

EPIDEMICS AND SIN /2

Chastisements of God, correction of children is mercy

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I concluded the preceding article on the chastisements of God ([here](#)) by noting the necessity of moving from an understanding of Scripture to a systematic intelligence of them, since a mere list of texts, even if it is organised, raises essential questions that

are often left unanswered. Here are some clarifications.

1. The virus of self-chastisement

Whoever has read the texts of the previous article on the chastisements of God runs the risk of getting the impression that he does not stand before God the Father but rather “The scourge of a Punishing God,” as the last aria concludes in Donizetti’s opera *Maria Stuarda*, with a loud and high emphasis on the word “Punisher.” But no, it is thought that God should not “appear malevolent,” and so an attempt is made to remedy this with a theological “virus” that has been going around for some time: the idea of self-judgment or self-chastisement, in the sense that the sinner condemns himself and sorrow is internal to sin itself without an added punishment, and if there are any disgraces or maladies, this is because it is normal. In such a concept, God does not play any unpleasant roles, and his attribute of mercy is preserved. In 2017, the centenary year of Fatima, some re-interpreted the chastisements predicted by the Blessed Mother in this sense.

Mind you, this explanation does hold truth, and it is supported by Biblical citations, for example: “Your own wickedness chastises you and your own rebellions punish you” (Jeremiah 2:19), “one is punished by the very things through which one sins” (Wisdom 11:16). But it becomes a virus when it is presented as the “only” Scriptural interpretation of this question. In fact, if we examine all the passages of the Old and New Testaments with the words “chastise,” “punish,” and similar terms, we will have quite a long list. And would God have spoken thus so many times and the Holy Spirit inspired all these passages in Scripture in order to communicate a message that is *not* the one that appears in the text? Obviously not!

2. Three Distinct human circles

Saint Thomas Aquinas († 1274) observes that man lives by relating on three levels: with himself, with society, and with God. If he lives virtuously on every level, he is fundamentally happy and receives the reward of virtue. But if he sins, sin provokes a triple punishment: “one from himself, which is the remorse of conscience; another from men; a third from God” (I-II, q 87, a 1). These three levels may overlap but they are not to be confused: so if one breaks the social pact even in small things (the second level) – for example, not paying for a ticket on a bus or train – the company cannot be content simply with his remorse (first level) but must impose a fine. In the same way, it is logical that God intervenes with a chastisement, even if in doing so it seems that God abandons his paternity and his purpose of salvation.

3. When God punishes he does not degrade himself

Again according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, revenge – not as it is understood in current language but in the technical sense of “inflicting a penal evil on the one who sins” – is both lawful and normal. It is lawful because it leads to the good, which is the amendment of those who sin or at least their “containment from doing evil and placing the peace of others at risk” and in this sense, because it preserves the character of virtue, it ought to be practiced “in due measure.” By contrast, it becomes illicit “if the one who carries it out has the intention of provoking evil” because then it would be an act of hatred” (II-II q 108, a 1; ad 3um).

Since God never carries out actions aimed only at provoking evil and since he always has a corrective intent, he never “appears malevolent” when he chastises. But today this annoys us, even when we find it written in the Bible, because it seems to us that God is too human and we expect more from him – much more. But what if we reverse our perspective? It is not God who imitates us, but rather we who in a weak measure imitate divine wisdom and justice – even in penal systems when they are righteous and corrective.

Continuing to follow the reflection of Saint Thomas Aquinas, “to reward or punish is the competence of the one who establishes a law, and this is the case with divine providence” (*Contra Gentiles* 3,140), which has established the laws of the world, creating them and ordering them, the laws of the internal harmony of man and of his relationship with others, the laws that derive from the covenants with Abraham and Moses and today with all of the faithful in Jesus Christ. Punishing – strictly relative to rewarding and thus God does not limit himself to punishing – implies imposing punishments, which however “are imposed by God not for their own sake, as if God took

pleasure in this (*quasi Deus in ipsis delectetur*), but are ordered to the other, that is for the order that ought to reign between creatures, the order that constitutes the good of the universe," which implies that God with his wisdom adequately rewards virtues and vices (ibid., 3, 144). Not judging the wrong done, not providing for a corrective or final sanction – the latter alas is no longer corrective – would mean in the final analysis maintaining a disordered world as normal and would mean that evil has the final word, while "every evil must in the final analysis be concluded in some sort of good" (ibid., 3, 140), in this case the goodness of a divine judgment and some sort of good" (ibid., 3,140).

I realise that for a certain type of person today, fascinated by spontaneity, by chance, by disorder and by rule-breaking, beginning with wearing ripped pants that are ripped on purpose to be a form of art, the reasoning given above borders on delirium. However, God re-educates this type of man and reveals a harmonious world, a harmony that includes the chastisements not directly willed by God but that are the consequence of disharmonies that we ourselves have provoked.

4. God is a Christian God and this is what is revealed in the scriptures

However, we must go further. God is the God who reveals himself in the Scriptures and Tradition, and in the preceding essay we saw that His revealed way of relating with us is that he desires the salvation of all (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4). And not only this: God knows our concreteness, which often involves falling many times and getting up again, which entails the desire to be in his friendship but with the psychological and structural difficulty of modifying certain situations, etc. Precisely for this reason the proposal of salvation is not offered once and then no more, but it continues to be offered repeatedly over the course of time and this "slowness" is motivated by the fact that God "does not desire that anyone be lost, but that all come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

It is in this horizon that we must interpret the punishments of God, which in the present life are always "chastisements" in the etymological sense of the word that derives from the Latin "*castus agere*" – making pure, corrected from errors – so much that at one time literary works were referred to as "chastised," that is, corrected from the errors of previous editions. The primary intention of God is neither a punitive nor a vengeful outburst, but simply that we may be converted so that we may turn to him.

Among other things, normally the chastisements of God, in contrast to human corrections, are never a sort of breathing down our neck after every sin, since "an immediate sentence is not pronounced against a bad action." On God's part it is about divine patience, while on our part it often means that "men's hearts are full of the desire

to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11). The great chastisements of God, for example the flood or the end of the kingdom of Israel and the Exile, take place after a prolonged series of infidelities and turning away from him. And at this point it appears to me that anyone wishing to interpret Covid-19 as a chastisement of God – I will shortly specify how it is and with what degree of certainty – ought to interpret it a) as a corrective intervention; b) as an intervention that follows numerous and continuous departures from the law of God, not only that of the Gospel and Christian Tradition, but also the law that God has placed in nature, increasingly overwhelmed by a human delusion of omnipotence.

5. Is it truly necessary for God to chastise?

One could object: if God wants us to return to Him, why doesn't he continue to call us instead of sending chastisements? Alas, this does not take into account the human condition, but comes from unrealistic "too good" speculations that we would like to impose on God, while in daily life this is not the way it works when it comes to the rules of the road, taxes, train tickets, etc., which are not proposed only with campaigns encouraging us to "think about following them" but are always enforced by sanctions.

I omit the citations which come above all from the Old Testament on corrections like whiplashes "the whip and correction are at all times wisdom" (Sirach 22:6) – tied to a culture that is no longer our own and that we are not required to re-establish, but I recall an illuminating passage from the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which recognises that in the case of a grave fault the strongest and most medicinal correction is the "excommunication," or the temporary separation of the guilty one from the community. This however supposes a certain finesse in the subject in order to understand the scope of the provision" – if he understands what this punishment is" (23:4) – while if the subject is a coarse or rough person who will not make such subtle reflections, "he may be given a corporal punishment" (23:5) which he will certainly be able to understand. Corporal punishment aside: we behave like this; civil society behaves like this; why would we want to impose another behaviour on God?

6. God is a God who is...metaphysical

Paul, addressing himself to the philosophers of the Areopagus of Athens and quoting a pagan poet, said of God, "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), and addressing himself to the faithful he specified: "it is God who inspires you both to desire and to work" (Philippians 2:13). In the Old Testament the sage already explained that "the heart of the king is channeled water in the hand of the Lord: he directs it wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1), and the prophet adds that God can also use Cyrus, the

Persian king who did not know him: “even if you do not know me” (Isaiah 45:4-5).

From this starting point, Christian philosophical wisdom has elaborated a metaphysical thinking about God, according to which when God acts in the world He is not merely one of the agents, even if a particularly strong one, but rather He is the one who sustains everything in acting and being, including the demons, whose action influences the elements of nature and persons. If we apply this concept to the hypothesis of Covid-19 as a chastisement of God, it means that the pandemic may normally be explained by natural causes or human malice. The hypothesis of a chastisement of God is a conjecture of faith, which may be proposed but not imposed.

Alas, I apologise to the readers, but the discourse expands like leavened dough, therefore a third intervention will be necessary to complete the argument. *To be continued.*