

The Holy Cross In Our Life

By T. Martin.

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‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to Myself.’ John 13:32.

Life is full to the brim with suffering. No one would be so foolish to deny that the world all around us re-echoes with the groans and sighs of suffering humanity, afflicted with disease, poverty, corroding anxiety, bereavement, loneliness, worry about an uncertain future, vain efforts to keep up appearances, active hostility of enemies, erring relatives, callous employers, idle or even untrustworthy employees, scandal-spreading neighbours, our own unforgettable – and unforgotten! – mistakes, to name only a few of the harrowing worries of everyday life.

In spite of all the devices and gadgets to blot out pain, and promote material comfort, there has never been so much pain as in this present age, and it has never been so gnawing, so hopeless, because it has been separated from God, its only cure. One thing we all forget: when God created man, there was to be no part in his life for death and suffering. Adam disobeyed God, and sinned, incited thereto by Eve who listened to the devil. They it was who brought all this deluge of suffering on us – as they knew they would. No good blaming them. How often have you and I betrayed God just for ‘a goodly apple rotten at the heart?’ Your sin and mine make the world worse for others, yet neither of us bothers about that if we obtain the gratification of the sin. So let us be fair to Adam and Eve. They suffered for it.

We can’t imagine what a disappointment it must have been to God when the beings He endowed with such marvellous minds and bodies, and to whom He gave a glorious world, turned out so badly. Yet because He loved us, He thought out a plan by which to save us from our folly. Straight away He envisaged and promised the Immaculate Virgin Mary who would crush the serpent’s head, and of whom His Son would take flesh, living our human life for 33 years and dying after infinite sufferings as a criminal on a Cross, thereby re-opening Heaven to us. By His Passion and Death He bridged the chasm made between God and man by sin.

We sinned, and God the Son paid our debt, and paid it abundantly, thus restoring to us the supernatural gifts of grace and eternal life. Is it unfair of Him then to ask us to contribute a little, not towards paying off the debt – He did that – but towards placing at His disposal a fund, as it were, on which He could draw for the good of others? The willingly-accepted pain, the voluntary sacrifice offered to God for the salvation of souls by ordinary people like you and me can bring to God’s Feet souls that but for us would be lost to Him forever. We enable God by our sufferings to distribute the unlimited graces of His Passion and Death. We ‘fill up those things that were wanted of the sufferings of Christ’.

No one likes to suffer; everyone tries to get rid of it but cannot, for it dogs the steps of every human being from the cradle to the grave. We all seek joy and happiness. Pain kills both, if we let it, but we need not. ‘Pain,’ George Eliot tells us, ‘is no evil unless it conquers us.’

To have everything the world can give us – love, wealth, happiness, health, and to have peace in our possession – is to be on the road to ruin, for the crucified Christ is not to be met with in such a life. If God loves us, if we have someone's prayers, such a world will come crashing down about our ears sooner or later, and the sacrifice and suffering involved will open up to us the right world. The foolish man, when such suffering comes, will ignore the spiritual side and try to get back what he has lost so that he can go on as before, forgetting God mostly. The wicked will raise defiant fists to Heaven refusing to accept the pain, his rebellion effecting no good whatever but only aggravating the pain and the bitterness. If he clenched his hands round his crucifix, he would derive benefit!

In itself suffering is fruitless, even an evil thing; it becomes a good only when borne for the love of God. It is, like a surgical operation, horrible in itself but life giving in its effects. The blows of life either crush us into the earth, or raise us up to a high spiritual level. Christ must have seen great good in the 'cross' when He told us not merely to bear it, but to 'take it up', as it were, gladly, if we want to follow in His footsteps.

Are not many painful things accepted in life because of their good effect? And we rejoice that the pain can have the beneficial effect desired. But when it comes to enduring pain for the improvement of our character, for the lessening of some spiritual defect like pride or self-sufficiency, greed or sloth, we are up in arms and refuse the cure.

How few there are who do not resent the big place suffering has in their life!

How few recognise it as an undoubted evil, which they themselves can turn into a blessing by accepting it as coming from the permissive hand of a loving Father! You can't barricade yourself against pain. It will seep in through an unseen crevice, and rise up all around you almost drowning you. The thing to do is to call out then as Saint Peter did: 'Lord! Save me. I perish.' And His outstretched arm will lift you up, restoring to you the peace that surpasses understanding. Most of us go through the Dark Night of suffering, written of by Saint John of the Cross who was so cruelly treated by his brethren; but if we love and serve God through it all, the 'Night' will pass and dawn will come to us resplendent.

Dear lovable Saint Francis de Sales tells us suffering is the road to sanctity, and though you may protest you don't want to be a saint if that is the way, there is no other road.

UNIVERSALITY OF SUFFERING.

LIFE presses hard on every one of us. Not a day passes without unpleasant things happening. Some days they are piled high in a cairn, and everyone passing seems to want to 'add a stone' to the pile. Many in God's army seem to be front line soldiers, never sheltered or protected. Of all the sounds (and how they are increasing!) ascending from earth the cry of pain must be the most frequent, the most poignant.

For we are born in others' pain
And perish in our own. (Francis Thompson.)

No one escapes. If pain does not come from others and from things outside us, it comes from ourselves and from our own hearts. Saint Paul, who said so many wise things nearly 2,000 years ago, tells us: 'Every creature groans and writhes in pain.' 'You have been given the favour (note!) not only to believe in Christ but to suffer for Him.'... 'Rejoice in being partakers of the sufferings of Christ that you may also rejoice in the revelation of His glory.'

Founders of religious Orders know their work is going to succeed if it meets with crosses and contradictions, the devil doing his worst to destroy it because of the good he foresees it will do. Saint Margaret Mary, who went through terrible trials both as a girl and as a nun, especially when obeying Our Lord in trying to get established devotion to His Sacred Heart, said: 'The more suffering there is – contradictions, calumnies and every sort of trial, – the more I feel encouraged and the more hope I have that all will succeed for the glory of His loving Heart.'

To read the life of a saint is to read of suffering borne valiantly. For thousands of years men have become God's nearest and dearest by schooling themselves to realise that it is God who is behind their pain. When we read that the saints accepted their suffering with joy we must not read with our human eyes but with the eyes of our soul, otherwise the meaning will be beyond us weak sinners. When Saint Lawrence said, jocosely, while being roasted on a gridiron: 'I'm broiled this side, now turn me over,' he was not talking as a human being but as a martyr and friend of God. In his lower nature, he felt every stab of pain but he refused to let it conquer him. He rose above it, looked down on it from the sublime heights of union with the Crucified, and while it scorched and seared and consumed him, he scorned it, taking refuge in the cover of God's wings where 'pain' was not.

It seems a far cry to Saint Lawrence of the third century, but Irish Missioners in our age – today – have been burned alive and suffered other tortures that only devils would think of. And you and I complain if we are stripped of our reputation, honour, friends, possessions; if we have an unhappy home, or lack health or appreciation or money. The only way to endure is to reflect on what others have endured, who were flesh and blood like ourselves – a [Saint] Oliver Plunkett, a [Blessed] Mother Marie-Thérèse de Soubiran, a [Blessed] Mother Anne Marie Javouhey, a Saint John of the Cross, a Saint Thérèse (de) Couderc.

Saints, because they loved God and knew the value of suffering, welcomed it gladly. Saint Teresa of Avila's, 'To suffer or to die,' re-echoes down the centuries; and Saint Magdalen de Pazzi's, 'Not to die but to suffer'. Saint John of the Cross prayed to 'suffer and be despised for Your sake, Lord.' And Saint John Chrysostom declares that 'all the riches and treasures of kings and emperors are not comparable to the glory of the Cross.' He even says he would leave heaven in order to suffer for the God of Heaven.

All the wisest and holiest men and women of all times attest their unfaltering belief that suffering is a blessing in disguise. All these people can't be fools, can they? Do they regret their suffering now, or is their only regret that they did not suffer twice as much, when they see the glory given to God by their attitude towards it? He, too, dislikes pain.

The tiniest moan of a child hurts Him as it hurts the child's own mother. Our attitude to pain tells God what we think of Him. When we love anyone, we want to shoulder all his burdens, to suffer for him, and thus prove our love. And the more we suffer for the beloved, the happier we are. This fact surely is born of Heaven not earth, and should make us understand why the saints loved suffering.

THE HOLY FAMILY SUFFERED.

LOOK at the sinless members of the HOLY Family, the holiest that earth ever knew. Did Saint Joseph not suffer? – He who had to endure the anguish of seeing his Virgin Spouse about to become a mother though he knew the Child could not be his. Later on, an angel told him of the Virgin Birth. No need to enumerate the heart breaking sorrows of her who is called the 'Mother of Sorrows', whose soul was pierced by a sword, as Simeon foretold, by reason of her motherhood of the Son of

God. She was sinless, undefiled, and yet no one ever suffered as she did. She is the sorrowful Mother of the whole world.

To counteract the suffering caused by Satan and sin, Our Lord assumed our human nature with what to the omnipotent God were its drawbacks.

He lived in Poverty, even in destitution that rarely falls to our lot; He worked in the sweat of His brow as one of us, to show us the dignity of labour; He put up with contempt, coldness, even calumny. Do you think that when He carried to the owner a farm implement mended by Joseph the carpenter, there were not snobs among those Easterns who kept him waiting outside for payment, spoke curtly and rudely to Him, as to an inferior, perhaps telling Him to call again at a more convenient time? And He was God who had created them, who held the world in His hand! He could have reduced the speakers to a mound of dust. He could have replied so effectively as to leave them dumbfounded – unlike you and me who think only afterwards of the grand devastating reply we could have given to ignorant bumptiousness. But ‘Jesus was silent’ – to show us how to act in a similar situation. He chose the meek and humble way to teach us that to meet pride with pride, injustice with anger is no solution.

When ‘put in His place’, He accepted it, and let it be thought all those 30 years that He was merely the Son of the carpenter, Joseph. He never boasted that He was the Son of the omnipotent God and equally omnipotent Himself! When He performed some miracle, the snobs asked, with raised eyebrows ‘Is not this (this!) Jesus, the Son of the carpenter Joseph?’ And... and... how we boast of our lineage! If we are confused with lesser lights, how it riles us, till our proper status is meted out to us! How we try to glamourise our names by altering the letters! But Our Lord accepted contempt, humiliation, misrepresentation for 30 years in preparation for the awful sufferings of the three years of His public life when He was maligned and calumniated, classed with sinners and profligates as their ‘friend’.

We know of His terrible physical sufferings ending in crucifixion for three hours suspended on a Cross, His bodily organs wrenched out of their place, the whole weight of His Body resting on a single nail, hammered through both feet! We who live luckily in this Western World can only imagine the torture of all this. And Christ never sinned, and, therefore, had no cause for expiation except as our representative who had assumed all our guilt and the burden of our debt.

You are maligned – listen to a few of the contemporary comments on the Son of God.

‘He was despised, a Man of Sorrows’;

‘Neither did His brethren believe in Him’;

‘When His friends had heard of it, they went out to lay hold of Him – for they said: “He is become mad”.’ – The Son of God, mad!

‘The Chief Priests sought false witnesses against Jesus so that they might put Him to death.’

‘The Jews took up stones to stone Him.’

‘With the wicked He was reputed.’

Of Himself He said: ‘If the world hate you, know ye that it has hated Me before you.’

‘I am a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people.’

‘All they that saw Me have laughed Me to scorn.’

Can you not see the scoffing and jeering mob; hear the withering speech and belittling innuendoes?

‘Shall I ever be subjected to as bad?’

‘If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.’

‘My soul is sorrowful even unto death.’

And the most heart rending of all His utterances: ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ (He thus quoted and fulfills Psalm 22. It is Psalm 21 of the Vulgate.)

Even when He agonised on the Cross, He was subjected to scorn and mockery – though two of the signs of a decent race are care for the dying and respect for the dead. Christ got neither.

‘They that passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads.’

‘If You be the Christ come down from the Cross.’

‘He saved others, Himself He cannot save.’

‘The soldiers mocked Him, offering Him vinegar,’ when He said ‘I thirst.’

To all the insults, the sinless Christ, atoning for your sins and mine, replied by calling on His Father: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’ This to teach us to forgive when we, too, are, as Saint Louis de Montfort says, ‘abandoned by men and angels, persecuted, envied, betrayed, calumniated, discredited and forsaken by all; suffering hunger, thirst, poverty, nakedness, exile, prison, the gallows and all kinds of torture, although not guilty of the crimes alleged, stripped of all one’s possessions, even honour, even home.’

We can never say that God does not know what we suffer. There is no earthly pain that did not first pass through the Heart of Christ. He bore the brunt of it all so that less would be our portion. We have only to look at Him when we are maligned and humiliated. He did nothing to deserve hatred. He went about doing good. He was Love it self. He was perfect, being God. And yet no one suffered as He did. You and I can help Him by willingly putting our shoulders under His Cross, the Cross His Hand holds out to us, or permits others to hold out to us. He is aware of every cross of ours, even the smallest.

He drank to the last drop the bitter cup of pain, enduring the worst mental sufferings a human being can endure. The physical sufferings did not penetrate His Soul, as did the mental agony – the realization of all who would reject Him and forsake Him denying His love and even His very existence, to be lost for all eternity, preferring the devil to Him. This was the culminating pain of His agony in the Garden and of His Crucifixion: ‘What use is there in shedding My Blood?’

Before we leave Calvary let us look at the three cross-bearers there, and see to which type we belong. Would that it were to Christ suffering intensely for others! But it is more likely we can be classified with the repentant sinner, Dismas turning to Christ at the last moment and imploring mercy. God forbid we should be like the third – the unrepentant thief who died in God’s company yet rejecting Him!

Unless we are crucified with Christ, we will never rise with Him into eternal happiness. It was the crucifixion with Christ of the good thief that enabled him to make atonement to God and to steal the biggest treasure he ever stole – Heaven. Had he never reached Calvary and the Cross, he had never got Heaven so easily – just for a pleading word to Christ and a kindly recognition of His Godhead. Carrying his cross to the summit he knew not the wonderful grace and happiness that same cross was to bring him. Neither do we.

Often crucifixion by suffering is God’s only way of making us turn to him. François Coppée, the great French writer, tells us, that he, a Catholic, gave up all religion and only when stricken with sickness after sickness did he realise his parlous state, and finally turn to God. How often has not a sick bed become the vestibule of Heaven! When the poet (and dreamer!) Francis Thompson failed for the priesthood, failed at medicine, failed everything, failed almost to keep body and soul

together by doing the lowest jobs, he learned through sorrow and failure and destitution to depend upon God. He learned, literally, 'in suffering what he taught in song, – for the lessons ripened into the most exquisite ode in, perhaps, any language, the immortal 'Hound of Heaven'. Had he become a famous lawyer, statesman, churchman, who would now remember him? 'Where, O Kincora is Brian the Great!'

WHY? WHY?

THERE is no answer to the many ways we all ask ourselves about suffering. No philosopher down the ages has ever succeeded in answering the question: 'Why the suffering?' Much less in giving the only remedy – God alone does both. We ask: 'Why this pain above all others? This is the worst.' 'Why to me? What have I done to deserve this?' 'Why, now above all other times when I am trying to be good?' 'Can God be just when He sends such terrible trials? It's no use my following any more the narrow path. For me in future the broad pleasant way!' – And you won't dare add the inevitable ending – 'the broad pleasant way that leads to eternal damnation.' 'There's So-and-So, who never goes to Mass or the Sacraments or pays his debts or keeps the Commandments, and everything is prospering with him.' Precisely. The devil takes care of his own – now! – Waiting like the leopard behind the tree till he has them in his clutches. He gives now the petty satisfaction of the flesh, to be followed by an eternity of anguish and torture. God, on the contrary, like a 'good mother giving nasty medicine', gives the bitter now to be followed by an eternity of bliss. Which is the bargain?

This is the sufferer's weak hour, and gives the devil his chance to instil rebellion against and distrust of God, trying to make the soul renounce God, thus turning into a terrible calamity what would, if God were trusted, turn into a blessing.

You are not singled out for misfortune. Everything seems to conspire to fell you to the ground, and leave you moaning there. God seems very distant and unhelpful, and thus distrust tries to get a footing in your soul. To let it in is to shut out the last gleam of hope and of daylight and so submerge oneself in a dark underground tunnel.

It is futile and criminal to scowl at Heaven. That only increases and embitters the pain. Why cast yourself off from the only source of help, the only One who understands? To renounce God because of it, to stupefy yourself with drink or drugs, or to wallow in the sensual pleasures of the world is no cure. It only adds misery to misery, sowing the seeds of what may well become a permanent trouble.

You don't understand why this grief has blotted the sun out of your life, why God has taken from you the one person who made life worth living, that health, so necessary to you and your dear ones; that work, that peace of mind, freedom of action, that home happiness, those resources one could go on endlessly. We don't understand, but we'll learn the reason one day when the veil is lifted.

It is only natural to shrink from pain, to feel the muscles of our heart tighten when memory brings

The light of other days around us,
The eyes that shone now dimmed and gone,
The cheerful hearts now broken. (Thomas Moore 1779-1852.)

Or when some soul-searching melody steepens us in an abyss of loneliness and longing for what only God can give. God understands and sympathises. He, too, knew anguish of spirit, but greater than ours will ever be. He missed Lazarus so much that He wept at his death. He raised from the dead the

only son of the widow of Naim for He could not bear to see her grief, and with arms around the boy, 'He gave him back to his mother.' No one has as soft a heart as our God. He is watching the scales of sorrow, yours and mine, lest it exceed by a hair's weight what we are able to bear, the amount necessary for our salvation. He hates to hurt us, to see us grieving, but He has to for our good. And He will re-unite us forever with the loved ones now gone from us for a time. If you are forced to suffer the loss of reputation, remember He was accounted the friend of sinners and partner of the devil.

Betrayed by your friends? All his disciples, leaving Him fled.

One sold Him to His enemies for the paltry price of an ox or an ass. Left lonely in your suffering? He was abandoned in the hour of His bitterest suffering in Gethsemane by His three closest friends whom He begged – God begging for support and sympathy! – to stay near Him in His agony, while He sweated blood in atonement for our sins. They did not. They slept on calmly, though twice appealed to by Him!

If your kindness has been requited with ingratitude, so was His. If vile accusations have been hurled at you, He endured the same. If you've been humiliated and belittled, He was clothed in a fool's garment, spat upon, slapped on the face as a presumptuous imposter, and He was Eternal Wisdom, all the wonders of whose creation the learned scientists after many years have not yet succeeded in understanding or exhausted the application of, where they do at last understand. Are you homeless and friendless, and solitary, all your children grown up and gone, or worse still, scattered by the caprice and dislike of your partner in marriage? The Son of Man had not whereon to lay His Head, was an outcast who never knew what it was to have a steadfast reliable friend. If you are 'a shut-in', tied to a narrow bed in ward or room and racked by bodily pain, at least you know that it is not caused by malice or dislike, and that it is nothing compared to having thick, cruel thorns, dug into your brain and rough nails driven through your hands and feet, by those indebted to you for life and every good they ever enjoyed. If a false friend betrays your confidence while simulating affection, Christ was betrayed by the kiss of a false disciple and abandoned by almost everyone.

If to Christ why not to you and me? 'The disciple cannot be greater than', or different from, 'the Master'. Moreover, he must do what his Master did – offer the daily round of remorseless petty sorrows, and the occasional agony of big ones for the salvation of the world. It will not be always winter, not always dark night Endure for the day. There is always a tomorrow. If you are bruised and battered today, look forward and upward, to-morrow will surely bring you a blessing or two. Life teaches us that. Only suffer in union with Christ. Offer it all to him in love and gratitude for His many mercies and in atonement for a world that ignores Him or denies him.

A sign of Salvation.

OUR Lord told Saint Gertrude that suffering is a sign of salvation as the ring is a sign of marriage. Sorrow is a great eye-opener.

Tears blind us for a while and scald our cheeks, but they have the affect of sharpening and cleaning our spiritual sight and of showing us the nothingness and unreliability of everything earthly. The blows of life reveal to us our defects of character, our mistakes of judgement, our slips of the tongue or hand. We often discover new beauties in the dark of a moonlit night. Only through clouds do heavenly horizons appear clearly and fascinatingly.

It looks as if we are all wrong in hating sorrow. Christ suffered; Our Lady suffered; all the saints suffered, some terribly, not counting the martyrs. If Paradise lay at the end of a sunlit road of happiness Our Lord would have allotted that road to His sinless, peerless Mother, and to His friends all down through the ages. But no-one suffered as did these. He could have redeemed us more easily, even by a word, but knowing life's agonies, His loving heart wanted to console and strengthen us and transform each earthly sorrow for us, leaving on it the imprint of His love.

Were suffering removed from this world, the nobler qualities of humanity would cease to exist – self-sacrifice, pity, compassionate help, heroism, and in their stead would flourish selfishness, cruelty, hatreds and ferocity.

'Put pain from out the world, – what room were left
For thanks to God, for love to man? (Robert Browning.)

The world is full of kindly people whose lives are 'dedicated to the alleviation of suffering' of all kinds, bodily, mental. A brave man risks his life to save another from fire or water, and though he does not desire death, in fact dreads it, he is resigned to it if, thereby, he may do good and bring joy to another by his own suffering. A Father [Saint Maximilian] Kolbe frees a married man by taking his place in the concentration camp and enduring tortures worse than death. This heroism is seen so often that nations set aside special awards for the heroic doers. How much more must it appeal to the God of Calvary!

To face danger, suffering and death, gives one a fuller, richer outlook on life and a more accurate sense of values. 'The character that has been built up in continuous sunshine is like a tree that never experienced the shaking storm that sinks its roots more deeply into the earth. Neither has a steadfast hold. Neither will weather a strong gale.' Sorrow matures our character, makes us more understanding, compassionate, forgiving, more forbearing, less inclined to find fault and complain, It enables us to distinguish gold from gilt; sincerity from pretence; it deepens our life, steadies us, makes us responsible, teaches us patience with ourselves and with others. Those who have suffered are a bulwark to others; their faces show peace after storm; passion and temptation overcome, in fact, they reflect the harbour lights of Heaven. What do they know of God who only know happiness? What do they know?

But the greatest benefit conferred by pain is that by it we can make atonement for our sins, and reparation for the sins of others. We cannot grasp how much our sins insult God because we have no idea of His exalted majesty as God and Creator. But His Passion and Death show us how terrible sin must be in God's sight. Things that to our sin coarsened natures seem slight are horrible crimes against the All-pure God. Insults wound, in proportion to the status and refinement of their object. They overwhelm one person with anguish while merely flicking the outside of a thick-skinned person. Saints who got even a faint idea of the enormity of sin used to faint when they sensed its presence. To you and me, accustomed to sin, this is incomprehensible, as we regard sin only from our side and through the tiny end of the spiritual microscope, already blurred by our desire for the sin. Atonement must bear some proportion to the majesty of the person offended and ours can't unless we unite it to the atonement made by God the Son on Calvary.

God sometimes sends sorrow as a warning, like a light on a floating buoy, that there is danger of shipwreck. Long lonely hours of mental or physical pain bring home to one the transient nature of earthly happiness. When we see health, family happiness, reputation, crumble to dust, our whole

outlook on things alters. God begins at last to get an innings. Only a fool would, when sinking in the swirling waters of sorrow, fail to take God's outstretched hand in his, recognising His love.

'You chastise them that err... so that learning their worldliness they may believe in You, O Lord.'

How grateful then we should be to God for sending us anything that will turn us back to Him for whom we were created!

To go on triumphantly through a sun-filled life ignoring the Giver of all the happiness is to be a castaway, unfit for a Heaven created to reward the good deeds done for God. To the soul blessed all along with life's good things, suffering comes as a rescuer from perdition. It is the surgeon's scalpel – saving life.

To many, suffering is God's last attempt at rescue. Refuse to accept it as coming from His loving hand and you render Him powerless to save you. He must let you go your own way to the everlasting bonfire.

We all have to be purified, and as pain is the great purifier, pain is essential to our lives. If we were to go into heaven with the besmirched souls we have we should beg to be sent to a place of purification. Is it not said that the soul at death seeks out Purgatory for this reason? Few are completely devoted to 'God, utterly His'. For many of us the aim is to get all the satisfaction we can out of life without going so far as to displease God. The great majority try to get this satisfaction even, if it displeases God. That is where sin comes in. Founders of quack religions always insert some licence that appeals to fallen humanity, such as easy divorce with re-marriage, relaxation of marital obligations, but God called on the Godlike qualities dormant in man and promised nothing but suffering in this life with eternal happiness to come. And yet millions find in their soul the strength to follow this hard way day after day, won over by faith in the sublime Leader who declared, 'I came not to bring peace but the sword'.

God 'must char the wood ere He can limn with it.' His 'harvest fields must be dunged with rotten death,' (The Hound of Heaven) the death of 'the old man' in all of us and its desires. We all have to go through the process of being stripped of the layers of material things in which we wrap ourselves up. We must divest ourselves of this cocoon and emerge fit company for the holy ones of God, or we must let God strip us relentlessly. The awful side of suffering is not the suffering itself but the cowardice of those who relying on themselves alone, crumple up under it, letting it conquer them completely even to losing their lives.

As we climb the hill towards eternity we get by degrees the wisdom to understand better God's reasons for sending us trials and disappointments and rebuffs, and as we look back along the path we've trodden we see that in all cases He was right in what He denied us, and that His ways were best.

'Did not God

Sometimes withhold in mercy what we ask,

We should be ruined at our own request.' (Hannah More.)

Our Lord told Saint Mechtilde that if she placed all her suffering in His Heart it would obtain forgiveness for sinners, relief for souls in Purgatory, merit for the just and additional honour for the blessed in Heaven. Our pain can do more for the Missions than all the labours of the most hard working missionaries and how they do work! The Little Flower offered all her pain for this end, and it was said she saved as many souls as did Saint Francis Xavier by his labours all over the East. That

may be what God wants of us – not our talents as teacher or tailor. Our real lifework, that is to win Heaven for us, may be just our patient bearing of the inescapable pains of life in union with those of Christ Crucified. On you or me may depend the success of the heroic men and women now striving to draw souls into the net of Christ, and to obtain constancy for the persecuted Church in East Europe and elsewhere in places under Communist or Islamist persecution. We are small, but united to Christ Crucified, – we are omnipotent. Perhaps it was our willing patience in pain that gave Christ the greatest consolation He got in His Passion. With God, there is no time. 2,000 years is as yesterday.

We must think of God as the surgeon of our souls who, to cure them, will use the knife of suffering. He will not probe or excise for the pleasure of it or for experiment. He will do it only as a sure cure for a sure evil. He knows what he is doing and the best way to give permanent relief. Can we not trust him even if only as we trust a very fallible doctor of the body?

HOW TO BEAR SUFFERING.

SINCE there is no avoiding suffering, and since its only merit is got from linking it up with Christ's suffering, we should when making our morning offering offer up all the trials of the day in union with Christ's Passion and Death for all His intentions and those of His Blessed -Mother. Then the devil can't snatch our merit. We can be apostles by offering our pain for the souls of especially our kindred. My pain of mind or body may be this moment winning the grace needed by a tempted relative who will thank me for all eternity for helping him to resist sin and win Heaven. I should offer it for pagans, for those so stupid as to be atheists, for the sinner sodden in his sin, and all the rest of the massa damnata (the masses of those damned) who have no one to pray them into Paradise. To save one soul is to establish a claim on God's mercy and His Kingdom.

He who for a kind word rewarded Dismas, the good thief, with Heaven, will be equally good to those who help save souls for whom He died.

Have you ever made a friend of someone, you did not like at first? You can do the same with suffering. Be nice to it by not complaining, don't show it your worst side, accept it, nay, welcome it in God's presence and between you two, God and you, you will make a friend of it and perhaps one day be glad of its company. Don't take it on my word, the wise and the good attest it. 'Blessed are they that mourn', not blessed are the rich and successful (who, usually, poor things! look so worried and unhappy), moreover, not blessed are they in eternity alone, but blessed are they at this very moment.

To accept suffering willingly does not imply indifference to pain or lack of feeling. They are not to be envied who are so hard or so shallow that suffering does not affect them. This is to take pain in the wrong way and, therefore, gets no reward. If they have steeled themselves against pain, they do not accept it. Being a Stoic is not being a Christian. One must feel the pain keenly while accepting it from God. But to carry one's cross obviously and to go about with a martyred air is only to evoke contempt. Those with grit and pluck keep on overcoming obstacles; the weaklings go under through lack of character.

We know how irritating people can be who, in our heartbreaking sorrows, say with that calm resignation we all have in other people's sorrow:

'It is the will of God.'

Of course it is, but they do not impress us by their unsympathetic way of using the stock phrase. If they only said it with pity and kindness, the effect would be to console us. But to have it thrown at your head like a sledge-hammer does not relieve your pain. The effect on ourselves should teach us how to console others in their afflictions and one way not to do it is to represent the good, kind, fatherly God as a dictator or a bit of a despot (sorry! Lord), or even as a surgeon armed with a deadly weapon and aching to cut into us.

It is foolish to look at happiness through other peoples' eyes. To us they seem to have all that can make life happy – they are cocooned in a blissful family life, everything they touch turns into gold, their children have successful careers and marry well, their lives are filled with health and happiness. But don't judge hastily. If this is a true picture, it can't last because it is not true to life. Most likely it is true only on the surface. If we knew the secret history of those people, we should find many traces of sorrow.

I, for one, never met anyone untouched by life's trials. Happy people we all meet but they are happy because they recognise that sorrow is the lot of everyone and comes from the permitting hand of an all-wise and loving Father. To see the hand of anyone else in it, is to be miserable. They forget – or try to – the hand that God allowed to smite them, and put bitterness and resentment far from them as unworthy of the brave Christian. That you have, or think you have, more trials than others, may be true, but is it not the courageous soldier who is given the post of danger? Cowards are kept with the crowd and in comparative safety. Do you want to be an outstanding soldier of Christ, and thus prove your loyalty to Him, or do you want to be sheltered in inglorious security? 'Gold and silver are tried in the fire but acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation.' (Ecclesiasticus 2:5.) 'Because you were acceptable to God it was necessary that temptation should prove you.' (Tobit 12:13-14.) It was a wise person who prayed. 'Lord, change into bitterness for me all the pleasures of the earth.' God does that for those He loves, just as a loving mother smears something bitter on the nails of a child who loves to bite them.

When God is in the soul of the sufferer, there, too, are perfect peace and poise in the presence of sorrow. All creatures must suffer. Saintry souls suffer most but loving God, they suffer with peace and resignation. Sinners suffer but having put God out of their life, they suffer the tortures of the damned. One half of the world is trying in vain to fly from suffering and death, the other half is inflicting both (through abortion, communism, persecution, and the like).

We must not let our cross be a conflict between our will and God's. Our will must be riveted in His and inseparable from it. If God were to offer us happiness of every kind, exemption from all ills of mind and body, in fact offered us a long unclouded life, we should so trust Him and love Him that we could say from our heart: 'Father, not as I will but as You will. – Do with me whatever You please. Send me whatever will draw me nearer to You.' And if God said, as He could, 'Joy and happiness will never draw you close to My Heart, suffering will,' it is easy to see what our choice should be – and, how difficult for nature to make! How much easier for us to leave the choice to Him, to abandon all to His Holy Will, taking the rough with the smooth, the shadow with the sun, today's heartache with tomorrow's Joy, all just as God wills. Only He can apportion sorrow and joy accurately.

DARKNESS.

HE is nearer to us in the dark than in the light, for darkness was His own portion on earth. Lean on Him, He is beside you. Make your cross into a crucifix by seeing Him on it and uniting your pains

to His. Only thus can you bear it. The naked cross without Him will appall you, crucifying you as it crucified Him. With Him, there He will turn His eyes of pity towards you as He did towards Dismas, promising you Paradise.

Tell Him all. He is the only one who will never tire of listening and helping, 'His arms are stretched over your life from end to end, mercifully and powerfully; mercifully by not permitting you to be tempted and afflicted above your strength; powerfully by giving you grace in proportion to the violence of your temptation '.... 'and by becoming Himself your support on the brink of the precipice on which you stand, your Companion on the road... your shelter... your refuge in the dangers that beset you, your harbour in the midst of the storms that threaten you with ruin and shipwreck.' (Saint Louis de Montfort.)

When you are sinking in the dark abyss of sorrow keep your head erect and 'your chin up'. Ask Our Lord, with Saint Thomas Aquinas, to give you 'an unconquerable heart, which no tribulation can crush or quell'. Don't play the poltroon – the coward; all Heaven and earth look on to see your reaction. Let God have reason to be proud of you as a follower of His Son, Let the audience of the Heavenly host, who may number many of your earthly friends, be glad to see you act as a valiant soldier. Let them be able to say to one another: 'I knew he had it in him!' Let those around you have reason to admire your loyalty to Christ, your steadfastness to truth and principle, your submission to God's will.

If your suffering comes from the malice of enemies, you can wipe out their satisfaction by bearing yourself bravely as a friend of God. Why give them the satisfaction of seeing you wilt under their action? Rise above it, leaving them to God and to the torture of mind they cannot stifle. If they repent of their injustice, it is all to your good; if they don't, infinitely worse suffering than yours, awaits them. Don't let it embitter you. Let it cleanse and purify you. Then it will elevate and ennoble you.

Above all, don't yield to self-pity like a baby in the nursery of life. The man of character not only accepts his share of sorrow willingly but he interests himself in the joys and sorrows of others. Help them to carry their cross and your own will already have become lighter. To tell them to forget their sorrow is a waste of breath. No one can. This sort of advice is given by those who have yet to ascend their own Calvary. More to the point to tell them that sorrow draws them closer to the Crucified. Advise them to bury it deep in the wounds of Christ.

When we hear of what others go through, it makes us ashamed of our cowardice. There are far worse crosses than ours, and people we never suspect are hiding an aching heart under a calm and even cheerful exterior. You read of Polyanna, who bent almost in two from arthritis, thanked God that now she would not have to stoop so far to do the weeding in her garden! And of the man who having no shoes complained till he saw a man on crutches who had no feet! You may dub them fools but are they not gallant fools? Is not their attitude more desirable than one of sour complaint? Is not the world the better of such persons, whereas, the grumbler does no good to God or man, or to himself. We all admire a little spirit. Nothing is so despicable as the self-pity that is always sopping up the sympathy of others, even for trifles. When our withers are wrung and our tenderest feelings galled, then is the time to act like a man, not a molly.

God does not ask us to love pain as we love life and health, family and friends. That would be impossible to our corrupt nature. Even Our Lord in the Garden found His suffering almost unbearable and prayed His Father to remove it, but He quickly added: 'Yet not My will but Yours be

done!’ The most God expects from common clay like you and me is submission. We can have that in our soul while our whole being is repugnant to the pain. To tell Him we wish we could accept it joyfully but that we just can’t bear it, is to tell Him what He already knows and understands.

NO ONE SO ‘BIG’ AS GOD.

NO one is so understanding, so tolerant, so big, so forgiving, as God. He went through every phase and variety of suffering Himself, and you’ve found out long ago that it is only persons who carry a cross like our own who really understand what we suffer. He knows we are bruised reeds and He never ‘breaks the bruised reed.’ ‘Though I should walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff have comforted me.’

Notice the rod! Being a son and heir you have not to be treated with aloof politeness, you can be whipped into good behaviour!

God’s Ways of shaping us for Heaven are drastic. He has to inspire someone to ‘squeeze the pulp out of our pride, and leave us stripped and naked,’ fit to be clothed with virtue. Our pain would be lessened if we did not luxuriate in it as in a hot bath. A good cure for it, or at least a softener, is to make a list of our many blessings. We all have some. And if we fix our eyes on these and not on the pain, we could be more courageous. There is no one without a cross, apparent or hidden. But their trust in God helps them to carry it gallantly. Without whining or darkening the lives of others with complaint and demands for pity.

We can’t find perfect happiness, that is joy, on earth; it is the element of Heaven. Those who tell you they are happy mean that at present life has let them alone. Why do two women love to put their heads together and ‘have a good talk’? Simply to tell each other about the wrenches and jolts and disappointments of their life and to compare notes. They are not so keen to share their few joys.

Find out the contented ones, the cheerful ones and you’ll notice they are not those who have no crosses, but those who have schooled themselves to see God’s Hand in everything, and who know He will work things out for their good. They wind up their ‘tale of woe’ always with our grand Irish saying: ‘Blessed be God’s holy will!’ May it never die out in our land! They know that God never closed one door without opening another; that a break is bound to come, that that needed money will be got somehow (try giving and you’ll get a hundredfold!); that desired job, or as good, will turn up, that hostility cease, that illness be cured, or – peace and resignation to the pain, be given. Don’t give up hope, for to lose hope is to lose all the zest of life and be worse than dead. But ‘be one whom hope cannot delude nor sorrows discontent.’ Neither let trouble and anxiety freeze you into a lonely iceberg, aloof from the comradeship of God and man and floating solitary in an ocean of bitterness and despondency. Open Book 2 and 3 of that wonderful book, ‘The Imitation of Christ’, in which people I know get an answer to all the puzzles and anxieties of life. Go to the Mother of Sorrows, whose heart is open to receive all the sorrowing, to guide and console them, a heart that sounded all the depths of sorrow. Though mothers all down the ages have suffered through their children, no one but Mary the Immaculate saw her Son crucified through the hatred of the guilty.

Make your own the motto of Juliana of Norwich, who, sunk in anguish over the evils of the world – even then! – came to the wise conclusion, after much thought and prayer: ‘All shall be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’ (Many regard her as an uncanonised saint.) One of the things that amazes most in life, and consoles, is to see how God turns the misfortunes and hurts of His friends into blessings. You may miss the boat but you also miss the collision. Take

heart. God is our Father. Are we treating Him as such? Put fear and distrust out of your life, and fill it instead with boundless confidence that the God who feeds the birds will look after you; that not a hair of your head falls to the ground unseen by Him.

Bring yourself to

Thank God for the bitter and endless strife
And the sing of His chastening rod
Thank God for the stress and pains of life
And oh! Thank God for God! (Joyce Kilmer.)

He has what no earthly father has – the power to do all things, and the knowledge of what were wise to do in the circumstances and what to refrain from doing. Do you know anyone who is not perplexed as to what course to take with husband or wife or child, with business, employers or employed? Is not this nagging worry on the increase, or am I mistaken? But we Catholics have God in our Tabernacles day and night waiting to help and sustain us. He gives us sympathy – unvoiced, it is true, but none the less real. He is ready to straighten out our tangles, to turn the discords of life into harmony, to soothe our jangled nerves.

He knows every bruise of our wounded heart and spirit, everything that was said and done for us or against us, every disappointment we have in ourselves and others. He will tell us exactly what to do and say in doubtful situations. He sees past, present and future, and is longing to help us, to guide, and console us, to remove the obstacles to our happiness. He is, you know, as soft-hearted as a fond mother.

THE COMFORT OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT.

WHY do we not kneel oftener at His Feet in the Blessed Sacrament, pouring out all our troubles and – our joys! He is a safer confidante than any earthly friend, and He is all powerful. It is He who all down the ages sustained the saints, the persecuted, the tempted, the wavering, the weak. No one fell who went to Him. And He will sustain us if only we go to Him trustfully. How much young people miss when they don't realise God's presence in the Blessed Sacrament! How real God must be to the youngster who lately ended up her night prayers during an epidemic with the original prayer: 'And please, Lord, do take care of Yourself, for, if anything were to happen to You, what would become of us all without You?' Strange theology, but how the Lord's eyes must have glistened with love, and His Arms gone out to hug that child who knew Him for her Father and Father of whole world! His Heart burns with infinite pity and desire to help us, because we are His children, and our tears over our broken toys evoke His sympathy. He will remove the trouble if removal is best for us. We can see ourselves that there could be cases where to remove trouble would be the ruin of us, and not what we would ask if we, too, could see the future. Sin must be expiated and Heaven earned.

And is it not more acceptable that way? How utterly out of place we should feel if untried and untested, we got into the glory of Heaven, receiving the accolade without having deserved it! God does not despise us as weaklings, unable to bear the slightest scratch. He knows every fibre of each individual, and why a slight cross weighs on one much more than a heavy one on another; why a slander that one would shrug off nonchalantly, tortures another. He knows where the cross hurts each, and it is only He who can adjust it so that it is less galling.

Earthly friends get credit for much that He inspires them to do for us. He never thinks little of our moans, never dubs us 'hippish', a word creatures love to use – of others. He only remembers that

we are like little children running to the mother with a finger prick. And as no one ever knew a mother to repulse her child, neither will He send anyone away unrelieved. Why, oh why, do we not go oftener to Him in His visible Home, the Tabernacle and tell Him all, good and bad?

That's why He is there. He won't turn a deaf ear or plead pressure of work as do earthly friends, who have trouble enough on their own, and do not want their hearts harrowed by any more suffering. God is not like that.

Though He likes to hear us tell Him our joys, it's our cares and worries and griefs He likes best to be told of, because in our joys we are self sufficient but in our sorrows we need Him and His helping hand, and He goes all out to assist us. But we must remember that this help may not always include removal of the trouble as He sees the good we can derive from it by submission to His holy will.

Our sick child may die but it is a thousand times better to bewail a dead child than a living one. Many a man or woman owes a rounded and perfect Catholic life to the anguish inflicted by an erring husband or wife or child.

Trust, only trust your Father. Say with Robert Browning:

Let one more attest I have lived, seen God's Hand thro' that life-time, And all was for the best.

Are we, Catholics, blessed with all the graces of the True Faith and having Jesus and Mary always at our beck and call, going to be less loyal to God?

Are we going to show the white feather and go under with cowards while the less favoured uphold His standard, fighting bravely and trustfully to their last breath?

Leave tomorrow, and its needs to God. He will provide if we trust Him.

That crushing misfortune will be averted or turned to our good, and the cloud will show its silver lining bringing joy.

God hears all our prayers but answers them in the way He sees best for us. That, too, should console, for we have seen mothers ruin their child's character by giving in to it on every point.

Listen to the God who lets suffering come to us: 'Fear not for I have redeemed you' – and loved you with an everlasting love. 'You are mine, when you shall pass through the waters I will be with you, and the rivers shall not overcome you. Call upon Me in the day of trouble and I shall deliver you. I am He that blots out your sins FOR MY OWN SAKE, and I will not remember them. Return to Me and I will receive you. He that touches you touches the apple of My eye. Even to your old age and to your grey hairs I will carry you. Because he has hoped in Me, I will deliver him. I will protect him because he has known My name. He shall cry to Me and I will hear him.'

Say this from a'Kempis, and get peace of soul:

'Lord, Your care over me is greater than all the care I can take of myself... for it cannot but be good whatever You shall do by me. If You will have me to be in darkness be You blessed, and if You will have me to be in light be You again blessed; if You vouchsafe to comfort me be You blessed; and if it should be Your will I should be afflicted, be You always equally blessed.... I will receive with indifference from Your Hand good and evil, sweet and bitter, joy and sorrow; and will give You thanks for all that happens to me.... Cast me not off for ever, nor blot me out of the book of life, and what tribulation whatsoever befalls me shall not hurt me.'

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