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Resurrected Christ Our Life: *azymus veritatis et sinceritatis*

Strange Spring we have this year. Painful crimes are repeating in ever more developed forms of mass destruction. Confusion is as extensive and overwhelming as a lack of moral clarity and sensitivity. The Passion of Christ and His Resurrection come late this season and mark April as the cruelest of months. We celebrate the Paschal Triduum not as remembering the distant past but as the actualization of the events of salvific history. This single liturgical celebration that spans three days is a compelling happening of Passing Over. The commemoration of Christ's death and Resurrection unfolds the mystery of salvation for us. In this unfolding, we pass from death to life (ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν). In 1 John 3:14, we read: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. He who does not love his brother abides in death, ἡμεῖς οἴδαμεν ὅτι μεταβεβήκαμεν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν, ὅτι ἀγαπῶμεν τοὺς ἀδελφούς· ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν μένει ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ." The contrast of love and hatred mirrors the one of life and death. It is difficult not to be attentive to the statement about "abiding in death, μένει ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ." In His *Farewell Discourse* (J, 14-17), Jesus commands his disciples: "abide in me, μέννατε ἐν ἐμοί." (J 15: 4) The same verb, abide, μένω, is used to describe the relationship between the vine and its branches, Jesus and his disciples, and those who do not love brothers and death. The question remains, who are my brothers? St John gives us a clear hint: If we love our brothers, this means that we have passed from death to life. Our Passover discloses the meaning of love and who our brother is.

A brilliant Italian, Caravaggio painted religious scenes the way he would experience as actual experience here and now. Bringing into the painting the biblical story and the story of his own life gives his works an enormous trustfulness. Caravaggio offers a convincing and thought-provoking interpretation for further engagements, discoveries, and rereadings of the Scripture by expressing the tension between conflicting inner forces encountered by a human being. *The Taking of Christ* is one of his masterpieces. He demonstrates the understanding that the sacred and its art does not need to be alienated from everydayness.

On the contrary, bringing his troubled life into the genuine engagement with the Scripture revolutionizes understanding of painting and introduces new ways of conducting existential and theological discourse on the canvas. Caravaggio acknowledges the significance of poetic imagination for the creativity of interpretation. He shows us convincingly that the (re)construction of the historical world is not only a matter of actualizing the past events for the contemporary viewer (*Nacherleben*) but an imaginative process of creative activity (*Nachbildung*). Caravaggio's

discourse generates new meaning and begins with imagination (φαντασία) which announces the appearance of a phenomenon and is not simply added to the pictorial representation. Caravaggio's hermeneutic ear sensitized him to reading the Gospels and enabled his hermeneutic eye to see the real life of real people. How else could he paint the betrayal by kiss: The kiss of death becomes the central part of the painting.



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ*, 1602, National Gallery of Ireland

Caravaggio knows how to tell the dramatic story poetically: Using one of his preferred ways of painting, *chiaroscuro*, he leaves in the dark everything unnecessary to concentrate the happening on the *dramatis personae*. In the shadow of the night where the forces of power and violence are hidden, and from where they come forth, Caravaggio gives us a closeup of Jesus and Judas. His interpretation is distinctly different from other famous depictions we know, like those from Giotto: their eyes do not meet. The kiss itself is not portrayed. Jesus's and Judas's faces are in the light coming from the left and convey opposing feelings. Jesus's face is almost expressionless, like in sleep. It could also be read as a sign of painful forbearance that finds its manifestation in restraint and resignation rather than surprise and disbelief. Judas's face with deep frown forehead wrinkles as he looks enigmatically ahead, indicates the tension of contradictory emotions, from sadness and worries to confusion and bewilderment. It might express the bafflement and incomprehension of the result of his betrayal. This interpretation seems to be substantiated by his immediate decision to end his life. God can deal with the atrocities of human beings. But when faced with God, a

human being cannot deal with him/herself. And like in Judas, the burden of carrying oneself becomes unbearable.

The faces of the soldiers are virtually unrecognizable. Caravaggio persuasively conveys their heartlessness and cruelty by overemphasizing the importance of the perfectly shining metal-clad arm that might serve as a mirror for future viewers.

To achieve the sharp color, painters used a light background. Caravaggio plays with the opposite. A *resparmio* allows him to paint on the very dark canvas from which the event emerges, shines forth. Caravaggio seems to introduce two possible levels of narration, creating a story within the story, theater within the theater. The hermeneutic reading does not privilege one of the stories. The central point is not conveyed without the entirety of the story. Similarly, the drama of the betrayal and the following Crucifixion cannot be separated from the importance of our looking into ourselves in the canvas's mirror and discerning the meaning of our own lives.

Caravaggio composes his painting brilliantly by offering a closeup of Jesus's and Judas's figure and crowding all seven figures to convey the participation of the great gathering at night that marked the beginning of the public development of events leading to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. An additional effect of crowding is the dramatic separation of Jesus from Judas. Jesus's folded hands as in a gesture of submission express the extent of the drama of being abandoned. After his intimate conversation with the Father, he is convinced that there is no other way to redeem the world while He still prays for the cross to be spared for Him. Jesus's posture persuasively indicates that He is not reciprocally engaged in the encounter with Judas. Mt 26:49 says: καὶ εὐθέως προσελθὼν τῷ Ἰησοῦ εἶπεν Χαῖρε, Ῥαββεί, καὶ κατεφίλησεν αὐτόν, And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. The Greek κατεφίλησεν (κατά φιλέω) expresses passionate kissing with intense emotion. Addressing Jesus as Rabbi, saluting and kissing him, stands in clear opposition to Judas's intent. It was common that the Teacher would embrace and kiss his student, not the other way round. The pretense with which Judas shows his respect to Jesus might further explain Jesus's posture with folded hands. The not reciprocated embrace is particularly profound in connection with Jesus's sharing His body and blood at the Last Supper despite the foreknowledge of the future betrayal. Judas's wretchedness is especially appalling since this scene of apparent homage is played with Jesus who foretold his breach of trust and lack of sincerity and friendship.

What is striking is that Jesus's head touches the head of the Apostle, who is on the run with his cloak flowing in the air and his hands widespread. Their hair merges. It can indicate the intimate closeness between Jesus and His disciples. People who are in love tend to begin looking alike. Caravaggio's genius allows him to emphasize Judas's choice to stand together with the soldiers on the side of Jesus's opponents. The immense crowd of Roman soldiers (possibly around 600) and Jews, represented in the painting by three soldiers on the one side and unarmed Jesus on the other, build an enormous tension between goodness and evil, peace and war, understanding of the salvific meaning of suffering and the atrocities of violence and oppression. Painting Jesus in his physical weakness and free self-emptying powerfully expresses the theological meaning of κένωσις (κενόω-to empty). This kenotic response to God conveys the ultimate receptivity to the disclosure of the divine will (τὸ θέλημα μου ἀλλὰ τὸ σὸν γινέσθω, literally, not the will of mine but that of yours must come into being).

In a similar way, poetry helps us to look into and connect with ourselves. A Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko, tells his own story, which becomes a story of many generations of the nation struggling for freedom and independence.

Тарас Шевченко
ЗАПОВІТ

Як умру, то поховайте
Мене на могилі,
Серед степу широкого
На Вкраїні милій:

Щоб лани широкополі
І Дніпро, і кручі
Було видно, – було чути
Як реве ревучий!

Як понесе з України
У синє море
Кров ворожу... отойді я
І лани і гори —

Все покину, і полину
До самого Бога
Молитися... а до того
Я не знаю Бога.

Поховайте та вставайте,
Кайдани порвіть
І вражою злою кров'ю
Волю окропіте.

І мене в сім'ї великій,
В сім'ї вольній, новій,
Не забудьте пом'янути
Незлим тихим словом!

1845, Переяслав¹

Taras Shevchenko
The Last Will

When I shall die then on the hill
Erect the grave for me
In the middle of a wide-ranging steppe
In my darling Ukraine:

To see the widespread fields
And steeping Dnieper's banks
To hear its roaring thunders
How they tear up the skies!

The tyrants' blood from Ukraine
Flows down into the blue sea
Once it will happen... I'll leave
Adorable fields and hills.

I'll drop the lot and fly away
To the Almighty's reign
To pray to Him... but till that day
I'll have no faith, not a grain.

Just bury me but then arise
To break shackles and chains
And with the blood of enemies
Bless freedom from restraints.

In a big future family,
A family free and restored,
Do not forget to remember me
With a blessed, softly spoken word!

In his poem, Shevchenko congenially and sensitively plays with each and every word and sets it in a relationship to a whole poem. Each word reverberates not only the delightful musicality of the Ukrainian language but the lifeworld in which the world is experienced. The unique blessing of

¹ Taras Shevchenko, *Selected Poetry* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1977), 198. My translation of Shevchenko's poem is an expression of the hermeneutic hospitality to the Ukrainians and their language in the time of war and purposeful and extremely brutal annihilation of the Ukrainian nation.

poetry makes it possible to bring to appearance (φαινέσθαι) the lived world as the event of a disclosure. The poet's word also embraces what is not said (*das Ungesagte*) and, through the genuine dialogue between the said and the unsaid, engages us in response, which grows into our radical responsibility. This horizon of radical responsibility moves with us. It constantly challenges us to rediscover the infinity of meaning and share it with others in a welcoming spirit of a hermeneutic conversation.

Shevchenko converses with us through the words of his poems and his paintings and drawings. The same intensity as in the *Testament* can be experienced in other expressions of his artistic sensitivity. The rolling steppe with Ukraine's highly fertile soil unveils the familiar landscapes' role in Shevchenko's life. The wide view is beautifully arranged to reawaken the viewers to the beauty and vastness of Ukraine. It can also be interpreted as the condensed depiction of the world in relationship to the vastness of space.



Taras Shevchenko, "Near Kaniv." Detail. Pencil, pen, and India ink. 1859.

Shevchenko reveals the complexity of feelings and emotions. Like in Heidegger, mood (*Stimmung*) is the fundamental way in which we are open to ourselves and the world. In our attunement to ourselves and the environment, we discover its indispensability for our self-understanding and, thus, self-finding. The phenomenological depiction of the emotionally laden and masterfully gathered experiences on the way to freedom gives meaning to the disclosure of our *status viatoris* and awakens us to seeing the revelatory dimension of our affective experiences.

The poet is hesitant to acknowledge God till there is no new life in freedom and love. Shevchenko addresses life and death at different personal, political, social, and religious levels. We can read his poem theologically as if passing from death into life discloses the meaning of death and life. Referring back to St John, we can see death, θάνατος, not only as wanting the knowledge of God, but abiding in death, ἐν θανάτῳ. The state of death expresses human fallenness and unrighteousness that lead to hating and persecuting others, as Cain killed his brother. In opposition to death, life, ζωή, embraces knowing God and living in truth and righteousness (*veritas et sinceritas*).

Mysterium paschale as a historico-salvific event is happening here and now. The overwhelming truthfulness with which Caravaggio interprets the mystery of the *Triduum Sacrum* in the tension between death and life, darkness and light, and hate and love inspires us to see the happenings in our lives and the world from a profoundly spiritual perspective. We cannot avoid looking into the world's mirror and seeing the brutal reality of war, tyranny, and injustice. Often, we cannot deal adequately with the challenges we are facing. We wait for someone to enter our world with ready-

made answers. We would welcome help in ordering the world we live in. We might even wish to have the moral compass that orients us toward living a good life reset by somebody. And since Caravaggio encourages us to read Gospel as if the biblical story was unfolding in front of our very eyes, nobody can dive for us into the fathomless depth of the salvific mystery and experience for us the pain of the Crucifixion and the joy of Resurrection. It is through the imagination (φαντασία) that the reader's/viewer's perception is determined by his/her positioning in the world and in relationship to the perceived phenomenon.

Paschal mystery is focused on the everlasting self-revelation and self-manifestation of God to human beings in Christ. The emergence of God's liberating presence in the world occurs in history and through human history. It is an extension of the mystery of Christ, a permanent and ever-present happening. The mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ is constantly being brought to completion. Every time we celebrate this mystery, we express our active participation in waiting for the final appearance (ἐπιφάνεια) of God in the life of His people (παρουσία). The empowerment for this active waiting comes from the Holy Spirit, παράκλητος. Together, as God's people, we can live the life of the Risen One and thus, participate now in the disclosure of eternal mystery of salvation.

Incarnated Christ reveals God who loves His people. In His death and Resurrection, a human being ascends toward God. Christ's Passover is inseparable from the Passover of every human being who becomes in Christ a paschal being. Our human activity in the world redeemed by Christ and our eschatological fulfillment through the transition from death to life into the new world brings to this world a new hope for the final liberation. This hope is particularly needed in this destitute time of war and global crisis. Shevchenko prays to God and quarrels with Him. He also puts his trust in the new life of the new world. We can draw our strength from the paschal mystery, in which all the evil and suffering of the oppressed and afflicted has been overcome. Shackles and chains are broken. Freedom is established and honored. The power of Resurrection liberates from within. It forms and transforms us. And we, as fellow workers for the truth (συνεργοὶ τῆ ἀληθείᾳ, *cooperatores veritatis*, 3 J 1:8), can liberate and transform others with our solidarity, compassion, and love.

Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus, alleluia. Itaque epulemur in azymis sinceritatis et veritatis, alleluia. Christ our Paschal Lamb has been sacrificed, alleluia. Therefore, let us keep the feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth, alleluia.

Andriy Mieravsky