

On the Redemption of Fallen Man

By St. Caesarius of Arles¹

On this day, dearest brethren, Christ was born unto us. Let us prepare for Him in our hearts a dwelling full of patient merits; let us prepare a crib, a cradle brilliant with the flowers of a good life and the perpetual sweetness of its fragrance. Let us receive the tiny little Lord in our hearts; may He grow and make progress there, nourished by faith, may He ascend to youth there on the steps of life, and may He exercise the powers which are mentioned in the Gospel. Within us the Lord has a blind man to whom He can give light, a lame man whose step He can restore and bring to the path of truth without stumbling. In this room He finds a dead man, a corpse stretched out; He even finds a foul cadaver which the kindly one who raises from the dead may bring back from the tomb of sin. What He did in those who were dead He does in the living. He raises a man to life in the room of his heart, just as He did the daughter of the head of the synagogue, provided that the man repents of his sins of deadly thoughts. Because a man is already dead if he has decided to sin with an evil intention, He raises him to life in the room, if, before he commits the deed which he thought about, with secret compunction he has recourse to repentance for the crime that he had conceived. He also raises to life the corpse of a youth laid out for burial and, when he is revived, restores him to his weeping mother, that is, to the grieving Church. This happens when a man has committed a crime before he is buried, that is, before he is overcome by habit, provided that the man returns to repentance by belated compunction after condemning his offenses. But why do I speak about corpses which are hidden or buried? Our Lord and Savior despises neither those who are buried nor those who stink from rotteness. He even arouses those whom He has recalled to a better life by repentance, even though because of long habit they were rotting from the dreadful ugliness of their vices, as if they were in a tomb. He restores to a better life bodies which have been overwhelmed with the weight of sins as in a tomb, and He orders the corpse which was bound to be released from its bands, that is, from its deadly ties. This is done provided that the sinner feels the weight by which he is pressed down and recognizes his corruption and foul smell.

For this reason, brethren, if the hidden concupiscence of any sin rebukes a man, he should hasten to be aroused in his room, that is, before he does what he conceived in thought. If there is a man whose death general lamentation has clearly revealed to the public, that is, who has committed whatever sin he intended, he should hurry and return to the restorer of life before he is overwhelmed by the weight of the tomb and before he begins to stink from rotteness. However he should not despair, even though the long-standing weight of sins has buried him in his foul-smelling condition as in fetid death. By those other resurrections which were accomplished for our hope, the Lord promises that He will restore life to all who desire to rise again. The goodness of our Lord is no less wonderful in the mystery than in the deed, for He has seen to it that the remedies for those who are willing to be cured are greater than the dangers, and that the remedies for restoring health are stronger than the wounds. Our Lord did not want to bring death to the human race through His birth. He became man so that man whom He had created might not perish; He suffered cruel torments in order that He might free the unworthy from deserving punishments. He hung on the tree of death in order to expiate the fault which was derived from the tree through disobedience; for this He died and descended into hell, in order to rescue from it the dead who were kept in hell under the

¹ Sermon 190, Given on the Feast of Christmas.

bond of sin. Overcoming death He came back bearing living spoils, that is, He restored to the living the life of those who were dead. He was not content to have man recover through His resurrection only what he had lost by disobedience when he was deceived by the poisonous inspiration of the serpent. For it was not right that God our Redeemer should give to those who have been redeemed by His death only what the hatred of the hostile deceiver had cunningly destroyed. The latter expelled man from his true country, the former brought him back; the one took away paradise, while the other restored heaven. Just as the devil overcame his captives by death, which was himself, so our Lord, who is life, gave to the redeemed eternal life and a share in His heavenly kingdom. Then we may taunt the devil and boast in the Lord as we say what was spoken through the prophet: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"²

The extent of the divine mercy has taken me quite far away from the present feast. However it is connected in such a way that the nativity could not be preached without the passion, nor could the passion without the glory of the nativity. Christ was born in order that He might suffer, He suffered in order that He might die, He died in order that He might descend into hell, He descended there in order that He might free the dead. Although as God He was incapable of suffering, by uniting the substance of a man with His divinity He humbled Himself in such a way that, although God, He was born as a man and as man He arose again to God by triumphing over death. For this reason, dearest brethren, the way came to those who were wandering, the judge came to the guilty, the physician came to those who were sick, life came to the dead. Why? Because without the way the pilgrim could not return to his true country, without a judge the guilty could not be forgiven, and without life the dead could not be revived. Therefore we have a way of return on the road, mercy in our judge, a remedy in sickness, and deliverance in death. The way by which we can arise came down to us, the judge came to chastise death and to free man, the physician came to remove infirmities and to grant endless health to the sick, life came to descend into hell, in order that it might free the dead from it by killing death. O Lord, with what joy and exultation shall we describe the benefits of such great goodness? What more is there that we who are sick might ask than what You have offered of Your own accord to those who did not deserve it? And yet we poor sinners also beseech You to love in us what You bore for us. If only we might love our own life in the same way that You deign to love Your death in us.

Therefore, dearest brethren, let us love our price and let us make ourselves worthy of it by good deeds and right actions, since we have merited to be redeemed and even freed by the death of our Lord. For this reason, too, let us keep our life pure and undefiled for our Lord and Redeemer as it was entrusted to us. As we joyfully celebrate the feast of His nativity, with His help may we endeavor to live in such a way that such great and immense benefits of our God may not bring us judgment but may lead to our profit: because He Himself is worthy of it, who lives and reigns with the Father.

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² 1 Cor. 15.55.