

Why Must I Suffer?

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Part 1.

OUR DIVINE LORD had a marked predilection for suffering. What took place in the last week of His life was only the climax to a positive devotion to the Cross, which He had clearly evinced during the years preceding. That a course of action was painful, or humiliating, or toilsome, or self-denying, always seemed, somehow, to be a reason for Him to accept it, or if He could not, to allow it to escape from His hands only with the regret one feels on parting with a treasure.

This is the more surprising when we remember that, strictly speaking, suffering was not necessary at all for the fulfilment of His mission. He had come to break man's chains, to set him free from the thrall of sin. The task lying before Him was to unbar the gates of heaven and secure that they should swing wide open.

Then man, redeemed by Christ's merits, might once again have the glorious opportunity of possessing the God for whom his heart hungers. But Our Lord need not have chosen to suffer in order to see that plan of love realised. He was God, equal in all things to His eternal Father. Hence, had He so willed, He might have come amongst us, not for thirty-three years, but only for a very short period – for a year or a month, or even for a few moments – and during that time He might have offered to His Father, in reparation for our sins, one single prayer, one single sigh, or one single drop of His Precious Blood. Such an offering, made by Him who is infinite in dignity, would have been more than amply sufficient to redeem not only this world, but countless other worlds besides, which might ever be created. Why then go out of His way to suffer? It is not easy to understand.

Then there is His apparently unintelligible treatment of His friends. You would say that His aim is to secure that at all costs they, too, shall have abundance of suffering. His Mother who undoubtedly held a place quite unique in the love of His Sacred Heart, was, like Him, crushed and bruised and ground into the earth by a load of suffering. In the Temple, holy Simeon placed Him in her arms – He was only an Infant then – and told her to prepare for a sword of suffering. On Calvary, they brought Him to her once more – this time He was dead – and she takes His hand into her hand, and a shudder passes through her frame as she feels the ugly hole made by the nail. She removes the thorns from His head. She looks into His face twisted out of recognition by suffering. The prophecy has been indeed fulfilled. All during those years since she received Him back from Simeon in the Temple, Mary has lived under the shadow of the cross. 'Your own soul a sword shall pierce.' That He loved her nobody can doubt. That He could spare her this suffering, or at least much of it, is beyond question. Yet He did not spare her. On the contrary, on nobody else did He heap such sorrows. It seems hard to understand.

Coming now to His saints, those special friends of Christ, we find that they, too, were subjected to trials the most diverse and the most painful. To some were given many long years of physical

torture, which kept them nailed to the cross. Others were victims of mental anguish – racked with scruples, abandoned by friends, humiliated by the disgrace of someone dear to them, contradicted, not trusted, misunderstood. Want and dire poverty, incessant labour, hunger and even starvation – open the pages of the stories of His friends and see how often Christ has sent these things into their lives. And yet He loved them dearly. And yet He could have had things so different for them. A strange way this, it would seem, to treat men who loved Him and by whom He was passionately loved. He could have given them abundance of wealth, but He sees to it that often they have not even the necessities of life. He could have secured for them ease and comfort, but He sends them toil and poverty. Health is His gift to bestow, but He crucifies them on a bed of pain. Did He so ordain, men would hold His friends in esteem and lift them up to the highest pinnacle of glory, but He will have them trampled upon and despised. Yet He loves them dearly. It seems difficult to understand. There must be, in suffering lovingly borne, some wonderful power, some precious treasure, seeing that it comes with such consistency into the lives of Christ and His friends. Admittedly, it is a treasure that is hidden, but can we go at least a little way below the surface and discover some of its beauty and unravel, some of its mysteries?

It is true that Our Lord could have redeemed us without suffering, and, had He done so, He would have conferred on us a benefit for which eternity would be too short to thank Him. Redeem us, that is confine Himself to what was strictly necessary in order to put into our hands the chance of securing again eternal life which we had lost by sin – that much He could have accomplished without shedding a drop of blood. But love does not act like that. Love will give a measure pressed down, shaken together and flowing over. While anything remains un-given, while any act of love that is possible to do is still undone, love is not satisfied. It must ‘bear all things’ and ‘endure all things’ for the one it loves. That is the first and most obvious reason for the sufferings of Christ. He is the greatest lover of all and He is an omnipotent God. If His sufferings, above all in His Passion, do not stun man into an understanding of the utter truth of His love, then omnipotence can do no more. ‘Greater love than this no man has that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ ‘What is there that I ought to do more to My vineyard that I have not done to it?’

Love, too, explains suffering in the lives of the friends of Christ. Generous souls in whom that divine fire has been enkindled find in themselves a longing to give tangible proof of the reality of their love. ‘Love,’ writes Saint Ignatius, ‘shows itself by deeds rather than by words.’

Now, everybody knows that there is no proof of love more searching than willingness to suffer for the one loved. See how a mother will rush blindly into a burning house and expose herself to the risk of death to rescue from the flames her child – because she loves. Now, the simple truth is that the saints had a love just like that for Jesus Christ, and they were consumed with the longing to prove their love. When a sinner makes a good Confession and begins a new life, he is for a time perhaps under the impression that all he has to do now is to avoid sin and its occasions. That he certainly must do, but that, after all, is only the negative side of his spiritual life. There is a double life in his soul – the life of grace, which after his Confession is dominant, and the life of sin and the world, which has been extinguished. The life of sin and the world has to be starved out, and the life of grace needs constant and careful nourishment. Now, the cross and suffering exercise here a most powerful influence. Suffering lovingly accepted has a way of teaching the soul the nothingness of the world and the utter truth of Christ’s love. Suffering shows clearly the fickleness of the world. While that man was without the cross, while everything was going well from a worldly standpoint, he was inclined to slip away from God and lose his sense of the supernatural. When the cross

comes, if it be accepted, it lets him see how precarious was his hold on the world, how insincere friends can be, how quickly hard-earned money can be squandered or lost, how soon health can be shattered or how swiftly death can snatch away a loved friend.

If now he will but open his eyes, the lesson is plain to read. Since this world is so uncertain, why not transfer all his affections to God and to the rewards He has promised? Why not lay up treasure in heaven, where neither rust nor moth can consume and where thieves cannot break through and steal? Suffering does more for that man than confirm his resolution against sin. On the positive side, it brings the love of Christ into his heart. It fires him with the desire to do something worth while with his life for Christ. And it shows him that, amongst the means at his disposal for proving his love, suffering rings truest of all. ‘Suffering is the badge of those who love,’ wrote Saint John of the Cross, and he covers page after page to show how suffering purifies the soul, burning out of the soul love of sin and the world, and whetting the soul’s appetite for the things of God. A doctor will sometimes have to make his patient suffer if he is to save his life. The divine Physician, too, sends suffering to His friends, because suffering draws off from the heart the poison of sin and worldliness and leaves behind a more vigorous life, a true life, the life of divine love. In proportion as the life of sin and worldliness dies in the same, will the life of His love flourish, and suffering lovingly borne kills sin and affection to sin and sets the heart on fire with love for Christ. To His friends, as to Christ Himself, suffering gives an outlet to love.

There is a second lesson to be read in the story of Christ’s sufferings. For man in his fallen nature sin has a terrifying fascination. Passion seethes within in every human breast, and outside there is the happy world appealing powerfully and arguing with apparent cogency that man should plunge into sin and enjoy life. It seems such an attractive programme. Can sin be so bad after all?

In the Passion, the sinless Christ is handed over to be made the victim of sin, and we know the result. Sin rises up to take its vengeance. In Gethsemani, Christ wrestled with sin, and the effort cost Him a sweat of blood. The pent-up hatred of sin against Christ was let loose and it scourged Him, all unresisting, at the Pillar. In mockery of His Kingship, sin wove for Him a crown of thorns and put it on His head. Sin flung the cross on His bleeding shoulders and drove Him up the slopes of Calvary. Into His hands and feet, sin hammered the nails, and then raised Him up to be jeered at and taunted as He hung in disgrace on the cross. Sin stabbed His Sacred Heart and with a fiendish delight drew His Heart’s blood. Glutted with triumph, sin staggered down from the hillside and now proceeded to stalk throughout the whole wide world and make further conquests of the souls He died to save.

When sin wreaks its wrath upon the sinless Christ, this is the result, or rather, this is an infinitesimally small fraction of the result.

A steady look into the Face of Christ in His Passion – such a look as pierced the heart of Peter – will reveal, as nothing else can reveal, the true nature of sin. He was the sinless One, and to this, sin has reduced Him. ‘Despised and the most abject of men; a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with infirmity; He was wounded for our iniquities’ He was pierced for our sins. The chastisement of our peace is upon Him and by His wounds, we are healed.... There is no soundness in Him, wounds and bruises and swelling sores....’ Even to graze the ocean of His sufferings reveals sin doing this much. What then must it be to plumb that ocean? What must it be to bear upon one’s soul the weight of sin, to taste its bitterness, to feel oneself somehow responsible to the Father for it all, to be ‘made sin’? It is easy to talk glibly about sin, but sin is a truly frightful evil, exacting a terrifying penalty

from those who taste its sweetness. In the Passion, sin opened the sluice gates and these torrents of suffering rushed into Christ's immaculate soul. 'If that be done in the greenwood, what shall be done in the dry?'

Christ suffers, therefore, to teach the true nature of sin. He longed, too, to rescue sinners, and we can imagine Him consulting with Himself as to what instrument would be most powerful to save souls for heaven. None could He find more effective than suffering. True, He laboured for souls; He prayed for souls; He worked miracles to win men's love, for He knew well that love of Him would prove to be their passport to heaven. All that, He did, but to win souls He relied on suffering more than on anything else. So true is this, that Saint Paul writes: 'He loved me and delivered Himself up, for me,' and Our Lord Himself declares: 'Greater love than this no man has that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

In just the same way and for just the same reasons, the friend of Christ accepts suffering. They know well that not a day or a night passes but there arises before the throne of God the stench of innumerable mortal sins. They know that they themselves in many cases have sinned in His sight. In His mercy, He has forgiven them; He has poured His grace into their souls again and once more made them members of His mystical body. Christ can now no longer suffer in His glorified body in heaven. But in His members still on earth, He can suffer, and by their sufferings, reparation can be made to the Father for sin. He knew no more effective means of saving souls than suffering. A man whose heart burns with love for Christ realises in some degree what sin is, and he wants to do what is in him to roll back that tidal wave of sin that is inundating the world. How can he do it?

Like Saint Paul, he will 'fill up those things that are wanting to the sufferings of Christ.' Not indeed that there was any shortage in the plenteous redemption by which Christ redeemed us, but that since He can now no longer suffer for the sins of this present time that are now being committed against His Father, the follower and friend of Christ will suffer in His place – a member of His mystical body. If sacrifice arises in the sight of the Father from the mystical body of the Son, it is certain that grace will be rained down upon souls and sinners converted.

'No good work ever succeeds unless it is accomplished by suffering.' 'Without shedding of blood there is no remission.' 'Sacrifice is the groundwork of every achievement of God's saints. The pastor of Ars knew this secret of the saints, hence the cruel scourgings and the severe fasts which he undertook in order to obtain the conversion of his beloved flock.' Thus says the Abbe Trochu, and he proceeds to unfold the marvellous story of the saintly Cure of Ars and to depict the portrait of a man truly nailed with Christ to the cross. Like every friend of Christ, Saint Jean Vianney suffered lovingly, urged to it by his understanding of sin and by his realisation that to suffer thus was the most effective means of grappling with sin and expelling it from souls. Not every Christian is meant in God's designs to be a Cure of Ars. Not every Christian is called upon to face the tortures he endured for forty years. But every Christian, as a member of Christ's mystical body, is called upon to suffer, and by suffering to win souls for heaven. 'Unless the grain of wheat, falling into the ground, die, itself it remains alone. But if it die, it will bring forth much fruit.'

When we were infants, we possessed the same soul, which we possess now. But at that time, our body was in a weakly condition, and because of its weakness, the soul was hampered in its powers of operation. We could not think then, or study, or argue, or write or read. These things we can do now because the body has developed and the soul can use it as an instrument. Now Christ is the soul of the Church and we are the members of His mystical body. But often the members are not

developed. Their strength is impaired. The result is that the soul (Christ) cannot make use of His members for the conversion of sinners. It is suffering that develops the members of that body; suffering lovingly accepted, as He accepted it in the Passion, will enable Him to do with His members and through their instrumentality that most divine of all divine works – the salvation and sanctification of souls. ‘Without shedding of blood there is no remission.’

Lastly, Our Lord suffers in order to be our Model. ‘If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me.’ The wonderful purpose of our existence in this world (to borrow a beautiful word from an eminent spiritual writer of our day) is that we are to become ‘Christified.’ This means nothing less than that Christ is to live permanently in our souls and take possession of our entire being. ‘I live,’ says Saint Paul, ‘now not I, but Christ lives in me.’ And in another place: ‘To me to live is Christ and to die is gain.’ This is what sanctifying grace means – the abiding real presence of God in the soul, making that soul His tabernacle. Sin and selfishness oppose the growth of this divine life. Hence, the man or woman who would have sanctifying grace increase within the soul must give no quarter to sin or self. In the proportion in which these are driven out, in the same will God take possession, and little by little, all the thoughts and words and actions of the person thus happily possessed by God will be performed under His action and under His controlling influence. The soul’s life becomes really an extension or a continuation of the life of Christ. He speaks through her; He thinks, or works, or rests, or keeps silence, or mixes in company, or seeks retirement, in her.

“The ever-present consciousness of Jesus dwelling within her reveals to her immediately every fresh attempt of her natural and selfish life to recover its former ascendancy. It gives her the precious intuition of whatever is not quite right, whatever ‘is not Jesus’ and could not be Jesus in her. A passing feeling of vanity, an almost imperceptible impulse towards self-seeking, or a slight and merely physical movement of impatience, is immediately recognised by her, and without any effort at self-examination, she at once perceives that such a thought or movement could never have proceeded from Christ living within her. Her life, her very breath must be ‘Christ’, purely and simply. ‘To me to live is Christ.’” (Footnote: From ‘One With Jesus’, by Paul de Jaegher, S.J., a booklet that gives a masterly exposition of Saint Paul’s teaching on the mystical body. Published by Burns, Oates & Washbourne.)

In bringing about this sublime concept of the spiritual life, suffering has an all-important role to play. The great Model suffered; the follower of Christ will feel uneasy and inclined to complain, not if suffering comes to him, but if it be absent. Uneasy, lest, somehow, God be forgetting him! For he knows well that suffering has a purifying effect; it lays the axe to the root of sin and selfishness. These must die if the life of Christ is to obtain possession. Hence, suffering is not only acquiesced in; it is lovingly embraced. Merely that something hurts somehow seems to be an argument in its favour.

Merely that kindness towards one who has injured me, costs me a good deal to show, seems an excellent reason why I should show that kindness. Merely that any course of action implies doing something hard, something I do not like, makes me inclined to regard that course of action as probably being the very one I should adopt. Perhaps it will happen, and probably often enough it will happen, that God does not will me to take that hard thing, whatever it be; all that is said here is that the mere fact that it is hard should make me regard it as a possible and even probable chance of growing in Christlikeness. In many Christians, there is not much Christlikeness, because in many Christians there is no love of the cross.

Perhaps now it is not quite so hard to understand why Christ our Lord suffered when it was not strictly necessary, and why He sends the cross to His friends. He suffers and He gives suffering to them for three reasons amongst others – because love proves itself most of all by willingness to suffer for the person loved; because suffering makes reparation for sin, the root of all the evil in the world, and draws men out of sin; and, lastly, because suffering develops Christliness by destroying sin and selfishness, the obstacles to the growth of the divine life in the soul.

It would be easy to cull pages from the saints in praise of suffering. Let one eloquent passage suffice, from the writings of Saint Alphonsus Rodriguez, the Jesuit lay-brother. 'By means of sufferings,' he writes, 'the soul arrives at great holiness and at a close imitation of the crucified Son of God. Thence arises true peace of soul and continual prayer. Thence a genuine union of the soul with God, the perpetual presence of God, and purity and stainlessness of soul. Thence humble familiarity with God. Thence perfect charity, the love of God and of one's neighbour. Thence the seraphim's crown of glory. Thence great spiritual treasures and riches which God is wont to bestow in abundance on souls in trials; and favours and heavenly secrets which God discloses to them – favours such and so great as are known only to God and to the soul which receives them; for they are such and so great that they may be tasted but not told, for they take place between God and the soul alone.'

'O sweetest Jesus, Love of my soul, Centre of my heart! How is it that I do not desire with stronger desire to endure pains and tortures for the love of You, when You my God have suffered so many for me? O Sufferings, how I hope that you will come to me and make your stay within my heart, for in you do I find my repose, and I will go to the Heart of my crucified Jesus, there to dwell in It with you. O Torments, how is it that you do not come upon me who await you with open arms that in you I may rejoice with my Jesus in torture? O Dishonour, why do you forget me who never forget you because I love you so much, in order that I may behold myself debased by you and humbled with Jesus? O Ignominious Deaths, why do you not come upon me in thousands when I desire so much and wish so continually to sacrifice myself to my Jesus? Come then every sort of trial in this world, for this is my delight – to suffer for Jesus. This is my joy – to follow my Saviour and to find my consolation with my Consoler on the cross. This is my pleasure, this is my delight – to live with Jesus, to walk with Jesus, to converse with Jesus, to suffer with and for Him, this is my treasure.'

One feels inclined to transcribe more, but enough has been said to show the attitude of the saints towards suffering, and to enable us, who follow afar off, to a clearer understanding of the treasures and mysteries of the cross.

Part 2.

IF WHAT OUR LORD and His saints have to say concerning the love of Christ and zeal for souls and immolation of self and thirst for suffering – if to us all that is a closed book, an apparently insoluble enigma – the reason probably is that we have never grasped, as the saints did, the lessons to be learned on the Hill of Calvary. Hence, in the second part of this paper, we propose to go up to Calvary and kneel down before Christ's bleeding feet and deluge our souls with the truths He designs to teach us there. The Sacred Passion is the most marvellous love story ever written, written in a language intelligible to every true lover, the language of sacrifice.

Saint Paul placed the title on the outside of the volume containing the story when he wrote: 'Christ loved me and delivered Himself up for me.' Our Divine Lord Himself wrote the chapters inside, and for ink, He used His Precious Blood. Now, we do not propose to read the entire volume, but rather

to glance at the table of contents and probe the significance of a few of the chapter-headings. Our position here, as we read, is on our knees, for the ground is holy, drenched with blood, the blood of the God-Man.

The first chapter-heading written in His blood in that volume is called: The Unselfishness of Christ. Unselfishness indeed had always been a notable trait in the character of Jesus of Nazareth, but on Calvary, and in all that immediately preceded Calvary, it shone forth with more brilliant lustre still. It shows itself in two ways – in the voluntary nature of His sufferings, and in His thoughtfulness for others even in the midst of His own excruciating tortures.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, the prophets keep stressing continually the truth that the Messiah will suffer of His own free will. ‘He was offered,’ Isaiah tells us, ‘because it was His own will and He opened not His mouth. He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter and shall be dumb as a lamb before His shearer and He shall not open His mouth.’ Speaking in the name of Christ, David writes: “In the head of the book it is written of Me that I should do Your Will, O God. Then said I: ‘Behold I come that I may do Your Will’.”

The spontaneity of the offering is here clearly expressed, and so perfectly did Our Lord fulfil that prophecy that Saint Paul wrote of Him: ‘He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant.... He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross. For which cause, God also has exalted Him and has given Him a name which is above all names, that in the name of Jesus every knee should bend.’

Looking back now from our place on Calvary over the events that are culminating here, we can very easily see how consistently Our Lord kept before His eyes this role of voluntary victim. The watchword of the Passion, as indeed of His whole life, was ‘Your Will be done!’ That motto is written large across the Sacred Heart for the Father to read. His loving eagerness to suffer in obedience to the Father’s Will is part at least of the explanation of His marvellous patience under an injustice so galling as to make us indignant even to read about it. When His enemies spat in His Face and smote Him with the palms of their hands, when they taunted Him in His last hours on the cross, it was in His power to cause the earth to open and swallow them, or, as the Apostles wanted to do on another occasion, to call down fire from heaven to destroy them. That power He had indeed, but He held it in steady check. He permitted their insults, their jeers, their devices to make Him suffer – all that He allowed when He might have prevented it because of His inviolable attachment to the Father’s Will. He had offered Himself freely to bear all this in satisfaction for the insult sin had hurled in the Face of His Father.

So much in general for the voluntary nature of His sufferings. There are, besides, many specific instances. Last night as He lay flat on His Face in Gethsemani a great sweat of blood broke out in His Sacred Body. Fear had seized Him, as well it might, at the vision of the sufferings that were about to fall upon Him.

A cry of terror was wrung from Him: ‘Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me.’ But He continued His prayer. ‘Being in an agony He prayed the longer,’ and little by little He regained His habitual spirit of ready acceptance. ‘Nevertheless not My Will but Yours be done!’

Of His own free will, He goes to meet His persecutors. He stands there in majestic dignity under the olive trees awaiting their approach. Peter, James and John are by His side and He points in the direction of His enemies, and they look and see the glitter of spears and helmets and the glare of the lanterns. ‘Behold,’ says Our Lord, ‘the hour is at hand. The Son of Man shall be betrayed into the

hands of sinners. He that will betray is at hand.' Peter, always impetuous, draws a sword to defend his Master, but Our Lord will have him understand that He is facing all this as a voluntary victim. 'Put up your sword.... Think you that I cannot ask My Father and He will presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels?' But ask His Father He very deliberately did not. He refrained from doing so, voluntarily. 'He was offered because it was His own Will.'

Evidence of the same power is seen in the actual arrest. At first, the soldiers are paralysed by the majestic bearing of the Man. There was, it would seem, a momentary breaking forth of the divinity through the Sacred Humanity, which ordinarily hid it from view. He advances and asks them: 'Whom seek ye?' They answer Him: 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Our Lord tells them: 'I am He,' and instantly, though nobody has laid a finger on them, but quite overawed by His dignity, 'they went backward and fell to the ground.' They dare not take Him prisoner until He, of His own free Will, hands Himself over to them. On other occasions they had tried, but He passed through their midst because His hour had not yet come. It is clear that now, too, had He so chosen; He might have walked away and left them. But this is their hour and the power of darkness and He voluntarily hands Himself over to be made their captive.

Next morning, before Pilate seated in the place of judgment, Our divine Lord stands bound a Prisoner. The governor looks at Him and begins to vaunt his power over Him. 'Speak You not to me? Know You not that I have power to crucify You and that I have power to let You go?'

At once Christ warns him of the futility of his boast. Any power Pilate has he holds from the Father, and the Son is exercising voluntary obedience to the Father, in Whose hands Pilate is only an instrument. Well then, in view of all this, might Our Lord declare: 'I have power to lay down My life and I have power to take it up again. No man takes it away from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. This commandment have I received of My Father.'

And voluntary suffering has ever been a characteristic mark of the friends of Christ. They look around the world and see how the votary of the world is ready to sacrifice himself. In the race for pleasure, worldlings will think little of going without sleep or food. Desire for wealth or big profits will urge them to undertake incessant toil night and day. Hatred of God shows to Christ's friend the truly appalling sight of men and women endowed with a satanic energy against Him. No sacrifice does the worldling reckon too great if only it will bring him more pleasure, increase of gain, if only it will give some measure of success to his anti-God campaign. All that sacrifice endured by His enemies is a challenge to the friend of Jesus Christ, and he feels the desire to meet sacrifice with sacrifice.

He will not allow the children of this world to be wiser in their generation than the children of light. He, too, will suffer, and voluntarily. He, too, it may be, in his past life, sacrificed his ease or his time or his wealth for the world. Now he sees that, like his great Prototype, he must learn the lesson of endurance 'With Christ I am nailed to the cross.' Like Christ, he will be unselfish and voluntarily do hard things for Him.

In practice what will this mean? It is not certain that Our Lord wants you to be another Father Doyle, standing in freezing water of the trenches of the Western Front to save souls, or another Matt Talbot, loaded with chains and spending hours in prayer. Men like these were called upon by Our Lord to do these hard things, and they responded nobly. It would be pleasant enough to dream of oneself and see oneself a great hero in God's service, regarded by one's generation as a saint, famed for all these crucifixions and austerities.

Whether or not God wants these things from you is not certain, but what is certain is that He will strew your way with abundance of little opportunities of doing hard things for Him. When you have schooled yourself in these, then perhaps you can turn to the others. You will not live long without receiving a snub. How do you react? It is hard to bear a snub, hard to treat the person who has snubbed you with your usual kindness as though you had not even seen through the insult. You will often meet with petty injustices, or perhaps great injustices. Someone will wrong you out of your money; it is not easy to forgive, therefore the true follower of Christ will forgive – for the very reason that it is a chance of doing something hard for Christ. Others will be preferred before you; your rights will be ignored; people will regard you as something of a joke; they will hint very clearly that your conduct shows you to be something of a simpleton, and they will shake their wise heads in pity. It is not easy to endure, not easy to keep silence, not easy to turn the laugh against oneself – therefore, for that very reason, Christ's friend will do it. This sublime folly is learned at the bleeding Feet on Calvary: the follower of Christ must be a voluntary victim, too, and he will keep his eyes wide open for even, and perhaps especially, little opportunities of suffering voluntarily. 'He was offered because it was His own will.'

There is another manifestation of unselfishness in Our Lord's Passion – throughout it all, Jesus is always thinking of somebody else. It is our way when we are in pain to allow ourselves to become preoccupied about ourselves and to expect more than ordinary attention from those around us – just because we are ill or in difficulties. If ever in anyone this attitude could be justified it was in Our divine Lord during His Passion. 'From the crown of the head to the sole of the feet there is no soundness in Him.' Nobody ever suffered a fraction of what He endured. So we should not be surprised to find Him judging by our own standards – so wrapped up in what He was suffering as to have no time or thought for anybody else. That is what we might expect, but what actually happened? Why, in the midst of sufferings unparalleled in history, Our Lord is preoccupied all the time with somebody else. He is shielding others, rewarding others, warning others, praying for others. It is the wonderful unselfishness of Christ – always thinking of somebody else.

There was, for instance, His exquisite tact in dealing with Judas Iscariot last night at the table of the Last Supper. He knew well, as He showed them, the horrible secret of Judas.

First, then, He will warn the unfortunate man, but when His warnings meet with no response, He does not force him. He fails in His effort to turn him from his projected crime, but at least He will save the man's reputation with the rest of the Apostles. 'That which you do, do quickly' – but no man at table knew what Our Lord meant. They thought he was to give some alms to the poor. Jesus has secured his reputation: He has been thinking of somebody else at a moment when His Sacred Heart was crushed by the treachery of His faithless disciple.

When His enemies advance to arrest Him in the garden, He tells them Who He is. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth. If then you seek Me, let these go their way.' He will not compromise His friends; He thinks of their welfare even at the very moment His own sufferings begin to loom largest. They had seen His thoughtfulness already tonight when they went with Him into Gethsemani. 'Sit you here,' He had said, 'while I go yonder and pray.' He would have them at their ease, in a sitting posture, while He knelt or lay flat on His Face, writhing in agony. He will be thoughtful even for His enemies.

Peter in his impetuous way draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Our Lord heals the servant – always thinking of somebody else.

The same thoughtfulness is in evidence in the meeting which tradition tells us took place between Jesus and Veronica. The good woman pushed her way through the crowd and took the veil from her head and wiped from His Face some of the blood and spittle. It was, after all, only what any true woman would have been impelled to do. But His own tortures do not prevent Him from showing His gratitude for this trifling service. When she went home and opened out her veil, there, easy to discern, were the features of the great Sufferer – always thinking of somebody else.

On that road, too, there was His thoughtfulness for the weeping women. No wonder they wept, but Jesus would have them think more of themselves than of Him. Of Himself, He has nothing to say, but for then He is full of concern: ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not over Me, but weep over yourselves and your children... If this be done in the green wood, what shall be done in the dry?’

Unselfishness, too, lights up the gloom of His death chamber on Calvary. To the very end, Jesus is thinking of somebody else. About Him stand His enemies, jeering Him, pointing the finger of scorn at Him. But it is very significant that, even their very taunts are further evidence of His unselfishness. ‘Vah, You that destroys the temple of God! Come down from the Cross! He saved others, Himself He cannot save!’ A pause in their jibes and there breaks forth from the Heart of this most astonishing Lover that marvellous prayer for mercy: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!’ Indeed, it is true that up to His latest breath Jesus is always thinking of somebody else. ‘He saved others, Himself He cannot save’ – a confession of His unselfishness all the more notable and valuable because extorted from the lips of His sworn enemies.

It may well have been this prayer of Our Lord, which converted the thief dying by His side. A death-bed conversion gives yet further scope to the thoughtfulness of Christ. ‘This very day you shall be with Me in Paradise’ – still thinking of somebody else.

He looks down, through the blood and spittle that blinds Him, and sees His Mother. ‘There stood by the cross of Jesus His Mother.’ By her side is John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. Can He make any provision at all for this Mother whom He loves? Even though He Himself be in agony, even though the nails pierce His hands and feet, even though the thorns cause His brow to throb, even though He is sickened with mental anguish, even though His sufferings are terrible beyond the power of words to express, He will not call attention to them; but He will think of somebody else. “When Jesus therefore had seen the disciple standing whom He loved and His Mother, He said to that disciple: ‘Behold your Mother!’ After that, He said to His Mother: ‘Behold your son!’ ”

You will find that same thoughtfulness mirrored forth in His friends. Self-effacing, self-forgetting, they are all eagerness to foresee the needs of others and anticipate their wishes. You will find them acting thus even towards those at whose hands they receive but scant recognition. They do not look for recognition. It is an honour and a joy for them to serve Christ in His members. The Christ, Whose love burns in their hearts, they see in His members. Often He is very effectively disguised, but the eye of faith penetrates the disguise. ‘What you do to these you do to Me!’ Why, then, thoughtfulness, forgivingness, hidden acts of kindness become the most natural thing in the world.

There was a strange darkness on Calvary. ‘Now from the sixth hour,’ writes Saint Matthew, ‘there was darkness over the whole earth until the ninth hour.’ Saint Robert Bellarmine invites us often to contemplate the dying Christ stretched out on the cross and enveloped thus in the darkness.

The scene indicates the second chapter-heading in the story of Christ’s love for souls. It is called: The Loneliness of Christ. That loneliness is symbolised by this darkness, which closes in round about His death-bed, but loneliness has been His constant companion all through the Passion.

The human heart can suffer emotions, which are too profound to be expressed in words or entered into even by one's most intimate friends. Thus, sorrow can be so deep that any exterior sign of it becomes impossible. It leaves the sufferer dry-eyed. This intense grief is pent-up in the heart, and an outlet, such as weeping, would rightly be looked upon as a relief. Sorrow like this cannot usually be shared with others; for all their goodwill and sympathy, they are not capable of understanding its depths. Now, the sorrow of Christ in His Passion was of this kind. It was a crushing weight, a mighty deluge, the keenest sorrow man had ever borne, so that Christ's friends, even His Blessed Mother, could not fathom its depths.

The result was that Our Lord suffered intense loneliness. Centuries before, the Prophet speaking in His name, had foretold it. 'I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the gentiles there is not a man with Me. I looked about and there was none to give help; I sought and there was none to give aid.'

Not only would His people not try to enter into His sufferings and be to Him some source of comfort, but they would deliberately turn their backs upon Him. 'Hear O ye heavens and give ear O earth, for the Lord God has spoken: I have brought up children and have exalted them, but they have despised Me.' 'My people have done Me two evils. They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, and they have dug to themselves cisterns, broken cisterns which can hold no water.'

Here on Calvary, and in the events that led to it, Our Lord fulfils these prophecies. A sense of isolation has accompanied Him throughout this last week of His life. On Palm Sunday, He rides in triumph into Jerusalem. But even there He is alone in the midst of a crowd, for they do not understand Him; they have failed to see the value He attaches to the supernatural. He weeps on the day of His triumph because Jerusalem does not know the time of her visitation. The Last Supper comes on the following Thursday night and He sits down with 'His own,' His 'little children,' at table. In a torrent of eloquence never equalled, He pours out expression of love for these twelve men whom He has chosen out of the world. He gives them Himself in the Blessed Sacrament. He empowers them to do what He has done – to change bread and wine into His Body and Blood. But they do not understand. Even later, when He has risen again from the dead, He will have to complain that they are foolish and slow of heart. Even in the midst of His own, and even for this last time, Our Lord suffers isolation. Their ideals and His, their outlook on life and His, their standards of value and His – these He has tried to bring into line, one with the other, but they are still without understanding. Jesus is alone, even here.

In the great Agony, a little later that Thursday, loneliness crushed Him. He had invited three of His friends to stay and watch with Him, for His soul was sorrowful even unto death. But their eyes were heavy. They fell asleep and left Him to bear His sorrow alone. Loneliness wrung from Him that sad reproach 'Could you not watch one hour with Me?' 'I have trodden the winepress alone.' Saint Ignatius would have us follow Him up out of the garden and contemplate His loneliness all that night. 'Jesus,' he writes, 'remained in bonds all that night.' Seated on the hard floor of a narrow prison cell with both hands tied; omnipotence in bonds; the stigma of the gaol upon Him; abandoned by His friends; the plaything of His enemies – Jesus is lonely, for it must needs be that the prophecy be fulfilled that He should tread the winepress alone.

Throughout the rest of the Passion, loneliness continues to accompany Him. As He stands on the balcony of Pilate's palace after the scourging, crowned with thorns, His Sacred Body a mass of wounds, the governor points Him out to the multitudes surging below: 'Ecce Homo! Behold the Man!' They look up hungrily at their victim, and Christ stands watching them from His place above.

A sea of upturned faces, but on no face does He see anything but hatred, and envy, and rage, and a determination to make Him suffer more. ‘Away with Him! Crucify Him!’ The loneliness of Christ! ‘I have trodden the winepress alone and of the gentiles there is not a man with Me.’

But not yet has He drained the chalice of loneliness. During His life, in times of contradiction or obstinacy from His enemies, or in times of isolation from His friends, He had always found a refuge and a consolation in the sense of companionship with His eternal Father. ‘I am not alone for the Father is with Me.’ Prayer sustained Him, for prayer was the meeting-place between His immaculate soul and the heavenly Father. Often in the stillness of night, you would come upon Him making His way up the slope of a hillside. There He would kneel, spending the whole night in the prayer of God, pouring out the love of His Sacred Heart for the Father, speaking to the Father of the desires that consumed Him for the Father’s glory, pleading with the Father for the conversion of men’s souls. ‘I am not alone for the Father is with Me.’ But here on Calvary even this one prop of support is, in some mysterious manner, removed. Even the Father has somehow abandoned His Son. He has withdrawn His protecting hand and has permitted this mob to vent its rage thus against His divine Son. Human friends had long ago deserted Him. Those who had remained faithful could not sound the depths of His sorrow. All that seemed tolerable, as long as He could lean for support on the Father. And now the Father has abandoned Him too! This is bitterness indeed. This is indeed the culmination of loneliness, and the piteous cry sends out its echo into the darkness that surrounds Him: ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ ‘I have trodden the winepress alone.’

The last chapter-heading concerning which we have to speak is entitled: The Price of a Soul.

Often when we look over the years that are passed, and recall the sins, which are strewn on the way behind us, we are inclined to become despondent. What a disappointing record life has been!

Resolutions broken, deeds of shame, others led into sin, graces and warnings neglected – how we would blush if our secret sins were discovered to even our dearest friend! Now, it is well to recall that, as we kneel here in our place on Calvary, the gaze of the all-seeing Christ penetrates into those secrets of our hearts. Not a single thought, not a single act done even under cover of night, but He knows all about it; knows about it even better than we ourselves know. He looks down from the cross and reads every detail of the life behind as an open book. He has listened while we told those filthy stories. He has been a witness to that impure train of thought followed by acts degrading to a child of God. He has received our protestations of sorrow, knowing that we would again betray Him, perhaps at the first opportunity. All that He knows, better even than we do, and yet, knowing it all, here on Calvary He shows us what He still thinks us to be worth.

How can we be despondent when we lift up our eyes and see the bleeding Christ looking straight into the depths of our souls? The Sacred Passion represents the price He paid, and willingly, for a soul. An utter sincerity shines in those eyes, a sincerity built up on His love for souls. A message of comfort falls from those parched lips assuring us that, though there may be temptation in the future, His grace is there to strengthen; though there have been falls in the past His Precious Blood is able to wash away all sins; though that love of His has been despised and flouted, all those years He, like the divine Hound of Heaven, has been pursuing that soul, His Sacred Heart so set upon winning it that He longs even still, in spite of all that has been, to pour into it the grace that is streaming down from this Hill. A soul must surely be a pearl of great price, seeing the value a God sets upon it. How easy He is to forgive sin, how ready He is to brush aside breaches of friendship, how long He is

willing to wait for the sinner to understand – all this is indicative of the value and beauty and destiny of an immortal soul.

There was a miracle of grace on Calvary – the conversion of the thief dying by the side of Our divine Lord. All his life this man has experienced a craving in his heart for happiness. All his life long he has reached out welcoming arms towards sin; he has walked with open eyes into haunts of sin; he has enthroned sin in his heart, deluded by the hope that in sin he would find satisfaction for the craving that devoured him. The result was that sin did indeed bring him violent spasms of pleasure, and for the time he was carried off in a whirlpool of intoxication. But when that sweetness had passed there had arisen a weariness, a disgust, and the sinner's only escape from the dreadful boredom had been to plunge deeper still into his excesses and in these to drown his remorse and lull his conscience to sleep. And now the sinner's life is nearly over, and with a pang, the dying man realises that for him it has been one huge mistake. What would he not give to be able to undo the ravages of sin in his wasted life! Happiness has been his quest all these years, but he has not found it. Can happiness be found at all in this world where men sit and hear each other groan? Into the hidden places of that man's soul long darkened by sin a ray of divine light is penetrating. The scales drop from his eyes and at last, he sees that he has found the object of his life's search. Only in Jesus Christ and His love can be found that happiness for which his soul has been hungering all these years. 'Lord, remember me when You shall come into Your Kingdom.'

He sees that sin is folly and that the love of Jesus Christ is the one enduring reality in the midst of a changing, shifting world. This he sees – but he sees it only now!

What a disaster that the discovery was not made years ago! Now there is nothing left to give except the ashes of a wasted life. He sees. And what brought him the grace, even at this eleventh hour? It was on the cross that he learned his lesson. It was suffering that opened for him the way to Christ. 'Suffering is the badge of those who love.'

It may thus be said that suffering lovingly accepted has a sort of sacramental value. It produces in the recipient a change, a Christliness in his conduct, a Christliness in his affections and desires and interests, a detachment from, and even contempt of, the world and its ways. It is very possible to allow life to slip out of one's hands (as the thief did) and not realise the sanctifying power of suffering until death comes to teach it. It is very easy to spend one's life shirking the cross, escaping, as best one may, from everything that is disagreeable.

It is possible, too, to make up one's mind to allow Christ's suffering life to be continued in one's own life. Christ living thus in the soul is a target for the world and the devil as He was on Calvary. But they who accept Him as He is, not as they would fashion Him – thorn-crowned, crucified, humiliated – these are the saints, or they are those who have at least begun to walk on the road of holiness. They submit to being crucified even as their great Prototype submitted.

In His life, there are two phases. The first of these began in Bethlehem and ended here on Calvary. It was the suffering phase. But swiftly on its close there followed the joyful phase when Christ emerged glorious and immortal from the tomb, and entered in triumph into heaven. And that phase continues still and will continue, for 'Jesus Christ being risen from the dead dies now no more; death shall no more have dominion over Him.' It is well worth toiling to Calvary in order to enter with Him into such rest; well worth while reproducing the suffering phase of His life when, for the disciple as for the Master, it is sure to be followed by the second phase – the glorious phase which

has no end. ‘The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory to come that shall be revealed in us.’

(Thanks to the Irish Messenger.)
