

"UNLESS A GRAIN OF WHEAT DIES"

The Historico-Salvific Exegesis of John 12,24



by Lanfranco Fedrigotti

As bishops from every nation gathered around the Vicar of Christ and Successor of Peter for the Second Vatican Council in Rome, the Church experienced for the first time in her history her emergence as a world community. Two of the world's largest continents, Africa and Asia, had strong representation, among them also some Chinese bishops, with the result that the former Church distinctions based on nation, race and continent never seemed more obsolete. The Catholic Church would no longer be able to see herself as primarily a European or Western reality. Her potential or virtual catholicity had suddenly become actualized, and the form she assumes today is that of a truly "global" entity. (1)

This "global breakthrough" has profound significance for every facet of the Church's life, not the least of which involves her biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. More to our present purpose here, however, is how her new situation throws a bright new light on the meaning of that briefest of parables uttered by Jesus centuries before in the gathering shadows of his impending death: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12, 24).

The global breakthrough of today's Church is, in actu-

ality, a new phase of the on-going realization of the truth contained in this parable. It is a new sign of the rich fertility of the "grain of wheat", a fresh expression of its ability to "bear much fruit".

During his farewell discourse after the Last Supper in John's Gospel, Jesus, in words meant to reveal and console, promises the disciples that the Spirit "will guide you into all the truth ... for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16,13-14). How does the Spirit of truth lead us into an ever deepening understanding of the words of Jesus? One of the paths followed by the Spirit is certainly the life of the Church in history, her development as she responds to the needs and the signs of the times. The life of the Church is a hermeneutical field of primary importance for our understanding of the words and actions of Jesus. Through the development of history, the Spirit leads man-in-history to recognize in Jesus the Lord of history, present in the world through his body the Church.

No wonder, then, that the "much fruit" produced by Jesus' death has been interpreted successively by the Church as: (a) the initial rapid growth of converts in the infant Christian Community (cf. Acts 12,24); (b) the Gentiles' generous response in faith to the Gospel (cf. Rom 11,25); (c) the incredibly swift diffusion of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire; (d) the mass entrance of "barbarian" tribes into the household of the faith; (e) the "baptism" of the New World in the wake of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America. Today's global breakthrough suggests that we add a further dimension to our interpretation of the abundance of fruit brought about by the death of the grain of wheat: the openness of the globe's two largest continents, namely Africa and Asia, to the call of faith.

In such a context, the response of the Chinese people to the Gospel is pregnant with hermeneutical significance. On the surface, the relationship of China and the Gospel appears marked by tragedy. Successive waves of evangelization: Nestorian, Franciscan, Jesuit and Dominican, contemporary missionary endeavours and the development of local churches have been marked by a tragic mixture of human failure and heroic witness. However, this realization need not be discouraging. In the light of the parable of the

grain of wheat, the Spirit helps us to see in all of this the proportionate cost to be paid for the surpassing abundance of the fruit prayed for: the coming of the Chinese people to the obedience of faith.

Let us now take a closer look at the parable of the grain of wheat. We shall do this in three stages: first, we shall address ourselves to the larger context of John's gospel, of which this parable is but a segment; second, we shall examine the parable in its immediate gospel context; third, we shall review how this parable has been interpreted throughout the history of the Church.

I. John's Gospel: the Larger Context

For a more fruitful understanding of our parable we must take notice of the overall framework of meaning characteristic of John's gospel as well as some of the more prominent features of John's style.

(a) The conceptual framework of John's gospel.

In the gospel of John, the person of Jesus appears as other-oriented; that is, he never speaks or acts to obtain something for himself, but has always in view giving glory to the Father and eternal life to man. This other-orientedness is not merely psychological. It is, so to speak, constitutive: Jesus not only speaks or acts for others, he is for others. In other words, Jesus has come on a mission of revelation and salvation: to reveal the Father and to save mankind. The revelation-salvation mission can only be achieved through Jesus' victory over sin and death. This victory, however, is primarily for our benefit. Jesus is not a new Prometheus, taking heaven by storm. He has come from the Father and returns to the Father. His final glorification was his from before the creation of the world. While Jesus' personal glorification is asserted in John, it is always explained as the glorification of the Father or as the bestowal of eternal life upon man.

Jesus' mission consists precisely in this glorification of the Father through the bestowal of life upon man. These two aspects are distinct, but inseparable. They are two aspects of the one reality. The glorification of

the Father is the bestowal of the filial life of the Son upon men. The Father is glorified by being recognized as Father by men who, through Jesus, are His true children. The achievement of this mission is Jesus' principal concern, both in word and in deed. The centrality of the bestowal of the Son's eternal filial life through faith appears in a particularly emphatic form in the hermeneutically crucial moments of the gospel: the prologue (1,1-18), the intermezzo (12,37-50), the conclusion (20,30-31).

Faith is the human response demanded by Jesus to enable man to be capable of receiving the gift of eternal life. It consists in an open and positive response to Jesus' person, words and deeds as revealing the Father. Faithlessness means cutting oneself off from this source of life.

Faith itself, however, is a gift. Man by himself is incapable of bringing to maturation such a positive personal response, unless Jesus wins for him this capacity by means of the paschal experience: the experience of the "hour", towards which the whole life of Jesus tends from its very beginning. The core of this event is the "lifting up" of Jesus, his death on the cross transfigured by the light of the resurrection.

The paschal event has for John two essential poles: death and life, cross and resurrection, passion and glory. The second pole of each pair is seen as the effect produced by the first, which is its cause. While the first is essentially and personally related to Jesus, the second flows out from the person of Jesus to include the participation of the whole of mankind.

Given the other-orientedness of Jesus' life, it is only natural that discipleship should also be a theme of primary importance in John's gospel. We could even go so far as to say that Jesus' activity has only one purpose: to enable people to become disciples, and to enable the disciples to pass from initial discipleship to total discipleship. Once situated within this full discipleship, the disciple continues the mission entrusted to him by Jesus of dispensing eternal life.

A final point to be made here is that the mission

of Jesus and that of the disciples begins, develops, and is achieved in the context of intimate, interpersonal relationships between Jesus, the Father and the disciples. After the departure of Jesus, the Spirit is the guarantor of the endurance of these relationships. However, on man's part, freedom and responsibility are the essential preconditions for the genuineness of these relationships. Eternal life, which is the gift of salvation, consists in the infinite dynamism of these interpersonal relationships.

(b) Peculiarities of John's Style.

We find in John a fine taste for paradox, which indicates a deep appreciation for a mystery that is beyond what can be conceptualized and expressed in human language.

John's style reflects the ambivalent semantic import of many words, where the real and the symbolical meaning coexist. "Lifting up" is a good example of this.

Another characteristic of John's style is the real-symbolic double value he gives to events. The historicity of these events is not put in doubt (as is shown by his constant stress on the theme of witness in connection with particular and concrete events), however, at the same time he exploits their symbolical potential. Thus an event of apparently slight import can, in John, become the symbol of the infinite mystery of God.

Finally, John's is a strongly paratactic style which gives a first impression of discontinuity at the superficial level of grammar and syntax, but achieves continuity at the deeper level of theme, concern, etc.

II. *The Parable Of The Grain of Wheat in Its Immediate Context*

The parable of the grain of wheat is to be found in the last public address of Jesus (12,23-36), which he delivered on the occasion of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and "the coming of the Greeks" (12,12-22). For an adequate understanding of our parable it would be necessary to begin with the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and to end at verse 36. But here we shall limit our exegesis to verses 20 to 24.

John 12,20-22

The Greeks who went up to worship at the feast were certainly Gentiles, but possibly also proselytes of some form or other. John sees in them the vanguard of the Gentile nations that will come to believe in Jesus.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus". This is not the remark of a tourist, prompted by curiosity. "Seeing" often has a deeper meaning in John. In 1,34; 6,30 and 36; 11,40 it is linked with believing; in 8,56 it is something akin to a messianic gift; in 3,3 sharing in the kingdom of God is expressed as "seeing" the kingdom of God.

The disciples Philip and Andrew are mentioned in connection with the request of the Greeks. We will see that verses 25-26 are discipleship sayings. These two occurrences of the theme of discipleship are not unrelated. Access to Jesus is given through the disciples' ministry. The birth-place of Philip is recalled: Beth-saida - "house of fishing" - an appropriate birth-place for the future "fisher of men"!

The last public speech of Jesus follows immediately upon this incident with the Greeks. "And Jesus answered them:" in John this expression usually retains its full force and is not merely a transitional device, even though sometimes the connection between the event and the speech is not clear at first sight. Jesus is not avoiding the request of the Greeks, but is responding to it. Since he opens with mention of his "hour" as finally having arrived, we understand that the coming of the Greeks and possibly his entry into Jerusalem are for Jesus the signs that his "hour" has come. On the other hand, his words can be seen as specifying the true way of access for the Gentiles to Jesus as well as the true nature of Jesus' messiahship.

John 12,23

"The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." This verse introduces three themes which are basic to John's gospel: the hour, the glorification, the Son of man.

First, the hour. This is the first time that Jesus says his hour has arrived. Previously in John's gospel,



it was stated on three different occasions that his hour had not yet come (2,4; 7,30; 8,20). Here the hour is described as the time of (or for) the glorification of the Son of Man. In two of three cases where the hour is mentioned previously, there are clear allusions to his passion, as Jesus avoids attempts by the authorities to arrest him. It is evident, then, that both his passion and death are contained in the "hour". Can the same be said of his glorification? We may look for a reply in

13,1: "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father." The hour is described here as Jesus' metabasis from this world to the Father. This is an all-inclusive description. Not only the passion and death, but also the resurrection and the ascension are part of the "hour". The hour, announced as finally having arrived in verse 23, is said to have begun in 13,1, and actually continues to the end of the gospel and goes beyond it. We ourselves are still living in this hour!

Second, the glorification. The use of this concept here bears close resemblance to 7,39 and 12,16. On these three occasions it is the technical term used by John to denote the completion of the work entrusted to Jesus by the Father. It is always predicated of Jesus in the passive voice. It is also used actively with the Father as subject and Jesus as object in 8,54. The completion of Jesus' work is called "glorification" because through it the manifestation of God's mystery (glory) in the person of Jesus reaches its climax. Like the concept of the "hour", it is an all inclusive concept: it includes not only his resurrection and ascension, but also his passion and death.

Third, the Son of Man. This expression is used in

a very specific way in the gospel of John. It is used repeatedly by Jesus when referring to himself in moments of particular importance: in connection with his being "lifted up" (3,14; 8,28); in his "ascending to", and "descending from", heaven (3,13, 6,62); in the bread of life discourse (6,27; 6,53); in the profession of faith requested of the man born blind (9,35); and in the judgment (5-27). Jesus throughout John's gospel uses "Son of Man" to emphasize his humanity - a man like us in all truth, and it is precisely through his humanity that he exercises Judgment, gives the bread of life, and accomplishes his work of revealing the Father.

The concentration of these three basic themes in verse 23 explains, perhaps, why our parable in verse 24, is preceded by the "authority formula" "Truly, truly, I say to you". This solemn introduction of verse 24 detaches it somewhat from verse 23. It is clear, however, that the parable in verse 24 functions as a complement of verse 23. A summary check of the other occurrences of the formula shows that it usually introduces a statement which refers to what precedes. Hence, we may say that the parable of the grain of wheat is applied first and foremost to the Son of man, his glorification, and his hour.

John 12,24

"Truly, truly, I say to you," this authority formula always introduces a solemn statement, a saying of particular importance, a truth of high revelational value.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit." The agricultural image, is already quite familiar to us from Mark's parable of the seed that grows of itself (Mark 4,26-29), the Synoptic parable of the mustard seed (Matt 13,31-32; Mark 4,30-32; Luke 13,18-19), and Paul's argument for the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15,36-39). Notwithstanding this wide usage, the semantic import of the image here is unique.

The conceptual content of the image (its connotation as distinguished from its denotation) is clear: death is a necessary precondition for fruitfulness. The uniqueness

of this semantic import is given by the combination of the two themes: the necessity of the death and the abundance of the fruit. Paul uses the image of the grain sown into the earth only to assert the former, the Synoptics to assert the latter. John joins the two in an indissoluble way. Perhaps the best way to express the connotation of this parable in John would be to use the two themes as subject and predicate of the same sentence respectively. Thus, the death of the grain of wheat is necessary because it is part of the fruit-bearing process. We obtain here a precious insight into the kind of necessity that characterizes Jesus' death: it is a necessity deriving from the fruit-bearing capacity of this death. Death is the first stage in the fruit-bearing process. It is necessary because only through it can fruit come.

So much for the connotation of our parable. Which, then, is the referential meaning (or denotation) of John 12,24? In other words, who is the "grain of wheat" that does not want to remain alone? What is the "much fruit"? To what life situation is the parable's pointe referring? We have seen the close connection of verse 24 to verse 23, and how both these verses are linked to the preceding event. This connection enables us to answer the above three questions: Jesus makes use of this parable to highlight the meaning of his glorification, that is, his death and resurrection. He compares his death to the death of the grain of wheat, a fruit-producing death. The grain of wheat itself is the Son of Man. The "much fruit" are the Gentiles, who, after Jesus' death and because of Jesus' death, will "see" Jesus in faith. They are the "much fruit" of the death of the Son of Man. The clause "it remains alone" parallels "it bears much fruit" and is a clear indication that this is the referential meaning of the "much fruit". In thus pinpointing the referents of the "grain of wheat" and of the "much fruit", we have not turned Jesus' parable into an allegory; rather, we have simply brought the parable to bear on the life situation which it is meant to illumine.

Let us pause now for a moment to consider the daring and novel message of this parable. Jesus and John, by means of placing this parable in the context of Jesus' last public address, affirm an equivalence between the vitally fecund "death" of the grain of wheat and the tragic death of the Son of Man. What they say is this: the death of the Son

of Man is unique in man's history because it is in reality a generative process gifted with prolific and vital fecundity. It is a death of a man that has the same function as the "death" of a grain of wheat does in the sprouting of new ears of corn.

Apart from the death of Christ, no human death can claim such a distinction. If the process of vegetative reproduction involves a phenomenon of "death" or self-consumption, it is equally true that the process of animal death and human death do not of themselves include any generative dynamism. They have nothing to do with generation.

On the natural level, the only comparison that can be made between a plant and a human being is the comparison between their respective processes of reproduction. If we do make this comparison, we shall see that these two generative processes are profoundly alike, united by the universal law of life transmission: omnis vita ex ovo, omnis cellula ex cellula. Of course, those two processes have also some remarkable differences. One of these is that the generative process of the seed usually involves the loss of the individual material grain, which is transformed into a plurality of new individuals. It is this loss, together with the evident self-consumption of most of its substance, that we call the "death" of the grain of wheat. While there is a loss involved in animal and human reproduction, this loss does not reach the depth of the individual self, and this is clearly because animal and human life enjoy a much higher degree of organization than vegetative life. Moreover, in the case of man we have to reckon with the presence of a spiritual principle of personality which is not totally tied down by material conditioning.

If we turn now to the phenomenon of animal and human death, we see that it has nothing to do with generation. It is much closer to (though not identical with) the process of decay and corruption. Hence the astounding novelty of the message of our parable. By means of it Jesus equates the phenomenon of his own death to a phenomenon of generation (and this is primary) which happens to involve also a phenomenon of the loss of individuality, and ending in a generative dynamism, which allows us to call properly "death" this very phenomenon of generation. (2)

By comparing himself to the grain of wheat, Jesus is saying: My death, unlike any other human death, is not a process of disintegration and corruption; on the contrary, it is a process of generation and reproduction. Because of this unique characteristic of my death (also your death, O mortal man) death is liberated from its slavish bond to corruption and is ennobled to become, like my death, generative of new life.

What is the basis for the wonderful uniqueness of the death of the Son of Man? For John there is only one answer: the Son of Man is not merely a son of man. He is the Son of God, with God from the beginning. "In him was life (1,4)." No wonder, then, that his death is not a process of degeneration, but of generation!



We must stop here, even though the rest of this section up to verse 36 would throw further light on the meaning of the parable of the grain of wheat. Let us only read verses 31 to 33, which open like verse 23 with the theme of the hour: " 'Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' He said this to show by what death he was to die."

III. The historico-salvific exegesis of John 12,24

Throughout the Christian ages, there has been almost a unanimous consensus in interpreting the parable of the grain of wheat within a historico-salvific perspective. Here I shall limit known Christian exegesis of this parable by Origen (185-254) and myself to the earliest one of the most recent by R. Bultmann (1884-1976).

In his Contra Celsum Origen says:

See the novel development that has been taking place since the passion of Jesus: I mean... the sudden birth of the race of the Christians,

which seems to have been begotten all at once (cf. Isa. 66,8). Moreover, it is also a novel fact that peoples that were strangers to the covenants of God and excluded from the promises (cf. Eph. 2,12) and far from the truth, should accept it as if by a divine miracle. All this was not the work of a magician, but of God, who has sent his Logos in Jesus to bring us his message ... His passion, far from undermining the message of God, has on the contrary led to its acknowledgment ... Actually, this is what Jesus himself taught: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; if it dies, it bears much fruit". Having died, therefore, the grain of wheat, Jesus, has borne much fruit, and the Father forever takes providential care of the fruits that have been, are, and will be begotten by the death of the grain of wheat. (3)

In his The Gospel of John: A Commentary, Bultmann writes:

... the 'glorification' of Jesus is not a mythical event that concerns him alone, but an event of salvation history: to his 'glory' belongs the gathering of his community. To this extent verse 24 can be understood as an indirect answer to the request of the 'Greeks': through his passion Jesus will become accessible for them as the exalted Lord. (4)

Not much reflection is needed to notice a deep consonance between these two exegeses and our own reading of the parable of the grain of wheat. I would like now to explore briefly and classify the great variety of expressions of this basically historico-salvific exegesis, which have appeared in the course of history down to the present day.

From the very beginning, the historico-salvific interpretation of John 12,24 has taken four different forms:

1) In close adherence to the immediate context of the coming of the Greeks, Jesus' death is seen as bearing fruit in the faith of the nations, with the consequent

disappearance of idolatry.

2) The death of Jesus is seen as giving birth to the multitudes of the faithful, to the Church.

3) The exegetical expression preferred by the majority of exegetes in all ages is that of presenting the death of Jesus as the source of divine or eternal life, of the resurrection of all men, and of redemption and salvation for all.

4) In close adherence this time not to the immediate context but to the more general Johannine context, the death of Jesus is seen as decisive for the success of the work of revelation and, therefore, of the kerygma, in the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of the world. In the modern age there has been a slight change in the expression of this: Jesus' death is seen as fructifying in the success of Jesus' work and in the success of the missionary work of evangelization.

There is also a fifth kind of expression which dates only from the Middle Ages: the fruit of Jesus' death is seen in its cosmic dimension, as the birth of a new world, a new creation.

All five expressions, for all their individuality, bear witness to a common historico-salvific understanding of our parable. Christology, Ecclesiology, and Soteriology could be pinned down, I believe, as the three basic dimensions of a truly historico-salvific exegesis. These three basic dimensions may be shown to be present in each of these forms of expression, even if from a different perspective. In fact, starting precisely from these dimensions it is possible to re-express all five forms of interpretation, without doing violence to any one of them:

1. Christ is the light of the nations, who draws all men to faith by his death. The Church is the community of believers in Christ. Salvation is to believe in Christ and through him in God.

2. Christ is the head and the generator of his body by his death. The Church is the body generated by Christ. Salvation is the gift of being a member of this body.

3. Christ is the saviour, the redeemer, the life-giver by his death. The Church is the community of the saved, of the redeemed, of those who enjoy the gift of the new life of communion with God. Salvation is the gift of

freedom and life, spiritual and eternal.

4. Christ is the revealer of the true nature of God by his death. The Church is the community of those who really know God in Christ. Salvation is the knowledge of the true God through the recognition of Christ as the Son of the Father and, together with the Father, as the giver of the Spirit.

5. Christ is the author of the new creation by his death. The Church is the beginning and the unfolding of this new creation. Salvation means to become a new creation.

A common structure underlies these five forms of exegesis: Christ causes (Christology) a transcendent effect (Soteriology) in the world of men (Ecclesiology).

To return now to the five-fold colouring of this basic unanimity, I would like to describe better the originality of each.

1. This is the closest to the original Johannine context. Jesus is seen as commenting on the coming of the Greeks. The Greeks, i.e. the Gentiles, and their faith are the fruit borne by the death of Jesus. The stress here seems to lie on the historical, concrete unfolding of the Christ-event, hence we may call it a Christological stress. The "much fruit" can be represented by the two words "Gentiles-faith".

2. This, the majority expression, is a deepening of 1. It shows, in fact, the profound change and the new reality effected by faith: divine life, new life, the freedom of the children of God. At this level, this expression is in harmony with the deep intentionality of the gospel of John, where the theme of life is primary. Having gone further in our understanding of the meaning of "much fruit", it is possible to expand the beneficiary of the fruit to include humanity as such. The stress here seems to be on the soteriological significance of the saying. The "much fruit" can be represented by the two words "mankind-life".

3. This expression is at the same deep level as 3, but it has the advantage of presenting the same reality in terms of fruitfulness or fecundity or generation, that is, making use of the semantic category proper to John 12,24. The theme of generation or re-generation is a typically Johannine theme. Hence, this expression, too, fits very well within the more general Johannine context. The stress

is evidently on Ecclesiology, and the "much fruit" is well represented by the two words "Church-fecundity".

4. This is derived from 1, but takes into account more of the larger context of the whole gospel of John. In this larger context it hits upon perhaps the most basic categories of all, i.e. revelation and mission. In comparison with 3, this expression appears to have the advantage of being more dynamic, of looking at the fruit as growing and multiplying throughout history. Hence, we may call its stress historical or also missiological. And the two representative words can be "history-mission". Human history is seen as the interlocutor of Christian mission, whose success has been assured by Christ's death on the cross.

5. This expression uses the widest possible categories, such as existence, world, and creation. It may be said to include all the preceding ones, putting stress on the eschatological dimension. This stress, however, is influenced decisively by the structurally correspondent verse 32. This expression can be said to fit the larger context of the whole gospel of John, if we attribute to the evangelist an interest in "creation", as many exegetes do. The salvific causality envisaged by this expression is the most radical: creation. Hence, to represent it, I have chosen the two words "world-creation".

It is a two thousand year old tradition that has given us these parameters whereby we can judge the adequacy of an exegesis of John. Tested by these parameters, the five contemporary and traditional expressions described above all prove to be basically solid historico-salvific exegeses of John 12,24.

Directly contrary to this exegesis would be an interpretation that envisages only the personal glorification of Jesus as the fruit meant by our parable. An incomplete exegesis would be that which stresses only the negative aspect of the necessity of death. A deficient exegesis, finally, would be that which empties nominalistically the concepts of faith, the success of the work and of the kerygma, of their ontological reality.

It is a pleasant discovery to find that the historico-salvific exegesis in all its fullness is also present in the pronouncements of our contemporary Christian shepherds,

and, in particular, in connection with the Church in China.

Ignatius Gong, Bishop of Shanghai, without mentioning our parable, shows that he is imbued with its message when he writes: "In drawing first of all the Sign of the Cross, the Christian reminds himself that he has been redeemed by the Cross of Jesus. He recalls that the Cross is for us the source of all grace and of all glory, the touching testimony of Christ's love, the banner of Christ the King. The Christian becomes aware that the worst sufferings can be the prelude to a glorious resurrection". (5)

Pope John Paul II, on his part, has made frequent references to the parable of the grain of wheat in his sermons and addresses. Before mentioning those connected with the Church in China, may I present some excerpts from the homily the Pope made during the Mass which concluded the International Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi on August 18th, 1985.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (Jn 12,24). These words were spoken by the Lord Jesus as he thought of his own death. He himself first of all is that "grain of wheat" which "falls on the ground and dies". The Son of God, of the same substance as the Father, God from God and Light from Light, was made man. He entered into the life of ordinary men and women as the son of the Virgin Mary of Nazareth. And finally he accepted death on the Cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world. Precisely in this way the grain of wheat dies and yields a rich harvest. It is the harvest of the redemption of the world, the harvest of the salvation of souls, the power of truth and love as the beginning of eternal life in God.

"In this way the parable of the grain of wheat helps us to understand the very mystery of Christ. At the same time ... Christ's parable about the grain of wheat helps us to understand the mystery of the Eucharist ... The mystery of Christ remains among us through the Sacrament of the Eucharist ... The Eucharist constituted ... the centre of the life of the Christian community, the centre of the life of the Church.

"Thus it was at the beginning in Jerusalem. Thus it has been everywhere, wherever faith in the Gospel together with the teaching of the Apostles has been introduced. From generation to generation it has been so among different peoples and nations. Thus it has also been on the African continent since the Gospel first reached these lands through the missionaries, and since it produced its first fruit in a community assembled to celebrate the Eucharist.



"Today this community united in Christ extends over almost the entire continent. This community of seventy million people is a great sign of the fruitfulness of the Eucharist; the power of Christ's Gospel has been revealed in Africa. From the rising of the sun to its settings, the name of the Lord is praised on African soil. Sons and daughters of Africa faithfully transmit the teachings of the Apostles, and the Eucharist is continuously offered for the glory of God and the well-being of every human being on this continent. The authentic living of Religious Life and the existence of millions of Christian families are proof that the grain of wheat has yielded a rich harvest to the glory of the Blood of Jesus and to the honour of all Africa.

"May Christ in the Eucharist, as "the grain of wheat" fallen on the soil of Africa, bring forth in his body the Church a rich harvest for eternal life! Amen" (6)

At the beginning of this article, we have seen that Africa is rising together with Asia on the horizon of the Church's life. What the Pope said to the African Church has a special relevance also for the Church in Asia.

The Pope has pointed out the great significance of the parable of the grain of wheat also when speaking directly about the Church in China.

On October 25th, 1982, in the address at the concluding

session of the International Ricci Studies Congress on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the arrival of Matteo Ricci in China, the Pope said: "The tomb of Matteo Ricci in Peking brings to mind the grain of wheat hidden in the heart of the earth in order to bear abundant fruit" (7)

On February 28th, 1984, John Paul, speaking to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Taiwan and to the Chinese community in Rome, said: "Since the long past epoch of the Tang Dynasty between 617 and 917 which is habitually taken as the time when the evangelization of the Chinese mainland began, right up till 1984, the word of Christ, his message and his church have lost nothing of their creative power, their light and their newness, for Jesus Christ is with us 'to the close of the age' (Mt 28:20) and his reconciling word has taken the form of a cross that links the most widely differing people. We always have to learn their language, their ways of speaking and their habits, in order to tell them about the plan of God the Father about whom Jesus, by his sacrifice, told us and showed us his love.

"It is to you Catholics of Taiwan and the diaspora that is entrusted this wonderful task of being a bridge-Church for your mainland compatriots. There other Christian brothers and sisters take up the relay, for the moment hidden like seed in the earth. But all these efforts, all these sacrifices cannot remain without fruit: a day will come when Jesus can be proclaimed, passed on, and celebrated in a more visible way through the culture, expectations and aspirations of the whole Chinese nation whom the Church deeply respects and loves". (8)

NOTES

- (1) Cf. K. Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II". Theological Studies 40 (1979) 716-27, cited by D. Senior and C. Stuhlmüller, The Biblical Foundation of Missions, London (1983) 1.
- (2) If there is any biological accuracy in these two or three paragraphs, it is due to my dear friend Rev. Mario Ferrari, Principal of the Liceo Classico and Liceo Scientifico of the Collegio Arch-Vescovile in Trent (Italy).

- (3) Origene, Contre Celse, Tome IV, Livre VIII, 43. Ed. M. Borret, SC 150, Paris 1969. My translation.
- (4) R. Bultmann, The Gospel of John: A Commentary (trans. by G.R. Beasley-Murray, ed. R.W.N. Hoare and J.K. Riches) Oxford 1971, p. 424. I have translated into English three Greek terms.
- (5) From the Pastoral Letter of Bishop Gong Pinmei to the diocese of Shanghai on April 22nd, 1951, published in French in China Missionary Bulletin 3 (4) (1951) p.658. My translation.
- (6) L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English 18 (1985) 34, pp. 1-2 passim.
- (7) International Fides Service, Nov 6, 1982. No. 3178-NE 461, reproduced in E. Wurth (ed.) Papal Documents Related to the New China, New York - Hong Kong (1985) p. 166.
- (8) L'Osservatore Romano, English edition, March 12, 1984, p. 10, reproduced in E. Wurth (ed.), *ibidem* pp. 178-179.

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