

They Crucified Him

The Stations of the Cross

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Catholic Truth Society of Ireland No.pr046a (1946)

The three words on our title page are Saint Luke's terse summary of the events of Our Lord's Sacred Passion.

Who "they" were, and what "crucifying" implied, and what manner of Man they outraged in crucifying "Him," — these ideas are capable of wide expansion, they have formed the subject-matter of innumerable meditations, and they are most aptly illustrated in the fourteen scenes known familiarly to us as "the stations." Catholics, thank God, nourish their love of Our Lord and deepen their hatred of sin, by frequently "making" those stations, so it may prove helpful in these pages to set forth thoughts which are easily suggested to the mind, and affections which readily arise in the heart, as one follows Christ and Mary through these events taking place on the way to Calvary.

I.

We find ourselves at the outset, in a quiet corner of Pilate's hall, looking on the Prisoner Who is standing before His judge.

In the street below a brutal mob is howling, and the cry, quivering from excess of hatred, sends up its echo:

"Away with Him! He is guilty of death! Crucify Him!"

Presently the Governor arises from his seat, dips his hands in a basin of water and holds them dripping over the edge of the balcony. "No," he declares, "this Man is not guilty of death. He is innocent and I wash my hands to show you that I am not taking responsibility for His condemnation.

"But, though He is innocent, I sentence Him to be crucified."

We might draw many a helpful consideration from this first station, but it will probably be most useful to concentrate on one at a time. So as we watch Pilate and the infuriated Jews we see very clearly indeed how foolish is that man who allows himself to be swayed unduly by desire for his fellowman's praise and approval. For Pilate's inconsistency is equalled only by his cruelty. In one breath, he affirms Christ's innocence, and in the next, he condemns Him! And as for the multitudes, it is barely five days since they gathered around Jesus on the occasion of His triumphant journey into Jerusalem, once more shouting themselves hoarse, but in jubilation this time as they acclaim this same Man their King. Look at them now and see how swiftly the popularist aura has changed. These are the people whose sick He has cured, whose dead He has raised to life again. These are the same who followed Him into desert places and whom He fed by working a miracle. They had

brought their children to Him to bless. Is it too much to suppose that to-day they lift up those same little ones high in their arms and teach them to yell curses at Him as at a hypocrite and a criminal?

Whatever be their charge and even if it were a just one, the Truth cannot but force itself upon us that he who leans much on mere human friendship and permits his conduct to be guided by the fickle opinions of men is building upon shifting sands. Of course, there is nothing more removed from our minds than censure of the beautiful and lasting friendships which abound. But unless friendship and affection be the overflow of the love of Christ in the soul, it will soon degenerate into mere expediency. A friend of this sort smiles upon you and is lavish with attentions as long as he has anything to gain from you, or thinks he has. But seek him out when sorrow presses upon you and he is 'not at home', or he is plainly bored and uninterested, and when next you meet him in the street, he looks the other way or crosses to the other side. Jesus, enduring this fickleness of men, would have me learn that there is one abiding friendship and only one, which stands unshaken in the midst of men's insincerity - the friendship existing between God and the soul, and the friendship which loves others for His sake.

There is another form of subservience to men's opinions and it is called human respect. Men will drink freely and use loose language or intersperse their conversation with foul oaths — and why? They will be ashamed to silence indecent talk, they will smile or laugh at a tale that nauseates — and why? They will fawn on those who have power, and compromise their consciences to win their approval. They will make careful study of the art of timeserving — why? Look back ten or fifteen years and see how utterly unimportant it is now what men thought of you or said about you then, when you were ridiculed or laughed at, or on the other hand, when you were lauded to the skies. Whether they praise or blame, whether they regard you as a wise man or a fool, you are what God sees you to be. Just that, and no more or no less. What fools we are to be so easily swayed, and to lose opportunities of growing in God's love or combating His enemies because we fear what others will think or say about us! "To me," writes Saint Paul, "it is a very small thing to be judged by you.... He that judges me is the Lord."

Jesus in this first station teaches me to ignore, as being unworthy of a moment's consideration, what men will think of me, and to seek to win for my words and actions the approval of Him Whose judgment of me, because unerring, is the only one worth having.

II.

So, He is accounted guilty of death, and accordingly Jesus, in the second station, proceeds to carry His cross.

This time we draw very close to Him and, as the excited crowds continue to yell that He is guilty of death, we may well ask to which of the two of us do those accusing fingers point. They cannot justly indicate our Saviour, for even the corrupt Pilate has pronounced Him innocent. But it is indeed true that every man who commits mortal sin is guilty of death. Before that fatal day and hour, his soul was pulsating with the very life of God Himself, for to be in the state of grace is to participate in the divine nature. But as the sinner consummates his foul deed, his hands are red with the blood of murder. He has stifled and strangled and slain the life of his own soul. He is branded in God's sight as a murderer, like another Cain. And like Cain too, often he is not satisfied with destroying the life of his own soul but must needs inject the virus into the souls of others. "Woe to the scandal-giver," says Our Lord. Woe to him or to her who teaches others how to sin, who tempts them to wickedness, who laughs airily at their just scruples. Such a one is indeed guilty of death.

The lying mob surrounding Our Lord gives place to the souls ruined and slain by such a scandal-giver and these proclaim in all truth, as they look upon him and point him out: “He has incurred sentence of death, for he is a murderer. He has murdered our souls!”

Fearful responsibility! Perhaps to set a young man on the road to moral collapse! To blight a fair young life by evil example; to stir up in another the flames of passion which may take years to extinguish and control again, if indeed the task ever be accomplished at all! “Father,” said an old woman, “I’m eighty-two and will you tell everyone you can what I’m going to say to you? I was a sinner, and the memory of my sins haunts me night and day. I sit in this bed at two and three in the morning and ask myself how am I going to answer to God for the souls I have led into the ways of sin. If only young people would learn from me what misery there is in sin!”

We are still standing side by side, Jesus and I. He willingly takes the cross though He is innocence itself. Must I not corroborate the accusation hurled against me, that it is I who am guilty of death? And if so, what could be more just or fitting than that I believe the innocent Man of His load, and accept the cross willingly for my own portion?

III.

Tradition says that Our blessed Lord fell several times on the road. In the next station, we make reverent commemoration of the first of these falls. It is greeted with shrieks of fiendish delight. Our divine Lord is prodded with a lance and rudely kicked, as He lies flat on the ground. And, while we are waiting for this poor exhausted Man to force Himself to rise again, we let our minds go back to our own first serious fall, back to the day of the sinner’s first mortal sin.

All sin is a species of idolatry, a falling down before impurity or drunkenness or injustice or hatred, and willfully to pay to them the homage due to God alone. Sin is thus the free choice of a soul, and if the soul passes out of this world in that state all God does is to confirm it in the choice it has freely made. It is the soul itself therefore that condemns itself to eternity in hell, for so great an evil is mortal sin that only in hell can it find the environment proper to it. If, to make an impossible supposition, such a soul were to be admitted to heaven and into the sight of the infinitely holy God, it would endure a more fearful hell than ever. Seeing its own filth and contrasting it with His ineffable purity, the soul would endeavour to crawl away out of this light, even as our first parents, after their sin, hid themselves from the eyes of God. What must be the enormity of sin seeing that the only place fitted for the unrepentant sinner is everlasting fire, in the midst of the screams of despair wrung from those who have not a single atom of hope, who have lost the power to love, whose hearts are continually torn by the thought that this is all their own fault?

The sceptic may sneer at the idea of hell and a hereafter, but the clear teaching of Christ stands against him.

“Fear not them who can destroy the body and after that have no more that they can do, but fear Him rather Who can destroy both body and soul into hell.

“Yea, I say to you, fear ye Him.” “If your hand or your foot scandalise you, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to go into life maimed or lame, than, having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.” If something so dear as a limb or an eye were to be a source of sin, we should not hesitate to take these drastic steps.

Why? Does Our Lord speak thus vigorously merely to strike terror into us? Undoubtedly, that is part of His purpose. But one thinks too that these weighty warnings about hell are dictated by His

love. He sees, on the one hand, the soul He loves intensely and purchases at such a price, and on the other He looks into the place of torments lying open there before His eyes. What wonder that His Sacred Heart throbs with anxiety to save, and that even divine eloquence finds difficulty in expressing the horror of the reality?

The sinner's first fall into mortal sin! His first prostration in adoration before an idol! His first deliberate preference in serious matter of passion and selfish gratification to God! What ever would have happened if there were no forgiveness! If God had taken him at his word! Recall the circumstances — the day it was, the person or persons who were there, the place the crime was perpetrated — that first fall. Doesn't it make one's blood almost freeze to think that if death had come then, the sinner was lost now in hell?

IV.

But the mercy Christ extended to the sinner after his first fall He does not accept for Himself. When He is down under the weight; not of His own sins but of ours, He is kicked and cursed and jeered at till at last, more dead than alive, He drags Himself again to His feet. And, as He forces open His eyes, weighed down as they are with blood and spittle, in order to see where next to place His foot, He finds Himself looking straight into the eyes of Mary His Mother. We have reached the fourth of the stations, the meeting of Jesus and Mary on the way to Calvary. When was their last meeting? Probably the evening before, when Jesus came in from the house of Magdalene and Martha at Bethania, (Bethany,) two miles out, and left His Mother behind. What a night has passed since! "Jesus," writes Saint Ignatius, "spent the whole of that night in bonds." He was flung into gaol, after the soldiers had finished their savage sport with Him. The stigma of the gaol! He is locked up, and wearily sits down on the hard floor of that narrow guardroom, with hands tied in front of Him, looking forward to the morrow which is to bring Him the Passion.

That was the night for Jesus. And for Mary? One thinks of the dreadful suspense all that night, as she remained waiting for His return in the house out at Bethania. He had gone into the city for the Paschal supper and His Mother knows that enemies are there, thirsting like wolves for His blood. Why is He not returning tonight? Every footstep she hears outside makes her mother's heart beat more rapidly in hopeful expectation, only to sink the more deeply when the footstep passes by the door and Mary realises it is not He after all. Morning comes and with the first grey streaks of dawn, she is on the road to Jerusalem. Magdalene, once the sinner but now the inseparable companion of Mary Immaculate, is by her side. Well-intentioned townsfolk meet her on the way, and without tact or thought, they blurt out the news that cuts into her soul. He has been taken and the report is on everyone's lips that He will surely be crucified. "There are tears which at their fountains freeze," writes the poet, and Mary's were of that kind. She was paralysed by excess of agony as she continued to walk towards Jerusalem, dazed and leaning on the arm of Magdalene.

Their last meeting — when He embraced her there at the door, when He was leaving Bethania, and she stood looking after Him, as a mother would, till He was quite out of sight.

And here is the next meeting in this fourth station. Such a terrifying contrast! When sin wreaks vengeance on the sinless Christ this is the result. And when He undertakes to prove His love for the sinner this is how He does it.

The Father did not spare His own well-beloved Son, and Jesus will not spare the Mother He cherishes. His anguish at the sight of the grief He was causing her was probably one of the most

poignant pains of the entire Passion. It is comparatively easy to bear suffering oneself, but it is agonising to make another suffer, whom one loves intensely.

But Mary too must share in the work of redeeming souls, and she too must be given this opportunity of offering for men's salvation Him to Whom she clung with a consuming love.

Their hearts were inundated with sorrow at this meeting but neither of them would have things otherwise. Jesus offered Himself, and Mary offered Jesus, each with a generosity devoid of any vestige of desire to withhold the offering, wholly or in part. For Jesus and Mary loved men's souls, our souls who now are accompanying them to Calvary, and, although to give thus cost them unutterable anguish, their love of us rose higher still and both spoke their fiat. "Fiat voluntas tua," 'Your will be done,' said Jesus to the Father. "Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum," 'Be it done to me according to your word,' echoed Mary. It was hard to say, but they both said it. It was harder still to mean, but they did mean it, and gave overwhelming proof of their sincerity when out of love for us, Jesus offered Himself and Mary offered Jesus, on the way to Calvary.

V.

Jesus could quite well have carried the cross the whole way Himself, had He not freely renounced supernatural help. But He needs help because He wills to need it. So Simon of Cyrene is forced to share His burden. God condescends to want the assistance of His creature. Just as last night, when Jesus lay prostrate in agony, He deigned to receive comfort from the angel — who after all was a mere creature — so now on the road to Calvary He is willing that a creature too should be privileged to give Him the help required to finish the journey.

The truth that God makes men's salvation depend, to some extent, on our co-operation is, in the words of Pius XII, "a subject of inexhaustible meditation." Let it be realised and the realisation must shake our souls to their very foundations. It is actually left to me to decide whether a certain number of souls is going to bless God throughout eternity in heaven, or blaspheme His holy name for endless ages in hell. How many are thus dependent upon me?

That is God's secret, but it is beyond question that if I make myself the instrument He expects me to be, He will use me to save others, and if, through my neglect and selfishness I fail Him, these souls will not receive the grace which otherwise would have come to them. And, as our holy Father is careful to point out, this weighty responsibility for the souls of others rests, not only on priests and religious, but in due measure on all members of the Church. The issues involved leave us baffled and speechless in our effort to express their gigantic importance.

If I fail to answer an urgent letter I can, perhaps, make good the omission by sending a telegram or a phone message. But my failure to render myself fit for use as an instrument in God's hand for men's salvation — this is fraught with irreparable losses of daily and perhaps hourly opportunities affecting the welfare which is eternal of the souls for whose sake He is going to Calvary. "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel!" cried Saint Paul. Small wonder!

Seize upon these opportunities, having made myself, as nearly as I can, what Jesus means me to be, and He pours into souls the healing graces of salvation and sanctification. Let these opportunities pass me by, let me resist His invitations and offers to myself, and it is more than possible that souls are excluded from heaven for ever as a result. Yes, assuredly, it is "a subject of inexhaustible meditation."

But my co-operation is much more than a responsibility and a duty. It is also an honour. You know how jealously men guard for themselves positions and tasks which will redound to their own praise or help to swell their own bank account. Often indeed, in order to oust another, they will stoop to methods that cry to heaven for vengeance. If a man wins the sweep, his instinctive reaction is to hug the prize to his own heart. If he is manager of a big firm, or shareholder in a lucrative policy, or if he has climbed to the head of his profession, you will frequently find that when he is getting old he wants to pass on these honourable posts to his own friends or relatives, and tries to exclude others.

Jesus Christ is very different. It is an inestimable privilege to help in the work of saving souls. It is a work that brings to him who engages upon it rewards and merits immeasurably above the highest pinnacle of worldly power or worldly prestige. Although it is the most divine of all divine works, still so pressing is it in its demand to be undertaken that anyone can help, anyone may have the honour, anyone and everyone is capable of learning how to do it.

Anyone and everyone. Before we pass on to the next station let us recall two anecdotes which have a bearing on our considerations here. A Legionary of Mary went one Sunday with a companion to mind the children of a poor woman and, by so doing, give her an opportunity of going out to Mass. But the woman declared she could not go, the reason being that she had no shoes. Whereupon this excellent apostolic Legionary took the shoes off her own feet, put them on the woman and promptly packed her away to Mass!

A certain artist used to spend long months perfecting the details of his pictures. Others would turn out six or seven pictures for a single one of his. A friend remonstrated. "Well," said the artist, "this is how I see it. The others are painting for time merely, and merely for money. But as for me — I am painting an eternity. I want to turn out works of real art that will endure." When men have long forgotten the victories won by generals and mighty statesmen, when hard-earned and closely-guarded money has long ago slipped like water through men's fingers, when edifices and cities that are monuments to men's pride have been reduced to a heap of ruins, when this world itself has crashed in — even then that zealous Legionary's act will still be living and remembered and rewarded by God.

Jesus deigns to want my co-operation — as He wanted Simon's and His wanting is my responsibility, and His wanting is my privilege. Aeternitatem pingo! 'I am painting an eternity. I intend my work to endure.'

VI.

No one tries to deny that in the Sacred Passion we are faced with lessons which our human nature, loving ease as it does, finds exceedingly hard to learn and put in practice. For this reason, there is a grain of comfort in seeing our divine Master and Model avail of the relief, passing though it was, brought to Him by the action of Veronica.

The woman's heart in her overflowed with sympathy for the poor Sufferer, so she pushed her way through the crowd and offered to wipe with a towel that disfigured and bleeding face of His. Far from repelling her on the plea that He preferred to suffer, Jesus, in this case, accepts what she is eager to give, and, as a sign of gratitude, leaves behind on her towel the image of His own countenance. The scene forms the subject-matter of the sixth station.

From other parts of Our Lord's life come other examples when again He chose or accepted what was naturally pleasant. Thus, He went to the marriage feast with Mary His Mother, and we may

reasonably assume that He partook of the simple pleasures provided. He was weary one summer evening and He sat down by the well on the roadside to rest. Quite exhausted, one day He stepped into a boat with His disciples, provided Himself with a pillow, placed it under His head, and soon was fast asleep.

There are times on life's journey when a faithful soul will please Him best by accepting relief, or a pleasure or a relaxation, in this same spirit of gratitude. "When the fire is lit," writes the gentle Saint Francis de Sales, "we see that obedience would have us warm ourselves, provided it be not done with too much eagerness." The proviso is important. In a painful illness, it may be (no, it IS) more pleasing to Him to take with gratitude the remedy or relief offered rather than bear the pain with a bad grace. It is quite possible that when depression weighs down upon one, the right course is to shake it off by curtailing one's penitential acts and one's prayer and allowing oneself more time for lawful recreation. Someone calls whom you are delighted to see, but just at a moment when you had arranged to go out and make a holy hour. Naturally, you would prefer to speak to your friend. It is likely enough that you will please God best in the circumstances by deferring your prayer and entertaining your friend. For it is not so much the accepting or rejecting of pleasant things that makes or mars the holiness of a soul, as the intention which directs the choice. Our Lord "did not please Himself," If He accepted what was easier and more pleasant He did so because He saw that this was the Father's Will. It would be unthinkable, for instance, that as He staggers along on this terrible journey, He should meet the offer of Veronica with harshness and remind her that He had come to suffer and not to seek relief. That would have cut into her heart. It would have wounded charity, and Jesus was incapable of inflicting such a wound.

You will always find that whenever He takes the easier course He is actuated by a high motive. It is not merely because that course is easy, not merely because He is led by natural impulse. Charity is at stake, or He sees a chance of instructing others, or He wills to draw souls to Him by accommodating Himself to their ways. There is nothing wrong in eating with publicans and sinners, or taking rest when one is tired. It is not forbidden to enjoy oneself and there is no sin in seeking relief when you are lying awake all night and convulsed with pain. You are not bound to fast if the Church grants a dispensation. But the all-important point for the soul that would follow Him loyally is the motive. There was no difficulty about this in His case, for He always did the things that were pleasing to His Father. With us, the case is quite different. Always ready to take the line of least resistance, we can arrange everything to suit ourselves and then proceed to persuade ourselves that we want nothing except God's Will — having first taken good care to have our own!

So, where there is question for us of accepting what pleases us naturally, there is need of great sincerity in probing and purifying our motive. Still, Our Lord's action in this sixth station makes it quite clear that many a faithful soul will remain most faithful, not by always thwarting itself, but at times by accepting — with the gratitude we see Him show here — the pleasant things of life, "giving thanks to God in all things."

VII.

It is likely that Our Saviour fell several times for He was more dead than alive as He stumbled along the cobbled streets. In this case, there would have been a first fall and a last fall, and three or four — perhaps even more — in between. The fall we commemorate in the seventh station then, may be regarded as being representative of that uncertain number occurring between the first and the last.

As the sinner contemplates it in this light, he can scarcely avoid recalling his own falls into sin from that sad day when first he grievously offended God down to the last mortal sin. How many such falls were there? Impossible, it may be, to reckon. He remembers good confessions made and firm resolutions taken, but after a while, these were forgotten and world and flesh and devil returned to the attack and captured once more the citadel of his soul. He recalls fervent missions or retreats. He thinks of the earnestness with which he assured the Lord "never more will I offend You." He thinks of the hymns he sang and meant, expressive of his sorrow, but, somehow, that contrition did not last, and when the atmosphere changed and the old sinful associations came back, he forgot all about his promises to God and all his good intentions.

The falls in-between! Suppose a child had the insolence to strike his mother a deliberate blow across the face.

But presently, realising the wickedness of the act he falls on his knees and begs pardon. And mother, because she loves, easily forgives and tries to forget. But lo, the next day, perhaps even that very night, the same offence is repeated. It is followed by another apology, but yet a third and fourth time, at every opportunity, that child raises his hand and strikes his mother. What would you think of the genuineness of his act of sorrow? Possibly indeed, he is sincere, but taking the whole proceeding at its face value, you would be inclined at least to doubt if that boy meant what he said when he assured his mother of his grief for his often-repeated sin.

Treat a human friend like this and the chances are that you sever the friendship for ever. Treat even a loving mother in this hard-hearted way and even she will ultimately grow tired of forgiving. But so immeasurably does divine love exceed even the strongest and purest human love, that it is prepared to go on forgiving even till seventy times seven times.

If, through God's mercy and grace a man or woman has kept free from all mortal sin, or at least has done so for a long time, there is still much matter for thought and prayer in connection with this seventh station. Looking back over those years such a person will see innumerable infidelities and venial sins, and an apparent inability to eradicate them. After so many years, trying to serve God there is still that bad temper which makes one impossible to live with. There is that slanderous tongue. There is that seeming lack of all love of prayer. There is petty jealousy. There is laziness. There is the shirking spirit which leads a man always to seek what is easiest for himself and let the difficult and disagreeable part go to his neighbour. There is love of ostentation, and worldly ways, and pride and censoriousness.

All this and more like it has been going on for years. And, during these years too, that man or woman has been perhaps almost a daily communicant. Who can estimate the opening such people give for hard criticism of religion?

Others will argue, illogically of course, but yet they will voice their opinion loudly and with conviction, that if such religious people can speak so harshly or treat their servants with such injustice or fly into tempers that are a source of constant trial to others — if religious people are like this, what's the good of going to sacraments and Mass, and saying prayers? Looking at Jesus lying flat under the cross in this second fall, one sees what good reason there is to strike one's breast for the innumerable falls sustained on the road of life, even though they did not amount to mortal sin.

Though, these lesser faults have a consoling aspect too. Saint Francis of Assisi, when he saw how pride had brought one of his brethren to ruin, lay down on the ground saying: "Only here is a man safe!" The memory of these lesser faults and one's inability to grapple with them can be turned to

account by increasing that virtue which lies at the foundation of all true holiness — genuine humility. A merciful Lord permits them in order to warn us that if we are weak in face of comparatively small temptations, we may not pride ourselves because we do not fall into mortal sin.

“Our Lord,” writes Saint Francis de Sales, “treats us in just the same way as a good father or mother, who lets the child walk quite alone when it is in a soft meadow where the grass is thick, or upon a mossy bank, but on bad and dangerous roads carries the little one carefully in his arms. We have often seen souls courageously bear great assaults without being overcome by their enemies, who have afterwards been vanquished in very trifling encounters. And why is this except that Our Lord, seeing that they would not be much hurt in falling, has let them walk alone, which He did not do when they were among the precipices of grave temptations whence He delivered them with His almighty hand?”

VIII.

In the sixth station, we saw Our Lord accept the comfort offered to Him by Veronica, and we might have noticed the same when He allowed Simon to relieve Him of the weight of the cross. But, for the few isolated instances wherein He accepts, there are very many wherein He refuses to avail of the consolation offered. Indeed, the whole Passion is a seeking out of what is hard and repellent to human nature. In the eighth station, we find the holy women weeping tears of compassion for Him in His truly heart-rending condition, but He does not, in this case, take what is offered to Him. Instead, He directs them to weep over their own sins.

Why does He refuse consolation and why should this be His more ordinary mode of procedure? In His case, there could have been no danger of His seeking it inordinately. If He was to accept the sympathy offered, as He did when He met Veronica, or when He ate with sinners, it is beyond question that He would have pleased the Father by doing so, and that His choice would have been determined by that motive only.

But He has come to give us an example and He knows all that is in man. He knows, therefore, that we are biased in favour of what pleases us naturally, and that there is need to suspect ourselves if we yield easily and frequently to our tastes and fancies, even if we tell ourselves that our motive is pure. “The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent bear it away.” The hard way is, generally, the safer way, if the soul is to advance in holiness. It is true that the hard way too has its dangers of pride, or imprudence, or lack of perseverance, but one must remember that the easier way is also beset with subtleties and snares. The question therefore is, which road has fewer perils, and the example of Our Lord and the saints indicates unmistakably that it is ordinarily the hard one. In an individual case, there may be room for doubt whether to take what is pleasant or hard, but the general principle stands firm.

“Let each one reflect,” writes Saint Ignatius — and the words have been cited as being an epitome of his whole teaching — “that he will make progress in all spiritual things in just the same proportion as he divests himself of self-love and self-will and self-satisfaction.” “Without mortification, and I say it boldly,” Saint John of the Cross tells us, “we shall make no progress towards perfection, nor in the knowledge of God and of ourselves, notwithstanding all our efforts, any more than the seed will grow which is thrown away on uncultivated ground.” And, in many subsequent pages he goes on to lament bitterly over those souls who come to the service of God and advance a certain distance and who do not ordinarily fall into serious sin, but who yet, because they lean on creature comforts inordinately lose the immense graces which God would pour into them if

they were only more generous in the practice of detachment. "Even one unruly desire, though not a mortal sin, sullies and deforms the soul, and indisposes it for the perfect union with God, until it be cast away."

These are hard sayings, but they mark the way traced by Jesus and Mary on the road to Calvary. And it is the unanimous teaching of the saints, who accept these hard sayings literally and aim consistently at living them — it is their experience that once they seriously undertook the task of self-abnegation, tolerating in themselves no deliberate fault and ruthlessly suppressing the movements of self-love — that from that day they can recall how a generous God flooded them with light and grace, and poured into them a torrent of joyousness such that no earthly satisfaction could compare with it.

Saint John of the Cross was nine months in a dark prison cell, during which time he was flogged every day, and nearly starved, and insulted, and taunted. Afterwards he assured a Carmelite nun that so great was the joy he experienced in his soul during that long period of imprisonment, that, for a moment of it a hundred years' such privation would be a small price to pay. Is it any wonder that he waxed eloquent on the disastrous loss sustained by many tolerably good souls because they cling inordinately to merely human consolations like those which Jesus rejects in this station?

IX.

Here in the ninth station Our Lord's last fall is brought before us for our reverent consideration. His last fall — and mine? What a comfort it would be to the sinner if, kneeling here he could assure himself that never again would he offend God, at least mortally. That, no matter how black the past had been, he was certain that now at least he had begun in earnest, and that the fall into mortal sin which he endured, an hour ago, or a week ago, or a month or a year ago — that that was his last fall. That this day, and this journey with Jesus and Mary, made today in this church, are going to mark a definite break with occasions which in the past have enticed the sinner back into the ways of sin!

The sinner's last fall! Why not? Doesn't everyone who ever tasted sin know that it is poison — a poison not without its sweetness for the time being, but no sooner drunk than it leaves in the sinner's heart a feeling of disgust and self-contempt? And, in spite of the frequency of one's experience, in spite of the fact that we ought to realise the price which will certainly be exacted afterwards in shame and anguish, none the less the serpent has continued to deceive us, time and time again. He did this with our first parents in paradise; he has done it successfully for thousands of years and with the millions of Adam's sons and daughters who have lived since.

And you, who are now following Christ and Mary to Calvary? He has deceived you too, has he? Perhaps so, but, please God you have had your last fall. What encouragement you experience as often as you recall that it is impossible to express the love that wells up in the hearts of Jesus and Mary for the poor soul that has fallen and that now fears the force of the bad habits developed! But that love of theirs is not mere sentiment. It is beyond question that a cure is possible, that many who stumbled and fell badly on the way did finally arise and go straight. More than that. Many repentant sinners, having had their last fall, arose to climb to heights of great sanctity. Why?

Because the love of Jesus and Mary for them translated itself into action; immense graces were poured into those sorrowful hearts, and new vigour and new life resulted.

Listen to the grand prayer of the penitent Saint Augustine and make it your own. "Take my heart, O Lord, for I cannot give it to You. Keep my heart, O Lord, for I cannot keep it for You. Send me any

cross O Lord, which may keep me subject to Your cross, and save me in spite of myself!" If only I could be sure that the past was all right, and that I would not fall again, then I might take courage and do. But there have been so many false starts, when I thought all was now at last firmly set for the rest of the journey, that I have lost hope! How often cries like these are wrung from the poor sinner's heart! But who can estimate the consolation given to Christ when, despite that fierce temptation to abandon the struggle and make a truce with the enemy, the sinner arises once more to his feet, and once again takes hold of the cross, resolving to wage unceasing war on that sinful inclination, and, following in Christ's footsteps, refuses to be beaten and stoutly affirms to himself the truth that that fall was definitely his last one?

It is not only those who have preserved their innocence who give much glory to God, but those too who are broken-hearted with sorrow and resolved to turn away from sin and its occasions. Mary Immaculate followed Jesus to Calvary. But so did Mary Magdalene, the woman who once was a sinner, and who, hearing one day of this wonderful Jesus of Nazareth met Him, knew Him, loved Him, and from that hour counted the date of her last fall.

"The soul," writes Saint Teresa, "should firmly resolve never to submit to defeat, for if the devil sees someone staunchly determined to lose life and comfort and all that he can offer rather than return (to sin), he will the sooner leave it alone."

X.

The stripping of Our Lord is symbolical of the completeness of His giving. "He emptied Himself," writes Saint Paul, "taking the form of a servant." (Philippians 2:7) And the prophet, speaking in His name asks: "What is there that I ought to do more to My vineyard that I have not done to it?" (Isaiah 5:4) We ourselves have the phrase, when we want to express our readiness to go to any lengths to help a person, that we are prepared "to take the coat off our back." We shall better understand that Jesus left nothing undone if we recall Who He was.

He was God, first of all, but in this Sacred Passion who could possibly recognise Him as such? All the way through the Divinity hides Itself. At any given moment, He might have exercised His divine power to end the tortures His enemies were inflicting upon Him. We know how eagerly we welcome relief in pain — an aspirin when we have a bad headache, a refreshing drink to assuage our thirst on a burning hot day. What love is implied in the sentence of the apostle that Our Lord "delivered Himself up!" (Ephesians 5:25) He handed Himself over to them to torture Him, and He kept His divine power steadily in check when He might have used it to paralyse the hand that smote Him or drove the nails into His sacred body. "He was offered because it was His own will." (Isaiah 53:7) He began to suffer when He willed and He continued willing to suffer all that we are contemplating as we follow Him. He need not have begun to suffer, and His enemies continued to have power to make Him suffer simply because all the way through He refused to stop them.

Jesus was God. He was man too, and how are we going to make even the barest summary of the completeness of His giving as man? The strength of His body is reduced to utter prostration. Its beauty — and He had been "beautiful above the sons of men" (Psalm 45:2 or Psalm 44:3 in the Vulgate) — is so marred that the prophet describes Him as "a worm and no man," (Psalm 22:6 or Psalm 21:7 in the Vulgate,) a "leper," (Isaiah 53:4) a man from the crown of Whose head to the sole of His feet is one mass of wounds and blood. As man, He possessed a human soul, all the powers of which were placed unreservedly at the disposal of those He loved. His mind was continually occupied thinking out ways and means to help them. His will bent all its energies in one direction

— to labour for them, to pray for them, to heal them, to die for them. Over and above all this, on the night previous, He gave them Himself in the Blessed Eucharist and presently on the cross, He will give them His Mother.

It is most literally true that He has nothing left. “What is there that I ought to do more to My vineyard that I have not done to it?” A Lover Who is omnipotent has been lavish of His power to do. A mind that is divine seems to challenge us to excogitate anything still left, in order that, if we succeed, He may do it for our sakes. A heart that is throbbing with infinite love has given superabundantly. So in this tenth station He lets them take the coat off His back to indicate that omnipotence and infinite love have conspired together to ensure the completeness of the measure of the giving of Christ. If the sinner does not now understand that Our Lord is ready to forgive and to restore him, what more can omnipotence and infinite love do to convince him?

XI.

The following extract is from *Songs in the Night* by a Poor Clare Collette, and it will serve to introduce the eleventh station in which Jesus is nailed to the cross and raised up upon it. “What each soul is interiorly, face to face with God, unknown to anyone, is of vital consequence to all the human race, and every act of love towards God, every act of faith and adoration, every mute uplifting of the heart, raises the whole church, yea, the whole world, nearer to God. From each soul that is in union with God and at rest in the divine embrace, radiates a spiritual vitality and strength and joy which reaches from end to end of the universe, a source of grace to those least worthy of it and knowing nothing of how and whence it came.”

Thus, the more a soul grows in holiness the more grace it draws down upon other souls. And what is holiness? Is it necessarily saying long prayers or performing frightening penances? No. Such things we find in some of the saints indeed, because by these means they make contact with Christ, the source of holiness, and ease their own cravings to atone to Him for sin. But it is “what each soul is interiorly” that really matters most. Each soul is to come “face to face with God,” and from this source to be filled with God’s own very life and energy — which sharing in His life we call sanctifying grace. The more fully the soul participates in this divine life the more it grows in holiness, and the more widely diffused will be its “spiritual vitality and strength” to save and sanctify other souls.

But before the soul can be filled in this marvellous way with God’s own life, it must first of all be emptied of sin and sinful attachments, and in this eleventh station, Jesus shows how this is to be done. For here, He is crucified, and the soul that would grow in sanctity must be crucified also. “They that are Christ’s have crucified their flesh with the vices and concupiscences.” Why? Is it that God delights in seeing His servants and friends suffer? Not at all.

But the gift of His grace can be communicated to a soul only in the measure in which the soul is capable of receiving it, and as long as sin and deliberate sinful desires reign, the streams of the divine life are held in check.

If you want to sow flowers in your garden, you must first uproot the weeds. If you want to pour gold into a vessel already full of mud, you must first make space by throwing the mud out. Now the life of sin is transmitted to us as a sad heritage from Adam, and that is why suffering — “crucifixion” — is necessary. The “space” so to say, in our souls which should be occupied with the life of God is filled with the life of sin and selfishness, and before the divine life can be established and consolidated, the other must be put to death. Every act of self-conquest, every effort to push

back the confines of the life of selfishness leaves more “room” for the divine life to expand, and so we pray, in a pregnant phrase put on our lips at Mass, that we may become “capaces sanctae novitatis” (made capable of new holiness). (Final prayer in Mass for Tuesday in Holy Week.) May we deepen the capacity of our souls to contain more and more God’s gift of grace!

That is a thought which we may profitably ponder and examine ourselves upon, as we kneel and watch Him being crucified.

But there is more. Our Lord said: “I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all things to Myself.” He is crucified first and we have seen the application to ourselves of this first incident in the eleventh station and, after He is nailed, He is elevated on the cross. In the measure in which the soul learns to withdraw by penance from what is sinful, in the same is she too raised nearer to God. She begins to relish the things of God — prayer, especially, and works of zeal. The mind is now absorbingly interested in what concerns God and His glory, so absorbed indeed that it is difficult for her to bother about anything else. The news of the day, the ways and means of making money, the pleasures which were formerly such a source of delight and excitement — these things have lost all their charm, for the soul has discovered other interests which are dearly perceived to surpass immeasurably in importance the trivialities upon which many men pour out their time and affections. Through the force of God’s grace, the soul too is “lifted up” into the bracing air of the supernatural.

Just as the trembling little thrush lying in your hand, will spring, by the very force of its nature, into the glorious freedom of the open sky the moment you release your hold, so the soul delivered from the bondage of sin, soars swiftly into the light of God. And just as Our Lord promised to ‘draw all to Himself’, so too the soul, when freed herself and exulting in her new-found happiness, must needs share her treasure with other souls. Perhaps, like the Little Flower, it will be the soul’s vocation to remain near to the source of this divine life and by prayer and sacrifice to open the sluice-gates of grace and in this way bring salvation to men. Perhaps the soul, intoxicated with divine love, will “leave God for God,” by engaging in the works of the active apostolate. Which it is to be is God’s will to decide, but in either case the object is the same — to be “a source of grace, reaching from end to end of the universe.”

XII.

All through this Way of the Cross, we have been watching how Christ gives. Now the question arises: “Is all the giving to be on His side?” And the answer? We have a gift too to offer to God, one only gift and it is actually the same which He Himself is offering in the twelfth station. The sacrifice He is making here of His life, is ours to offer too, through holy Mass. What an ineffable privilege it would have been to stand or kneel on this hallowed spot while Jesus was hanging on this cross! When we come to Mass, we are not coming merely to say our prayers, or make a visit, or go to Holy Communion. We are coming, first and before all else, to offer Jesus to His eternal Father — that Jesus may plead for us as He pleaded here on Calvary, that He may thank the Father in our name for the innumerable gifts lavished upon us, that He may adore the Father and supplement our inability to do this in a fitting manner. Jesus belongs to us and we present Him, as the only gift worth while, to His eternal Father. We stand in spirit with Mary near the cross and continue the stupendous offering made on Good Friday.

Complaints are made about us that we do not understand the value of the Mass and that, as a result, we come late or not at all. If there is question of catching a bus on Sunday morning to get to a

match, we take very good care to be in ‘our queue’ in time. But ten minutes or a quarter of an hour after Mass has begun is good enough for Jesus Christ! There is not much use in abusing Catholics who act in this way. Rather, let them sit back and try to realise what the Mass is. That is to get at the root of their trouble — little love for the Mass because little understanding of its marvellous significance.

And why is it true that “of all honours that have ever been rendered to God,” to quote Saint Liguori, “whether by the homage of the angels and by the virtues, austerities, martyrdoms and other holy deeds of men, none could procure so much glory for Him as one single Mass?” Why? Because, in the Mass, Jesus takes our poor prayers and acts, and makes them His own, presenting them on our behalf to the Father. “He catches them up,” writes Bishop Hedley, “in His own infinitely strong and perfect acts and so carries them to the throne of His Father.”

You consider yourself fortunate if, when seeking a favour from somebody in a high place, you have a friend of his to plead your cause. Jesus pleads in the Mass — the well-beloved Son of God. He it is Who presents our prayers and petitions with His own, just as the priest offers, in one and the same chalice, the wine and with it, the tiny drop of water.

Mass continues Calvary. That is why you cannot dissociate the two, and the twelfth station leads you almost imperceptibly into thoughts concerning the Mass. Indeed this station is represented at every Mass for at the altar the crucifix must be placed, to keep vividly before our eyes the amazing truth that we need not envy Magdalene or John, or even the Blessed Mother, their privilege of standing by His Cross. What we should beg for in this station is a deeper faith, for if that comes then our eyes will be opened to see into the depths of the mystery of the Mass and our hearts inflamed to love it. “The active participation of the faithful,” writes Pope (Saint) Pius X, “in the sacred mysteries... is the first and indispensable source whence is drawn the true Christian spirit.”

XIII. A few years ago a little boy was dying, aged nine and a half. His mother, broken-hearted, was kneeling by the bedside. “When you go up to heaven, son,” she said, “you’ll ask Our Lord to send something to mother, won’t you?”

And what will it be? There was a short pause and then the child, gasping for breath and holding mother’s hand, managed to murmur: “When I go up to heaven, I’ll ask Our Lord to send you much — suffering and pain!” Of course, the mother was dumbfounded, but the little lad continued: “Yes, mother. I’ve noticed that He kept a lot of it for Himself, and gave a lot to His own Mother whom He loved. It must have a great value then. If He couldn’t find anything better for His Mother could I ask Him anything better for you?”

Often when the cross presses heavily upon our shoulders we are inclined to ask querulously what have we done against God to deserve to be punished so. Such a question dies away on our lips if we kneel on Calvary in the thirteenth station. Nicodemus and Joseph are taking out the nails from the hands and feet; for Jesus is dead.

Reverently they lower the sacred Body and Mary stands there in mute agony to receive It into her arms. Between them, they bear this treasure over to the “Stone of unction” — a table of hard stone, convenient for the work of embalming. Some horsemen, tradition says, pass by while the friends of our Lord are washing His wounds and embalming the Body, and horrified at the sight of His mangled condition, they stop to ask what He has done to deserve this. The answer is that He has done all things well, but He has submitted to this unparalleled butchery because He loved. That is the only explanation.

And as Mary sits there watching, holding His sacred head between her hands, pressing the wounds to her heart — now His hands, now His lips — ask her, and the answer is the same. Mary loved, and Mary's love too must be subjected to love's most searching test — readiness to suffer for the sake of the one loved. She must share in men's salvation; she must be given opportunity to show her love for them, and for the Father's glory, so she too is permitted to suffer to a degree impossible for us to fathom or guess.

You can ask any chance acquaintance to perform a service that costs little or nothing — to open a door or drop a letter in the post-box. But if your request is going to make demands on his spirit of self-sacrifice — if it implies that he must hand you a large sum of money, or necessitates his denying himself a holiday or a free day, or if it will mean that he must endure for you hunger or thirst — if your request is going to include any of these things you are not going to turn to a chance acquaintance. If you have a true friend and his adoption tried, to him you will go, confident that he will do what you want, even at such a cost to himself. And your confidence is built up on the knowledge you have that sacrifice is the test of love.

We prove our love for Christ by prayer, by works of zeal, by organising sodalities and similar associations, but there is a proof more sure than all these or any of these. It is especially when He turns to us and asks us to suffer that He shows He can depend upon us to give the proof par excellence.

XIV.

What a desolate little party they were, who followed His dead body to the tomb! You would say, as you walk after them in the last of the stations, that you could imagine no more ignominious failure than this. But are you right? Even as they are walking to the place of burial, He is already beginning to enter upon the hour of His triumph. For no sooner had He expired on Calvary than His soul went to Limbo (the Limbo of the ancients) and we can dimly imagine the ecstasy of joy with which the souls imprisoned there heard the gladsome news of their fast-approaching delivery.

The faithful prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament are there. The heroic mother of the Machabees who sacrificed her seven sons rather than violate God's Law, Judith and Esther — types of Mary His Mother, Saint Elizabeth, Saint Zachary, and their son the Baptist, Saint Joseph His foster-father — all these names come readily to mind as we enter with the triumphant Christ into that prison house.

The place is flooded with light, for Jesus is the true light, and we hear the heartening message: "Come ye blessed of My Father, possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

The triumphant message continues, and on Sunday morning His sacred soul returns to Calvary to be re-united with His glorified body. Such a contrast now — no more suffering or disfigurement — but the face of Our Lord radiant with joy as He hastens, first to His Mother, and then to one friend after another, to speak to them of the kingdom of God, and to assure them that He is risen indeed. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

Without the hope of our own resurrection too, life would be a sort of blind alley. But we know that if we suffer with Him we shall certainly rise with Him. And even in this vale of tears, we can begin to share in the joys of that resurrection. For there is a resurrection above our sins and passions, there is a resurrection above our worldliness and our petty jealousies, above our cramped and narrow

selves, a resurrection befitting men destined to share, even here, in the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

We are told that He was risen "truly" — no mere appearances, but in very reality. After having thought on the lines indicated as we walked with Him to Calvary, surely that must be the first trait in our resurrection also — no mere external conversion, but, what He values alone, a conversion of heart, a turning of the heart away from sin, to be inflamed by His love. His resurrection was lasting, for "Jesus Christ being risen from the dead, dies now no more." He wants from us too, a clean breakaway, a definite and entire severing of the manacles that have held us captive — such as we saw when thinking about our last fall. And, after His resurrection, He appeared openly, letting everyone know of the wonderful change. Let me not be afraid to imitate Him here also. Many are timid about giving the impression that they love Him enthusiastically, and, whatever they have been in the past, are now determined to canalise all their energies in one direction — to make Him known and loved.

He rose truly; He rose never again to die; and He let the world know of His resurrection. So, the little procession to the tomb is not so desolate after all, for Calvary is not the end but only the beginning.

One of Michelangelo's greatest works is the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The surface measures some ten thousand square feet, and it is covered with over eight hundred figures, some twelve feet long, others eighteen, all most carefully and conscientiously finished. Every detail of each picture stands out with marvellous truth to nature — the hairs of the head and beard, the finger-nails, the creases in the garments. A masterpiece, an everlasting monument to the genius of him who produced it!

But what a price it cost him! Day after day, the artist had to work, lying flat on his back, with the paint dropping down on to his face, In the course of time his eyes grew so accustomed to looking upwards that, long after he had finished his beautiful ceiling, he would have to hold a letter above his head in order to read it. You can produce a masterpiece only by being willing to pay the price.

We have seen the price paid by Our Saviour as we accompanied Him and His Mother from station to station.

His masterpiece is the human soul pulsating with His own very life. Treasures of grace He has accumulated on Calvary, and He longs for the soul to draw near and be filled. Could we see into a soul radiant with sanctifying grace we would drop down on our knees in adoration, thinking ourselves to be in presence of God Himself.

How do you think Michelangelo would feel if, when coming one morning to continue his glorious work, he found that during the night his pictures had been destroyed, that someone jealous of his genius had smeared paint all over his ceiling, effacing entirely those lovely images? It is a feeble expression of Our Lord's attitude towards sin which utterly undoes the grand work which cost Him such a price. And suppose that during the night, the great artist conceived a new idea, and next day proceeded to put it into execution, and after a month or two has the satisfaction of seeing it in all its perfection, how his heart is gladdened by his success! But again, his joy and satisfaction are negligible compared with the joy the soul gives to Christ and Mary by endeavouring faithfully to correspond with their inspirations.

Admittedly this is hard to understand, for it is all to the soul's interest, here and hereafter, to co-operate thus with the workings of grace within her. So concerned is Jesus about the soul's sanctification that you would be inclined to believe that to Him some advantage must accrue from its fidelity and advancement. Nothing of the kind.

All the benefit is to itself. Why then does Christ "bother" about the soul? Why not allow it to go its way? Why pay such a price for its redemption? Only one answer is possible, and we have seen it already. Love is the only explanation. "Greater love than this no man has, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

On our first page, we promised to try to develop one single idea at each of the fourteen stations, and it may help us, when making the stations to have that idea in a form which is easy to remember. So, here is a summary, indicating each of these ideas in the corresponding station:

- I. Independence of men's opinions. Jesus is condemned to death.
- II. Is it I, Lord, who am "guilty of death"? Jesus carries His cross.
- III. Hell, and the sinner's first serious fall. Jesus falls the first time.
- IV. The fiat of Jesus and Mary. Jesus meets His mother.
- V. The apostolate — a responsibility and an honour. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the cross.
- VI. Veronica and how to sanctify pleasure. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.
- VII. The falls "in-between." Jesus falls the second time.
- VIII. The safety of the hard way. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem.
- IX. "Never again" — the sinner's last fall. Jesus falls the third time.
- X. The completeness of the giving of Christ. Jesus is stripped of his garments.
- XI. The soul's Crucifixion and exaltation. Crucifixion: Jesus is nailed to the cross.
- XII. Calvary and the Mass. Jesus dies on the cross.
- XIII. Suffering, the acid test of love. Jesus is taken down from the cross.
- XIV. Calvary, the prelude to our resurrection. Jesus is laid in the tomb.

(Thanks to: The Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart.)
