

***Herakles Cult in Hellenism and Luke-Acts:
Reflections Offered During the Cause for
Beatification of Vincent R. Capodanno, MM***

As the church reflects on the life of God's Servant, Vincent Capodanno, in this 50th anniversary of his death, it may be interesting to some to think about a particular example of the church's acknowledgment of heroes and her engagement with the military. What immediately follows in Part I is a discussion of the Jesus-Herakles connection first in Luke-Acts and then in emerging early church tradition. Part II reflects on Fr. Capodanno in light of these and other theological concerns.

I.

Herakles and the Jesus Tradition in *Luke-Acts*

-----The Twelve Labors of Jesus.

In his independent ministry in Luke 4-8, Jesus' acts of power evoke the outline of Herakles' 12 labors (*athloi*). After the first six, the Twelve are called. The final labor involves the 12-year old girl and the woman with a 12-year hemorrhage, immediately followed by the mission of the Twelve. Most of the material here is derived from Mark.

- 1) Man with unclean spirit (Lk 4:31-37)
- 2) Healing of many people (Lk 4:38-41)
- 3) Miraculous catch of fish (5:1-11)
- 4) Cleansing of a leper (Lk 5:12-16)
- 5) Healing a paralytic (Lk 5:17-26)
- 6) Man with withered hand (Lk 6:6-11)

- Choosing of the **TWELVE** (Lk 6:12-16)
- 7) healing of a crowd (Lk 6:17-19)
- 8) healing of centurion's servant (7:1-10)
- 9) raising the son of widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17)
- 10) calming of a storm (Lk 8:22-25)
- 11) healing of a Gerasene demoniac (Lk 8:26-39)
- 12) healing of Jairus' daughter & hemorrhaging woman (Lk 8:40-56)
- If one dwells on the unity- of -scene for the two female healings, we have 12 exercises of power. More importantly, however, the woman's flow of blood lasted 12 years, and the girl is 12 years old. Counting the women separately brings us to 13 acts of power, both of which, however, celebrate Twelve. And the number of labors fluctuates slightly in the Herakles tradition.
- Mission of the **TWELVE** (Lk 9:1-6).

In addition to this Heracleian patterning, there are several points of similarity between the Herakles traditions and special Lukan material (L):

-----The sayings in Lk 12: 49, 50 focus on fire and a baptism:

49 I have come to cast fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. 50 And I have a baptism to undergo, and how I am constrained until it is completed.

Through a Heracleian lens, the saying about fire bears an oblique relationship to the culminating events of the earthly life of Herakles. Given a garment tinged with poison, and standing near a fire, he

found that the garment clung ever more tightly to his body until the pain became so unbearable that he threw himself on the fire to end his life, in what is understood as a burning away of his mortal element and ascension into the company of the gods. The water saying may reflect a stage in the tradition of the hero that associated him with Palaemon of Isthmia, near Corinth in Greece. Plautus (ca. 250 BCE-184 BCE) in his *Rudens* 160 includes this invocation:

[At the sight of two girls drifting in the sea] O Palaemon, sancta Neptuni comes, qui Herculis socius esse diceris [O Palaemon, holy friend of Neptune, you who are said to be a companion of Hercules].

Palaemon's cult depicted him as drowned in the sea but raised to new life. Helmut Koester has wondered about its relevance to the discussion of ritual life at Corinth ["Melikertes at Isthmia: A Roman Mystery Cult" in H. Koester *Paul and His World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 180-91, esp. 183.

The advantage of this approach to the adjacent sayings in Luke resides in their status as part of a death-and-rebirth narrative of the hero.

----Hera tried to deprive him of his earthly throne (cp. message of Gabriel in Lk 1). She arranged to have her favorite, his cousin, born before Herakles.

----He fed at his mother's breast, producing the Milky Way; the mother of Jesus is praised for having fed him at the breast (Lk 11:27).

----One of his labors involved being conveyed from the far east to the far west of Ocean, traveling in a Cup. There is an extra cup in the Lukan last Supper. One of its symbolic contours may be an anticipation of the story in Acts that brings the movement from Palestine to Rome.

----Another of his labors involved the temporary hoisting of the world on his shoulders, relieving Atlas of his burden. However, he soon got Atlas back on the job. Does this help to generate “Take up your cross EVERY DAY and follow me?” (Lk 9:23).

----When attacked by Celts, Zeus sent a rain of slingshot-size stones with which he could repel the attackers. Is this partly formative of “on whom the rejected stone falls, that one will be crushed?” (Lk 20:18). Here the mythology may meld with Roman armament lingo. Stone-throwing machines were used by the Roman army.

-----One of the most tantalizing of riffs effected by Luke on the Heracleian tradition resides in the presentation of the hero’s “knot.” This knot is constituted by the lion skin that Herakles wore around his shoulders after conquest of the menacing Nemean lion. The shape of the lion skin as secured on his person is perhaps what today we would call “a square knot” and its reproductions in various media in antiquity were thought to convey healing and apotropaic dynamics. The word for knot occurs in Isaiah 58:6 LXX as part of the injunction to undo the *fetters* of the violent. The Greek word for knot is *strangallia*. It is not present as such in the New Testament. However, one may discern its presence in a surprising form in the places where Luke discusses *Galilaios*, Galilean. They are Luke 13:1, 2, 2; 22:59, 23:6. Each of them has some partial or full sequence of the letters that begin the word *strangallia*, that is, *stra-* preceding mention of “Galilean.” And more importantly, each discusses Pilate or Herod. Is Luke presenting these figures of the Roman Empire’s bureaucracy as a new version of Herakles’ lion, bearing down on the home province of Jesus and Jesus himself with increasing force and leading to his crucifixion? I find this wholly within the realm of Luke’s literary skill evidenced throughout the Gospel and Acts.

----He freed Prometheus from his daily attacks by an eagle (Lk 17:37). Actually, *aetos* in this verse may mean both *eagle* and *vulture*. Plutarch *Moralia* “The Roman Questions” 93 transmits a report

of Herodotus that Herakles delighted in the appearance of the vulture at the beginning of any undertaking because Herakles believed the vulture to be the most righteous of all flesh-eating creatures (inasmuch as it never kills a living creature). This link to the Herakles tradition is published in M. Eugene Boring, Klaus Berger, Carsten Colpe, eds. *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville; Abingdon, 1995) 230.

-----As mentioned previously, Herakles' death is intertwined with a gift of clothing. And note that Jesus is dressed by Herod in "gorgeous apparel" (Lk 23:11). Nicole Loraux posits that Herakles' last poisonous garment feminizes him, whereas Llewellyn-Jones evaluates the clothing issue more moderately, drawing on a full range of sources that include "gorgeous apparel" for males under varying circumstances. [Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones "Herakles re-dressed: gender, clothing, and the construction of a Greek hero" in Rawlings, L. and H. Bowden, eds. *Herakles and Hercules: Exploring a Graeco-Roman Divinity* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005) 51-70].

Euripides *Children of Herakles* ca. ll. 500—630 depicts a daughter of Herakles who is drawn to the sound of lament by an aged Athenian. Upon hearing that there is need for a noble human sacrifice to save the city, she volunteers herself on behalf of her brothers. She imagines a pointless life if she doesn't offer herself, for that would involve her brothers' deaths, leaving her with no one to provide the dowry giving entry into marriage. She imagines her bloodletting and asks only that she die in the presence of women (who can hold her during the sacrifice) and be covered with her garments (peplos). She insists that she makes this offer freely, under no compulsion (anangkē), and is lamented.

Luke's Jesus functions in part like this courageous teenage girl. Though there is much discussion (19x) of what is necessary (dei) to happen to and through Jesus, it is clear that Luke's Jesus wants what is written of him to be fulfilled. The talk of the fiery ignition of wood (Lk 23:26-31) alludes to the upcoming sacrifice as a bloody one to be followed by immolation, the daily *Tamid* of the Temple as Dennis Hamm

has described it. [“The Tamid Service in Luke-Acts: The Cultic Background Behind Luke’s Theology of Worship (Luke 1:5-25; 18:9-14; 24:50-53; Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Apr 2003, Vol. 65 Issue 2, pp. 215-31]. Jesus’ radiant garments given in mockery by Herod and his soldiers are never removed from Jesus. This is unique to the Lukan account. The silence of the text on this point implies that he dies brilliantly attired. The 10th century Byzantine encyclopedia known as the *Suda* names the anonymous *Parthenos*, Herakles’ daughter in Euripides’ text, as *Makaria*. It is tempting to entertain the notion that the tradition in the *Suda* knows its Euripides and the makarism in this Lukan text when it dubs her *Makaria*. That Luke is indeed engaging in dialogue with the Herakles tradition is evident in the uniquely Lukan notice of Lk 23:32 concerning the *kakourgoi*, wrongdoers. This is a dim reflection of Herakles’ battle with *kakos*, evil.

What more might be said about the radiant garment/gorgeous apparel in Lk 23:11 as an expression of the contempt of Herod and his soldiers for Jesus the Servant? It has its antitype in Acts 10 where the centurion Cornelius, a member of the Italian cohort, is the epitome of one who fears God and does justice, welcoming Peter’s preaching of the message about Jesus. As a centurion, Cornelius would have been responsible for offering at least three times a year a sacrifice, *sacramentum*, on behalf of the Roman people and their leaders. George Kalantzis asks “Could Cornelius, newly recruited to the Jesus movement whose good news announces the peace of Jesus who is *Lord of all* (Acts 10:36), could this Cornelius have continued to offer the *sacramentum* in honor of the Emperor as *Dominus et Deus*, Lord and God?” Kalantzis thinks not; that Caesar would have relieved him of his post if not his life for such dereliction of traditional duty [*Caesar and the Lamb* (Cascade: Eugene, OR, 2012) 66-68].

----Euripides’ *Madness of Herakles* includes this lament by his wife Megara “Come, come, come as demon or ghost or dead hero: come back in a dream.” P. 189 in Slavitt & Bowie, eds. *Euripides 4*. This is relevant to another special Lukan tradition, that in Luke 24, wherein Jesus specifically guards against

interpreting his new state as that of a ghost (*pneuma*) and confirms the assertion by eating a piece of fish in front of the disciples (Lk 24:39-43).

Attention to the tradition of Herakles as a hero is situated within a discernible trajectory in classical Greek drama. Michael Kellogg *The Greek Search for Wisdom* (Prometheus, 2012) 245-48 situates Euripides in this Platonic schema whose characteristic stances are represented in the *Symposium*:

Aeschylus-----gods demanding objective divine justice

Sophocles—gods as representative of socio-political dynamics

Euripides—"the twilight of the gods" whose presence is increasingly irrelevant to mortals and whose salvific role is being replaced by heroes (like Herakles).

Herakles and Emerging Early Church Tradition

Herakles garnered some attention from the early church Fathers Justin Martyr, Origen, and Basil. See Emma Stafford *Herakles* (London: Routledge, 2012) 202-05 whose book offers a rendition of his story extending from the first doxographer ca. 600 BCE to more recent artistic renderings in several media. She joins other commentators in noting that one of the primary avenues of his ongoing influence was in the military and among several of the Emperors. The Roman army, particularly its officers, promoted veneration of Hercules, as attested in shrines strewn throughout the Empire, in the period of the republic and then Empire and into its twilight and the sack of Rome in 410. Amulets depicting him and his club are known in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The pagan revival under Julian 361-63, would have been another factor in promulgating his legend. As late as the Battle of Frigidus in 393, the West was still trotting out a statue of Hercules, in this case with a statue of Jupiter, as the battle commenced. [For this battle in context, see James J. O'Donnell *Pagans* (NY: Harper, 2015) 202.

One of the issues endemic to consideration of sanctity in military contexts concerns the exercise of force that one directs against one's own limitations. A scenario from the 4th century of the church's growth illustrates the point. The Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) wrote a lengthy essay *On the Superscriptions of the Psalms*, ending abruptly at Ps. 58 LXX (Ps. 59). [See Heine, Ronald E., *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise On the Superscriptions of the Psalms* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995)].

There may be no overarching theoretical reason for the termination of the commentary prior to the presumed goal of covering all 150 Psalms. However, it is tempting to correlate the fact that there were 59 centurions in a legion with the fact that he ends his commentary on the 59th Psalm. How so? In 376, he was deposed by a synod of bishops under the government of the Emperor Valens. The Emperor opposed Gregory's defense of the Nicene Creed. We surmise the emperor's motive from the fact that in 370 this same Valens responded to clerical protests over the appointment of Demophilus, an Arian bishop, by having the protesters burned to death. [Henry Chadwick *The Early Church* 1967 pp. 145-51]. Gregory was accused of embezzlement and irregular ordination of bishops. He was exiled and replaced by an Arianizing bishop, and was only returned to the see of Nyssa in 378, after the death of Valens. Danielou places the writing of the commentary in the two-year period of exile from his see. To the adulation of martial virtue in Roman Cappadocia, Gregory juxtaposes the virtues promoted in the Psalms and explicitly says that inculcation of virtue is the point of the Psalms' existence. As he begins the second section of his commentary, he says that those who have reached more than an elementary stage in the spiritual life have devoured the passions "with the teeth of self-control." I suspect that this image serves as antitype to Ps. 59's description of the *growling dogs who rave with their mouths, [having] swords on their lips* (Ps. 59: 7, 8). The tension between heroic violence done to others in a military context and that done to one's less worthy self is at the heart of the tension between the Eastern Empire and the emergent church of the latter fourth century.

And at the sociopolitical level, one of the questions underlying this episode is the following----

Is an Arian Jesus the Eastern Empire's functional equivalent of Hercules in the Western Empire?

i.e. helper of humankind but not supremely authoritative? Remember that at this point in the fourth century, Jesus had been recognized in the Nicene Creed of 325 as “consubstantial with the Father.” However, that still left open the option of viewing him as half-human and half-divine, much as Herakles and other heroes were born of one human and one divine parent. It was only in the statement of Chalcedon in 451 CE that the church would differentiate its understanding of Jesus from the classical heroic tradition by insisting that Jesus is fully divine and fully human in a way that finally escapes complete comprehension or articulation. For example, the least unsatisfactory formulae posited that God in Christ *suffered impassibly*. By 451, the heroic tradition would serve as a mere scrim highlighting merely one relatively minor aspect of Jesus' fully human and fully divine identity. [For more on the Christological debates, see Christopher A. Beeley *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* New Haven: Yale, 2012].

II. Is Vincent Capodanno one of the blessed, a saint of God?

Vincent Capodanno (1929-1967) was a native New Yorker who is today best remembered by those who know his story for the culminating sacrifice of his life on a battlefield in Vietnam on Sept. 4, 1967. Fr. Capodanno was a member of the Maryknoll Missionary order, originally founded to serve the mission field in China around the turn of the 20th century. He trained at the seminary in Ossining, New York in the 1950s and was ordained in 1958. Two prominent German theologians, Otto Semmelroth and Karl Rahner, explored Marian theology during this period. However, their works were not translated into English until 1963 and would probably not have been known to Fr. Vincent who was in active mission work in the Pacific in 1963. However, in 1956, precisely toward the culmination of Vincent's seminary studies, Rene Laurentin's *A Short Treatise on Marian Theology* was published. Two emphases

are repeatedly made throughout the work. First, the author reiterates the traditional avoidance of saying that this or that event in salvation history had to happen in the way that it did. There is no *necessity* in God's creation of or continued interaction with the world. This insistence preserves our sense of God's freedom- in-act and so of the character of divine love. The default language used to describe the preparation of Mary for her role in bringing Jesus to the world is that of "fittingness." Secondly, Laurentin emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in shaping Mary's person and role in the Christ-event. The Spirit is the same Spirit received by all Christians in baptism. Her special privilege of being assumed into glory body and soul at the end of her earthly life, the teaching concerning her Assumption, was declared dogmatically in 1950. Laurentin emphasizes that it was fitting (though not necessary) that Jesus and she, representative male and female, enjoy glorified bodies prior to the general resurrection, and reiterates the teaching that this state is the hope to which all are called in Christ. [See Matthew Levering "Mary and the Holy Spirit in the 1950s" in John C. Cavadini and Danielle Peters, eds. *Mary on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council* (Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 2017. pp. 133-55.)

The larger context of the communion saints in which this teaching about Mary was available to Capodanno in his seminary days would have been the widely distributed and oft-reprinted book by Karl Adam *The Spirit of Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1935) 12th rpt. 1955 which offers two chapters on the communion of saints. On pp. 135-36, he treats this theme of Catholic theology in the context of the common cultural practice of hero-worship:

"The veneration of the saints...was from the beginning ... contained in the nature of the church as the Body of Christ, in the Christian conviction of the fellowship and solidarity of His members, and ultimately in the comprehensive validity of the Christian commandment of love. It is no pagan growth, but indigenous to Christianity. It has this much in common with pagan hero-worship, that it venerates the historical achievement of the saintly figure and reverences the manifestation of the divine in human

form.....That is an impulse which is not specifically pagan, but belongs to our common humanity and is therefore of universal validity. But the special characteristic of paganism was to obliterate the boundaries between the divine and the human and to cultivate polytheism. In that respect the influence of paganism upon the development of the veneration of the saints was rather to impede than to promote, for it was the fear of polytheistic instincts which prevented the earlier blossoming of this veneration. It was not until the Christian conception of God and the worship of our Lord were deeply and firmly rooted in the consciousness of the masses, that the ground was ready for the specifically Christian form of hero-worship.”

To what extent is this true? The data in Luke-Acts would suggest that Luke was rather comfortable with integration of Heracleian hero-worship in his presentation of Jesus himself, seeing the parallels as constituting an initial draw for hearers who knew little of the Jews and their god. One wonders what Adam would have made of the Herakles-effect in Luke-Acts, had he noticed them, as well as the fact that such dynamics do not impede Acts of the Apostles 9: 13, 32, 41 and 26:10 from discussing *the saints* of the Way under One Lord. Though Chalcedon’s formula still lay some centuries in the future, the tradition of Heracleian hero worship had found a place at the church’s Lukan table.

Beyond that historical point, what’s interesting to me about Adams’ book, which would have been available to Capodanno in the Maryknoll seminary, is the list of implications spelled out by Adam concerning the shape of belief in the communion of saints. What are they?

People in the struggling church, the church militant, enjoy the benefit of prayer by the dead as described in a text in the Catholic canon of Scripture. And here I quote Adam (*Spirit* p. 136):

Like Onias, the High Priest, and the prophet Jeremiah who as “friends of the brethren on earth pray much for the people and for the holy city” (2 Maccabees 15:14), so does the great company of the saints supplicate for the struggling members of Christ on earth. Their

intercessory prayer manifests their ardent longing that the name of God should be sanctified and His will be accomplished on earth as well as in heaven.

Intercession for people in the church militant is an expression of the life of the blessed. The blessed, who enjoy a treasure trove of graced love constituted by self-sacrifice and service, gladly share that with the struggling members of His Body. In this ever-available outpouring of God's grace, the person of Mary is noted by Adam as especially powerful.

This activity is complemented by another circle of relations in the Body of Christ. The suffering church, that which is in a post-mortem state, is unable to ripen to its final blessedness by its own efforts, but its members are aided by the church militant in the world:

“The Church has from the earliest times faithfully guarded the words of Scripture (2 Maccabees 12, 43ff.) that “it is a holy and a wholesome thing to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins. The suppliant cry of her liturgy “Eternal rest give to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them” can be heard already in the *Acts of the Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* (AD 203).” [Adam *Spirit* p. 141].

This interaction of different dimensions of the church is manifested in venues public and private, with multiple interactions whose contours we do not fully know, involving the particularities of the persons' lives. Karl Rahner would remind us that God as such is the unspoken partner in discourse about all aspects of the saints:

“The basic mystery of Christianity is not that God has created a world different from himself, in which he must be served as Lord, which gives him greater honor in proportion as it disappears, but rather that the grace which is identical with God himself, has permeated the world with God's own presence. And when the world runs its course in this sense it is progressively glorified and

redeemed.” [“Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?” *Theological Investigations* 8.1. New York: Herder, 1971, p. 23.]

For all of its variety, the state of blessedness described in theological handbooks during the period of Capodanno’s maturation consistently evinces two realities: the full interpersonal reality of the church, Christ’s Body, both visible and invisible, where beatitude matures----- and the blessedness enjoyed intrinsically by God who communicates that blessedness by a free gift, by grace. These gracious dynamics are present in the particulars of human lives.

At the time of this writing, July 2017, Vincent is known as a *Servant of God*. The Vatican office that assesses claims to holiness on behalf of candidates has yet to weigh in concerning Vincent’s intercession with God resulting in miracles. Nor has there been any public report from the Vatican about the extent of heroic virtue in his life as a whole, or the status of his death as a witness to the Faith per se. See Kenneth L. Woodward *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn’t, And Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). Also see George Evans *101 Questions and Answers on Saints* (New York: Paulist: 2007). However, the July 20th edition of the NY Archdiocesan newspaper reports that a new path to sainthood has recently been acknowledged by Pope Francis. The conditions sought by the investigating committees now include the following:

- Free and willing offer of one’s life and a heroic acceptance out of love, of a certain and early death; the heroic act of charity and the premature death are connected.

- Evidence of having lived out the Christian virtues- at least in an ordinary, and not necessarily heroic way-before having offered one’s life to others and until one’s death.

- Evidence of reputation for holiness, at least after death.

- A miracle attributed to the candidate’s intercession is needed for beatification.

[Carol Glatz *Catholic New York* “New Path to Sainthood: Heroic Act of Loving Service” July 20, 2017. pp. 1, 4. Also see the capodannoguild.org website].

This makes for a very interesting preparatory scenario in the ongoing investigation of Vincent’s life. And while the outcome is not yet apparent, I think it fair to say at this point that one part of the Capodanno dossier reflects one of the earliest strata of the church’s engagement with the military, one that bears the beneficent profile of the most widely venerated hero of Greco-Roman antiquity:

“Stay calm, Marine. Help is coming. God is with us today.”