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FR LEONARDO CASTELLANI: AN INTRODUCTION

Castellani on the end of times
and three of his essays

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INTRODUCING FR CASTELLANI

Because he's quite unknown to the English-speaking public, I would very much like to introduce to you, in English, Fr Leonardo Castellani, an Argentine Jesuit born at the turn of the XIXth century (1899) who died in Buenos Aires, in 1981.

Why? Why do I venture to write about this rather obscure character seeing that English-speaking Christians have so many classic authors to read, such as Newman, Benson, Belloc, Chesterton, Lewis and more recent ones in nearly the same league such as Peter Kreeft? Well, the short of it is because this unknown Argentine has written about one or two things that I've never seen considered by those authors — nor by anyone else for that matter. Castellani is an original (a word, by the way, that evokes a going back to one's origins.) Of course, he followed suit — in all his works you can always detect “de la suite dans les idées”, a certain harmony with every Christian in history who was willing to fight for the Church, be it St Augustine or Ronald Knox. Castellani was fiercely in love with truth and from there stemmed his unbending loyalty to Tradition. But perhaps more importantly for us, his original insights seem to be very relevant to our times.

“How come?”, one could easily ask. Well, let's take a brief look into his life.

A quite prolific author (he authored more than 1000 journalistic articles and about 50 books - never translated into English), Castellani has had a very important influence on Argentine Catholics concerned with the Church and its stand in the modern world, mainly owing to his, as I say, very orthodox views aired in his original style.

During the '30's, Castellani studied as a Jesuit in Europe, first Theology in

Rome (at the Gregoriana where he was under Cardinal Billot's tutorship), moving later to Paris where he obtained a "Petit Doctorat" in Psychology: his resulting thesis is a very interesting piece on the cathartic effect of St. Ignatius's Exercises (1932) very much pondered then by Jacques Maritain, among others (a reference to Castellani can be found in the second edition of "Art and Scholasticism" where he discusses the relation between art and morals.) In 1935 he came back to Argentina where he taught and wrote some very controversial articles on all sorts of subjects, but mainly on politics, sociology, philosophy, psychology and theology. His main thesis was that the Jesuits specifically but also the Church in general were in a very poor intellectual state that would eventually undermine its stand against the modern world. Par contre, Castellani was quite well-read and drew freely on Aquinas, Augustine, Bossuet, Lacunza, Chesterton, Belloc, and C.S. Lewis among other authors. His great love was literature, especially French and British. He also knew the American great authors such as Walt Whitman, Marc Twain, T.S. Eliot, and Emerson. At about forty he was quite fluent in English, French, Italian, and German and could read (and write!) in Greek, Latin and, of course, Spanish. He knew a bit of Hebrew, and a little Portuguese too. In his later years he dipped into Danish to understand Kierkegaard better (the result is one of his best books.)

Notwithstanding such impressive credentials and impeccable orthodoxy - in those days a priest in Buenos Aires with such widespread knowledge was quite unheard of - his writings got him into trouble with his Superiors, being eventually expelled from the Society in 1949 without due process or formal prosecution. As a result, he was suspended "a divinis" and "sine die". He had his full priesthood returned to him only twenty years afterwards - thanks to an energetic papal nuncio in Buenos Aires, who took the matter into his hands. All the same, the restitution was made silently, without any

explanation for what had happened, in a “non mi ricordo”, “let bygones be bygones” sort of way.

From 1949 onwards for the rest of his life he consecrated himself to write religious and literary articles in magazines and newspapers - mainly to keep body and soul together. In a sort of Leon Bloy way he lived in extreme poverty (mostly depending on his friends) until he died in 1981.

This is no place to go into much detail about the circumstances that led to his expulsion, but suffice it to say that without a proper prosecution he never had a chance of a proper defence. And that the real reasons for him being treated in this way were connected to his criticisms of the state of the Society and Church at large—a state of things that nobody wanted to hear about and that anticipated much woe for the future of the Church (any reader interested in a detailed account of his life with a good hold on Spanish can consult Sebastian Randle's biography “CASTELLANI 1899-1949”, Bs. As., Vórtice, 2003.) [*](#)

NOTHING COMES FROM NOTHING

He was right thirty years before Vatican II and because of this, during those thirty years was treated as a madman or a fool. But nothing changed for him afterwards; most of the progressive clerics were the old conservatives now enthusiastically backing the new horse. In any case, Castellani has been systematically ignored through and through.

I sometimes like to think that Castellani's enemies in the (R. C.) Church were right. Let me explain myself. He contended that the Church was a boat in bad condition, it was in heavy need of repair, it leaked, the navigation was erratic and therefore he argued that it should, so to speak, stop for a while

and consider carefully the maps, decide on the right course, repair the ship and then, only then, march forwards once again. In those days, such criticisms were not favourably received. As Newman himself had discovered so painfully half a century before, Castellani found the same sort of adversaries à la Ward, Faber, and Talbot. The Church was right. The World was wrong. Period. No amount of arguing would make these people change their minds. Instead of discussing modern issues these people simply wanted them suppressed. They thought this was a solid way of proceeding and during that period between both Vatican's Councils they seemed to be quite right. They stated dogmatically and hated free discussion. They studied, but superficially. Clericalism was rampant. A certain Puritanism had made its way into morals - any Newman reader would know what I'm referring to. Both of them, Newman and Castellani, said it a hundred times in different ways, to no avail: one day the situation would explode.

Now, of course, we can easily see why these authors are particularly relevant to our times. Their work is tremendously enlightening in so far as they denounce all sorts of bad doings in the Church before Vatican II which explain most of the debacle which followed... (nothing comes from nothing).

Again, he was not quite alone in seeing this sort of thing (I've just mentioned Newman, but we can also find such reservations in other twentieth-century brilliant scholars, the likes of Fr Louis Bouyer, Albert Frank-Duquesne, Fr R. L. Bruckberger, among others).

A FORGOTTEN DOGMA

However, to my mind what is really exceptional in Castellani's views is that, being as he was such a good Biblical scholar (and lover of Holy Scripture) he easily identified in the Roman Catholic Church a whole trend of thought that

drifted away from one of the main dogmas (on the whole in Reformed Churches, the story runs differently).

Here's how he puts it in one of his books:

Jesus Christ is coming back, and his doing so is one of the dogmas of our faith.

It is one of the more important dogmas that we find wedged between the fourteen articles of faith that we recite every day in the Credo and that we intone when we assist to a solemn Mass. *“Et iterum venturus est cum gloria judicare vivos et mortuos”*.

Also, it is a somewhat forgotten one. A splendid dogma, which few people reflect upon.

Its translation runs like this: this world will not evolve indefinitely, nor will it end by chance, as if it were to collide with a fallen star, nor will it end by natural evolution of its elementary forces or cosmic entropy as physics like to say. Instead, it will end by a direct intervention from its Creator. It will not die from a natural death, but by a violent one; or to put it better—since He is a God of life and not of death, from a miraculous death. [*](#)

But things were worse than that. Not only had the modern world (and good portions of the Church) forgotten this. They forgot to even consider the question:

Our world's specific mental disease is to think that Christ will never come back; or, at the very least, to not even consider His coming.

Consequently, the modern world doesn't understand what's happening to it. They say Christianity has failed. Intent on saving humanity, they invent fanatical as well as atrocious systems. They are about to beget a new religion. They want to build another Babel tower that will reach unto heaven. They want to win back Paradise with their own forces.

As Hilaire Belloc described it, today's heresy doesn't explicitly deny any one single Christian dogma, it only falsifies them all.

It manifestly denies Christ's Second Coming and with that it denies his Regnancy, his Messiah-ship, and his Divinity. In short, it denies the whole divine process of history. And in denying Christ's Divinity it denies God Himself.

This is radical atheism dressed up with religious clothes.

As anyone can easily see, this characterises nearly every trend in our world and in the Church in our times. Think about Vatican II. Remember John XXIII's admonition against the "prophets of doom" on occasion of its formal inauguration? Think about John Paul II (or even Benedict XVI if you feel up to it). To my knowledge they have never referred to the Second Coming. And it's not only a most important dogma of our Faith. It has been prophesied that in the last days it would be precisely forgotten. With what consequences?

Consider this:

This religion has no name yet, and when it will, its name will not be its own. All Christians who do not believe in Christ's Second Coming will yield to it. And the New Religion will make them believe in the Other one who will come before. For "I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive" (Jo. V:43).

The first Pope wrote about this: "Know this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts. And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? (2 Petr. III:3-4).

ALL IS NOT GOLD THAT GLITTERS

Of course, Castellani was perceptive enough to detect some tares among the “prophets of doom” too. These days, lots of people seem to guess that some of the events taking place in the world (say 9/11, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, bird flu, etc...) anticipate terrible things for the future. But they have forgotten the Bible; they have lost their compass.

Our world is anxious for prophecy. Because of the disasters and threats of these catastrophic times it is only natural to want to know what's next. He who doesn't know where he's going cannot take a single step. Everybody is wailing, where is the world going?

False prophecies are addressed to this hunger. So it is necessary to let the true prophecies be known, for it is for that purpose that they were given to us.

False prophecies? Where are the true ones? Shouldn't the Church be clear about this? Is there any other topic more important than this one? Then why doesn't Vatican II or any of the Popes since say a word about the four last things? Shouldn't the Church be frank and outspoken on these issues (as she was in other, better, times?) All the more because,

Some Catholics without much theology recklessly sift through private prophecies from the dangerous field of pious books.

We must, then, go back to the great primordial prophecy, Christ's eschatological prophecy, Saint Paul's prophecies and Saint John's Book of Revelations.

This world will end. The end will be preceded by a great apostasy and a great affliction. After that, Christ's Second Coming will take place, and of his Kingdom there shall be no end.

These prophecies are found firstly in what is known as our Lord's eschatological sermon.

Anyone can find them in the synoptics. Here they are, chapter and verse:
Luke, XVII:20, Mathew XXIV, 23 and Marc XIII:21.

STRONG WORDS

So much talk about this and that! When one reads all those Church documents about, I don't know, ecumenism, altar girls, third world debt, housing, and general welfare it seems that Catholics have forgotten Jesus Christ's admonitions and that even traditionalists have got entangled in this or that or some other secondary issue. I don't say that we don't need to address the question of women-priestesses or abortion or whatever. Everyone has to battle on every issue he can as well as he may. But Castellani reminds us that to forget Jesus' "ipssissima verba" would render all those battles futile or worse - because even the Antichrist could appear in a traditionalist guise (after all, he seems to be a somewhat serious guy).

Did I say "ipsissima verba Jesu"?

In their simple brevity, Christ's words are far more fearsome than the fulgurant visions of the Book of Revelations, with its terrific scenes of blood, fire, and ruins. Christ simply says that there shall be a great tribulation, one without precedent, such as has not been seen since the beginning of the world until this time, nor ever shall be - and we have seen more than one! And that except those days should be shortened, no flesh would be saved and that if it were possible, even the elect would perish.

The terrible wars, plagues, and earthquakes that must come to pass are but the beginning of sorrows. The Sorrow itself will be even worse. Because, having ripened, the world's iniquity will rise in all its artlessness and will draw from all its previous rehearsals, this time directed by Satan in person, who will be cast unto the earth having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time. Woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! Woe unto them that remain to

be riddled and winnowed out by Satan himself in the last trial!

ANCESTRAL VOICES PROPHECYING WAR!

As Coleridge puts it, we militant Christians cannot forget that we live in the middle of a war, and that this is no time for jejune talk. The voices are ancestral, all right. But the war is ongoing.

The two antagonistic forces that battle in the world since the Fall will reach their maximum tension in their effort to prevail. The saints will be overcome and defeated everywhere. Apostasy will cover the world like the Flood. Iniquity and lies will have a free hand. The most powerful political governance ever seen will not only slaughter Religion with fire and sword, but will dress up as a false religion too. And the few remaining faithful will seem to lose their poise when, separated from the Obstacle, the Son of Perdition makes his appearance; him in which God has no part and that Christ not even deigned to name: Antichrist.... the Other one.

Here, then, is One who doesn't like to mince words. This doesn't mean, of course, as maybe our liberal friends would like to think, that we don't have any Hope. Far from it. But facing as we do, dire facts, we need strong words and we can do without all the wishy-washy, insipid twaddle we have to listen to from all those so very politically-correct "pastoral agents", priests, Bishops, Cardinals, and Popes that we have suffered for so many decades!

And the only words strong enough to face such troublesome times as those we have to live through are the Lord's words, that are, as St Paul reminds us, "sharper than any two-edged sword":

To talk about a "tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world" is to say a lot. It means that the Christians of those times will suffer as no one ever suffered before; not even like Job, nor Oedipus, nor Hamlet; not like Thomas Moore, Edmund Campion or Saint John of the

Cross. And those Christians have already passed away; it is our turn now, or someone near us, to suffer so. Let us welcome such afflictions as long as we see Christ's Coming once again!

HOPE AGAINST HOPE

No, we Christians have only Hope to sustain us. That's the real difference with our enlightened and progressive friends, that's what differentiates the wheat from the tares.

The awesome visions of the Seer of Patmos - that Renan calls "deliriums of terror" - and Christ's own words are stronger in their steely transparency than those used by his disciples and should induce to panic and despair were they not compensated by the most sweet promises.

As the greatest tribulation in its short span of years conveys an inordinate terror, in the same way, the conditional "were it possible" expresses the most loving promise. "Were it possible, the very elect would be deceived", says Christ.

It is not possible, then, for the elect to fall. An Angel seals their foreheads and numbers them. God commands that the great plagues be suspended until everyone is sealed. Out of love for them, God shortens the persecution. Antichrist shall only reign for half a week of years (42 months, 1.260 days). The martyrs shall all be avenged. The ungodly shall suffer countless plagues. Two great saints will defend Christ having in hand prodigious powers. And when they fall, Christ will summon them and they will revive.

BACK TO BUENOS AIRES

Anyway, enough is enough. I'm writing this essay at home, in a small suburban town near Buenos Aires, on a cold dark evening. There's a

photograph of Father Castellani looking down at me while I pound these computer keys and fight with my dictionaries (only one “n”, right?) Just now a daughter of mine has asked me if two men can be married. She’s only nine; I wish she had never even heard about these things, not yet at any rate.

I’m a bit afraid, all right. I admit it. An Argentine Bishop has been recently caught with a hidden camera: he was having sex with a taxi boy (and, surprise, surprise, was for the very first time dressed in his cassock. Can you believe that?). But no, things aren’t easy for anyone anywhere. I’ll be warily on the look out for new disasters on my T.V. tonight while I think about my children’s future once again. Yup. There's no denying it; I’m a bit afraid all right.

But, at the same time, I can’t quite wipe out a smile that keeps coming to my face remembering all those astringent truths Castellani insisted on reminding us.

After all, we Christians think it is incumbent on us to remember them, and that anyone who thinks of unlearning and forgetting them is in the wrong, shall I say, business.

* * *

ON BEING SHOT: PROVIDENCE OR DOOM?

We have already seen - the Gospels show this easily enough - that Christ gives second place to his miracles. From his point of view they are merely illustrations and confirmations of his doctrine, managed with circumspection and great precaution owing to the fact that miracles tend to mean everything to the crowds. God performs miracles reluctantly.

Hence Christ accepts Destiny: and when he breaks its laws by introducing exceptions, he does it with full argument and reason. The pagans believed that Jupiter came under the sway of Destiny; Christ shows that God is above Destiny, but that, all the same, Destiny does exist.

“If Christ really had the power to cure the sick and to resuscitate the dead - if he were God - and didn't cure all the sick in the world, he must be a criminal.”

These words by an impious Englishman remind me of those others by a fellow countryman of mine: “Oh Virgin of Itatí, if you have healed my pig, and healed my donkey, why don't you heal me also, seeing that I'm from Corrientes too?”

The first act of common sense is to accept reality. Christ accepts human reality just as it is and above that promises Salvation, the Kingdom of Heaven. Miracles are like glimpses or flashes of insight into this Kingdom; but they do not profess to be the abolition of Destiny, or as it were, the immediate recovery of the Garden of Eden with a wave of the wand.

Destiny exists; it is made up with the laws of nature, heritage, the place where I was born, the education I received, the country where I acted, the time at which I lived, the sins I have committed, and, in fact, everything I have

done... things that if and when I did them, were willingly done, but once done, became necessary. If I have an illness, contracted or inherited, it is part of my Destiny and with this and through this I must obtain my salvation. If a thaumaturgist comes along and cures me, lucky me. If not, I must learn to get on with it. A time will come for it to be cured... if I am saved.

If Christ accepted the Destiny of Humanity, with all its ills and misfortunes, it is obviously because he could not have done otherwise, even if he was God – or rather precisely because he was God. Here we are faced with an indestructible fact, a reality that has its own laws: Jews and Christians call it Original Sin. Oriental religions such as Buddhism recognize it without trying to explain it... Plato did the same, probably under oriental influence, plastering one of his myths over it. The mythology of all peoples contain myths that are remnants of this mystery.

It is a divine reality related to God; that is why it is a mystery and surpasses the boundaries of human reason; but the reality is there.

Christ accepts the Destiny of Humanity and accepts his own Destiny as a man. This is the capital fact. If Christ had carried out his miracles for his own benefit - excepting himself from the common Destiny - Butler's and Thomas Payne's objection would be valid. If "the doctor cured himself" he would be very much obliged to cure everyone else also as long as he were to bear the name of Saviour. But Christ did not perform a miracle for his benefit except the Resurrection which was, of course, for the benefit of everyone else. As a sick man, Kierkegaard said with bitterness: "the worst illnesses are where body and soul meet, such as melancholy, and Christ had this illness." We might add that in his Passion he underwent all the illnesses together: a *leper*, the *man of sorrows*, and *acquainted with grief* as he was described by the Prophet.

Of course, the godless have an easy game for they suppress the reality of Sin. If sin is an unreal concept, imaginary, a relationship of man with social laws invented by other men, then it is obvious that they are right. The existence of physical ills becomes a scandal and it becomes impossible to reconcile them with the existence of an all-powerful and paternal God. But physical ills are the result, the mirror, and the image of all moral ills. And the extreme resistance of man to this is a reflection of his soul's divine origin.

Bernard Shaw included my *Correntino's* objection in his *Major Barbara*. In art terms it is one of his weaker comedies, but one of his best as a pamphlet which was of course Shaw's main concern. It is a socialist tract on religion; the characters, rather than real people, sound more like dialectical puppets. Scandalised by the world's illnesses, which he summarises as poverty, he calls on the religions to reform themselves and do away with it and he expresses his disappointment with the Salvation Army that appeared at the beginning to be on the right path. Barbara, the leading character, is a brave girl, a major in the Salvation Army; she gets weary of her army "that has not saved anything" and finally becomes a capitalist.

"Cursed are the poor...". Poverty is the supreme evil. One must have money... and money to count on. But the Churches, all of them, rely on the ill-earned money of the *rich*. There is a true christianity based on pardon and the renunciation of vengeance... and justice. There is a false christianity – Crosstianity - based on the adoration of the gallows. The solution is to have money (Shaw had it) well earned (Shaw earned it by poisoning the English public with his sophist ingeniousness as a pseudo-prophet) and more or less morally distributed: "I save a soul with a salary of 38 shillings a week" says the cannon manufacturer. And in the last resort, even if the money is not well-earned, it is still money; and as poverty is the greatest evil, well, of course, logically.... Such is the theory of the English buffoon.

Your socialist is a capitalist who has no capital... yet. Born religious (Irish) Shaw in this work of his youth is moving from religious agnosticism to the vague modernism of his maturity.

What is interesting in his comedy-tract is the fact that it naïvely reflects the attitude of the ungodly towards creation: the impious man seizes the world and makes it his own; then he wants to fix it; for that purpose he appeals to religion, and if all is to be said, to a new religion. But the world belongs to God, it is not mine, I am not the Creator.

Shaw candidly believes himself to be the Creator of the world. He doesn't start by submitting to reality, but instead believes himself to be the lord of reality.

The first reality is man's limitation; but man's reason is in a certain sense unlimited and so he can deify himself. The first reality with which man is faced is Destiny; but man is destined in the last resort to become the master of Destiny; and the false step that can be taken by reason in a spirit of pride is to make him feel the master of Destiny before his time: now. On the basis of the idea that man can see how things should be - according to his taste and convenience - he begins to lecture the fates. But the fates laugh at his teaching... If I suddenly want to become a capitalist, like Major Barbara in the comedy, I can't; Destiny laughs at me. This is easy enough in comedies and novels; but in Argentina it is only possible for sophists or dishonest writers. I know from experience that for me it is out of the question.

To submit to reality is to submit to God. The non-believer tries to free himself from reality and so he makes himself God. Once he is God, to fix the world on paper is quite easy: you can save souls on a 38-shilling weekly salary.

The saviours-of-souls-with-salary-increases are well known to us.

The blasphemy of those who demand of God the immediate establishment of the total miracle of putting the world in order (in other words the maximum disorder) crystallised in Stendhal's well known phrase, which was a delight to Nietzsche: "Fortunately God doesn't exist, because otherwise we would have to shoot him."

They have already shot him. That is is the irony of it. God became man and was shot by all that is high in the name of law; the Roman Law, nothing less, with all that it stands for, by the representative of public order in the most legally minded and juridicial Empire that has ever existed. What more can be asked for? Christ lived and was shot. Tutti contenti.

Stendahl's blasphemy is an imbecility and God's consent to being shot - or crucified which is worse - is Christ's greatest miracle. They complain that we adore his scaffold: that Gallows in itself is the Universal Miracle that they are asking for.

*

NOT BY ELOQUENCE, NOR BY DIALECTICS

As a young man I was an enthusiastic debater. But while I used to revel in such things, it's now been over 30 years since I've debated my works - even with the "censors" (If there were literal "censors" this word is ok. If it's figurative, then another word is needed). Approaching religion in this manner is something I simply no longer enjoy.

It's a useless endeavor, in fact. Those with religious objections, for the most part know nothing about the subject and one must recommend them a good Catechism. If they really want to know, they'll read it; if not, they're just debating for the fun of it, making the discussion futile — even dangerous.

To those that on a ship or a train come up to you with "But Father, what about this?", one must not give the answer. Instead, one should intensify the objection, stoking it to a point where the inquisitor is persuaded that one knows all about his queries, that one "feels" them as much, if not more, than himself. That is to say, one must increase his hunger, his love of knowledge - or perhaps, even create it. For if such hunger does not exist, giving one the solution will only be a waste of time.

Having said that, one must answer that God in his divine nature cannot suffer due to the damnation of the condemned, nor with the sins that preceded their punishment and caused this eternal affliction, because His nature is immutable and in no way subject to men's passions. To want Him to suffer is to want to change His nature, to want to change God into a creature, which is quite impossible. It is a very grave mental vice and a widely scattered one at that, and it is called "anthropomorphism": that is to say, conceiving God as someone like or identical to man, a very common error among the ignorant

such as Jorge Luis Borges, for example.

These days one frequently meets people who ask “What do you believe God is like?” with the explicit intention of accepting his existence or not based on his accordance with their tastes. But his existence comes first; so if his existence is a fact, whether I accept him or not is quite irrelevant. By denying him I do not destroy the fact that he exists (instead, I destroy myself.)

If God exists, one must swallow him just as he is. Jacques Rivière wrote very sensibly to Claudel: “If he consoles or not is something I’m not now interested in. Before that I want to know if he exists or not”.

To take the position that, “If I happen to like God and find him consoling, well, then I might believe in him” is an absurdity one should never bother to argue against. If God exists and does not suffer, I have no alternative but to say: “I don’t like it and I can’t quite understand it, but it’s a fact and I have no choice but to accept it and make the best I can of it.” After all, this is what we regularly do when faced with the laws of Nature or the reality of the human condition. Let one try, for example, to deny the existence of a polio case or a hurricane; see if that will get them anywhere.

Yet preachers are continually telling us that we “offend” God with our sins - and to “offend” means to “wound”. All the mystics assert that God suffers with and for those condemned to Hell. Even Kierkegaard wrote that when God “abandoned” his Son (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”) God the Father suffered terribly for it. So how can one reconcile these with the image of an imperturbable God?

As we shall see, in a certain manner God does suffer because of all men’s sins and their consequences. What manner? Two, actually: in his Son made Man and in the Order of the Universe, which is Himself.

I.-

God took Human Nature, condemned and fallen with all its consequences, and paid for its sins: He suffered for those sins a nearly infinite sum of humiliations and pains. (In a certain sense, we could even drop the “nearly”). This is what we call Redemption.

A well known ungodly Frenchman (Stendhal) wrote “Luckily God doesn’t exist because otherwise we would have to execute him” - on account of the existence of pain.

And yet, God does exist, was made flesh, and in fact, *was* executed.

The Roman Church Fathers, beginning with St. Ambrose, explained Redemption with a judicial metaphor: God took all men’s “debts” and transferred them to His Son made man and afterwards punished Him; that is to say, He settled the account. The Son willfully accepted this universal debt and paid it with his Passion, Death, and all the rest of his acts while He dwelt among us: a life that is, in a sense, an infinite humiliation, to descend from God to man - as St. Paul puts it “exinanivit semetipsus”, He stripped Himself, becoming nothing (Philippians II:7).

The Romans were of a juridical turn of mind and easily understood the legal metaphor - all the more so because St. Paul’s took it further saying that Christ was nailed to the cross “chirógraphum decretum” as if a “written decree” of our debt. (Colossians II:14).

This “judicialism” passed on to Western Theology (not to its Eastern counterpart) and so Redemption was explained more and more in terms of a “contract”, “debt”, “transfer”, “bill”, “payment”, “compensation”, “sentence”, etc. The formula that Borges stumbled across that “Infinite punishment

corresponds with an offence that is, in a certain sense, infinite itself” belongs to this tradition. Yet over the centuries this vocabulary became formulaic, withered, petrified, conventional, and, in the mouth of some effete preachers and theologians, became quite unacceptable.

On the one hand, God appeared implacable (one who must levy recompense, cannot pardon, and cannot abandon retribution) and, on the other, totally unjust: that one should suffer for the sins of others, while those who benefit remain quite content with being cleaned and freed from any payment – *quite an injustice*. That was what a tyrant like Dionisius of Syracuse used to do.

“All comparisons come up short”. This legal comparison, if one forgets that it is only a comparison, encourages this misconception: that Christ has already suffered for our sins, we haven’t any need to suffer, we have been forgiven, all that is required is that Christ’s merits be “applied” to us, like a garment that covers our wounds we are “justified”, and that through Faith we are attributed these merits of Christ. This is the doctrine (if it can be called a doctrine) of Luther, who of all theologians is the greatest simpleton, the most coarse and vulgar.

How, then, did Christ suffer for the sins of all? Christ had to suffer and die this way literally through the action of Sin. Sin, iniquity, and evil are to a degree in solidarity: sin coalesces, piles up, propagates, pushes, moves... and ends up crucifying an innocent Christ, its victim; by accepting and bearing this, he destroys all its consequences. That’s Redemption, materially speaking.

Explain this.

Evil is not static, but dynamic; as is Love that attracts all goodness. They

have a “social dynamic”, because they have an ontological dynamic. Plato, in a prophetic inspiration, wrote that if a completely just man happened to appear in the world (a man he describes in detail) that all men would unite together to torment and murder him: the iniquities of all would gather for such a purpose. Plato thought that such a thing had happened to Socrates: that he had died through the sins of Athens. What he described in the future had already passed. Yet he was thinking of, at the same time, of one greater than Socrates, who would take on himself all the world’s sin. He spoke of Christ without knowing it; and he spoke well.

Evil, just like good, is, as the Classics called it, “diffusivum sui”: it communicates, it sticks, it propagates and bounces until it ends up with one who accepts it and returns good in place of bad: there Evil dies. All the iniquity in the connected universe (because the whole of humanity is knitted, so to speak, in relationships of good and evil) concentrates itself in one place in the world, Palestine, where it forms a sharp point, the Pharisees; and that point went toward Christ. It’s as if we imagine a bullet going first through three men then losing momentum in a woolen mattress where it is finally still; as is Evil, when it finds no more resistance.

If a man receives evil and then returns it to the world, evil increases; if he keeps it, the evil remains with him and is passed to others, even the innocent; but if he instead returns goodness in place of that evil, then the evil dies there. If a man cuts off his enemy’s arm and the enemy returns the deed in kind, you have two maimed people. Or, if the second can’t manage revenge and he is left only maimed and destitute, then the pain might be shared with his wife and children, reducing even more to misery; and perhaps the misery will yet be passed on still to neighbors, irritated and inconvenienced at their pitiful state. This is easy to understand. This is the infinite migration of injustice — *motus perpetuus* — that cannot be stopped;

not even by Justice, only by Love. I'm not saying here that justice should not be applied to the wicked, only that Justice by itself is not enough.

Christ was in actuality the victim of all this sin: all the sins of the past that bred the sins of his era, and all the sins of the future, which He foresaw. He cured them through suffering, baptizing his Gospel through his passion, rendering it efficacious for all future times.

So God suffered for all the world's sins and, because of eternal damnation, he suffered really and truly in the Garden and on the Cross a pain equivalent to that in Hell. There isn't a sin in the world, be it however small, that isn't stained with a drop of Christ's blood, Christ who is God. There is not a single person in Hell for whom Christ didn't suffer really, truly and physically.

Those sins that occurred after Christ were not the material cause of His death, but they are the material cause of the suffering of Christ's Mystical Body — in which we all partake. The consequences of these sins — the pain — pass from man to man till they find a true Christian to suffocate them in his heart, accepting them in union with Christ, "in our flesh completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church," as St. Paul has said (Colossians 1:24). And as the patience of Job, Abraham and Anna did truly help and console Christ fortifying Him in his Passion, so too, Christ suffered then every material consequence of future sin (in pain) that would eventually fall on every one of His living members.

If one would say here, "I do not accept this, it is too metaphysical" the only possible answer is "This is a fact; if you go to Hell by your own fault, little will it matter whether you accepted it or not".

II.-

Now to something yet more esoteric: God suffers from men's sins against the natural Order, which is not different than He. That's why to sin is to "offend" God.

Sin destroys the natural order of the Universe. Such natural order is not an external thing, an invention whereby God would have said something like "I want things to work this way or that. And if not, lo!" in the manner of tyrants. The order of the world is nothing but God's action as Regulator, his activity of Creation, Conservation, and Providence — that is to say, one single, continuous action, not external but internal to the natural order. He who sins acts against this order and (as God allows) destroys it. So if God could conceivably suffer, He'd suffer. If He could conceivably be destroyed, He would be — by sin.

In other words, the Order of the Universe belongs to the very nature of things which are united one to another by a tight net of causes and effects, means and ends, conditions, occasions, and consequences, that make up one "single", solid thing. This is what the word means in Latin: "versus-Unum" (towards the One). Have you ever meditated on the significance of a "natural community" between all men? It is of the utmost importance. Here you will find the roots of our duty to Justice and Compassion.

So anyone who wounds the Order in any way (and only man, who is free, can do such a thing) acts against it; so much so that if it were possible, the whole Order would be destroyed — like the "chain reaction" of atoms disintegrating that physicists describe. Sin acts against the very nature of things, which is grounded and cemented in the very nature of God. It acts against Love, because God's nature is Love.

But God does not suffer, and is not destroyed. God suffers through his creatures, even irrational animals, whose lot it is to bear the material

consequences of this disorder (pain), out of balance and seeking desperately to re-establish equilibrium. So this time it is not only Christians who suffer “with Christ” but all men and the whole of Creation, subject since the first sin to terrible throbbing of this pain, in search again of natural equilibrium, Christians and heathen, sinners and saints, adults, children, and even beasts.

Those who use this pain to restore in themselves the equilibrium of justice, are saved, and consequently are freed from this pain for ever. But those who do not are not freed and because of this are “*miseri miseria non utentes*” (miserable people who don’t even profit from their misery): they remain eternally out of balance, this is to say, subject by their own will to the law of expiatory pain, not by a “Decree” from God who would want revenge, but by of the very nature of things.

Moral nature is this: that disorder breeds pain and pain delivers from disorder those who will it; and to those who do not it establishes itself in them in a permanent and incurable way. Even in this life we see it happen, that an unremedied sin begets new ones. The old ones become habits, habits make vices, vices breed perversity, which revels in doing evil things for their own sake, and perversity becomes obstinacy, for which there is no remedy: a horrible image of Hell, that is not in the center of this planet as they say, but in the very center of the obstinate man’s soul.

Truly Christianity has not been invented to console, it has been invented to frighten in an awesome way. Only later does it console. Tell this to your friend.

III.-

Sin is a God-killing act; and I freely admit that is a very difficult mystery; let us not ask for too much. But however inscrutable, this mystery finds justification in the reestablishment order in the moral universe, rejoining in harmonious unity different and till then irreducible elements, while giving at the same time an acceptable solution to the problem of pain. As long as one considers sin as only the breaking of a “Law”, such an awesome punishment remains incomprehensible; because it is above all a crime against Love. The sacrifice on the Cross is not simply “reparation of a debt” because in addition to Justice, Love is involved also. To a crime against Love, Love answers in its own way and according to its essence through an infinite gift... Where then will Creator and Creature be joined, where will the debtor meet his creditor? Their pain is a common one. On the Cross.

We are in the midst of this immense tragedy, in the heart of the Sacred Trinity. How? In God Himself, a kind of incommensurate storm? That seems incredible to us because we imagine God as nothing more than a good, reasonable, intelligent order. But that is not the first definition of God; before anything else is said, God is charity. He is Absolute Love. With our miserable hearts, let's try to understand this unheard movement. (We live comfortably, unconsciously, in the middle of this awesome whirlwind, so much so that the smallest deviation of this inflexible sphere would, if possible, disrupt and smash the world to smithereens.)

For Love nothing is insignificant, everything matters. For Love the tiniest parts are precious, urgent, necessary. Hence the smallest infidelity infuriates. Reason recedes when confronted with this prodigious calling that has fertilized the chaos, a calling that would blow away the most powerful of all angels as if it were a tiny piece of driftwood, a calling coming to die pleading, insatiable, unquenchable, in the ears of a poor little man.

I don't know — looks like I've ended in a rather Bossuet-like manner, so much eloquence isn't mine. But to acquiesce to these truths, that exceed all reason and are only known through Revelation is not something one can acquire through eloquence or dialectics. They ask for an open heart; and then even a child with common sense will understand them. *Da mihi amantem et quod dico intelliget.* Give me a lover, and he'll understand what I say.

* * *

ON TRANSLATIONS

You can't translate without blemishing; but try to render a poet's poem and you'll find your efforts quite preposterous.

Cervantes said that translations are exercises in inverted tapestry; he could be right on prose; but if you're dealing with poetry your brocade will be entirely different: never the same, always for the worse; in sackcloth.

There's only one exception where the tapestry might be as good as the original, and that's when the poem is foreign to you, and one read years ago; it's the case when suddenly one morning your translator wakes up and on the spur of the moment translates it *currente calamo* not even remembering every line; and that can only happen if the translator is in fact a better poet than the one he's translating; but then, it's difficult to conceive a man with that class of talent doing translations.

Because if he is a minor or an equal poet, the rendering will always be inferior for the obvious reason that the translated poet had a free hand when he was at his work whereas the translator, as if in a sack race, has his own ideas and feelings tied up in someone's else bag; and for any poet the things referred to are wound up to certain words in such a way that transplanted to other ones they just wither away; keep in mind that there is no such thing as an exact correspondence between two languages, and that only "transpositions" are possible.

So it has been said, and verily, that in literature, stealing is lawful provided it is followed by murder.

Such has been the case in the history of poetry three or four times; if I say

seven, I think I'd be counting one to many. Horace's Odes rendered by Luis de León, Virgil's Pastoral Poems by Garcilaso de la Vega...

I don't remember a third example, but I'm quite sure it's not Mitre's translation of Shakespeare, as a friend over here suggests. Maybe one could include Goethe's version of Marlowe.

One example I do remember is Leopardi's translation of the short and precious poem and epitaph that belongs to an unknown Spanish poet, remarkable for its sober brevity.

Lungi dal proprio ramo

Povera foglia frale

Dove vai? Dal faggio

Là ov'io naqui, mi divide el vento.

Esso, tornando a volo

Dal bosco alla campagna

Dalla valle mi porta alla montagna...

Seco instancabilmente

Vo pellegrina e tuto l'altro ignoro.

Vo dov e va ogni cosa

Dove naturalmente

Va la foglia di rosa

E la foglia d'alloro...

The original inspired dirge has been translated to Italian without a word too many (in fact, one can count three words in excess, but that's neither here

nor there). It goes this way:

Pobre hoja seca, ¿dónde vas en vuelo

De mariposa enferma y desvaída,

Entre la niebla y luz descolorida

Del sol de otoño y desteñido cielo?

¿Dónde vas, hoja seca, no nacida

Ni para el alto azul ni el bajo suelo,

Ni para demasiada dicha y duelo,

Hoja que va como se va mi vida?

(Yo no sé. De la flor vuelo a la fosa,

Del suelo al astro, al lodo o al vergel,

Presas de un aspirar que no reposa,

Donde va toda cosa

En confuso tropel...

Voy donde va la hoja de la rosa,

Voy donde va la hoja del laurel...

Perhaps one should note in two pieces with identical content where the differences between the Italian and Spanish taste lie; the latter stresses color and ornament, the former is pure.

We believe the Italian rendering is superior to the original sonnet (unless they both plagiarized an anonymous French poet), which was common practice during the 19th century.

Having said this, there was no need to wrong the great Mr. Gilbert by translating him in verse, especially if the translation would be published with the original face to face, as is here the case.

In front of me I have two volumes of translations from English and American poets into Spanish... They all seem rather like each other... In spite of the fact that they are as different as a village of angels, the Spanish translations sound monotonously uniform (one seems to be repeatedly listening to the tones of the Spanish Academy before the times of Rubén Darío.) And that, even when the translators are excellent poets such as Querol, de Vedia, José María Heredia (not the French one), Caro, Unamuno, Isaacs, Samaniego, Díez Canedo, Pombo and Llorente: this last one, the nearly successful translator of Faust and Sully-Prudhomme.

In Llorente's version, Byron's ferocious pirate sounds like a medieval troubador: the Viking transformed into a southern Spaniard. Ideas get diffused, unduly sweetened and, as it were, "caulked".

Here however is a poet that seems to be up to the job: Mr. Félix M. de Samaniego who's several fables were presented to the public as his own when in fact they belong to the English poet, John Gay (1688-1752). The innocent thief was discovered by Marquis Melgar; we say innocent because the perfect Spanish makes him worthy of the indult we have mentioned before.

The great translator in verse, Mr. Carlos Obligado, once told us that you can translate from English into Spanish respecting the metrics because Spanish synalephas work in a way that it is quite possible to squash several words into the hendecasyllabic verse. We didn't agree. We're sorry for our much loved and missed friend, it just isn't possible. English is the most brief, barbarian and beautiful language in the world. On the other hand, Spanish, at

least the way we use it, is swollen and obese.

So after trying in vain to render,

But I have learned what wiser knights

Follow the Grail and not the Gleam

and suchlike verses, the translator here sagely chose to put it into prose—at least that would be of some use to the Spanish reader, avoiding the jarring notes; grinding sounds is something we could do without, especially in a book dedicated to Our Blessed Lady, our “Queen of the Seven Swords”.

As it is, in Argentina we’ve had enough of that.

END

All the texts from Castellani that I quote in this essay have been translated from his book, “CRISTO, ¿VUELVE O NO VUELVE?” (Will Christ ever come back?), recently reprinted in Spanish (Bs. As., Vortice, 2005), and, yet more recently, translated into English: see <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/141645>. [Back to text](#)

However, in connection with his life and what's going on in the Church, if anyone is really interested, one should read his book "Christ and the Pharisees" recently translated into English: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/174468>. [Back to text](#).