The Corruption of the Resurrection of the Flesh*

by Javier Sicilia

The Covid-19 emergency negated what the Gospel brought to the world which was the word that God, by incarnating himself, made the human being sacred in his carnality: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did to one of the least of my brethren, you did to me."[1] For the first time in two thousand years of Christianity, the flesh where God dwells, our *sarx*[2] – that by which we perceive ourselves and the world and we mistake for the body, which is only a form of the flesh[3] – was par-

* Neto Leão and Samar Farage did the hard work to translate this text. I take responsibility for what mistakes remain (Ed).

1 Mt. 25; 40.

2 Unfortunately, in Spanish there is only one term to talk about flesh (*carne*). Its excessive relationship with dead meat destined for food makes us lose sight of the meaning that *sarx* has in Greek, that which constitutes every living being, contrary to *trófimo*, the meat that nourishes; which in French is equivalent to *chair*, different from *viande* and in English to *flesh*, different from *meat*.

3 Flesh, understood as *sarx*, is not, as we usually think, the body – a pure body, like a stone, Heidegger says, no matter how close it is to something, it will never know it is. The body in every living being is the form of flesh. Through the body, the flesh not only expresses itself, it also experiences pure bodies or the flesh of other bodies. What defines it is not, therefore, the body, but the perception, the sensation. Thanks, moreover, to the tongue and to the word that are in the flesh, which are also flesh, the human being understands and deepens what he experiences; we are flesh that knows what knows. For this reason, as flesh, we do not apprehend ourselves as bodies, that is, we do not look at or listen to ourselves as we do with the bodies in which other flesh or pure bodies manifest themselves before us. We perceive ourselves and, at the same time that we do so, we also perceive what those bodies that are outside of us provoke in our flesh – cold, heat, fear, pain, joy, love, desire, tenderness, etc. Hence, for example, the strangeness that looking at ourselves in a mirror, in a photograph or in a video, or listening to our recorded voice on a recorder generally causes us. What we see and hear about ourselves in these artifacts – our flesh expressed in its corporeality – does not correspond to the perception we have of ourselves. We are alive, we feel alive through and in our flesh. The flesh is thus the intangible in the tangible, the invisible in the visible of the body; it is what fundamentally defines all living beings

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adoxically regarded as an evil in the most catholic or universal sense of the term.

In ancient times, evil was focused on the diseased flesh of the leper or on beings that came from outside — the *xenoi* (foreigners in ancient Greece) or the *barbaroi* (barbarians in imperial Rome) — or, in societies in a state of crisis due to an epidemic or widespread violence on those alien to the "normality" of the social or political body. As René Girard's entire work shows, these beings contaminated everything and had to be separated, distanced, and even killed, to heal the social body. However, with the appearance of Covid-19, everyone's flesh —redeemed by the Gospel — became, almost overnight, the receptacle and transmitter of evil. Medical discourse, which holds preeminence in the social imaginary to combat the transmissibility of the virus, established this perception and promoted a way of relating that dispensed with carnal contact as much as possible. Transformed into a source of contagion, our relationships with others began to be mediated by distance. To accentuate the contaminating nature of physical contact, medical discourse specified this physical distance as one and a half meters and further categorized as "healthy" – compulsive hand washing and the use of technical devices — antibacterial gel, face masks, plastic masks, goggles, gloves. It was a matter of isolating ourselves, of escaping the air given off not only by the flesh of the other but also by the world that the flesh inhabits and in which it flourishes. Everything outside the home was contaminated and cursed by the invisible presence of a virus that represented evil.

as pure life, as *zoe*, and not as *bios* – life organized in a culture. Everything that lives, that is, everything that has life, is first of all *sarx*. See in relation to flesh the splendid phenomenological study by Michel Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2015.

Given this perception it is not strange that the computer, the cell phone, and related digital devices became central to the implementation of the logic of isolation. Through the ascepsis of those luminous screens, we could keep close from afar; we could pretend that we continued to see, hear, and relate to others as we once did. Our encounters were forcibly displayed in public on a screen to avoid the personal presence of the other, who was now transformed into an existential threat. We were thereby abandoned to devices which medical discourse deemed absolutely essential to preserve us from evil. Erased in their carnality by Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram..., those we love or work with appear devoid of any flesh. Before our sanitized eyes and ears, they are transformed into a corpus of electrical signals: a weird ectoplasm, a trace of voice, or of writing, an unthinkable and strange resurrection on a lit screen — something that was unimaginable less than a hundred years ago when Turing dreamed the machine that has made it possible.

This extreme state of exception has been relaxed. But our return to what we had once known is not and will not be the same. Something profound and fundamental has settled into our perceptions and in our relationships with others, something that was already in the world that we inhabited —the one dominated by systemic processes, global supply chains, processed foods, technological prostheses, and violence of all kinds. The return to what the Mexican government described as the "new normality", defines it well. We have returned to the same thing which, at the same time, is also new. Our relationships are and will be increasingly disembodied, mediated by technological prostheses that will distance us ever more from the carnal presence of the other. This is obvious in the glare of lights, the face masks, the increasing demand for more cell phones, computers, programs, and technical accessories to mediate all kinds of relationships, whether teaching,

commercial, friendly or even amorous. "Technology – wrote Jean Robert commenting on Illich – engenders 'non-things' made of shadows of matter [and flesh] that threaten to engulf all the residues of reality in a boundless virtuality." [4]

We are witnessing the end of an era that began more than two thousand years ago with the event of the incarnation — one that we celebrate every year with the name of Christmas (Nativity) and, increasingly watered down, marks the Western calendar — and the beginning of another era. In the absence of a name because the concepts that could grasp it do not yet exist, this era may be called post-carnal. It is impossible to form an idea of it. We live in ignorance and what we have experienced under the perceptions and regulations dictated by Covid-19 are just a glimpse of its unprecedented presence. Yet, as happens when an era has not yet been born and the previous one has not completely died, the coming of the new one will be punctuated by more chaos, more fractures and violence, and as yet unknown exclusions and segregations, the temper of which can be felt in some of the dystopias that cinematography – a disembodied art – more than literature has produced in recent decades.

Ivan Illich, who summed up his thesis on evil with a phrase from Saint Jerome, *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* ("the corruption of the best is the worst"), showed that with the emergence of the Gospel a new, totally unknown type of evil also appeared. It introduced a new way of loving that is very well expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For the first time, the human being was able to love another beyond the restrictions imposed by belonging to a certain *ethnos*[5] which, at

4 See, "Sistemas… en la cabeza," in *La edad de los sistemas en el pensamiento del Ilich tardío,* Ítaca, México, 2022.

5 See in this regard, "*Una relectura del Evangelio*", included in *La edad*…cited above, and above all, Ivan Illich & Davida Cayley, "L'Evangile", in *La Corruption du Meilleur Engendre le Pire*", ACTES SUD, France, 2007 (*The Rivers of North of the Future, The Testament of Ivan Illich,* House of Anansi Press, Inc., Canada, 2005). The translations are

the same time, also introduced something contrary to its gratuitousness — the temptation to preserve it through its institutionalization.[6] What was experienced as a novelty in the first Christian community – my neighbor is not the one I should love, but the one I want to love, even if he is, as the parable shows, my enemy[7] – became something else when the Empire gave it imperial rank and, nascent Christendom, touched by Roman law, became a power. From that moment on, the parable which responded to the very precise question of "Who is my neighbor?", was read as the answer to another question, which though not in the parable was inferred from it; "How should I behave with my neighbor?" With this change, the neighbor ceased to be understood as an other with whom I establish a free, personal relationship that is foreign to any utilitarian criteria, and became, first, everyone who suffers and to whom we must attend; and then, everyone who must be educated in the

mine. See also, Javier Sicilia, Preface to t. II of *Obras reunidas* de Iván Illich, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 2008 and Javier Sicilia, "Memoria y el rostro", in *Conspiratio 06*, July-August, 2006.

6 Reading the incarnation of God from the parable of the Good Samaritan, it would be necessary to say with Illich and against the classical theology of the Church, that the incarnation was not something owed, something necessary, a divine plan for our salvation. On the contrary, it was, like the act of the Good Samaritan, a gesture of freedom, a free and loving act, a response, without restrictions or obligations or debts, to the call of someone in need. See *ibid*. and "*Una relectura del Evangelio*".

7 This was expressed in the fact that Christian families always had a candle stub, a little bread and a bed in case Jesus knocked on their door in the form of a stranger; a practice that is still preserved in some monasteries. It was also expressed symbolically in the first liturgies in which the mystery (*mysterium* originally meant representation) of the love brought by Christ for the benefit of all was represented. In them, recalls Ivan Illich, there were two fundamental moments that the modern liturgy of the Mass preserves only amputated of its most somatic expressions: the *conspiratio* (the greeting of peace) and the *comestio* (the Eucharistic communion). The *conspiratio* (breathe with, union of breaths), which takes its meaning from the Latin *spiritu* (spirit, whiff, breath, air), the supreme form of interiority, was a kiss on the mouth, an exchange of breaths, a sharing of vital principle, which in the Hebrew tradition is also part of the vitality of God who through his breath, his *ruaj* – a carnal act – breathes life, as when he created Adam. With that kiss on the mouth, the participants of the *agape* shared his spirit. Thus, they designated their union in the breath, in the *ruaj* of God, wherein the community took shape. It was a co-breath, a conspiracy: the creation of a common atmosphere.

faith of the Church for their own good, for their own salvation. Love thereby also lost its free and gratuitous character; it became a duty, a rule whose violation is criminalized.

This way of understanding *agape* began to corrupt the incarnation by not only institutionalizing love — subjecting it to stringent administration, but also by using power to guarantee its fulfillment, which was paid for by the community. Things that were previously inconceivable now arose in the sphere of the Greek, Roman, and even the Jewish world: houses for foreigners, widows, and orphans that morphed into hospitals, which, once the State stripped the Church of that power, became the entire network of services that we know well in the modern world. Institutions for health, for education, for transportation, for the care of the elderly, for welfare, for services of all kinds were born from the attempt to establish and extend Christian love to the whole world. These institutions have become essential to satisfy the needs that they impute to us all.

It is difficult to grasp the character of disincarnation and evil that is institutionalized care. We are so imbued with understanding love as an institutional duty and our neighbor as an abstract and impersonal reality, that nothing is more irritating and repulsive for us than knowing that there are neglected people, people who suffer and yet, are deprived of services. When the State forgets or is incapable of providing what we today call basic services – education, health, transport –to the most vulnerable, then humanitarian associations and political movements arise. These seek to compel the State to satisfy needs that are impossible to satisfy —there will never be enough education, health, transportation, communication, or commodities. They are also blind to the way that such meliorating institutions generate forms of exclusion, misery, and violence – evil – which were unknown in pre-Christian times. What was born from the gratuitousness of love became an

institutional obligation with increasingly utilitarian purposes that, while they deprive us of our autonomy, also separate us from the charity expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Cut off from the heaven that the clerical institution promised us, the service society that emerged from its bowels now promises us a heaven stripped of the weight, the density, of the flesh of our neighbor and of his call. Mediated from our birth to our death by institutions endowed with increasingly sophisticated systemic devices – ranging from obstetric care to funeral parlors and by the many thousands of networks and industrial processes that interconnect them – our flesh has been giving way to impersonal, anesthetized, assisted living. Not only, says Illich, did this institutionalization of the flesh excise the neighbor as a subject of freedom as implied in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it also created the so-called need for services and commodities that can never be enough for everyone.

To better explain this disincarnation, Illich uses the term eversion: turning something inside out, like a seamstress does with the sleeve of a dress or a glove. Throughout his work, Illich, historically explained from many angles – school, medicine, transportation, optics, somatics, the alphabet, water, gender… – the subtle processes of that eversion that no one had seen before until him and few others have yet fully understood, which only proves the seductive strength of the eversion that we inhabit.

Following his method, I want to talk about another element of this eversion that Illich outlined in *Guarding the eye in the age of show*[8] and in a letter written to his friend Hellmut Becker, then director of the Max-Planck Institute in Berlin, published as *The loss of world and flesh*. I want to focus on the eversion or corruption of the resurrected flesh that I believe I discover in the technological devices and the demonization of

8 This essay has not yet been published in Spanish.

flesh instituted by the emergence of Covid-19.

The Gospel and the idea of the incarnation brought with it not only the new idea of a love that allowed me to love in the flesh, another who does not belong to my *ethnos* but to God himself. It also brought the idea of the resurrection of the flesh: that our flesh, like that of Jesus in which God became incarnate, will rise again after death. The event, like that of the incarnation, was just as surprising and bewildering. Nothing could have predicted that the tortured and destroyed flesh that lay in the bowels of a cave could rise again. That idea was as absurd as the idea of the incarnation of God. However, it is part of the Gospel. It is the corollary of the gratuity of love. "If Christ has not risen", says Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, "our faith is vain". I say that it is the corollary of that gratuitousness because the idea of the resurrection, like that of the incarnation, is a gift as gratuitous as it is unexpected. The resurrection is the response to the call of the flesh that death interrupted and that is restored by the same love which made creation and incarnation possible. Before the Gospel was read from a utilitarian perspective and the resurrection was thought necessary and planned from the beginning of time, it was a gift of the flesh, mine and that of the other, of Jesus and our neighbor, as the privileged place of love, of encounter, and of celebration of the encounter.

The very ambiguity of Jesus' risen flesh, half himself, half other,[9] emphasizes this. It is, at the same time, his own and that of our neighbor who, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, challenges us beyond any obligation, any norm in-

9 Mary Magdalene, who mistakes him for the gardener in the tomb garden, recognizes him by the way he says his name; the pilgrims from Emmaus, who have walked with him there, because of the way he breaks the bread; the disciple when he shows his wounds, and John, on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, by an interior revelation – "It is the Lord!" – which he communicates to Peter and the disciples who fish together and do not recognize him in the man who asks them to cast the nets to the right side of the boat.

cluding death itself. It is the act that seals the Gospel: where two or three are gathered in his name (Mt. 18: 20); everyone who loves his neighbor loves him in his flesh (Mt. 10: 40-42; 18: 5 and 25: 35-45; Jn. 15:13) or, to return to the dialogue with the Levite who initiated the parable — if we really love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves, we will have eternal life. Not life in the abstract, but in the flesh, which is the only way the human being and all living things live and experience their relationship with themselves, with others, and with the world they inhabit.

The original community seems to have understood the resurrection that way. Despite the strangeness of the flesh of the risen Jesus, it did not question its reality. Despite the imprecision of his features, what mattered was that his resurrected flesh was flesh again: he felt as when he was alive, he ate, he spoke, showed his wounds. Instead of racking their brains seeking to understand the type of flesh it was, the community celebrated the carnal presence of the resurrection in the love brought about by the incarnation, that is, in the flesh of their neighbor. The early liturgies, which I describe in note 6, show this. This is also shown by the way of life described in the *Acts of the Apostles* (4: 32-36) and the exhortation that Paul makes to the Colossians. In his letter, he calls them to live Christ in the flesh of their neighbor in which, due to this new love brought by the Gospel, "there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all."

For witnesses of the resurrection who were recently created in the love of Christ and were awaiting his imminent return that would establish in the world what they already lived under that new love, the resurrection was at the very center of their carnal experience. It was a longing that still awaited its fullness in the resurrection of what was already living in the community, not in a transformation of the flesh,

but in a new experience of living it in accord with the depth of the revealed event: the participation in the being of Jesus that makes them, like him, beings for others.

However, once this horizon was revealed, the temptation arose to know the kind of flesh that was the risen body of Jesus, and for the same reason, the kind of flesh that awaited us in the resurrection, what we had to do to acquire it, to be deserving of it, and how to escape from the corruptibility of the flesh. It seems to me, the one who introduced this problem is Paul himself.

In the best tradition of primitive Christianity, Paul saw the obstacle to clothe himself with the love brought by the Gospel, that is, to become like Christ, in the desires of the ego. Nevertheless, it was also Paul who introduced, on the one hand, in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans, the idea of the flesh as a reality opposed to the spirit – "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other." On the other hand, – in the first letter to the Corinthians – he also introduced the idea that in the resurrection, the flesh ceases to be flesh, to become a glorious body, incorruptible, and immortal unlike the flesh – "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither does corruption inherit incorruption."

In Paul, the flesh is not properly the origin of evil, but like the good, its receptacle. His point of reference is the emptying of himself to become like Christ and to go out to meet his neighbor: "I no longer live – he says in the letter to the Galatians – but Christ lives in me". Few, have left more fascinating pages on *kenosis* (the emptying of God as power, as well as of the I, which is the form of power in the human being) and *agape* (love expressed in the Gospel) than has Paul. However, by contrasting the flesh with the spirit and referring to the flesh of the resurrection as a body, he introduced an ambiguity that, in time, made the flesh the cause of evil. Vague in

Paul and satanized over time, it was no longer the flesh but the spirit that became the object of the resurrection. The spirit is later associated with the soul understood as "the breath of life" (subsequently related to the intellect: the ability to do good), as an immaterial principle that animates life and is related to the *ruaj* (breath) of God, which in *Genesis* fluttered over the abyss before being articulated in words and gave life to the muddy body of Adam. That immaterial principle became the guide to our actions and, by subduing the flesh, allows us to resurrect in an unpolluted body not tied to the desires of the flesh and its corruptibility. This is a glorious body, says Paul, which means one that possesses greatness, splendor, and happiness. Morality thereby gradually replaced the unpredictable and gratuitous freedom of *agape*, to become the foundation of love.

Four centuries later, when the early Church became part of the empire with the Edict of Milan causing the corruption of the Gospel to which Illich refers, and the *parousia* – the return of Jesus — which primitive Christianity believed to be imminent was deferred in time, Augustine deepened the ambiguity introduced by Paul. According to him, the fall of Adam and Eve in paradise was a metaphysical and ontological cataclysm that made the incarnation necessary. (Augustine had already corroborated the idea of the incarnation as necessary, predetermined, and inevitable rather than as an unexpected and gratuitous act). By eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve broke the bond of love with God. Since then, the human soul (Augustine already uses this Greek category in an absolute way to refer to the immortal part of being) has been chained to the desires of the flesh for things and, consequently, to its corruptibility and death. Augustine defines the disobedience of Adam and Eve as *concupiscenctia carnis* ("lust of the flesh"). Its clearest expression for him is in

sexuality and eros – the sublimation of sex by the powers of the imagination – Augustine's quintessential example of the fallen soul's desire for things. Removed from its Augustinian context, this idea led the Church to condemn and criminalize sexuality and popular religiosity to confuse the complex metaphor of the Fall in *Genesis* with it. Thus, sexuality and eros became the fundamental sins of the flesh, along with greed, envy, laziness, gluttony, anger, and pride. In his *Life of Saint Anthony*, Athanasius of Alexandria emphasized eros among the temptations of the Desert Father – a theme that, starting with Bosch, painters would revel in – and speaks of the fall from *agape* towards sexuality as a metaphor for the corruption of the flesh.

To aspire to the resurrection and to avoid the eternal damnation of hell, the human soul was obliged to purify itself of the appetites of the flesh. According to the Platonic categories with which Augustine interprets the Gospel, the soul would not animate this flesh, but a different body from the one we had here; a spiritualized body, free from the constrictions of the flesh and its appetites, inhabited by a peace and happiness that are beyond all comprehension. With diverse, subtle, and complex distinctions that inhabit the intricate building that are theology and philosophy which have shaped the West, the flesh – with its finiteness, its joys, its sufferings, its corruptibility, and death – was criminalized to become the source of evil that had to be denied through the moral and institutional care of the Church in favor of a body defined with the abstract and immaterial categories of the soul.[10] In this way, the flesh not only acquired, together with the devil and the world, the status of enemy of the soul, but the Church itself evicted the flesh from the resurrection, changing the for-

10 Thomas Aquinas – who, unlike Augustine thought Aristotle from the standpoint of the Gospel – believed in the unity of body and soul, and in the resurrection of a body identical to the one we have here but, similar to that of Paul and Augustine, transfigured and free from the appetites of and ties to the flesh.

mula of the Apostles' *Creed* – "I believe in the resurrection of the flesh" –, for an ambiguous, but less problematic –"I believe in the resurrection of the dead".

This subtle and almost invisible eversion of the flesh of the resurrection can be best seen in pictorial art. Long before painting acquired a certificate of naturalization in the Church, the incarnation, which was born within Judaism (it would have been inconceivable to think of it without YHWH's own carnality, a God who feels, gets angry, suffers, loves and speaks, always speaks), was also imbued with the prohibition of the second commandment to make images, expressed in the book of *Exodus*: "You shall not make to you any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them [...]". This prohibition is at the heart of Augustine's theory of *conscupiscensia carnis*, whereby Adam and Eve, by breaking with God's will in paradise, fractured not only his image and likeness in them, but in all of creation.

It seems that the first disciples and the primitive community complied with the prohibition against images. Apart from a supposed portrait of Mary which, according to tradition, was painted by Lucas and has never actually been found, the only image that is recorded and preserved in the Palatine Antiquarian Museum in Rome, has the character of mocking Faith. It is, Illich tells us, a drawing on plaster, dated between the 1st and 2nd centuries during the reign of Emperor Domitian, known as "Alexamenos graffito". Made with coarse and childish lines, it represents Jesus crucified with the head of a donkey. To his left is a man with his hand raised and a legend written in Greek*: Alexámenos cébetai theón* ("Alexamenos worships [his] God"). There are a handful of images dating to the 3rd century, depicting the Annunciation, the Good Shepherd, and the Adoration of the Magi, and many more found

in the catacombs. Despite the ban on images, the Christian community was not scandalized by the creation of this type of image. Even if they did not fully accept them, they did not forbid them either.

I will not detail the history of the iconoclastic controversy, which also informs Illich's understanding of the icon and the gaze. It is sufficient for my purposes here to note that from the end of that dispute brought about by the "iconoclastic reform" until the schism of East and West in the 11th century, pantocrators, Christ teachers, trinities, crowned virgins, and, to a lesser degree, annunciations, births, or evangelical passages of the miracles of Jesus will accompany the pictorial pedagogy of the Church. In them, the exaltation of the glorious body is represented by the trappings of power transformed into an extramundane and extra carnal domain: thrones from where a haloed Christ, with the Gospel in his left hand and the gesture of blessing in his right, dominates the world above the crosier and sword of the emperor; Mary, enthroned in heaven carrying the baby Jesus, haloed, like her, on her lap. These are bodies clothed in the power of glory that symbolize the immortal body devoid of the miseries of the flesh. This exaltation of an immortal body will become more this-worldly in their depictions of power and its pageantry.

The Eastern Church preserves and cultivates these images from which smallness, suffering, death, and the putrefaction of the flesh have been erased. Nourished on such images, it can be understood why a deeply spiritual man like Dostoevsky when confronted by the pale, greenish, bloodless flesh of Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the tomb* would cry out, "this painting can make you lose faith". Accustomed to Byzantine iconography, the orthodox Dostoevsky could not bear the horror of flesh condemned and not transformed into the glorious body of the resurrection. The impact that Holbein's image had on him was witnessed by his wife

Anna Gregorievna and remains one of the most lucid and vivid passages in *The Idiot*. On returning from the visit to the Museum of Fine Arts in Basel where the painting is located, Dostoevsky was very disturbed and cried out in Anna's presence the very phrase that he later puts into Mishkin's mouth, and suffered, like him, the severest of his epileptic attacks. It was as if his flesh, carrying the guilt of desiring the death of his father and the Tsar – vicarious symbols of God in Christ – was ashamed of itself and was punishing itself for having desired those deaths, also separated from the resurrection.

However, Dostoevsky's carnal reaction to Holbein's image of Christ barred from the resurrection was in keeping with the intent of the painting. It is the time when the Western Church, particularly in Spain, begins to accent spiritual reflection neither on the incarnation of the nativity nor on the resurrection of the Church already robed by the empire, but on the passion and death of Jesus. Although in Holbein – particularly in his sculptures in which Christs and virgins are taken to their crudest and most painful realism – the suffering and death of Christ are decontextualized from the resurrection, just as in Spanish religious art, the intention is to make the faithful feel responsible for causing the suffering of Christ by their carnal desires. This is a subject that will become deeper and terribly painful after the French revolution, not in painting, but in handbooks of spirituality.[11]

In these, the suffering of Christ is the reminder of our inability to deny ourselves in our flesh for him and thereby prevent him from resurrecting in the body of the Church, which is made of us, human beings. For that to become possible, it is necessary for us to deny ourselves in our flesh, to mor-

11 There is, on the other hand, in the *Trinity* of Masaccio a tomb similar to that of Holbein, in which a startling skeleton, representing not Christ, but Adam, lies under the cross that is raised and is received, in the suspended body of Christ, by the Father and the Holy Spirit – an exquisite line that simulates the neck of his clothing.

tify it until it is separated from the soul, to suffer like Christ and therefore be worthy of the resurrection. The wounds on the body of Christ which, until the 17th century could be seen as a refuge from our own sufferings, gradually acquired this face of shame. The carnality of the world that had led God to become incarnated and to suffer had to be erased from ours.

Ascesis[12] (the athlete's exercise, the work on gross matter, spiritual discipline) has been practiced by mystics, and the monastic tradition since the Desert Fathers tried to empty themselves and recover the *agape* brought by the incarnation. Fasting, silence, prayer, austerity, fraternity, and forgiveness no less than flagellation, hairshirts, hot irons, and, epilepsy in Dostoevsky, were forms of penance directed against the flesh; symbolic expression of the denial of the flesh in favor of a body that strains for resurrection.

Whoever seeks Christ must seek the perfect body, seek the immaculate image of the body that one will have in the resurrection through the mortification of the flesh. This was also the time when, according to the institutionalization of the Church, the priest became the vicarious presence of Christ. Whoever aspired to the priesthood had to be an image of the corporeal perfection of the risen man. Contrary to what may be thought in modern secularism, this idea was not intended to harm anyone but instead to help human beings escape the misery of their flesh, to subject the flesh to intense attention to preserve the soul from its corruptibility and to lead it to animate an immortal body.

This idea is close to how Christianity understood the incarnation. For the most pious believers, the Church added this idea to the set of institutional practices that, from its first charitable foundations, had in its discipline and administra-

12 Tomás Calvillo and I dedicated an essay to this point titled "Ascesis or the oasis of the body," original in Spanish: La ascesis o el oasis del cuerpo. in *La revelación y los* días, Cuadernos de la Orquesta, SEP, 1987.

tion, the same function of subduing the flesh to save it from its corruptibility. Just as the purpose of penance and the sacraments is to save the soul from the flesh and its desires, so the school, the orphanage, and the hospital still have the function of saving the soul from ignorance, defenselessness, and suffering the finiteness of the flesh, all in the name of a healthy body and soul. In these institutions, which the modern state born of Enlightenment ideas and of the French Revolution will later administer and multiply alongside the Church, penance becomes discipline and therapy. For those who did not want to accept this idea – heretics, apostates, witches... – there were other disciplinary institutions, including the stake, where the flesh could be purified to save the soul from its possible eternal damnation. Since the Church institutionalized *agape* and viewed the flesh as evil, the human being has become a fallen being who, confined to the limits of his flesh, is in need of salvation. As in the Church's reading of the parable of the Samaritan and of the incarnation, saving the human being means being obliged to heal the wounded flesh of a neighbor who has acquired the abstract status of anybody.

The secular State appropriated this vocation of the Church and evicted it from its theological home by accusing the Church of being against freedom while, in reality, the State continued the task of building an immortal body — one destined not for heaven but on earth itself. While the disciplines and therapies of modern institutions appear bloodless and organized to promote freedom, they are, in reality, just as bloody as the penitential disciplining of sinful flesh and just as hopeful in building an immortal body as was the dream of the Church. We relentlessly fight and even shed blood, to institute schools, hospitals, transportation and communication systems, products and services of all kinds to make bodies full of greatness, strength, and happiness just like the glorious body of theology. We submit to weird sufferings that sever us

from the flesh in the name of a body free of suffering. All the technological developments which the Covid-19 emergency amplified is condensed, like a metaphor, on the screens. There, we appear devoid of our flesh, as a radiant body. Just as the iron, the scourge, and the thumbscrew once did for the quasi-celestial body, this subjugation of the flesh distances it from the contamination implied by the presence of the world and the flesh of others.

What else does suffering the counterproductivities of medical therapies, of schoolwork, and of transportation speak of? What else do the painful penances of the medical beauty industry, that modern *farmakon* of eternal youth, speak of? What else does the sting of permanently unsatisfied desires to acquire this or that thing or service speak of? What do automation and robotics intend to replace the flesh, or the indelible tattoos and intradermal implants that regulate body temperature in any type of climate, say about the flesh? What does the diffusion and expansive use of increasingly sophisticated media say? Do not all of these promise to produce that radiant body which the Church no longer offers? Are not both state-sponsored social services and profiles on the screen its clearest metaphors? Do they not all speak of bodies devoid of flesh, radiant images unstained by any possibility of contagion, glorious in their haloed presence; no longer doorways but barred doors, simulating a resurrection as luminous as the light on the screen where our corporeality now appears?

In this world, in which not everyone can fit – Illich showed its exclusionary character, its impossibility of satisfying everyone – there are, however, certain types of flesh that can neither be saved nor ever acquire the glorious and anesthetized body that technology in its many guises promise. This flesh is what Giorgio Agamben has defined as "naked life", unprotected life, the life that is marginalized by power, and that has its place, like other apostates of the Church, on

the margins, among the detritus who painfully will never be able to enjoy a body without flesh. The only thing they can aspire to, if they have not died, if they have not been murdered or disappeared, if they have not already been erased in their flesh from their passage through the world, is the gift of those so-called human rights institutions, whose origins lie in the *xenodochia* (houses for foreigners) of Christianity assumed by imperial Rome. Even though the Church wants to see the consequences of carnality in what remains in a world inhabited by the desires of the flesh, in reality, this world is the result of that eversion the Church itself caused by criminalizing the flesh, evicting it from the glorious body and then, institutionalizing *agape* in order to heal the rift.

Denis de Rougemont demonstrated in *Love in the Western World* that adultery in the Western novel is what remains when the West stripped the novel of its Cathar theological origin. So also, what remains of the glorious body once expelled from its theological basis is the body of the modern world which does not want to die. In submitting itself to every kind of institutional therapy, oblivious to the world and to the alienations of the flesh, this body opens in a paradoxically painful way – a category of the flesh – to a post-carnal era; a body whose suffering lies in the very intention to amputate it from its flesh. What Michel Foucault called biopower, a disciplining of the body for social control is, in reality, a disciplining of the flesh whose purpose is to build amortal bodies free of suffering, a body accustomed to increasingly sophisticated post-carnal technological prostheses which redeem it of the wonderful and unbearable weight of the flesh and the world.

From a spiritual perspective, this is what we call evil. Evil is not carnality or the absence of good but, as Illich saw, the deep and brutal eversion of the best thing that came into the world — *agape*; an eversion in the most proper and intimate part of the human being — in his flesh, that is, in disin-

carnation. It is also what in the eschatological tradition (the time of the last things) is called "the end of time", a drama that – according to a penetrating tradition that comes from Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians (2:1-11), the *misterium iniquitatis* – comes from the Church itself. This is what I have tried to say in this approach to the flesh, in "the time of the end and of the *katekhon* (the one who holds back)", following Illich and Agamben.

I do not know if this is the meaning that the word *Apocalypse* – the book with which the Christian Bible ends. The revelation, the definitive arrival of the kingdom in the midst of a terrible conflagration, where what we had known will be devastated or, better, the recognition, in the midst of the darkest of nights, of the light of the *agape* that we betray. It is a matter concerning faith about which not even faith knows anything. The terrible, dazzling, and cryptic images of the *Apocalypse*, as well as the suggestive and no less terrifying speech of Jesus, known as "Great Tribulation" (Mt. 24), lack a date and a time. It is, however, in the time of the end. The world that ends is the world that came with the incarnation, the world of the flesh and *agape*, a world that, in its long eversion, lasted more than two thousand years. The absence of public worship during the months of the pandemic and its increasingly widespread transmission through electronic screens is the ominous sign of disincarnation within the Church itself. The world that is announced and seems irreversible is its confirmation: it is a post-carnal world, whose consequences are unimaginable; an abyss of the same depth but contrary to the height of the incarnation, one whose unfathomable horror made Illich exclaim in bitter bewilderment that he felt the "temptation of cursing God's Incarnation".

We must live this condition without illusions. Just as great losses are experienced, just as Illich did towards

the end of his life, just as I have lived with the murder of my son Juan Francisco at a time when so many crimes continue to happen in my country. We must allow all the weight of its irremediable loss and its immense pain to enter, while we still preserve and celebrate what we can still preserve and celebrate of the *agape* that one day came into the world through the flesh.