

Christ's Suffering

April 4, 2009

The eve of Palm Sunday is surely a good moment to consider with St. Thomas Aquinas (IIIIa, Q46, art.5,6) how Christ's suffering surpassed all other sufferings. Of course Christ could not suffer in his impassible divine nature, but he had chosen his perfect human nature, conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, to provide him with an incomparably sensitive instrument of suffering, in body and soul, to redeem us all and to save us from Hell if we wish.

As for Christ's body, every part of it, from thorn-crowned head to nailed feet, was tormented in his Passion, culminating in the excruciating pains of death on the Cross, three hours racked between cramp from pushing up on nailed feet to breathe, and breathlessness or suffocation from slumping down on nailed hands to relieve the cramp. Crucifixion was positively designed to be excruciating – both words derive from the Latin for “cross” (crux, crucis).

As for Christ's soul with its far greater range of perception than that of mere bodily senses, however perfect, St. Thomas names three heads of suffering. Firstly, by infused knowledge, Christ saw all sins of all men of all time, and chose to pay by his self-sacrifice for all those sins in general. In other words he used his superhuman gifts not to avoid suffering but to suffer the more. Yet at the same time he wished to suffer not just by a divine reckoning according to which a mere pin-prick of the Divine Person would have been payment infinite and more than enough, but by a human reckoning, as though he alone were to undergo umpteen executions to pay for umpteen criminals!

Secondly, by normal human knowledge, Christ suffered in his soul from observing all the kinds of people contributing to his Passion: Jew and Gentile, man and woman (e.g. the serving-

girl mocking Peter), leaders and people, friend and foe. In particular, says St. Thomas, Christ suffered in his soul from being hated by his own people, then still God's Chosen People, and – worst of all – from being abandoned and betrayed by his very own Apostles. Thirdly, like any man, Christ suffered in his soul from having to die, and the more innocent and perfect his life had been, the more keenly he suffered its loss and the injustice of its loss.

Now what other human being, or mass of human beings, have lived a perfect and innocent life; have chosen to lay it down by a death anything like as terrible as crucifixion; have been able to see all sins of all men and wish to pay for them; finally have observed abandonment all around them to the point of feeling deserted even by God (“lama, lama, sabactani”)? Were there six million such men, still they could not claim that their sacrifice was motivated by anything like the charity of Christ, with his overwhelming divine and human love for every one of us poor sinners. So their sacrifice would still not be remotely comparable to His.

Kyrie eleison.