain so as to have to endure it longer.

But crucifixion was designed with still another even more callous intent. It was designed to humiliate the person. Among other things, the person was stripped naked before being hung on a cross so that his genitals would be publicly exposed. As well, at the moment of death his bowels would loosen. Crucifixion clearly had humiliation in mind.

We have tended to downplay this aspect, both in our preaching and in our art. We have, as Jurgens Moltmann put it, surrounded the cross with roses, with aesthetic and antiseptic wrapping towels. But that was not the case for Jesus. His nakedness was exposed, his body publicly humiliated. That, among other reasons, is why the crucifixion was such a devastating blow to his disciples and why many of them abandoned Jesus and scattered after the crucifixion. They simply couldn't connect this kind of humiliation with glory, divinity, and triumph.

Interestingly there is a striking parallel between what crucifixion did to the human body and what nature itself often does to the human body through old age, cancer, dementia, AIDS, and diseases such as Parkinson's, Lou Gehrig's, Huntington's, and other such sicknesses that humiliate the body before killing it. They expose publicly what is most vulnerable inside of our humanity. They shame the body.

Why? What is the connection between this type of pain and the glory of Easter Sunday? Why is it, as the gospels say, "necessary to first suffer in this manner so as to enter into glory?"

Because, paradoxically, a certain depth of soul can only be attained through a certain depth of humiliation. How and why is this so? It isn't easy to articulate rationally but we can understand this through experience:

Ask yourself this question with courage and honesty: What experiences in my life have made me deep? In virtually every case, I will venture to say, experiences that have deepened you will be incidences that you feel some shame in acknowledging, a powerlessness from which you were unable to protect yourself, an abuse from which you could not defend yourself, an inadequacy of body or mind that has left you vulnerable, an humiliating incident that once happened to you, or some mistake you made which publicly exposed your lack of strength in some area. All of us, like Jesus, have also been, in one way or another, hung up publicly and humiliated. And we have depth of soul to just that extent.

But depth of soul comes in very different modes. Humiliation makes us deep, but we can be deep in character, understanding, graciousness, and forgiveness or we can be deep in anger, bitterness, revenge-seeking, and murder. Jesus' crucifixion stretched his heart and made it huge in empathy, graciousness, and forgiveness. But it doesn't always work that way. Many of our worst mass-murderers have also experienced deep humiliation and it too has stretched their hearts, except in their case it has made them deep in bitterness, callousness, and murder.

Several summers ago, I was at a conference at the University of Notre Dame where the Holy Cross community had gathered to prepare itself for the Beatification of its founder. Reflecting upon the spirituality of their founder, one Holy Cross member offered this challenge to his community: If you live inside of any family for any length of the time, at some point that family will wound you and wound you deeply. But, and this is the point, how you handle that wound, with either bitterness or forgiveness, will color the rest of your life!

In the crucifixion, Jesus was humiliated, shamed, brutalized. That pain stretched his heart to a great depth. But that new space did not fill in with bitterness and anger. It filled in instead with a depth of empathy and forgiveness that we have yet to fully understand.