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"Can Violence Cast out Violence? - Christian Sacrifice According to St. Gregory the Great."

Abstract:

Gregory the Great wrote in a world that he identified as beset by a triple violence stemming from the fall of Adam and Eve: the natural world had become the enemy of humankind, human beings felt themselves tossed from within by the riot of the passions, and they were assaulted from without by the illusions of the devil. Violence begets violence; and human beings, addicted to the material world, have propagated this disorder by their further hatred for one another and for God.

Gregory would put such violence to rest by calling Christians back to the authentic sacrifice abandoned by Adam -- the self-offering of love upon the altar of the heart. The sacrifice of the contrite heart proceeds from fear of judgment to love of God, from mortification of the flesh to detachment from desire, and from restraint of vengeance to the compassionate forgiveness of one's neighbor. By this path, the Christian imitates the martyr, who is the prototypical imitator of Christ, by pursuing a desire for God through a renunciation of the fallen "carnal" self.

In a contingent and provisional manner, violence can cast out violence. Christian sacrifice, rooted in love, puts sinful violence to rest as the athletic struggle of the martyr is replayed in that of the ascetic; this is war indeed -- waged with the weapons of obedience in service of the victory of love. Yet the necessarily-violent and penitential beginning of this sacrifice arises not from the essence of sacrifice but from the conditions of the fallen will. Gregory's Christian sacrifice is not first of all a response to sin but a response to God; this sacrifice heals every hurt and broken link between the world, the human community, the body, the soul, and God so that when violence ceases at the end of time, sacrifice will continue in the eternal holocaust of love.

For Gregory, the appearance of violence in the fallen world is ambiguous; and what distinguishes the murderous rapine of the carnal soul from the sacrificial fortitude of the saint is the love of God which alone can bring the Christian from the distorted dimness of the fallen world to the bright clarity of the heavenly city.