JESUS'S PRAYER IN GETHSEMANE:
INTERPRETATION AND IDENTIFICATION

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THE SPECIAL experience to be sought in our contemplation of the Passion is a real empathy with Jesus sorrowful, in anguish and in pain.[1] Through the exercises of the second ignatian period or week, the retreatant has reached the stage at which he has given a sincere if hesitant, 'Yes, I will', to the invitation to follow Jesus and to live by his standards, with the possibility that, like the Master, he too will have to suffer. Up to this point, the basic features of that suffering are not clearly seen: the fact that it will be a constant companion of that freedom with oneself and in oneself which is the objective of the Exercises as a whole, is not yet really appreciated. Suffering and the Beatitudes are still not indissolubly linked. The imitation of Jesus seems easy: the question of the rich young man, 'What do I still lack?', has been asked only notionally; nor has the reply been fully assimilated. Real assent will come only through the reasoned colloquies in the passion contemplations,[2] particularly that of the agony in the garden. The transition is painful: more often than not, the absence of sensible consolation and the prevalence of distractions contrast with that closeness to Jesus which was the experience of the retreatant in the contemplations of the second week.

The substance of this essay is an attempt to deepen our understanding of the centrality of the experience of Gethsemane in the christian life, both within and without the context of the Spiritual Exercises, provided that the grace to be sought remains the same. First of all we shall consider the gospel record in the light of some new christological insights, as a prelude to reflecting on the precise content of Jesus's prayer.

The gospel record

Discrepancies or omissions in the gospel accounts of any event in the life of Jesus do not present difficulties, now that we appreciate the evangelists' preoccupations with resurrection faith rather than with detailed historical accuracy.[3] With regard to the experience in Gethsemane, however, the basic facts seem clear. Following the supper, Jesus and the eleven made their way out across the Kedron valley to a garden at the foot or on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, a frequent meeting place for the group, where they may have been accustomed to spend the night.[4] Having drawn aside with Peter, James and

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[1] Exx 203.

[2] Exx 199: *en los coloquios debemos de razonar y pedir segun la subiecta materia.*

[3] St John omits the prayer itself, but we find many clues to Jesus's agony of mind in his account of the Last Supper. Cf Jn 13, 1. 21. 30; 15, 23; 16, 32; 17, 4. 19. Perhaps the best johannine parallel to the Gethsemane scene is 12, 23-28.

[4] Jn 18, 2.

John (the witnesses of the Transfiguration), Jesus 'began to be sorrowful and troubled';[5] he said to them: 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me'. Then, withdrawing from them 'a little farther' (Mark and Matthew) or 'about a stone's throw' (Luke), he threw himself upon the ground and his anguished prayer began. According to the first two synoptics he returned three times to the apostles and found them sleeping. Luke omits this point but adds: 'And there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground'.[6]

The words used by Jesus show little variation in the three accounts: a prayer to the Father evoked by natural human reluctance to face the terrors to come, but also expressing a divinely inspired human readiness to meet them should this be the Father's will. Certainly we meet here the depths of the mystery of the Incarnation itself which will be highlighted in the apparent abandonment of Calvary.[7] Yet on the human level there is nothing surprising in Jesus's agony of mind, in view of the increasingly threatening events of the previous two years, the outcome of which could have been foreseen by anyone, and of his continually exercised and expressed concern for the Father's will. 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt'.[8] We are told he used these words or some variation on them each time he returned to his prayer.

So the basic facts are presented and the questions begin. What exactly took place? Considering that Jesus prayed at some distance from the apostles, and that he found them sleeping, can we say we have the actual words used, or are we given a summary based on his obviously distressed state? Scholars lean both ways on this point, the balance heavier on the side of those who favour the summary point of view. Some argue plausibly that Jesus would not have prayed aloud at all, but silently and in secret. At any rate, that the words are derived seems a sound opinion. Most scholars find echoes of the Lord's Prayer here.[9] Mention of the cup has its roots in the Old Testament; and Jesus made use of it quite frequently.[10] Further, it is safe to say that the prayer must have lasted a considerable time: Mark speaks of an hour;[11] but it may have been longer, which makes it unlikely that the same words were used throughout. What are we to make of the appearance of the angel mentioned by Luke? Does it mean any more than the evident results of Jesus's prayer — consolation and resolution? We

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[5] Mt 26, 37 (Revised Standard Version — RSV). The greek words used here by Matthew and Mark are stronger in connotation than the english translations indicate. Cp Mt 17, 23 and Mk 14, 5.

[6] Lk 22, 43 (RSV).

[7] Jesus's mental attitude on Calvary is a direct reflection of his mind in the garden: an increased sense of abandonment perhaps, but a predominant faith; cf Lk 23, 46.

[8] Mt 26, 39 (RSV).

[9] Cp Mt 6, 10 and 26, 42; 6, 13 and 26, 39.

[10] Isai 51, 17. 22; Ps 11, 6; Mt 20, 22; Mk 10, 38; Jn 18, 11.

[11] Mk 14, 37.

must remember here that the bible does not always make a sharp distinction between an angel as a personal being and as a personification of the divine word or action. Besides, those in favour of the strictly literal view have to face the objection that the apostles were sleeping. Finally, the Lucan 'like great drops of blood', whatever its artistic force, can be no more than a matter of setting in telling relief the intensity of Jesus's anguish.

We can certainly understand something of his state of mind in the garden that night. Any trace of docetism must be rejected: there was no pretence here. He was as humanly distraught as any man would be when faced with imminent humiliation and suffering at the hands of those who had marked him out for death in their unscrupulous efforts to maintain their political position. Difficulties of interpretation have arisen here through dubious presuppositions regarding the humanity of Jesus. Traditional christology, with an over-emphasis on the duality in Christ, human and divine, has led preachers and spiritual writers along uncertain paths. While it is admitted that Jesus the man could foresee to some extent the suffering he was about to undergo, it was also popularly held that, since he was divine, he could foresee world-history in all its details, coloured by a real rejection of his sacrifice; my sinfulness was therefore present to him and intensified his *human* agony. Such a view of interaction if not fusion of the two natures is theologically indefensible. It actually reduces rather than enhances the role of the *humanity* of Jesus in our redemption, and consequently weakens the relevance of the man Jesus to our spiritual life. As man, Jesus suffered uninfluenced by the divinity; for that very reason his human mind was not influenced during that suffering either by the beatific vision or by the knowledge of ages yet to come. The agony in Gethsemane was a truly human situation. Undoubtedly we are in the presence of a great mystery here; but I suggest that the mystery lies, not in some interaction of natures, but rather in the more fundamental fact that God wished through the Incarnation to reveal himself precisely as man, with all that this implies, including the limited scope of human knowledge as such. The traditional thesis that Jesus was *simul viator et comprehensor* has all too often been misinterpreted. That God revealed himself precisely as *viator*, like us in all things but sin, does not weaken the dogmatic fact that God was present in and to Jesus in an extraordinary and unique way: he was the divine revealing itself as man. On the other hand, to postulate theandric thought and activity in Jesus at *any* time in his life, with the implied interaction of the human and divine, does in fact weaken the other dogmatic fact that he was fully man, subject to human stress at all times.[12] Jesus was divine as the human expression of God; but the humanity in him was never compromised.

[12] This point would need further development. Suffice it here to say, with regard to the miraculous events in Jesus's life, that his *human* faith was sufficient to move mountains (Mt 17, 20) or raise the dead etc. (Mk 9, 23). Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus never appealed to the miraculous to prove his divinity; the same applies to the apostolic preaching which rested its case on the fact that the Father raised Jesus from the dead.

In the present context then, the agony in the garden was a matter of real *human* anguish and desolation, brought on by human factors alone. A clear understanding of the situation into which he was plunged, and its inevitable consequences, prevented Jesus from underrating what lay in store for him. He did not want to be humiliated, tortured or abandoned, and he did not want to die. Moreover, the reactions of those he loved to his mission, and by human inference the reactions of those who would come after him, would make him recoil even more from an ordeal that for so many might be in vain. So a picture emerges of one who is indeed 'greatly distressed' and 'sorrowful even to death'. Furthermore, the terrible sense of being completely alone in his hour of trial is highlighted by his repeated desire during his prayer for some human companionship.

Faced, then, with the prospect of a lonely stand against forces which would humanly destroy him, and deprived of the consolation of the coming resurrection experience (could he, as man, have appreciated its import?), Jesus went through a real agony of mind. One thing alone supported him: his consciousness of having up to this point remained faithful to the Father's will. His earlier deliberate, inspired but reasoned, choice to follow the role of the suffering servant in Isaiah,[13] together with his realization, born and confirmed in moments of real consolation, that this was his Father's will for him,[14] formed a solid human bastion against his understandable reluctance to drink the cup that was now held out to him. The underlying context here is that of the 'self-emptying' of Philippians 2, 7.[15] If we understand this *kenosis* as a decision taken within the limits of Jesus's human existence, to follow the path of the servant and prophet rather than the more humanly inviting (and in itself entirely legitimate) path of a spectacular Messiah, we can come nearer to the reality of Gethsemane. Here the matthaean account of the temptations in the wilderness and the present agony are meaningfully linked as general pattern to inevitable climax. Taking the temptation experience to be a synoptic summary of Jesus's divinely supported but human decisions throughout his public life, the force of the struggle in the garden readily appears.[16] The servant-pattern and the Father's will were identified in Jesus's mind: there could be no deviation now that he faced the ultimate test. The Father's will had always been his basic concern;[17] given his human insight into the servant pattern in the scriptures, Jesus knew, at least in general terms, where the accomplishment of the Father's will would eventually lead him; hence that steadily increasing foreboding which comes down to us in the form of the three prophecies of the passion and death.

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[13] Cf Isai 50, 4-11; 52, 13 - 53, 12.

[14] Cf Lk 3, 21 (Baptism); Mt 17, 1ff (Transfiguration); Jn 11, 41 (Raising of Lazarus).

[15] Cf P. Schoonenberg, S.J. in *Concilium*, vol 1, no 2, pp 27-36.

[16] The temptations in the wilderness appear frequently on the lips of disciples or bystanders, e.g. Mk 3, 32; Jn 6, 15; Mt 16, 22. The main theme of all three temptations is regard for self to some degree; Jesus's replies counter this completely.

[17] Cf Jn 4, 34 etc.

The stage for the final struggle in the garden is set: here the dire test would be finally resolved and human exaltation achieved. Subsequent events, even Calvary itself, add no more than the carrying out in deed of the stand taken by Jesus during his mental agony.

The struggle is real and deep. Earlier decisions to follow the path of self-forgetfulness had indeed been accompanied by uplifting consolation; but, as is the common experience in times of great personal stress, the consoling memories which should bear us up tend to fade to the purely notional level in the face of the real calamity of the moment. So Jesus, though mindful of the delight with which he had constantly embraced the Father's will as this emerged through circumstances in his public life, needed to have that memory reinforced. Over and again he needed to reaffirm his resolve by a repetition of the memory. He had to pray that, in the face of the weakness of human nature and its continued temptations to avoid the painful, his resolve would stand. The words which the evangelists put into his mouth amply describe such a prayer; and, given his utterly unique faith and trust in the Father, the prayer bore magnificent fruit.

How did Jesus pray?

The frequency with which we find the psalms on Jesus's lips throughout the gospel record, and particularly during the passion itself,[18] might prompt us to search in the psalter for a prayer that he might have used in Gethsemane. Is there any one or any group of psalms which would mirror his mind? I suggest that there is one which fulfils all the conditions involved: Psalm 119 (Vulgate 118), the longest in the psalter, and one that has occasionally been described as the most boring and clumsily constructed of all.[19] Its 176 verses are seldom prayed together: the repetitious character of the successive strophes, and the apparent lack of development in thought, have proved barriers to our enthusiasm. St Augustine actually by-passed it in his commentaries on the psalms, and there is evidence that he did not tackle it until his last years. But lest we think that he did this for obvious reasons, we might read what he has to say in the preface of the thirty-two discourses he penned on it:

> This psalm I kept putting off, not so much because of its notorious length as for its profundity, which is known to few. The plainer it seems the deeper it always seemed to me, so much so that I could not even show how profound it really is. Of other psalms difficult to understand, though the sense be obscure, the obscurity is obvious, but in this case not even the obscurity. Now that I have come to deal with it at last, I have no idea what I shall be able to make of it.[20]

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[18] Cf Mt 27, 46; Mk 15, 34; Lk 23, 46; Jn 19, 28.

[19] E.g. Duhm: *Die Psalmen* (Tubingen).

[20] *Enarrationes in Psalmos:* Ps cxix. Pref.

Psalm 119 cannot be categorized with anything else in the psalter. An acrostic poem, it is so artificially constructed that each verse of each strophe begins with a particular letter of the hebrew alphabet, a feature that would certainly aid the memory through the entire twenty-two letters. The main theme, constantly repeated, is the situation of the just man (or the jewish nation as a whole?) unjustly condemned and about to die, whose delight rests always in the fulfilment of the divine will, but who is also very conscious of being unable to accomplish this without divine saving help. Every strophe includes eight terms covering eight aspects of the will of God for Israel. Roughly translated these would be: law, statutes, commandments, word, precepts, decrees, instructions, judgments. This plan, however, is not consistently adhered to in the text, either through the errors of copyists or through the abandonment of the alphabetical arrangement in the septuagint translation. Its composition may be attributed to some late jewish captive exile, but the sentiments expressed could be those of a faithful Israelite of any period. Its adaptability to what we know of Jesus's mind in the garden is indeed striking.

The psalmist is hounded by many persecutors (v 157), whom he brands as arrogant (v 85) and as liars (v 86). They wish to destroy him (v 95) in their complete forgetfulness of the word of Yahweh (v 139). Ensnared by them (v 61), he, whose constant delight has always been in the command of Yahweh (v 14 etc.), finds himself in deep affliction (v 20 etc.) and acute suffering (v 107), prostrate in the dust (v 25) and sleepless with grief (v 28); while he foresees that princes will put him on trial (v 23) and insult him (v 39). Yet, relying on the fact that he will receive divine help (v 41), he is confident that he will endure in the observance of the will he has always loved to follow (v 88); he is even prepared to sacrifice his life (v 109). Throughout the psalm, we find a continuous fluctuation between affliction and a readiness to fulfil the will of God. To concentrate on the repetitions in expression, and overlook the mental struggle involved, is to miss the point and slip into the position of those who dismiss the psalm as tedious.

Petition is the keynote of the whole: the plea that Yahweh is aware of the psalmist's sufferings, and by this very fact gives him strength and life. 'Do not leave me to my oppressors' (v 121), 'in your steadfast love spare my life' (v 88), 'take note of my sufferings and deliver me' (v 153). Side by side with this plea runs the persistent will to continue in the way of righteousness: 'Yahweh is my portion, I promise to keep your words' (v 157). Consolation and encouragement grow stronger and eventually win through. At no time does the human dread of humiliation or even of death itself gain the upper hand. Indeed the final strophes do not mention either the approaching torment or the psalmist's inner conflict; a strengthened love for Yahweh's commands and the promises connected with them have taken control. The prayer itself, a repetitious recital of mental anguish, has ultimately brought its own uplift and determination. The final petitions have already been heard and answered:[21]

[21] 'Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will' (Mk 11, 24 [RSV]).

'Let my cry come before you, O Lord; give me understanding according to your word. Let your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts' (vv 169ff). The psalmist rises from his prayer strengthened and resolute.

Perhaps one can say no more than that this psalm is appropriate on the lips of Jesus before the passion.[22] Certainly nothing else in the psalter or in the prophets quite fills such a role. This is highlighted even further by the realization of what the psalmist does *not* say in this particular prayer. Here there is no question of revenge on or hatred of his persecutors, a rare omission in psalmodic lamentations.[23] The deep despair of Jeremiah is also missing.[24] So also is a confession of personal sinfulness.[25] It is moreover significant that the psalmist's stress on past obedience to the divine will is usually missing in Old Testament prayers; where it is mentioned, the sense of personal affliction by unjust oppressors or by fears is not mentioned. Here the author is in personal torment akin to the mental state of Jesus as outlined in the gospel; the conflict is purely internal to the psalmist himself. One further point: some commentators have taken a purely legalistic view of the psalm, and have thus missed the meaning of the whole. Far from seeing the Law as an obligation, the psalm embodies a loving desire for the realization in deed of the word of God enshrined in the Law, itself an expression of God's revelation of his will for men. 'I revere your commandments which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes' (v 48).

There is no evidence that any of the Fathers in their commentaries explicitly proposed that this psalm might have been used by Jesus in Gethsemane, although many do indeed read his suffering sentiments into isolated verses. St Augustine, however, is preoccupied with the idea that this psalm is the prayer of the Body of Christ under persecution, precisely because it is the prayer of the Head. He thus introduces a dimension into its interpretation which sets in relief the identification with Jesus in his passion:

> Our Lord Jesus in this psalm through his prophet prayed that enlightenment be given by God to his Body which is the Church, as if to himself. For the life of the Body, that is, of his people, is hidden in God; and he himself, in this very Body of his, suffers want and prays for that which is necessary for his members.[26]

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[22] It seems hardly possible, as has been suggested to me, that the theory be inverted by postulating that Matthew was influenced by this psalm in his account of the Agony.

[23] Verse 113, 'I hate double-minded men' is hardly an exception to this. With v 158 it is consistent with the indictments of Mt 23 and the 'Father, forgive them' of Calvary. The prayer of Ps 35 for example, for the destruction of the psalmist's enemies, is quite otherwise.

[24] Cp Jer 15, 10; 20, 14-18.

[25] The Jerusalem Bible translations of vv 26, 29 and 32 are faulty; cp Hebrew, Vulgate, RSV. Verse 176, 'I have gone astray like a lost sheep', in the light of the psalmist's stated fidelity to God's will, must refer to the innate weakness of human nature left to itself. Cp Mk 10, 18.

[26] *Enarr. in Ps cxix; Sermo* 32, 1.

> Listen to the words of him who prays: since we know who is praying, we recognize ourselves among his members unless we are reprobate.[27]

The theme is constant through all thirty-two discourses. Christ, the Head in the members through his Spirit, prays in this particular way for the determination to be true to the Father's will more especially when, notwithstanding a deep love for the divine word, the weakness of human nature suggests a temporary relaxation in the face of oppression of whatever kind. Jesus's prayer in the garden embraces the prayer of the Church; and since his prayer and agony were the climactic expression of his human role as the definitive revelation of the Father, so our efforts to identify with him must focus on Gethsemane.

We know that the prayers of the psalter were constantly used by Jesus. We know too the main features of the interior conflict he underwent: a determination to follow the path of the suffering servant to the bitter end, since this was the confirmed will of the Father, but one which was temporarily weakened by the temptations of human nature to which his humanity had been prey from the beginning. Our own experience tells us that in times of stress, prayers with which we have grown familiar can, through a deepened assent to their meaning, be of particular value. Psalm 119, with its ten repetitions of the same theme, admirably fulfils the conditions set out in the gospel record, both with regard to the summary words and to the repetition stressed in Matthew and Mark.

The Agony and the Spiritual Exercises

In the petition of the third week, we ask to be sorrowful *with* Christ sorrowful: what is at issue is a sense of identification. In fact we pray that we may be incorporated into that very *kenosis* which was the predominant feature of Jesus's life. We pray for a real participation in the radical self-forgetfulness for which he prayed, and which bore fruit in his resurrection and in our redemption in him. It is true that we have prayed for this earlier in the course of the Exercises;[28] but, in a sense, we did not deeply appreciate the scope and the demands of our plea. The fruit of the second week is that we are prepared to throw in our lot with Christ; but are we thereby much further beyond those whose generosity is conditioned?[29] The radical self-emptying we prayed for in the colloquy of the third mode of humility is still largely on the notional level. Now in this third week we ask to share the *kenosis* of Jesus at the crucial point: we wish to take to heart that basic self-renunciation which he likened to the grain of wheat which must die before bearing fruit. We do this through our efforts to have a real sense of the cost to Jesus himself of that total self-denial to which he had earlier committed himself. In him the whole of humanity

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[27] *Ibid.*, *Sermo* 19, 1.

[28] Exx 98, 147, 156, 167ff.

[29] Lk 9, 57-62.

was put to the definitive test; on him alone the burden fell, and with him alone the crucial victory was gained. Here in all its depth we wish to put on the mind of Christ.

Fidelity to prayer in this contemplation of the agony usually involves something of the dark night of the soul. Desolation is a common feature among retreatants, particularly those engaged in the full thirty days' programme. The temptation to avoid the real issue is understandably strong. The absence of the palpable consolations of the second week makes it increasingly difficult to return to the point of crisis (*krisis* — trial, issue, decision) again and again. We dread losing everything. There is a definite self-preserving force at work in us continually, drawing us back from the brink. Death to self and the rejection of all complacency is the most difficult thing in the world. The step into the dark assumes momentous proportions, and the knowledge of our own weakness can be both a real preoccupation and a temptation to compromise. All this in itself is already a participation in the Gethsemane experience, and a prelude to the deeper realization — a highly personal one — that Jesus, once *for* us and now *in* us, has overcome and is overcoming the forces which by ourselves we could never withstand. These desolate experiences themselves are already a gift; the greater gift is to realize what is involved.

So we pray as he did. We may look back perhaps to a lifetime or a number of years of comparative fidelity, where consolation was present or never too far away; but the memory fades with the realization that fidelity and consolation were too closely interdependent. Now, faced with a fidelity which promises no earthly rewards at all, we cringe, hesitate and may even draw back. Our prayer must take the form of Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane. Psalm 119 gets to the heart of the matter.

Having then experienced this crisis, and in him been strengthened and made resolute, we arise to travel the Calvary road with him, realizing that the nineteen centuries are totally irrelevant — he walks to Calvary now in us. As we travel the road, the shadows or the reality of the scenes of the passion narrative are there: the bearing of the cross, the feeling of abandonment perhaps, the humiliation. Yet the self-forgetfulness engendered in the garden lifts us up to him, enabling us to take all with patience, to bear ourselves in determined fashion, to stand mute before those who cast aspersions on us, to be mindful of others, compassionate towards the wayward and forgiving towards those who injure us. The Beatitudes are experienced in their depths. The *consummatum est* comes effortlessly in him, and we stand on the threshold of the supreme joy of the resurrection experience.