

- [Panayiotis Christou](#)
 - [Примечания](#)
 - [1](#)
 - [2](#)
-

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Notes on the subject of salvation

In his comprehensive paper Father Congar illustrates in a few pages the whole area which salvation in its Christian meaning can occupy. Faced with such a wide scope, a general critique is impossible. Therefore, I avail myself of his appeal to an orthodox voice to express my view on one or two basic points.

The most fundamental question on the subject is probably the one which is related to the situation from which someone is saved. Is socio-economic liberation -i.e deliverance from political oppression, from captivity, from forced labour or from famine- a basic element of Christian salvation? Is acquisition of health and wealth included in the content of salvation?

If the answer to this question is positive, the Christian idea of salvation is borrowed from the Old Testament, at least to a great extent, since all these benefits constitute there the content of salvation. But also all these benefits constitute the content of liberation movements of all kinds and of all ages. If the answer to the question is positive, the results of Christian salvation are identified with the demands of those movements. And in this case what would be the role of and the reason for the existence of Christianity?

Our answer to the question is negative. Wordly liberation has its value and the Church must work actively to achieve it, but it is not in any of its forms an element of Christian salvation. The leader of the Christian faith died on the cross and most of his disciples met their death as prisoners. None of them could take pride in earthly freedom, wealth, health or security and none of them pursued such goals. The Lord said to Paul: «My power is accomplished in weakness'.¹

Then what is salvation? Here I must point out how often words lead us into false interpretations of the spiritual situations described in the New Testament; in this case, the words δικαίωσις and σωτηρία or λύτρωσις, justification and salvation or redemption. Theologians used to present the central teaching of the New Testament as meaning justification and deliverance. Although such notions are not absent, it would be a serious mistake to take them as forming the Christian message, i.e the Gospel. This message will lose all its greatness

and splendor, if it is presented as justification of men by a God, who enters into transactions with them or in his mercy releases them from their debts. On the other hand the terms redemption and salvation fall short in describing the work of Christ and the condition in which the faithful enter. Redemption can have the meaning of a release from anti-godly powers: demons, evil, sin. Of course, no one could overlook the presence of abundant images relating to such a release: but in spite of them I believe that a presentation of God and Christ as warriors who fought against those hostile powers and defeated them, with the result of redeeming men from their sovereignty, would be completely alien to the Christian message.

Furthermore, to interpret the Gospel exclusively in such terms would mean to limit the process of the reconstruction of mankind to the work of Jesus Christ alone; after his glorious victory there would be no need to continue or to repeat the fight. However, in the New Testament we find no conception of the course of renovation being terminated. The work of Christ constitutes rather the starting point for renovation, which may be completed by a synergetic activity of divine grace and the human will. On the other hand, if we limit redemption to deliverance from worldly oppression and social evil, the Christian message would again lose all its spirit and its value.

It is not difficult to understand why St. Paul and other early writers use so constantly- though not exclusively- the terms of redemption. When someone is a slave, he does not think of what he will do or what he will become after his eventual liberation; he thinks only of how he can be liberated. And when his wish is realized, for a long time his mind is occupied by the conditions under which deliverance was achieved. Now all those who live apart from Christ- even they do not realize it- feel in one way or another like slaves, and only long after their liberation are they freed from the intense impression of the change they went through. Here we find the reason why the New Testament authors often use such negative terms to describe the feelings of the Christians, who were then Neophytes.

Later theologians, especially of the west, influenced by juridical ideas and wishing to interpret the Christian message in a way clearly and easily understood, composed the soteriological section of their dogmatic system on the basis of those terms; so, for the sake of rational clarity they fell into a one-sided formalism. However, it would be an unpardonable omission to neglect the positive aspect of the Christian message, which is imposingly present in the books of the New Testament; i.e. to neglect the aspect of presenting the achievements of the Divine Logos incarnate, not as redemption or as justification, but as a continuation of the life-giving revelation of God. When

we consider the facts from that view-point, we find that the Gospel in the first place describes the climax of the revelation of God's life. Revelation is the personal appearance of God among men and the communication of his life to men.

So salvation should be considered as a product of that decisive moment which occurred in the in the course of human history though the entrance of the divine into its path. God brings his life to man and man participates in this life, when he lives freely, consciously and existentially, in an unceasing process towards perfection, through strengthening his will and developing his spiritual powers. What happened with the human nature assumed by Christ, is repeated in every man. This is effected by the energy of God and the effort of man in cooperation. This is salvation; completion of personality, transfiguration, elevation to the throne of God, theosis.

Now, if this is the meaning of salvation, we face two objections. First: Is salvation a universal event? All modern theologians of the Western Tradition, fed by the Augustinian doctrines, are accustomed to affirm such a statement. If man is nothing but a passive object, he cannot expect anything else than the verdict of God. St. Augustine, by having differentiated the verdict, gave to one part of mankind a forced salvation, to the other a forced damnation. Some theologians of our days preserve the compulsory character of salvation, but they give it to all men.

Of course we may observe here a serious mistake. They confuse what God does with what man becomes. God saves all men, but not all men are saved, because not all men save themselves. So I agree that salvation is a universal phenomenon, but in a different way. It is universal as far as God's will and action are concerned; it is not universal as far as man's will and action are concerned. This is the restriction of salvation.

That Augustinian conception about a compulsory salvation or damnation is something inconceivable for Greek Patristic thought, something offensive to God; because it presupposes abolition of man's self-conditioning ability, *αυτεξούσιον*. Westerners seem to have disregarded it so much that they did not care to coin a Latin word for translating this term, though *αυτεξούσιον* is the greatest gift of God, for it is the power which enables man to become man.

Personal renewal is impossible without personal participation, without the contribution of that personal being who needs it. Before it becomes the aim and the task of human existence, it cannot become its property. Salvation is not a toy given to a spoiling child; it is a prize gained by an athlete.

Of course, we have the theory of recapitulation. I think, however, that it

does not tend to assure personal salvation of all men, but rather a union of all men who live the divine life with God. It means furthermore that all hostile powers in the world will cease operating; evil, death and sin will cease to exist. Evil men do not participate in the divine life existentially: this means that they cease to exist too.

Now, whether there exist other ways for God to communicate his life to mankind, this is out of our range of discussion, since our documents keep silent on it.

In the spiritual reconstruction, certainly man acts and participates in his totality, with all his physical and spiritual powers and in all his relations. However, a reconstruction of only his relations does not mean salvation; it is a consequence of salvation. To use only one example, a man is not saved spiritually, if he happens to be delivered from physical slavery; on this he supersedes any kind of physical slavery, if he is saved spiritually.

Finally what is the meaning of the participation of all creation in salvation according to the words of St. Paul and St. Peter?² I find the following answer suitable. The whole of creation participates in salvation in its capacity as the environment of man's relations, as the frame of his salvation. It shares man's salvation, though only unconsciously.

Примечания

1

[II Cor. 12,9](#)

2

[Rom. 8,23](#) , Pet, 3,13