

Preaching Christ Crucified

By Rev Robert Nash, S.J.

Catholic Truth Society of Ireland No.lit045a (1941)

INTRODUCTION.

A YOUNG WOMAN was kneeling in tears, for sin had broken her heart. To be sure, she had no enviable reputation in the happy city where she lived. For years she had continued on her evil way, deafening her ears to the warnings of conscience, laughing with an assumption of gaiety when her friends tried to save her, fondly talking herself into the belief that she was happy and carefree; that her beauty held many enthralled, and that she had found in the thrill and excitement of her sin, all that this life held of true enjoyment.

But a change has come today. Quite suddenly, it would seem, she has decided to call a halt to this reckless chase. Today compunction has seized upon her at last, for she has listened today to a new Prophet, and never did man speak as He has spoken. His words have pierced her heart like a two-edged sword and she has found her way, indeed she has probably forced her way, into this banquet-hall where He is reclining at table. She kneels very low here, even down at His feet, and she sobs out her story of sin and shame and repentance. And Jesus bent over Magdalene that day and pronounced a sentence upon her that nearly paralysed her, so overpowering was the ecstasy of joy with which it inundated her soul. "Many sins are forgiven her because she has loved much."

It was a moment of extraordinary grace, and she knew that never again could she be the same Magdalene. Henceforth one longing alone will occupy her — to prove to this merciful Christ that her repentance is genuine. She arose to her feet a woman transformed. On that momentous day Magdalene took her first step on the road to high sanctity, and love beckoned her from one pinnacle to another, and ultimately it drew her on, this alluring power of a mighty love, even as far as the summits.

Saul of Tarsus hated Jesus Christ. In a paroxysm of fury against Him and His followers, he rode with an escort of soldiers into Damascus, bearing in his pocket the written authorisation to arrest all Christians there and bring them bound to Jerusalem. And suddenly a light from heaven shone round about him. Terrified, he fell off his horse, and, kneeling with joined hands on the dusty roadside, he there received what has well been called "an audacious grace." The persecutor was changed into an apostle; the hater of Christ stood up and knew that on that day Christ had sown in his heart the seeds of a love stronger than death.

Henceforth Christ and His cause became for Paul (the former Saul) a sort of obsession. Such a marvellous change! People who listened to him saw that the man was like one beside himself. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... I am sure that neither life nor death... nor any other thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord." He was imprisoned, shipwrecked, scourged, laughed at as a fanatic, but "in all these things we have overcome, for the sake of Him." No power on earth or in hell can hold him now, for he carries in his great heart a very furnace of love for Jesus Christ.

This is what happened to Saul when he surrendered to that mighty grace offered him on the Damascus road.

Time was hanging heavily on the hands of the wounded soldier, and he called for a book to read and while away the weary hours of his convalescence. They could find nothing to give him except a book of the lives of Christ and His Saints. These he looked at with something very like scorn. No reading for a soldier, that! However, for the want of better, he began to turn over the pages listlessly. Presently interest quickened. What a revelation this is! Here is a whole new world, the existence of which he had never even suspected. Here are men and women fired with a love and a zeal for Jesus Christ beside which Don Inigo's ambitions and schemes for greatness cut a very sorry figure indeed. Would it be possible for him, even for the worldly Spanish hidalgo, to serve the King of Kings and become distinguished in His service? Perhaps he too could become a saint like these other men and women? Why not?

A mighty grace was offered to him that day, and with a grateful and a generous heart, he stretched out both hands to accept it. The spark of divine love had caught in his soul, and very soon, it became aflame. It is the nature of fire to spread. The love within him cannot rest, and he gathers around him a group of disciples into whose hearts he fuses that fire with which he himself is aflame. They must go into the four corners of the world with a mighty ideal spurring them on — to set the entire earth ablaze with the love of Jesus Christ. Here is ambition worthy of all that is noblest in man. Here is the marvel that was wrought when a special grace descended into the soul of that wounded soldier and made the love and loveliness of Jesus Christ a reality to him. Inigo is known to us as Saint 'Ignatius of Loyola.'

The nun had been there for some time in the stillness of her convent chapel. Presently she opened her eyes, and to her utter amazement, she saw Jesus Christ standing before her in human form. He showed her His Sacred Heart, and He told her that the flames of His love for men were so violent that they could no longer be restrained. So He had chosen her, Sister Margaret Mary, knowing that she was, as she declared, "an abyss of ignorance and weakness," for a great mission. He desired to use her as His instrument to enkindle in men's hearts the fire of His divine love. Would she allow herself to be used thus?

No wonder she was overpowered at the divine condescension. No wonder that she nearly died from excess of love and gratitude. That she, the most useless and insignificant nun in the convent, should be singled out for a work of such magnitude and grandeur! And then, upon her giving her consent, there shot forth from Our Lord's Sacred Heart a ray of the fire which pierced her own heart. Now surely she must have died of love had not Christ sustained her. Never again could she think of anything except that Heart of Christ. Never again could she speak of anything, write of anything, take an interest in anything except the all-absorbing truth that Christ's love for men was beyond the power of words to express, and that men were indifferent and should be roused to realise the actuality of the love of a God for their souls. For Margaret Mary Alacoque, too, transformation had begun.

From all of which it seems clear that there are moments to which God's Providence has attached the communication of special graces. You may go along for years in sin, like Magdalene or Saul, or steeped in worldliness like Ignatius Loyola, and then at last God's moment arrives to lay siege to your soul.

Or you have been trying hard to love Christ and to serve Him well, but some day He visits you with a very torrent of graces. Nothing seems clearer to you now than that every single obstacle to His complete reign within you must be swept aside.

This love of His is now understood to be so true, so living a thing, and by comparison everything else is so fickle, so weak and unstable and languishing, that there arises in your heart a craving to open the hearts and the minds of others, blinded as they are, to see and understand even as you yourself see and understand. When you hear His appeal for apostles, it dawns upon you, perhaps by degrees or perhaps all at once, that that 'appeal' is made to you. He wants everybody to help in His work, and everybody includes you! It is a light, a new impetus, and a powerful urge comes to fling in your lot absolutely and unreservedly with His. A loving Christ is calling and you want no more. If He invites, you have no desire or wish to ask whither.

Now, if there is one place more than another where it is reasonable to hope for such a transforming grace, that place is the Hill of Calvary. For here is Omnipotence taxing its powers in the effort to stun us into a deeper understanding of the truth of God's love. "Greater love than this no man has that a man lay down his life for his friends." Calvary is like a great reservoir, the capacity of which is, infinite, and in it are stored up "the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Let the soul therefore come to Calvary and kneel down there at those bleeding feet. Here is the source of all grace. Here is Christ ready to pour abundantly His treasure into the soul, the only limitation being the soul's power to receive. Saul of Tarsus went forth to preach Christ and Him crucified. If the world is to be saved today, salvation can come only from the Cross. If grace is to transform individual souls and fill them with an efficacious desire to become saints, that grace will be given only to those who strive sincerely to reproduce in themselves the virtues of a bleeding Christ.

Christ spoke on Calvary and His words came charged with special graces. Even to this day, those words of His retain their efficacy, for they are divine. They possess a transforming power, and it behooves us to listen, and listening to understand, and understanding to put in practice what is enjoined upon us. Then will Omnipotence be enabled to act, when it finds us in fit dispositions. Grace will allure the soul and try to win her, but never will grace use force. Here on Calvary the persuasive eloquence of divine grace reaches its climax, and it finds its expression in the seven last words of the dying Saviour.

First Word:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

You will never find an instance of harshness in Our Lord's treatment of a repentant sinner. On the sin itself, He was inexorable, but for the sinner who avowed that he was genuinely ashamed of his base conduct and resolved to amend, for him Jesus Christ ever showed all the compassion and understanding of a tender mother.

Nothing is easier than to illustrate this trait of His character. A whole list of His dealings with repentant sinners comes instinctively to mind. There was Magdalene, the woman in the city who was a sinner. There was Peter who denied Him, cursing and swearing that he never knew Him, although only a few hours had elapsed since he had vehemently affirmed that he would shed his blood for Christ. There was the woman of Samaria, the woman taken in adultery, there was Judas even, whom with a tact truly divine He tried to save almost in spite of himself. There was His

mercy towards His corrupt judges. Witness His warning to Caiphas and His readiness to speak to Pilate and explain to him everything he wanted to know. And now, here on Calvary, there is yet another instance of this same unfailing mercy. For even His persecutors He prays. They stand around His cross jeering Him in His dying hour, pointing at Him the finger of scorn, but for them, too, He will pray. 'Father, forgive them.'

And His excuse for them? "They know not what they are doing." But surely, His mercy and love without precedent should have taught them? Could any man who was man, and no more, evince such patience, such thoughtfulness for others, such astonishing readiness to forgive as they had witnessed this day in Jesus of Nazareth? Why, then, did they not know Him? What was holding their eyes?

If friendship with Our Lord, following upon experimental knowledge of Him, is to come into its own and transform the soul, every obstacle must first be removed. The soul has the fearful power of being able to erect walls that will oppose the action of divine grace, and sin and selfishness form the bricks and the mortar and the clay. Only when those walls have collapsed, or at least have begun to totter, only then will the soul begin to understand, from her own intimate experience, what it is to know Him Who is hanging here on Calvary today.

Sin and selfishness — how they blind the mind and harden the heart against the influence of grace! Look around at those responsible for the death of Christ and see the many manifestations of selfishness that have conspired to bring about this tragic ending to His life. In Annas and Caiphas, selfishness took the form of an insane hatred and jealousy of Christ and the power He held with the people. If He is allowed to go on like this, He will win their allegiance, and the Jewish priests and rulers will be out of the picture. They had said as much: "Do you see that we prevail nothing? Behold, the whole world is gone after Him." Selfishness, in Annas and Caiphas, took the form of an ungovernable jealousy, and they swore to put Him to death.

In Pontius Pilate, selfishness manifested itself under the garb of slavery to the opinion of the world. This unfortunate man knew very well that His Prisoner was innocent. He declared this openly.

Hence, you would say that Pilate's course must be clear. If the Man is innocent, let Him go free at once. But would that please the world? Pilate might anger the Jews. Pilate might lose the favour of Caesar. At all costs, he must keep on good terms with those in power. So he has resort to a series of shameful subterfuges — sending Our Lord to Herod, scourging Him with savage severity, putting him up against Barrabas. All this he does in the vain effort to keep himself on good terms with the world. Selfishness in Pilate's case was synonymous with worldliness.

Herod too was selfish. No more need be said of this dissolute prince than that he was a slave to the unclean sin. Pleasure was Herod's idol, before which Christ refused to bend. Herod could not argue with Christ. No defence of his life was possible, so he just laughed at Christ as being out-of-date and sent Him away. The atmosphere was uncomfortable with this Man about. Herod's reeking soul could not endure contact with the immaculate Christ. He would not argue: he would not try to put up a defence (as Pilate and the others tried to do). He preferred to smile indulgently. The Man is a simpleton. Take Him away and let Herod go on with his fun! Impurity is the very enthronement of selfishness in the heart.

Lastly, there is the mob around the dying Christ. They have been goaded to this act of deicide because they have permitted themselves to be duped by blind guides. They refuse to stop and think and reason for themselves. They are victims of lying propaganda.

“They do not know,” because they, too, are eaten up with selfishness. “We will not have this Man to rule over us.”

Why? Because their leaders hate Him, and they have promised the mob with rich rewards if they succeed in slaying Him. It is selfishness again that is responsible. The crowd listens and believes these specious promises. If these are fulfilled, things will go well indeed with the mob. Wherefore let Christ die. Away with Him! Crucify Him!

Jealousy, worldliness, impurity, credulity — four forms of selfishness which condemned Christ to death. Notice, in passing, the striking contrast in Our Lord. Already we have dwelt upon His mercy and thoughtfulness for others. Even His enemies on Calvary bear unwitting testimony to His unselfishness. “He saved others, Himself He cannot save!”

So it is selfishness which blinds men’s eyes thus. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know.” And selfishness is blinding them today. First of all, there is jealousy and hatred. You will never taste and see that the Lord is sweet as long as you harbour in your heart bitterness against your neighbour.

“As long as you did it to one of these, you did it to Me.” You are estranged from another? You say you will not forgive? You will never salute that person again? Granted that you were treated unjustly. Granted that lying tongues defamed you. Granted that perjury wronged you out of your property.

All that was done to Christ and His vengeance was to pray: ‘Father, forgive them’. As long as you cherish feelings of resentment towards anybody, you are separated from Christ. He is in that person — so unjust, so thoughtless, so selfish. “You did it to Me.” Let the streams of His blood flowing from Calvary today break down the barrier of jealousy and uncharitableness and He will enter deeply into the soul. Then you will “know” Him — not out of books or sermons, but from your own intimate experience. Selfishness was holding your eyes, but now with forgiveness comes light to see and to know, and to understand a little better, the strength and sincerity of Christ’s love.

Pilate was filled with the spirit of worldliness, and there are many Pilates abroad today. What is the rift of pleasure except worship of the world? No time for Christ or deep prayer because there are so many things to do: so many shows or dances or films. Even if serious sin be avoided, how can any sane man expect to know Christ, and to love Him and to realise Him, if life is a ceaseless chasing after amusement? No one has a word to say against reasonable recreation, but the evidence is abundant that pleasure-seeking is fast tending to absorb the whole life of many of our people. The result is that God and His service are regarded more or less as an interference, an inconvenient and irksome duty to be got through with the minimum of time and trouble.

Little they suspect, these votaries of the world, the deep joy they are missing. “They do not know.” They fancy that passionate devotion to Christ must somehow be a burden. “Being good always” must be such a penance! The only happiness they know and have experience of comes from the world.

If only they would give grace a chance to teach them the trifles with which they are satisfied and the solid peace they are losing!

The beginnings of every science are difficult. You can recall, perhaps, the painful hammering out of scales and exercises on the piano, or the laboured sentences of your first essays in writing. But as you grow proficient, ease comes and pleasure, and finally an absorbing interest.

This is exactly the course, too, in the science of knowing and loving Christ. "It is the first step that counts," the Little Flower has written. To break with the world you love will probably be desperately hard. Deliberately to turn your back on many a dance or cinema, and instead to make a Holy Hour, or visit a slum area, or work for souls in your Sodality or Legion — not a bit attractive to your natural taste. But try it. At present selfishness is blinding you. At present selfishness has vitiated your taste. Put in the sword courageously and cut out this cancer-selfishness, and see how you will then come to know Christ. It is the first step that counts.

Second Word:

Lord, remember me when You shall come into Your kingdom.

Everybody suffers, at least sometimes, from depression. The disease is so universal that definition of it seems superfluous. Times there are when everything goes wrong. Normally, you are easy enough to get on with and people have no difficulty in coming to you in the course of business or recreation. But when you are depressed you are inclined to be snappy and irritable, and your friends leave you wondering what has happened. Usually you take a healthy interest in your work, and it is a pleasure to you to settle down to a good hard grind. At normal times, you can concentrate, but when this depression settles upon you, it is only with an almost superhuman effort that you drag yourself into your shop or sit at your desk. You cannot well say what you want to do instead, but, if you allowed yourself, you would be peevish and restless. You are in a mood to doubt if anything is worth while. Normally you are fond of a game or a hard tramp into the country or you can enjoy an evening with your friends. But, since this feeling of depression has fallen upon you, you want to be left alone, and possibly your friends' efforts to arouse your interest only irritate you the more.

A time of depression has great possibilities to make or to mar your spiritual life. Nothing is easier at such a period than to pitch aside all effort, to forget all one's good resolutions, and, like a spoilt child, to pout and stamp one's foot at the world in general. Nothing is easier than even to fling one's self recklessly into serious sin at such a time in order by such a course to try to find the satisfaction one is craving for. It was all very well in the fervour of your retreat or mission to make grand promises and to resolve to be all that you know a fervent Catholic should be. But now that this disease has come, and, it would seem, has come to stay, you are ready to yield one point after another. What's the use? Others all around you are having a good time. They sin freely and seem to enjoy it. Why do you want to make an exception of yourself?

On the other hand, a period of depression can be a decided lift to higher things in my spiritual life. It teaches me to look below the surface and read life with the eyes of Jesus Christ. This sense of dissatisfaction with everything and everyone, what else is it but a most cogent argument that I am made for something higher than this world? I can often give no reason to myself for my depression. People are kind to me, my work is said to be a success, my health was never better, I hear good news of those who are dear to me. And yet, with it all, there is this unaccountable fit of weariness with life and this constant restlessness and apparent inability to settle down to work or play or prayer. Is there an explanation?

Yes, there is. If there is no infidelity with which I have to reproach myself, if I have tried all the while to be faithful to my ideals of prayer and generosity in God's service, and if, in spite of this, I am crushed down by this load, I am safe in assuring myself that the load has been measured out and placed upon my shoulders by the hand of God. There is a deep lesson here for me. The Lord Who loves me would teach me and convince me that nothing can satisfy my heart except Him alone.

That was the lesson learned by the Prodigal Son. It was only in his hour of depression that he came to know his father. It was not until he had reached the squalor of the pigsty that he realised his mistake. "How many servants in my father's house, and I the son am here famishing with cold and hunger. I will arise and go to my father!" It was the same depression that brought back the repentant thief here on Calvary. "Lord, do You remember me!" It was, if you will, a poor compliment to the Lord that the thief called to Him only after he had drunk to the dregs the intoxications of the world and found them unsatisfying. When all else had failed he turned to Christ. Lord, 'remember me'. He had wearied of all that sin could give him. He had learned that sin is misery indeed. Perhaps Christ could satisfy. Perhaps He after all held the secret of happiness. The thief would try, at least. 'Lord, remember me'. Everything else has turned to ashes.

We could never dream of treating a human friend like this. Suppose he offers me his friendship and I reject it. Instead, I go my way and find that I in turn am also unwanted by those for whom I rejected him. Years pass by and I have been all the while unresponsive. All the while, I have sought other friendships and have deliberately held myself aloof from him. Suppose it is only after a life like this, when I am unwanted by others, when I have all these years been turning my back on him, suppose it is only when there is nobody else left to fall back upon, that I now return to my friend and accept his friendship and his love. But if even now he will have me, if even now he is glad to receive me, I may indeed congratulate myself on having found a friend whose friendship is almost unique. That is the theme of Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven." All those years the soul has fled Christ, and it is only when it has tasted and tried sin that it finally gives Him a chance of pouring into it sweetness and the happiness it has sought. "Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee, save Me, save only Me?"

It is here precisely that Our Lord's love proves itself so immeasurably superior to the love of everybody else. Reject a human friend and normally the friendship is severed forever. I have spurned his offer of love and have gone for years seeking other friendships. I cannot go back to him now no, not to a merely human friend. But the friendship of Christ is different. He will have me at any price and at any time. Disappointed I may be with the world and sin; disillusioned I may be by its specious promises; depressed I may be and weary of the burden of life. That is often Christ's moment. It was at a moment like this that the thief saw the light. It was on the cross that he learned to seek Christ. It was when all else had turned to ashes that he understood at last where to seek and to find a friendship that would endure. And it was after a life of ingratitude, after a life in which he had sought and tried out every means of finding happiness apart from Christ, it was only at the end that Christ came into His own.

And the vastly consoling truth is that Christ accepts him, even now. "This day you shall be, with Me in Paradise." A sentence that surely filled the repentant thief with joy. But the joy was scarcely without alloy. The calamity of it, that life is gone and he has discovered Christ only now!

Third Word:

Behold your Mother; Behold your son.

The Blessed Trinity conferred a marvellous privilege on Mary of Nazareth when they sent the angel to ask her to consent to be God's Mother. But it is far from the truth to imagine that the divine maternity implied an honour only. Our Lady knew well that her "fiat" would entail a life of suffering. (Be it done to me according to Your will.) All through those years since the Incarnation, she was being asked for sacrifice, and today on Calvary, she is placing the crown on her offering.

Behold your Mother. What is that Mother doing? “There stood by the Cross of Jesus His Mother.” Round about her are the jeering crowds hurling their taunts at her dying Son. And Our Lady stands there as a priest might stand, underneath the cross offering her Son as a Victim for sin. Here is the culmination of her “fiat.” Overwhelmed as she is with grief, she will not wince. Sin has to be atoned for and Mary offers Christ. Such a Victim, offered by such hands, must surely find acceptance in God’s sight. Even as the priest at Mass offers the Host and the Chalice in reparation, so does Mary stand here and offer the prayers and the wounds of her divine Son.

The taunts and blasphemies uttered on Calvary find a ringing echo in this twentieth century. As we write, the world is drenched in the blood of the most frightful war known to history. Europe is a slaughter house. How much sin must necessarily follow in the trail of this carnage! How much hatred, and blasphemy, and immorality; how many thousand lives lost; what destruction to property; what passions let loose. And, even apart from the war, who can reckon up the sins committed in a city like this our Dublin in even one night? We are gathered around the Cross of the dying Christ. Make no mistake about it, before another sun rises over Dublin, Christ will be offended by crimes which Saint Paul tells us should not be even mentioned amongst us. You will soon step out of this Church and you know the world in which you live. You know the restless element that is abroad. You see for yourselves the loosening of morals, the little regard to God’s warnings, the break-up of home life, the heartlessness towards Christ’s poor, the neglect of prayer.

Do not tell me about our crowded Churches, our zealous apostolate; do not cite for me examples of generous self-sacrifice. For all that, we thank God and gratefully acknowledge that it is so. But what is to be said about those who do not crowd our Churches? What of those who crowd instead into our cinemas and dance halls: what of those who crowd into our County Homes, yes our poorhouses, who crowd our roads at night time? Speak about the activities of our splendid Catholics if you will, but do not forget that Satan, too, has his agents. Do not fail to reckon those whose lives are pampered and lazy and selfish. If you think they are few, you do not know the force of the jeers uttered on Calvary that is finding an echo in our midst today.

Many Catholics seem to be under the impression that the service of Jesus Christ is a negative thing merely. It seems to them that if they keep from sin and its occasions and ultimately, escape hell, that is all that should be expected from them. Of course, it is of first importance to do that much, and the words of Our Lord have so far impressed upon us the absolute need of breaking forever with sin and all that leads to sin. But now, there comes the positive lesson. Now comes the answer to that dynamic question that has revolutionised so many lives: What am I going to do for Christ?

What? Christ answers by telling me to look at His Mother. Behold your Mother. Here on Calvary she is offering Him as a Victim for sin. That offering made adequate reparation for the sins of all time. It was infinite in value, and as a result of it, there are stored up on Calvary the “unsearchable riches of Christ.” The soul may draw near and draw off from these fountains of the Saviour.

But what of the crimes of these present days? Our Lord can no longer suffer in His human Body for the sins that are being hurled against His Father today. But He can suffer in His mystical Body, which is composed of the members of His Church.

And that is the positive side of the spiritual life. That is Saint Paul’s sublime concept when he writes: “I fill up in my flesh those things that are wanting to the sufferings of Christ.” It is not enough merely to avoid sin and escape hell. He wants to do something positive in proof of his burning love for Christ “Who loved me and delivered Himself for me.”

On Calvary, they mocked Him as they are mocking Him today. On Calvary, Mary stood offering Him on the Cross in reparation for sin. Mary still stands waiting for victims who will go on the cross willingly and allow her to offer them, as part of Christ's mystical Body, in reparation for the heinous crimes that are surrounding us today. It is a sublime vocation. It is to reproduce the victimhood of Christ in our sinful flesh. On Calvary, Mary's first Victim prayed and suffered. He who would present himself to her in place of her Son must prepare, too, for a life of prayer and suffering. By such means, Christ expiated sin on Calvary. By these, it must be expiated today. Who is willing to come to Mary and say to her: Behold your son?

Fourth Word:

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?

It seems likely that this word of the dying Christ was uttered after that strange darkness had covered the earth. For the greater part of three hours, our Saviour hung there in a state of torture that baffles our powers of imagination to conceive, and now this darkness descends upon Him and accentuates His feeling of complete isolation and loneliness. It is very well worthy of note that at such an hour of loneliness His remedy is prayer. The pathetic cry breaks out over the hill of Calvary and sends its echo into the darkness: 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?'

It is easy enough to pray when consolations abound. Often at the outset of the spiritual life, the soul is inundated with a heavenly joy. Everything seems so simple, sanctity is so reasonable, the cross is so loved. It is difficult to understand why all men do not see and understand the love of Christ for them and why they do not make Him a fitting return. When the soul is in this state of sweetness and appreciates thus the value of the supernatural, there is nothing more natural than that she should find in prayer her chief delight.

But if she perseveres, a change will probably come to her. Presently, this sweetness will begin to evaporate. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "I gave you milk to drink, not meat, because you were not able as yet." In the beginning of the Soul's journey Godwards, on the road of prayer, God generally allures her to love of divine things by giving her "milk" of sensible sweetness. As she progresses, He will offer her the meat of the strong. He will withdraw from her all taste and delight in the things of the spiritual life, and, like Jesus on Calvary today, she will be inclined to complain and cry out: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Has He forsaken her actually? Not at all. Prayer does not consist in sweetness but in converse with God. In order that a soul may enter into "holy familiarity with God", she must be purified. Now at first, she is attached, although she does not know it, to this sensible sweetness. She believes she wants it only that it may help her Godwards, but in reality she is loving, not so much God, as this sweetness which God is giving her. In order to train her to rise above this feeling, God takes it away, when she has grown somewhat in spiritual strength.

How will she react? It is of paramount importance at a time like this, that she understands clearly that her policy must be to make no change whatever in her spiritual life or in her resolutions. Let her turn back to creatures now — to the world, to comfort in gossip, or cinema, or dance hall, or news — to any of the thousand things which she has seen are hindrances to her progress, though they are not sins. Let her, at a time of trial like this, go back again to the good things the world has to offer her, and she may mar a life of holiness. Much depends on her fidelity in this period of dryness. Jesus prayed in the darkness. Let her do the same and she will advance more in the love of God and in solid spirituality at a time like this than when she is abounding in sweetness.

More than this. If she will but hold on, the sweetness will return, as soon as the Lord sees that she has been purified. But it will not be the same. It will be deeper, more soul-satisfying, because now, on account of her greater purity, she can draw nearer to the source of all purity. Hence, her prayer after this period of apparent dereliction has gone through a cleansing process. She seeks God alone now whereas before she sought His gifts.

It would be very easy to illustrate this from the lives of the saints. They became saints through the cross, and the form the cross most often took was just the dereliction of Calvary. Long periods of utter dryness, during which it would have been so simple a matter to let go their hold upon the spiritual life, were crowned by a triumph similar to that which shone out after the tragedy of Calvary had been consummated.

It is not sweetness in prayer that makes saints, but the adherence of the will to God. And the most searching test of this loyalty of the will is given when darkness covers the face of God. Calvary taught the saints to pray at such a time with all the greater earnestness and because they learned that hard lesson, they rejoiced later in a fuller possession of God.

Fifth Word:

I Thirst.

When Our Lord was kneeling in Gethsemani last night, on the last night before His painful and tortured death, He prayed that the chalice might pass from Him. It was indeed a bitter chalice. The evangelists tell us that there were three ingredients in it.

“He began to be afraid”; “He began to be weary,” or filled with loathing and disgust; “He began to be sorrowful and to be sad.” Fear, disgust and sadness are thus the contents of His chalice. Fear filled His Heart because of the near approach of His sufferings. Disgust seized upon His immaculate soul because of that slimy spectre which issued from the shadows, whose name is sin. And sadness crushed Him to earth last night, on that last night, because, in spite of all He was about to suffer, souls would be lost.

Still, He took the chalice, although He had to force Himself, and now on Calvary He declares that He thirsts. It would seem as if the dying Saviour would, thus express His willingness and His eagerness to drink even more deeply still of that bitter chalice which at first He found so hard to accept. Last night, on that last night, He prayed: ‘Father, if it be possible, remove this chalice’. Today He tells the Father: ‘I thirst’. Not only has He drunk the chalice, but, if the Father willed, He would drink more deeply of suffering still.

It is God’s way never to allow Himself to be outdone in generosity. It is beyond question that the close following of Our Lord will entail the acceptance of hard things. This condition He will not tone down. “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me.” Many hear this and pass Him by. It is a hard saying, and they cannot bring themselves to believe that His fellowship is worth it.

But there are others who stop to listen: They hear Him invite them to a life of sacrifice, and little by little, perhaps at the cost of many a stiff battle with self, they come ultimately to a state when they live a life of habitual sacrifice. As they draw near towards this happy consummation, they make a discovery that surprises them. It is that the more they “go in” for sacrifice, the happier they become. Just as Our Lord experienced a thirst for even greater sufferings, did the Father so will, so they too discover that the cross and suffering, lovingly accepted, so far from embittering their lives and

making them unhappy, prove rather to be the highroad to an intense gladness of heart which before this they never experienced. It is Our Lord's generosity. The moment they give up anything for love of Him, He rewards them with a wonderful sense of freedom. A chain has snapped. They feel that they are emancipated from a tyranny that was holding them captive. When they broke the chain, they entered at once into the freedom of the children of God.

Our Lord refused the vinegar and gall which would have robbed Him of this precious suffering. So, the soul which has discovered the joy of sacrifice, so far from wanting relaxation, regards suffering rather as her greatest gain, for it affords her an opportunity of proving her love for Christ. And it affords Him an excuse to pour into the soul a joy not of this earth.

This sublime folly is learned at the feet of Christ on Calvary.

When Saint John of the Cross was asked by Our Lord what reward he wanted for all he had done in God's service, he answered: "Only to be despised and to suffer for You!" When Saint Francis Xavier knelt in prayer at the close of an exhausting day of toil in his missions, he was heard to cry out: "Lord, withdraw these consolations from me and give me the cross and suffering." This is, if you like, "unnatural." Better, it is supernatural. Grace can effect marvels on nature when given an opportunity. Let the soul, like Christ in Gethsemani, steel herself to grasp the chalice and drink it, and when she has drunk she will still cry out, again like Him: 'I thirst'. 'I would suffer still more, seeing that suffering opens the way to such intimacy with Christ.'

Sixth Word:

It is consummated.

This word was spoken just before Our Lord died. After He had uttered it, Jesus, bowing down His head, gave up the ghost. Hence, the most natural interpretation to give to His word is that it refers to His life, which has now at last come to a close. That life is a perfect life. He has lived it in the manner most surely calculated to give the maximum of glory to His eternal Father. Man's task, too, is to give glory to God by his life, and, since this was done in the most perfect way by Our Lord, it follows that the more closely man reproduces Christ's life in his own, the more perfectly he too will glorify God.

And that is the teaching of the saints, and notably of Saint Paul. The great apostle never wearies of impressing upon us that Christ is the model Whom we have to reproduce in ourselves. "My little children for whom I am in labour again until Christ be fashioned in you." "Be ye imitators of me as I am of Christ." "Always bearing about in our bodies the mortification of Jesus." These are a few texts which come instinctively to mind as illustrative of the central idea of Pauline theology, so that a Christian must reproduce Christ's life in himself.

Now, this life which is ending here, has two phases, and it is really one of these which is "consummated" on Calvary. There is the suffering phase, and there is the glorious phase. When the suffering phase ends for Him the clouds part, the sun shines through once more and Jesus enters in triumph into heaven and begins the second phase of His life. This will continue throughout the endless ages of eternity.

And at present, they who are Christ's are engaged on the task of reproducing the first part of his life. That is why there is nothing more reasonable than to expect treatment in this world similar to what He experienced. "Wonder not, brethren, if the world hates you." "You are not of the world as I also am not of the world. If you had been of the world, the world would love its own. But because you

are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” That is the first part for the Christian. Hence, while he is here, he looks out for hardship and suffering and contradiction and poverty. It seems to him the most natural thing in the world to have these things, for it is by these that he is to be fashioned according to the Model. “Suffering,” writes Saint John of the Cross, “is the badge of those who love.”

But it is not all toiling to Calvary. There is the second phase, too, to be reproduced. When the soul has followed Him faithfully throughout the shame and humiliations of Calvary, for it, too, as for its Model, the clouds part and there is the wonderful welcome home. “Well done, good and faithful servant!” It is the glorious phase, the second part of His life, that now begins in that soul, and, as in His case, that second part will go on throughout eternity, yes, without end. In proportion to the fidelity with which it has been fashioned in the way of suffering and humiliation, in the same will now be its share in the second part of the life of the Model.

“It is consummated” can refer, too, to the love of Jesus Christ for a soul. Times there are when, during the period while we are following Him to Calvary, we feel footsore and weary and almost ready to think that all religion is a make-believe. But at a time like that, if we come and kneel down here, we are cheered and encouraged at once. Why? Because Jesus Christ on Calvary has done all that an omnipotent love can do to prove itself. As He looks down into the soul there at His feet, He sees all its most secret sins — all the broken resolutions, all those others it has led into sin, all the sacrilegious Communion, the impurities, the drunkenness. Such a terrible catalogue of vice! Yet, knowing all about that poor soul and her evil ways, He tells her that His Heart loves still, and still is ready to forgive.

He cannot do more than He is doing here on Calvary to assure the repentant sinner that, even if her sins be red as scarlet, He is anxious to make them white as snow. Here is the “consummation” of His love. If Calvary fails to convince me of His readiness to forgive, then omnipotent love can do no more. He is a friend, indeed, and he fulfils in Himself that grand definition of a friend, “a man who knows everything about me and loves me just the same?”

Seventh Word:

Into Your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Death is a penalty, and it is useless for us to try to rob it of its terrors. Try as we may, the fearful issues that are in the balance at that moment fill us with dread. If I am at death what I ought to be, then my eternal destiny is secure; if at death I am found wanting, my life, whatever it may have been in the eyes of men, is now proved to be an utter failure. “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”

At the death of Christ I cannot but be impressed by the confident assurance with which He passes out of this world. Some time ago, He cried to His Father as if in despair, but now that has all passed away, and He speaks with confidence and with peace. “Into Your Hands, O Lord, I commend My spirit.”

This confidence of Our Lord is at once accounted for when we recall the inviolable fidelity with which He did the Father’s Will. That Will was the rule of His life. “The things that are pleasing to My Father, I always do.” Hence, when He looked back from Calvary over those thirty-three years, He could see clearly that in everything He did or left undone, in all that He said or did not say, in His journeys or in retirement — throughout all, one only guide determined His actions, — the Will

of His Eternal Father. Well, therefore, might He sum up His life by saying: “Father, I have finished the work which You gave Me to do, and now I come to You.” There is no anxiety. There is the confident assurance that all is well, for the dutiful Son has done exactly what the Father sent Him into the world to do. Hence, His dying word is a shout of victory, for to serve God is to reign.

Can death be robbed of its terrors? Many friends of God have gone to meet death with a smile of joy on their faces. What is the explanation of their confidence? It is built up on the same assurance that accounts for the confidence of Christ. Like Him, the faithful servant has done God’s Will, though not indeed with the same exactness. There have been failures, many of them perhaps, but at least the desire and the effort have been kept up, and the trustful soul knows in Whom she is trusting. Little does it matter to her on her deathbed that she has been popular, or much travelled, that she has had a “good time,” that she lived in Ireland or at the antipodes — all that simply ceases to matter. One fact only will comfort her: one thought only will sustain her — that she can lift up her eyes until they meet the eyes of Christ and can say, like Him, that she has tried consistently to do God’s Will in her special state of life. With this assurance, she can indeed face death calmly and repeat with her great Model: ‘Into Your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit’.

We are living in an age which should be prolific in saints. We are crippled at present with mediocrity in the spiritual life; we are paralysed by ordinariness. In view of the sin that is rife, it is time we realised the need there is of reparation. The Sacred Heart appeals for reparation, and reparation is to be made by modelling ourselves on Him. This means sanctity, not mere avoidance of sin, nor mere escaping hell. It means generosity, the determination to offend the whole world and risk every material gain, rather than swerve a hairs-breadth from what we know to be God’s Will.

In the proportion that we do God’s Will (even the will of His good pleasure, which we can disobey without actually committing sin) in the same will the grace of God flow from Calvary into our souls. In the proportion that the grace of Christ flows into our souls, in the same shall we become modeled upon Christ. These are the three steps on the road to sanctity — do God’s Will, do God’s Will, and then do God’s Will; yes and grace will flow unimpeded into the soul; let grace flow thus into the soul and the soul will grow in Christliness; and Christliness is another name for sanctity.

Christ appeals for saints. What a bitter regret we shall have at our death if we have turned a deaf ear to the appeal! What sorrow that we are only good enough when He was urging us all those years to generosity! But what confidence if we have tried consistently, in spite of many falls along the road, to keep our eyes fixed on the Model and to do God’s Will! Such a perseverance will entitle us to look forward to the crown, to mingle our confident prayer with the prayer of the dying Christ: “Into Your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.”

(Thanks to Irish Messenger Office.)
