

# Gethsemane

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[Father Almire Pichon, S.J. was a confessor of Saint Therese at the Carmel of Lisieux. Readers will find this spiritual reflection of his to be very reassuring and uplifting.]

Gethsemane.

The true lessons for us of the sufferings of Our Lord in the Garden of Olives.

Let us consider the Passion of Our Lord, His supreme Passion, which took place in the Garden of Olives. There He endured a Passion of the Heart, of Love spurned, rejected, betrayed. All the tortures that He endured after that — the outrages, the brutality of which He was the object when He was delivered over to the executioners — all of that was little compared to what He suffered in Gethsemane.

It seems that Our Lord willed to pass through all the phases of suffering. Through His martyrdom, He willed to take to Himself all the sharpest elements in suffering, and thus in some mystic way to alleviate our sufferings. The soul experiences, in suffering, three bitter griefs, swords that pierce the heart through and through.

We feel that we suffer alone;  
that our sufferings are valueless, without merit;  
and finally, that they are, in some way, culpable.  
These are the three martyrdoms that render our sufferings doubly painful.

First, it seems to us that we suffer alone.

"If only I could know that I do not suffer alone."

"I feel myself so isolated in my anguish."

"It seems to me that I am the only one to taste such bitterness."

"Alas, my sorrow must not spring from a good source."

The enemy of our soul, secondly, jealous of the glory we render to God through suffering, tries to render it insupportable to us by making us believe that our sufferings are sterile, that we suffer without merit. It is this aspect that causes us to feel our pain so intensely that it throws us into a profound bitterness, a kind of despair. "If I knew that through these pangs I were purchasing at least one soul, I should bless my anguish. I should be content to suffer. But what breaks my heart is that I can perceive no fruit to be gathered from my trials. They appear to be sterile."

There is a third pain, even more bitter than the two preceding ones. Not only do we believe ourselves to be suffering alone and without merit, but it appears to us that, instead of meriting, we are actually offending God.

Our sufferings appear to have resulted from our defects and are, therefore, culpable.

There arises within our hearts an accumulation of things that trouble our peace, our security as God's dear children.

But we never suffer alone.

Our sufferings are never sterile.

Above all, our sufferings are never culpable.

I do not want to exaggerate. Is it that in our sufferings we may not offend God by a lack of resignation, of patience, or by some other venial faults of that kind, arising from the very excess of our pain? I claim that there is very much less of this than is commonly thought. It may even be that we lose some merits, but how far does the indubitable gain compensate for the loss? How many good persons cover themselves with reproaches, distressing themselves unduly, over having felt a certain repugnance to their trials?

Oh, how I love these words of a saint: "The cross never appears in a life without leaving there some good." He did not say, "The cross, well-accepted, carried joyously by a generous heart." No, every cross leaves benign traces in a life, even — and I shall go so far as to say, above all — a cross meagerly, miserably accepted.

Our Lord, who gives individual care to each soul, says to Himself: "From every possible consideration, this soul is about to acquire more merits, make more progress, glorify Me more, if I send him this trial. It will be profitable to him." The hour, then, for suffering has arrived. It is the hour of salvation.

Let us ask of the Holy Spirit that we may fully understand this page — admirable, sublime, incomparable — in which He Himself dictates all the passages. Wonderful page, capable of furnishing a balm for all wounds, a remedy and a consolation for all who suffer! I admit that before I came to understand this, suffering was, for me, a mystery.

Jesus then went toward the Garden of Olives. On the way, He felt Himself invaded by a profound, heartbreaking sadness, which enveloped His whole being. It was a sadness that all His courage could not throw off and that wrested from Him this plaint: "My soul is sorrowful unto death." This was not a vain expression, a rhetorical exaggeration.

How strangely did I once misunderstand this scene! I should have imagined that, like the first martyrs, He would have gone into the midst of tortures singing, that He would have been joyous in the midst of His trials, of His incredible sufferings!

Our Lord did not sing. He was not overwhelmed with joy. He was not full of happiness. On the contrary, He was overcome with sadness to the point that His terrible agony wrested from Him this cry: "My soul is sorrowful unto death, even to die of grief."

Ah, when I behold the martyrs throw themselves, singing, upon the instruments of torture, kissing the instruments of their death; when I see them call to their executioners, that they are their benefactors, and express gratitude to those who persecute them, I can see clearly what they suffered in their bodies, but I do not see what they suffered in their souls. Their souls were in perfect serenity. Their souls already tasted heaven through anticipation. Their interior joy rendered them insensible to their physical torments.

The martyrs endured torture in their bodies. Jesus, King of Martyrs, willed to be 'martyrs' in His soul. My divine King did not sing in going to His martyrdom. His Heart was stricken. His soul was sad, sad unto death.

Oh, my soul, why then reproach me for my sorrow? Why are you so severe toward me? Why do you demand that I suffer with joy, when God permits suffering to invade me, to overwhelm me? Our Lord endured sorrow before I did, and more than I ever have, or ever shall, yet His sufferings were good, meritorious. Ah, then, in my grief I can present myself to Jesus, kneel beside Him in Gethsemane, unite my pain to that of His Heart. No, I am not alone when I suffer with overwhelming sorrow. Jesus suffers with me.

The Holy Spirit emphasizes another detail: Our Lord commenced to be afraid. How is that? Our Lord afraid? Of what? Of His bitter chalice, of His Passion, of His cross, of the will of His Father? It was necessary that He drain His chalice to the last drop, yet He was afraid.

Do I still dare to believe that a generous soul must never quail before suffering? Do I believe that we must always look upon it with joy? Go out to meet it? Oh, my soul, why do you reproach me for my fears, my apprehensions? Even when I tremble before trials, even when the sight of the cross fills me with fear, I can still present myself at Gethsemane, can kneel beside Jesus and offer my sufferings to God for His glory and my salvation. His Divine Son suffered even as I do. How good was Our Lord in revealing to us the merits hidden even in sufferings that appear to us as paltry, unimportant!

But the Holy Spirit reveals to us a third suffering of Jesus, even more astonishing. Our Lord began to fear and to be troubled. "Troubled"? Is not trouble the emotion of a soul that is not entirely sure of itself, which is no longer master of itself? Is it not the emotion of a soul that is disturbed, disquieted? That no longer possesses itself in peace? A generous soul permits itself to be troubled? Should it not rather await, with a collected and firm mind, whatever the will of God provides? Oh, my soul, why reproach me for being troubled? Why represent it as a moral defection? Jesus was even more troubled than I.

Yes, even when I am worried, troubled, I can go to Gethsemane. I can prostrate myself at the side of Jesus and offer my troubles to God. He will accept them. I suffer, then, as did my divine Model.

A note even more surprising is added to this score: Our Lord commenced to experience repugnance. He began to fear and to be heavy. Repugnance? Is not that the point at which we commence to abandon everything? Does not aversion amount to repulsion, and that to a high degree? Repugnance, and of what? Of His Passion. Of all that was most holy in the will of His Father. His repugnance was so profound that He was almost overcome by it. He could hardly control Himself.

Oh, my soul, why reproach me for my repugnances? Jesus suffered from repugnance of His sufferings before I did, and more than I ever have. You will that I love suffering? Jesus did not love it. He did not feel any attraction for suffering. On the contrary, it inspired him with fear, with sorrow, with repugnance. In the midst of my own repugnances of all kinds, I can still prostrate myself at Gethsemane and offer to God those pains that devour my heart; it was thus that His Divine Son suffered.

The Gospel says then that He commenced to fear. Fear? Is not that a cowardly sentiment, small, miserable, despicable? Is not that the sentiment of a soul, which feels itself to be weakening, which sees its courage evaporating?

Fear? Is not that the feeling of a soul that asks itself a second later if it can still hold out, still consent to suffer?

Our Lord was fearful, and of what? Of what was to Him most sacred and most holy: He feared His mission, His vocation of redemption.

Oh, my soul, why do you reproach me for being fearful? Jesus was fearful before ever I was, and even more than I, yet He is my model in suffering.

Even, then, in the midst of my fears, even while I feel myself to be so poor, so weak, in my discouragements, in my despairs, I can go to Gethsemane. I can kneel by the side of Jesus and offer my sufferings to God, who will receive them favorably for they resemble the sufferings of His Son.

To suffer generously, I once believed, was to suffer with a courage that never winces. I thought it meant to go to meet suffering, to hold out my arms to it. Now I understand that we can suffer just as generously, yet suffer with sorrow, fear, worry, repugnance, that we can suffer miserably.

When, in the midst of suffering, we feel our heart to be resigned, generous, it is to be feared that self-love is taking its toll. But to suffer without realizing that one is suffering well, to suffer with all the sorrow and discouragement which lead one to believe that all merit is lost, that we are even offending God with our lack of generosity, this is to suffer without any consolation. This is pure suffering. When a soul is conscious of its generosity, can testify that it is fully resigned to the will of God, its sorrows are softened. But to suffer in such an interior confusion that no luster issues from the suffering, when one fears one's pains are sterile — ah, that is suffering par excellence. It is that of Our Lord in the Garden of Olives.

Let us accompany Our Lord further in the Passion of His Heart, and we shall find more precious lessons. When Our Lord arrived in the Garden of Olives, He knew that His agony was about to begin, and He took with Him three apostles, Peter, James, and John, the identical three who had accompanied Him to Thabor. He did not wish to be alone in His sorrow. He longed to have near Him hearts that would sympathize and console Him. He was begging, wordlessly, for a little consolation. "Watch, all of you, therefore, and pray with Me." I have encountered critics who declare that in order to merit, we should refuse all aid, all consolation. They forbid the seeking of a little support, a little spiritual comfort, lest all merit be lost.

Was not Our Lord a martyr to grief? Yet He sought consolation. It is true that Our Lord's attempt was a failure. He came to His disciples and found them sleeping. He returned to His prayer, then came a second time to seek a little consolation from His apostles, whom, only an hour before, He had called His "friends." I have, therefore, the right to go to a friend in whom I can confide, or to a superior, that I might find some comfort in his sympathy, his counsel. I have the right to seek out my spiritual director. He will have precious words to offer me, words of life that will help me. I have the privilege of seeking to open my heart to those who have the right to console, to aid me. This does not mean that I lose the merit of suffering.

Our Lord fell to His knees; He began to pray. A strange prayer! Do I hear it aright?  
"My Father, if it be possible, remove this chalice from Me!"

But, oh, my good Master, this chalice is the will of Your Father! This chalice, if You drain it, means our salvation. You came into the world to drink this chalice; it is Your vocation. And You refuse it? You ask that it be withdrawn from Your lips? "Father, if it be possible, remove this chalice from

Me!" Our Lord is the model of all generosity. Yet, in spite of this, His poor human Heart refused to suffer.

Oh, my soul, why do you afflict me? Why do you reproach me because at the foot of the tabernacle I, too, have said, "Lord, if it be possible, remove this trial from me; let this suffering be softened. If it be possible, let the designs of Your providence be changed. If it be possible, remove this cup from my lips."

It is true that Our Lord added: "Not My will, but Yours be done." But after having made this act of resignation, He seemed to retract it and to begin again His former prayer: "Father, if it be possible, remove this chalice from Me." And for two whole hours, He was hard pressed to say: "Your will be done."

My dear friends, you, too, have sometimes come to the foot of the altar to protest to the Lord that you accept a certain trial. An hour later, you are surprised to find yourself saying: "My God, if it be possible, remove this cup from me." There were within the Heart of Jesus identical motions of acceptance and refusal, of resignation and repugnance. Our Lord had His interior conflicts. We can well have our own.

The last prayer of Jesus, that which terminated these alternations of resignation and acceptance, was, "Father, not My will, but Yours be done."

Do you grasp the full significance of these words? I do not know in all the Gospel any words so human, that so bring Our Lord down to our own stature. Do you grasp their full meaning?

Our Lord did not say, "Father, I will what You will. My will is Your will." No, just the contrary was their significance. "Father, do not ask Me to will what You will. Everything within Me is repugnant to suffering."

"This is all that I can bring Myself to say, 'Our two wills are not in accord, but since one must be sacrificed, let it be Mine — let Your will be done, not Mine'."

How good of Our Lord to make of Himself a model for our weakness to copy, and to give us, in His Person, so many motives for encouragement, making it easy for us to imitate Him. He repeats the same lessons over and over, bringing them down to our measure. He permits us to read within His Heart so many lessons of the very essence of divine wisdom, of charity.

Thus, it seems to me that I can present myself to Your will, Oh my God, and say in the simplicity of my heart, "My God, our two wills are not in accord, but carry out Your will. Close Your ears to my groans, to my complaints, to my reproaches."

Our Lord, after this prayer, after this resistance to suffering, felt His strength failing. He fell, His face to the earth. A bloody sweat poured from His Body, running down to the earth. He fell in an agony.

There are severe, austere directors, who say to a poor soul, "What? You think that your health is injured by your moral sufferings? You have become ill? Why, you lack moral strength, energy, generosity. Had you been more resigned to God's will your health would have held up." Did Our Lord act so? Is it that He was not generous? He, the model of all generosity? He finally became exhausted, threw Himself down upon the earth, sweated blood through all the pores of His sacred Body. If He experienced such weakness, so can I.

An angel came from heaven to comfort, to sustain Him. When God sends an angel to comfort me — an understanding friend, a confessor — I reproach myself for having accepted consolation, for not having rejected the aid of an angel. I believe myself to have lost all merit through having accepted such consolation. Did Our Lord refuse the angel's aid? Was it by chance that the angel was sent from Paradise? Did Jesus refuse the help sent Him from His Father? Does perfection consist in refusing the help that comes to us from God? When He sends us an angel, let us know how to profit from the encounter.

Doubtless, there remains a certain balance to observe. But Our Lord has furnished us with the example. "My God, when You send Your angel to me, I shall accept his help. I shall rejoice in his consolations."

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