

The Child Jesus

Part 1: Reflections on Sacrifices

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From The family for families: reflections on the life of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

THE SACRIFICE BEGINS.

‘AND when eight days were fulfilled for his circumcision, his name was called Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb’ (Luke 2:21). ‘And [Joseph] called his name Jesus’ (Matthew 1:25).

This was the day on which Jesus received ‘the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend of those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:9-11). The rite of circumcision was the sign of the ‘testament’ – the covenant or agreement – between God and Abraham and the sons of Abraham.

Jesus subjected Himself to the law of circumcision in order to show that He had taken on our human nature in all its completeness. The rite signified the consecration of its subject to God. This held true for every Hebrew male child. How much more truly did it not apply to Jesus, who although the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity in His divine nature, consecrated His human nature to the service and glory of His Godhead!

‘And when the days of Mary’s purification were fulfilled, according to the Law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord’ (Luke 2:22). In this episode, which occurred forty days after the Nativity, many people are puzzled by the ‘purification’ to which Mary subjected herself. Did it mean that motherhood among the Jews was considered something impure?

The answer to this question depends on what we mean by the word ‘impure.’ The law of purification did not imply that mothers contracted a moral blemish by bearing children. Rather, it referred to a legal ‘uncleanness’ the precise nature of which is not known. After the birth of a son, a period of forty days had to elapse before the mother could touch hallowed things and enter the sanctuary of the Temple. But this did not mean that motherhood was something sinful or less perfect. Actually, children were deemed signs of God’s favor, and a childless wife considered herself cursed. The law of purification of mothers probably had its origin, as did so many of the old laws of the Hebrews, in sanitary considerations. The ceremony itself consisted of offering a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons for sacrifice. Thereupon the legal blemish was removed.

One of the impressive rites of the Church, which recalls Mary’s visit to the Temple, is the ‘churching’ of women after they have given birth. [It is not so much practiced since Vatican II but the ritual ‘Blessing of Mothers’ is included in the child’s Baptism ceremony.] In the minds of many, there unfortunately exists a more or less hazy misunderstanding of the true meaning of the

ceremony. Churching does not imply that women because of childbirth incur some sort of stain, which must be duly removed by the prayers of the priest. It is a blessing, which the Church confers on the mother; and the mother in her turn offers thanks to God for her safe delivery.

The ceremony is made up of a psalm of gratitude and praise, a blessing of the mother with holy water, and various prayers suitable for the occasion. As part of the rite, the priest places the end of his stole into the mother's hand and leads her into the church, saying, 'Enter into the temple of God, adore the Son of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who has given you the fruitfulness of offspring.' Then he recites a special prayer as follows: 'Almighty everlasting God, who through the delivery of the Blessed Virgin Mary has turned into joy the pains of the faithful in childbirth, look graciously upon this Your handmaid coming in gladness to Your holy temple to offer thanksgiving: and grant that after this life by the merits and intercession of the same blessed Mary, she may merit to arrive together with her offspring at the joys of everlasting happiness, through Christ our Lord. Amen.' And to the mother the priest says, 'May the peace and blessing of Almighty God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, descend upon you and remain always, Amen.'

Since Mary had given birth to Jesus miraculously, she undoubtedly was not bound in conscience to observe the law of purification. In the same way, Jesus was not obliged to be presented to the Lord, for He was already God by nature. The custom of offering the first-born to God hearkened back to the Israelites' release from captivity in Egypt. There, God struck dead all the first-born of the Egyptians, sparing, of course, the Hebrew children. In remembrance of this favor, first-born males were consecrated to God and then redeemed by the payment of a token price – five shekels, [about \$50 (U.S. in 2015)]. There is wonderful meaning in this scene of Mary and Joseph redeeming the Redeemer. Jesus submitted to the rite of Presentation in order to show us once again how truly and fully He became one of us.

When Mary and Joseph gave Jesus to the priest in the Temple to be offered to God, they united in that offering themselves – everything they were and everything they had. It was the closeness of their union with Jesus that made them holy; and if their Son in His human nature was making the oblation of Himself to His heavenly Father, these two beloved parents were not going to stint the generosity of their cooperation with Him. They would offer themselves, too.

As Mary and Joseph made their self-consecration, so should we. It is true that in a very correct sense, everything we are and everything we have belongs already to God. He has given us even our free will. But in another sense, God made us stewards of our talents, our bodies, our very souls, putting them into our charge to be cared for and developed so that they might ultimately be fit to be raised to eternal union with Him. In giving ourselves back to our Creator, we ask that we be employed according to His holy and all-good will. It is an offering born of love and gratitude.

Sometimes people are frightened to make such an offering. They imagine that God will ask them to undergo terrible sufferings, or that He will take away from them their legitimate pleasures. No, that is not the sense of self-oblation. It is merely an explicit method of telling God that you wish His will to be accomplished in your regard. You already know His will in its general aspects. Its purpose is one and only one: that you may become holy. The means to become holy you already possess. If you observe the commandments, receive the sacraments, and carry out the duties of your state of life, you are doing God's will. When you make the offering of yourself, you are saying equivalently that you desire to fulfill these obligations ever more perfectly and confidently leave yourself in His hands. Is there anything frightening in that?

In connection with the possible crosses you may fear, never forget that Almighty God is bound by His justice and by His own promise to give you all the graces you need to carry out anything He asks of you. Usually the worst crosses we bear are those we create in our imagination. And even if some trial we dread does come to us, it cannot be the agonizing experience we foresaw. The reason simply is this: at the moment we are called upon to carry the cross, we have the grace to do so. But at the moment we fear that this or that cross will come to us, we do not have the grace to bear it. In other words, God has not needlessly given us the strength to carry a cross, which He has not asked us to bear.

Look back on your life and count up some of the benefits you have received – Creation – redemption – sanctification: the last-named of these implying that you were baptized in the Church of Christ, nourished by the sacrament of the Eucharist, restored to peace with God or increased in that peace by the sacrament of Penance. Now you may be united in another wonderful sacrament, Matrimony, in a lifelong union of married love. Probably you have or will have the inestimable blessing of seeing your children and children's children gather round you. (There are thousands of childless couples whose greatest cross is the fact that they cannot have children even though they desire them. They know what such a blessing would mean to them.)

There is so much, too, in your past life for which you feel grateful. In the rush of earning a livelihood or caring for the family you perhaps have been too busy to count up explicitly all these blessings – special favors from heaven that have been for your particular benefit. Yes, take the time, carefully itemize the list of all good things God has bestowed on you, and automatically there will rise in your heart a deep sense of thanksgiving that impels you to come to Joseph and Mary and ask them to accept the offering of yourself, to unite it to their own, and to give it to the beloved Infant so that it might arise together with the oblation of Himself to God the Father.

But your offering can be made still more complete. You will perfect it by including your whole family. Again, the method of making this offering is as easy as it is efficacious. It is the consecration of the family to the Sacred Heart. Our Lord in His appearances to Saint Margaret Mary promised special blessings to those families that have thus consecrated themselves: 'I will give them all the graces necessary for their state of life; I will console them in all their difficulties: I will bless every place where a picture of My Heart shall be set up and honored; I will be their safe refuge in life and still more in death.'

Preferably this Consecration should be made officially by the Reverend Pastor or some other priest, but it is sufficient if the head of the family (or all the members together) recite this formula recommended and highly indulged by the Church. Preferably, too, the Consecration should be offered before a picture or statue of the Sacred Heart.

'O Sacred Heart of Jesus, who manifested to Saint Margaret Mary the desire to reign in Christian families, behold us, here today in order to please You by proclaiming Your kingly rule over our family. We would live in the future with Your life, we would cause to flourish in our midst those virtues to which You have promised peace on earth, we would banish far from us the spirit of the world which You have cursed. You shall reign in our minds in the singleness of our faith; and You shall reign in our hearts by the love with which they will burn for You alone, with a flame kept alive by the frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist.

'Deign, O divine Heart, to preside over our gatherings, to bless our spiritual and temporal enterprises, to protect us from trouble, to sanctify our joys, and to lighten our sufferings. If ever

anyone of us should have so great a misfortune as to displease You, remind him, O Heart of Jesus, that You are full of goodness and mercy for the penitent sinner.

‘And when the hour of separation strikes and death casts mourning into the midst of our family, all of us, both those who pass on and those who remain, shall be submissive to Your eternal decrees. This will be our consolation, to recall that a day will come when our entire family, joined in heaven, will be able to sing forever Your glories and Your mercies.

‘May the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the glorious Patriarch Saint Joseph deign to offer this consecration to You, and to preserve it in our memory every day of our lives.

‘All glory to the Heart of our King and Father, Jesus!’

(For indulgences, see No. 655, The Raccolta).

After Joseph and Mary offered Jesus to His Eternal Father, there occurred that touching scene when the aged Simeon ‘came by inspiration of the Spirit into the Temple. And when his parents brought in the Child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law, he also received him and blessed God, saying, ‘Now You do dismiss Your servant, O Lord, according to Your word in peace; because my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples; a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and a glory for Your people Israel.’ (Luke 2:27-31).

Simeon’s canticle expresses so perfectly his joy over a life well spent that the phrase ‘nunc dimittis’ (from the Latin, ‘now You do dismiss’), has become a part of our language as an expression of satisfaction and thanksgiving to God at death’s approach.

As you read these lines, you probably may think to yourself that you are far from the moment when you will be called to leave this world and go to your judgment and reward. Perhaps so; but you can never forget that the moment is ever advancing. It is at the same time equally certain and uncertain. There can be no doubt that it will occur, but just when it will occur is the greatest question mark in your life and in the life of every other person now on earth.

You can adopt only one sensible course about the moment of your death. Live in such a way that no matter how suddenly it comes, you will always be prepared to say your nunc dimittis with a heart trusting in the goodness of God, conscious of your lifelong efforts to serve Him and love Him faithfully.

There are, of course, the usual two extremes, but neither of them is to be recommended. Some persons avoid the thought of death as if by forgetting the inevitable, they could stave it off or dodge it completely. For them the pleasures and parties of their hurried existence are emphasized out of all proper proportion. These people cannot bear the thought that one day their life will be over and they will be face to face with the sole reality that counts for anything: Did they or did they not save their souls by obeying the laws of God and of His Church?

So much for the attitude of the sophisticates. At the other extreme is a smaller group of people who make their mistake in being ‘too good.’ True, there are not many of these, but enough are around us to serve as a warning to stay out of their class. These are the worriers who make life miserable for themselves (and incidentally for others also) by imagining God as some sort of bloodthirsty tyrant who wields over their puny heads the threat of instant death and eternal punishment. Fear rules their lives from start to finish – fear that penetrates their most fundamental relationships with their Creator as well as their dealings with their fellow men.

What is their mistake? They are concentrating on merely one facet of God's infinite perfection. They see and hear and think of only His justice and punishments. They forget that He is all-good; that the source of all that is tender and affectionate and generous in us comes from the depths of His eternal love. Probably God in His goodness will magnanimously take care of them, for they are erring, as we would say, 'in the right direction.' Nevertheless, theirs is a real error, and it is far removed from that spirit of Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis*, which we want to develop in ourselves.

The correct attitude brings serenity into our lives, peace in our dealings with others, and security and deep happiness because of our relationship to our God. We trust that we are ready at any moment to go before our Judge, and we do not worry about it. It is His part to determine when our time is fulfilled, and with His infinite knowledge and providence, He knows what is best for us. We do not try to fathom the mind of the Almighty, but we do try to accomplish what we can, to have something to show in our favor on Judgment Day.

An attitude of this sort can usually be implicit and pervade everything we do. The thought of death will not spoil our enjoyment of life if we accept the licit pleasures God has given us as good things that help us live as humans ought. In such a life, we cherish our husband or wife, we love our children and strive to fulfill our obligations toward them, we obey the Church in its position as the divinely appointed and divinely guided teacher of faith and morals. And in doing this, we are building stone by stone the tower of confidence on which we can stand when death approaches. Then will we look back on a life well spent and thank the dear God for helping us during the time of our pilgrimage.

At that moment, too, God will be bringing us into the place where the incomplete is made complete, the temporal is changed into the eternal, and the ties of love, which we had on earth, are forged into everlasting bonds of happiness uniting us and our loved ones to our Creator, our Last End. It is the realization of all this that will evoke from our lips, 'Now You do dismiss Your servant, O Lord, in peace.'

But in the Temple at Jerusalem on that day two thousand years ago, Joseph and Mary were to hear more words from Simeon's lips, somber words that reminded them all too clearly that their own mission was just beginning, and that much suffering would be ahead of them before they could say their own *nunc dimittis*.

'And Simeon said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and the rise of many in Israel, and for a sign that shall be contradicted. And your own soul a sword shall pierce, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed".' (Luke 2:34-35)

Simeon under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit prophesied Our Lady's role as the Mother of Sorrows and the Queen of Martyrs. Even though Mary's suffering was to occur in the future, the prophecy served to remind her of what was to come, and to prepare her for the trial, which would test the supreme heights of even her sanctity and generosity.

It is in this light that we should interpret Simeon's prophecy. God did not cruelly send Our Lady an unnecessary cross. Long before the angel had asked her if she were willing to become the Mother of God, Mary knew from the Scriptures that the Messiah would be the Man of Sorrows. When she consented, she realized what she was accepting. She would be closest to Jesus in everything – closest in suffering and love as well as in triumph and glory. In His Passion, her sympathy was to be His greatest consolation. By a triumph of His grace, Our Lady's merits, dependent on those of her

Son, were to help restore the fallen human race to the friendship of God, which it had lost when Adam, its head, betrayed his trust.

At the moment of Simeon's prophecy, Joseph, too, understood what the sword of sorrow meant to his wife and what it would mean to the lovable Babe who had just been offered to His Eternal Father. The words of Simeon were a sign from heaven that Christ's oblation had been accepted. And because Joseph was closest to Mary in holiness, after her he was closest to Jesus in the suffering that redeemed us.

According to God's plan, Joseph was not present during Christ's Passion and Crucifixion; but like Mary, he knew what the Scriptures had foretold of the Messiah. Because his will was one with that of Mary and Jesus, Joseph truly sympathized with them in anticipation (for 'sympathy' means 'to suffer with') so that he participated intimately in applying Christ's redemption to mankind.

We should be careful to place the proper estimate on the attitude of the Holy Family. After Simeon's prophecy of the future martyrdom of suffering, Mary and Joseph did not live a dismal, foreboding existence in the years of preparing their Child for His future. Knowing, as we do, how closely they imitated Jesus, we can be quite certain of the serenity and happiness in their lives.

Jesus, on His part, always had before Him the prospect of His Passion and death, yet He never let it distress Him outwardly until the night of His agony in Gethsemani. Even then, His action was not one of weakness but was deliberately permitted for our instruction and consolation. Moreover, He knew the glory of His Resurrection, and He looked forward to the wonderful joy and peace, which He as the risen Savior, would bring to His friends, His adopted brothers and sisters.

How could He have appeared to His neighbors of Nazareth as a normal boy, 'the carpenter's son,' if His mood had been one of despondency or never ending seriousness? No doubt, He was grave and dignified in His public life, but His love of little children and the trusting affection they gave Him in return, show that His demeanor was not overwrought with heavy thoughts of His future. In the same way, Joseph and Mary were not glum folk but were accepted by their friends and fellow townsmen as normal, everyday citizens.

This proper picture is most important for our purpose. A one-sided presentation – that the Holy Family exclusively thought of suffering – would be erroneous. Their life could hardly have been the model of Catholic family life in all ages if they had permitted dread anticipation of the future to ruin their happiness constantly. It is interesting to recall that in Our Lady's Rosary there are only five Sorrowful Mysteries, but ten that are Joyful and Glorious. [Plus five more that are Luminous!]

In an earlier pamphlet (a chapter of my book), we spoke of the essential goodness of human nature, and of everything created. Now, humor, lightheartedness, and song are creations of God and therefore must be good also. They have their place (and a very important place it is) in the life of every individual and family. True joy belongs to Christianity alone. We see the bleakness of the old pagan religions appearing in the activities of the gods, who were never pictured as laughing, but rather engaged in quarrels, jealous rivalry, and Bacchanalian feasts.

There is a real need of a sense of humor and what is called 'common sense' in family life. Undoubtedly, grave situations do arise at some time or other, but the ordinary husband and wife do not find their existence marked by constant crises. Rather, their life flows evenly, happily, and calmly.

In your own case if you were to dwell exclusively on weighty matters, believing that your religious observance was enhanced in proportion to your somber moods, you would merely be creating a useless trial for yourself and the rest of your family. Sadness cannot come from God but only from the enemy of all that is good. Idleness is not the devil's single workshop. Depression and moodiness serve him just as well.

The cheery husband and wife at peace with God enjoy life without resorting to all sorts of expedients to have 'a good time.' Happiness comes to God's friends naturally and that is why we know that happiness came to Mary and Joseph in abundance. Even in making the application of the serious lessons in their lives, we must not infer that they knew nothing of lightheartedness. Certainly, they drew their example from Him whose spirit would later animate Saint Paul to write, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice... Have no anxiety but in every prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your petitions be made known to God. And may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

'For the rest, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever honorable, whatever just, whatever holy, whatever lovable, whatever of good repute, if there be any virtue, if anything worthy of praise, think upon these things... And the God of peace will be with you' (Philippians 4:5, and 6-9).

The Magi.

'NOW when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, there came Magi from the East to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newly born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him".' (Matthew 2:1-2).

Who were the Magi? This is a much-discussed question to which no certain answer can be given. Probably, however, the 'Wise men' were astrologer-priests of the Zoroastrian religion of Persia. Western Christianity thinks of them as the 'Three Kings' because the liturgy for the age-old Feast of the Epiphany applies the text of Psalm 71 of the Vulgate or Psalm 72 on the Hebrew, 'The kings of Tharsis (Tarshish) and the islands shall offer presents; the kings of the Arabians (Seba) and of Sheba shall bring gifts; and all kings of the earth shall adore him; all nations of the earth shall serve him.'

When did the Magi come to Bethlehem? Apparently, some time had elapsed after the birth of Christ. Since Herod later massacred 'all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old or under' (Matthew 2:16), Jesus was no more than two years old. We know that Herod died at Jericho about 4 B.C. after a lingering illness. He was not ill at the time the Magi visited him; that seems quite certain, for he was still living at Jerusalem. Evidently, then, the Magi visited Bethlehem during the year 6 or 5 B.C. They must have come some time after Christ's birth, for the journey from Persia to Jerusalem – 1,200 miles – took three months to a year by camel.

How many Magi were there? Again, we do not know! Early Christian art represents two; tradition of Catholics of the Latin rite mentions three (Since three gifts are mentioned); a memorial in the old Roman cemetery of Domitilla depicts four; and the tradition of the Catholics of the Eastern rites favors twelve. The Latin Catholics have called the Magi Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar; the Armenian Catholics give them the names of Kagba, Badadilma, et cetera; and the Syrians, Larvandad, Hormisdas, Gushnasaph, and so forth up to twelve.

There is the same divergence of opinion about the star, which the Magi followed. Some writers hold that it was miraculous; others hold that it was probably an extraordinary conjunction of Jupiter,

Saturn, Mars, and another heavenly body. The astronomer Kepler calculated that such a conjunction occurred in 7 and 6 B.C.

By their contact with the Jews, the Persian astrologers may have been looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, the savior of the world. In their religion, they believed that each person on earth was represented by his star in heaven. A most unusual sign in the sky would thus signify to them that the long-expected savior had come, and they would naturally go to the Jewish capital, Jerusalem, to find the exact spot where according to the Jewish prophets the Messiah would be born.

For our sketch of the life of the Holy Family a most interesting feature of the story of the Magi is Saint Matthew's incidental comment, 'And entering the house, they found the Child with Mary his mother' (Matthew 2:11). This seems to indicate that Christ was born in the stable only because of dire necessity. The Holy Family moved as soon as possible to a permanent residence in Bethlehem.

The Magi presented gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Throughout the centuries, spiritual writers have made much of the symbolic nature of these presents, but in reality, the Magi probably had no idea when they set out on their journey that Christ was God. He would, they thought, be a great man, a savior of his people and of the world, perhaps a powerful conqueror. Accordingly, he deserved the gifts befitting nobility.

It is more than a mere possibility that at the moment the visitors paid their homage to the infant King, a special grace illuminated their souls, and they realized that their Creator lay before them, God in human form. The Magi were men of good will. They followed their conscience in what it told them was good and noble, and for this fidelity, God was not to be outdone in generosity. He repaid them lavishly here on earth. They were the first Gentiles, representing the entire world, to behold the Redeemer. From this contact with the very source of divine grace, they must have won for themselves eternal life in its fullness.

With us, too, God will not be outdone in generosity. Even though we are obliged to obey His commandments by reason of the fact that we are His creatures, in His goodness He will reward us for our fidelity as if we were doing Him a favor. Actually, because He is infinite, He needs nothing. By a triumph of His creative power, He brought us out of nothingness, endowed with a free will. In other words, He made us such faithful images of Himself that we have something to give Him freely and thus be repaid bountifully.

Of course, our complete reward will not come until we have passed from this life of testing and pilgrimage into the life where the obscurity of faith is removed. Nevertheless, occasions usually occur faintly foreshadowing the munificence with which God will treat us.

You yourself must certainly recall some instance when you were praying for a great favor, some spiritual or temporal grace, which you needed urgently and which seemed to be for the good of your soul and body. The favor was granted – and at that moment a spirit of thanksgiving overwhelmed you which made you feel that all the fidelity on your part was as nothing to make you worthy of receiving such a gift. God showed that He would not be outdone in generosity. Yet an experience of this sort can be at best an inadequate preview of the supernatural reward God has promised to those who love Him.

If it were possible to feel shame in heaven, all of us would blush to the roots when we shall see with our own eyes so much from God in return for so little from us. That is why in this present moment

we should build our ‘little’ as high as possible, by giving back to our Creator the free will He bestowed on us, by the tribute of our faith in His word, our trust in His promises, our love of His goodness.

As was mentioned in an earlier pamphlet (chapter), this course is not easy to follow when difficulties and discouragement come into your life. It is, however, at such a time that you can merit most, for you draw more on your love in making an act of faith in God’s goodness when bereavement or misfortune strikes. When your temporal fortunes are at high tide, it is easy to be strong in faith.

By way of habit, you ought to remember in times of evident blessing and prosperity that other times will come when you will not see so clearly that God is still directing your life. The words of Holy Scripture describe this attitude accurately: ‘If we have received good things from the hand of God, why should we not receive evil? The Lord has given – and the Lord has taken away; as it has pleased the Lord, so is it done. Blessed be the name of the Lord’ (Job 2:10; Job 1:21).

This is the attitude of absolutely unshakable trust in God that brings down His superabundant blessings. God knows in His wisdom why He permits or sends what He does. We do not grasp these reasons, for our minds cannot comprehend the plans of creation, which God has formulated from all eternity and which He is carrying out in time by means of His benign providence. We can, however, have the staunchest conviction that everything God does is for our good. With that attitude, we rest content, leaving all our affairs in His hands.

‘God will never be outdone in generosity’ – that is the principle without exception, ever true. Sometimes you will hear complaints, or perhaps you yourself may be tempted to complain against God’s justice. You read of a lifelong criminal reared in the slums, led astray in his earliest years by hardened sinners, excelling in works of evil, and in the end dying miserably without remorse or the least preparation for eternity. Someone will say, ‘But the poor man never had a chance! Why should he be damned?’

The answer is simple. We do not know that he is damned. God alone is aware of the state of that man’s soul at the moment it appeared for judgment. We must, therefore, completely reserve all judgment on our part.

A related case of this sort actually happened in one of our large cities, except that the criminal in question was baptized and received into the Church minutes before his death. Here the objection was not that the unfortunate fellow had lost his soul, for according to all external signs he saved it: but good Catholics were heard to complain that such a last-minute conversion was unfair to the faithful souls who had frequented the sacraments, performed arduous works of charity, and had in the words of the parable of the workers in the vineyard, ‘borne the heat of the day’.

It is correct doctrine that Baptism remits all temporal as well as eternal punishment, so that this particular criminal, dying immediately after Baptism, probably was received directly into heaven. On the other hand, so the complaint ran, the devoted Catholic, baptized in infancy, can die in the grace of God after a lifetime of service, yet some temporal punishment for forgiven mortal and venial sins can well remain, calling for purification in purgatory. ‘How can God be less fair, less generous?’

Again the answer must be: ‘Reserve judgment!’ God has His own way of evening all scores. Here on earth we see only part of the pattern of His providence. In the next life, we shall see it all, and

one of the greatest joys of heaven will be the answer to this problem. We shall behold the picture of all creation moving before our eyes, and all along it, we shall see that justice and mercy have both triumphed, and God's generosity has always surpassed by far the generosity of the noblest of His creatures.

In your own life, the application is evident. If from your experience thus far you think God is treating you stingily, your judgment is wrong. Perhaps you are the one at fault as far as stingy treatment is concerned. If, however, you are doing your best, the best that is in you, wait at least until the moving picture of your life is over. You will have all eternity to decide who has been more generous – you or your Creator. Until then, wait! From the Magi you can learn that you will receive a reward tremendously greater than you expected.

The visit of the Magi to the Infant Jesus has, however, a lesson equally as impressive as that of God's generosity. Theirs was the occasion of the first 'Epiphany', the 'showing-forth' of the Savior to the Gentile world, which the Magi represented. In the early Church this feast, celebrated on January 6, rivaled and surpassed December 25 in liturgical importance (as it still does in the East). The Christians of the first centuries considered the day of Christ's manifestation to the whole world even more momentous than the day of His birth.

We in our twentieth (and twenty-first) century cannot easily understand how exclusive the worship of God in the Old Testament had been. The Hebrews were the Chosen People, and to them God confided the revelation of the one true God and the promise of the Redeemer to come. The Jews thus became a people set apart. Theirs was not the mission primarily to spread Jewry to the ends of the earth as the one and the only permanent religion. They were to preserve their heritage free from the abominations of the idolatry practiced by their pagan neighbors. They were to make converts if possible, but even here, they were warned against the possibility of being corrupted (as history shows they repeatedly were corrupted) by the example of those with whom they came in contact. Fundamentally, they were to keep pure the worship of the one true God in preparation for the Messiah who would make all things new. All this led to the mistaken notion that exclusiveness was an essential feature of the Kingdom of God.

With the appearance of Christ, all was changed. The years of promise were over, and the religion Jesus instituted was not to be a religion restricted to any one people or race or land. It was to be truly catholic. 'Catholic' means universal, and universal means that it was to be made up of everyone everywhere. The Magi represented the multitudes of the Gentiles who were to accept the new faith when the Chosen People rejected their chance to be the first-fruits of Christ's redemption.

That is why the visit of the Magi teaches the universality of the good tidings of Jesus Christ. The 'all-ness' of the Church means that no one in the Church is permitted to treat any human (any potential member of the Church) in such a way as to deprive him of his basic human rights.

All men have immortal souls, for whose salvation Christ died as much as for your own soul. The universality of Christ's redemption and of His Church brings before us a sharp conclusion: in God's sight, there does not exist any inferior race or inferior people, and we are positively in the wrong and may be sinning against charity and justice if we treat any person unfairly because of his nationality, racial stock, or color.

If we were to act thus, Mary and Joseph would be the first to reprimand us. At Bethlehem, there were no sharp looks at a skin darkened by the sun of another land, no curt snubs given in return for sincere good will, no condescension as to inferiors. None of these – for Joseph as head of the Holy

Family was a just man, and Joseph knew that all men were sons of the same God, brothers in His creation. He understood that the Infant had come to save all men with no color-line distinction. Joseph treated the Magi for what they were, potential heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven, just as he and Mary were, with all the rights of human beings.

Or did Mary refuse to put the Babe into their arms to let them adore Him as grace told them who He was? The answer is given by the shrines of Our Lady in every corner of the earth. There are Madonnas that are Chinese and Mexican and Negro and French and Bohemian and Italian. In every land, the Mother of God extends her universal welcome.

If prejudice and early training or an unfortunate incomplete experience with a racial or national minority tend to make us forget the Church Universal, we have only to look at the Magi scene and then thank God that we were not the ones excluded on that day in Bethlehem. Had Christianity been reserved for the Jews alone (who after all, despite shortcomings preserved the knowledge of the true God and fought and died for it throughout so many centuries), would our supercilious treatment of other peoples still remain in us?

Again, it is this same Saint Joseph, leading the foreign Magi to the Mother and Son who is Patron of the Universal Church. The Church is Christ's family, and all of its members are His brothers because He has adopted them as His own in a special way. Mary is its mother, for Jesus gave her to us when He gave her to Saint John on Calvary. And Joseph, the foster father and protector of Jesus, thus becomes truly the father and protector of all the Church – everyone, everywhere.

The Magi 'found the Child with Mary his mother.' Wherever we seek the Child, we, too, will find Him with Mary His mother. Our best guide to Mary in turn is Saint Joseph, he who loves her more than any other creature and who is loved by her to the same degree.

Familiarity dulls our perception. We hear so often of the unsurpassable holiness of the Mother of God that its magnificent attractiveness escapes us. Mary is one of ourselves, with a character so sweet that we cannot imagine its full tenderness.

Her maternal compassion for all in this life is unbounded. Particularly will she aid mothers in their needs, for understanding what it means to be a mother she understands how to love as a mother. To those who are making an effort to carry out the law of God in their lives, she is ever gracious. Even to hardened and blinded sinners she is always the mother, seeking her lost children.

In temptation, in difficulties of all sorts, go to Mary through Joseph. Mary will answer in some way or other every petition addressed to her. This is so certain that the Church has approved and indulged Saint Bernard's prayer, called the Memorare from its first word in Latin: 'Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that any one who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided. Inspired with this confidence I fly to you, O virgin of virgins, my mother. To you I come, before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in your mercy hear and answer me, Amen.'

You will never fail to obtain the peace of Christ through your prayer to Mary, for in every instance you will find the Child with Mary His mother.

The Flight.

THE rest of the story of the Magi is well known: how Herod jealously tried to trap Jesus in order to kill Him, and how God, in His providence, warned the Magi not to return to Herod to tell him the whereabouts of the Babe. Herod made another attempt to murder Jesus, even at the cost of massacring the boys of Bethlehem (of whom there must have been at most forty ‘two years old or under’). But again the crafty monarch was thwarted, for ‘when the Magi had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph, saying, “Arise, and take the Child and his mother and flee into Egypt, and remain there until I tell you. For Herod will seek the Child to destroy him.” So he arose and took the Child and his mother by night, and withdrew into Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod’ (Matthew 2:13-14).

Because of the necessity of secrecy, Joseph probably did not lead Jesus and Mary to the coast and then southward along it to Egypt; that route was too well traveled. Choosing the more difficult way, he went directly south in order to cross Palestine’s boundaries as soon as possible. The legends locate the Egyptian home in Memphis, but it seems more likely that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph settled in the Jewish colony at Alexandria. Their trip from Bethlehem took at least twelve days and was about 350 miles long. As on that earlier trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Mary rode on an ass, but now she was holding Jesus in her arms while Joseph trudged alongside.

Since the Holy Family stayed in Egypt until after Herod’s death (which occurred in 4 B.C.), their exile probably lasted about four years – from 6 to 3 or 2 B.C. (Other Biblical scholars believe their stay was less than a year in duration.)

In our past glimpses of the life of the Holy Family, we have had several occasions to point out the workings of God’s providence in directing their course. In all the infancy and hidden life of Christ, the story of the flight into Egypt teaches more forcibly than any other incident that God’s ways are not man’s ways, and that God in the end always obtains His purposes despite the deliberate attempts of man to frustrate His designs.

Herod was determined to murder the Infant. He craftily plotted in secrecy; God made use of extraordinary means to bring into the open Herod’s hidden designs. The cruel monarch ordered a mass bloody execution; again God, without any great effort on His part (as it would seem to us), removed the Child Jesus and His mother safely from the clutches of the tyrant. Except for the angel’s warning to Joseph, no special miracle was involved.

If we marvel at God’s providence at work (‘providence’ means ‘seeing before,’ ‘planning ahead’), equally must we marvel at Joseph’s obedience. Here is the perfect example of a creature’s cooperation with the plan of his Creator. Joseph did not know the future. God alone knew what He was going to accomplish. Joseph blindly obeyed the angel, realizing that eventually he would see that this plan of action was the best because it had been ordered by God. Was it easy for him to act thus – or is it ever easy to act on blind faith in God’s promises? If it were, the good Lord would hardly have rewarded His loved ones so munificently for their faith.

All through His life Jesus seemed to place a high premium on people’s faith in Him and in His divine mission. He knew that they were acting against the sense of pride and material self-sufficiency which dictates, ‘I know what is best, I have intelligence enough to judge what is good for myself, and I believe no more than I see!’

So often our Lord’s words dealt with faith and its reward. ‘Your faith has made you whole.’ ‘Amen, I say to you, I have not found so great faith in Israel.’ ‘Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed. Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believed.’ ‘If you have faith like a

mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Remove from here," and it will remove.' 'Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done to you as you will.'

Always, the Sacred Heart of Jesus responded most warmly to the persons who had faith in Him, who trusted Him, who believed His words and His prophecies, even though they did not perceive at the moment how He would accomplish His ends.

We can well understand, then, with what joy the eyes of the Babe looked up at Saint Joseph and saw him obeying promptly without a word of complaint or questioning. The angel had said, 'Take the Child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, for Herod will seek to destroy him.' That was all Joseph needed. 'He took the Child and his mother and withdrew into Egypt.'

It is the contemplation of this scene that has brought so many great writers and preachers to point out the rich depths of Joseph's character. Knowing what we do of Christ's later appreciation of those persons who had faith in Him, we see now why the Babe beheld His foster father with special approval. In a human way, we could venture that Joseph's faith was enough to make even God marvel and say, 'Truly have I selected a remarkable man to be my foster father on earth, a worthy companion and husband for Mary – the wife who had heard from the lips of Elizabeth, that blessed was she who had believed, because the things promised her by the Lord should be accomplished.'

However, our admiration of the workings of God's providence and of Joseph's faith and obedience must not stop at mere admiration. Practically, in our own lives we must apply the lessons before us. We must draw strength from the manner in which God justified His wisdom. Difficult times can easily occur when our trust in His providence will be sorely tried. On such occasions, we will need all the strength we now have, and perhaps more. God for His part will give us sufficient grace; nonetheless, the struggle can be most difficult, and sometimes the outcome will remain long in the balance.

To understand God's providence completely is impossible, as we have commented so often. God is infinite, our minds are finite. Here on this earth we cannot see the why and the wherefore of all events because we do not see the whole picture. But for God everything is one eternal present. Before Him lies all creation, from its beginning to its end. He beholds good rewarded, evil punished, and His own justice and mercy vindicated. For us during the time of our pilgrimage and testing we are looking at only the reverse side of the tapestry of creation. Hence, our judgments about divine providence are of necessity woefully incomplete. There is one way of completing their evidence, and that is the way of faith.

On God's word, we know that He is all-good, all-powerful, all-just, all-merciful. Nothing can happen in the world without His permission. We know, too, that He has created man with a free will. By this fact of creation, He has implicitly pledged Himself not to interfere directly with the workings of that free will. He will help, He will coax, advise, admonish, but He will never force that will. Of course, we do not deny that there is a mystery here, for while man's free will ever works in full liberty despite the infinite power of God, nevertheless God's omnipotence somehow governs all things despite the freedom of man.

Joseph and Mary in their superlative sanctity trusted in God almost automatically. We, however, weak and inclined to sin, must study their reasons for such trust. We have to learn these reasons as a child learns his lessons at school, so that they will be at hand to strengthen us when trials come. At the moment we obey God's providence, at the moment we trust in His goodness, we will be using

the same motives Joseph and Mary used in their marvelous obedience: God is all-good and will never permit us to be tempted beyond our strength.

Our vision on earth is always hampered unless we remember that temporal and created things are only means to our salvation. Life here simply is not the final goal. If it were, death would be the greatest tragedy possible.

After we have done our best, if the cross enters our lives, our attitude should be something of this sort: 'O my God, I know from my faith in Your word that You are all-good, all-merciful, and all-just. I know that this trial has come to me by Your own permission.

'I believe that You wish nothing but my happiness. I believe firmly that in the end, either in this life or in the next, I shall see how all this suffering is for my own good. Here and now, accepting all this on faith, I welcome what You are sending me. If I ask anything at all, it is for strength to bear this trial generously, without complaint. Sacred Heart of Jesus, I trust in You!'

Is this apathy? Not at all. An apathetic man shrinks back and refuses to do anything to reject misfortune. He does not have even the positive reaction of accepting for God's sake a trial, which he cannot avoid. Nor is this the stoicism of the old pagans or the spinelessness of the decrepit and debasing religions of the Orient. Active conformity to God's will elevates human nature, enlightens it, lifts it to the level of the divine plan. Although you yourself do not know the exact reason why God desires this or that course in your regard, you are willing that it come to you because you know that the good Lord has chosen it for you. Relying on His word, you accept it willingly. Such trust can reach the heroic.

This trust in Divine Providence is not a substitute for personal effort. Only after we have done all we can, may we leave ourselves in God's hands complacently. In such an event, our trust will never be fruitless.

Perhaps you can see from all these considerations why the Church has richly indulged the act of resignation to death: 'O my God, I accept gladly and calmly whatever death it may please You to send me with its pain, anguish, and suffering.' To make this act of resignation – or better still, should we not call it an act of conformity? – to make it only once during a lifetime is sufficient to gain a plenary indulgence at the hour of death provided we have confessed our sins, received Communion, and prayed for the intention of the Holy Father at the time we say the prayer.

As a daily habit, offer yourself to Divine Providence every morning. If in advance you accept what God will send for the day, you will be ready in advance. Your strength to bear the light crosses and trials – as well as the occasional heavy ones – will be increased a hundredfold. The offering is simple. It can be made at home in a moment, on a busy street corner, anywhere, anytime. 'My God, I accept whatever cross and death it may please You to send me, whatever You send this very day.' And why? '...for love of You.'

There is the great motive: 'for love of You.' Your faith has flowered into love, for in making the act of loving conformity to God's will, you are making at the same time a deep act of faith such as Christ rewarded in all His dear ones. You are trusting the good Lord for all the strength necessary. You have no fear that you will be 'snowed under' by troubles.

As we have already insisted, people fear that God will take advantage of their generosity if they explicitly accept what He will send them. No! In the ordinary case, they undergo the same trials

they would have encountered in any event. The only difference is that they themselves are changed: now no longer complaining or reluctant, but actively conformed to God's will.

This conformity does not mean that you must feel perfectly calm and happy in your knowledge that you are doing what God wants you to do. The mistake of assuming that feelings are the will is only too common. To put the matter simply, what you deliberately desire is the product of your will, a rational faculty. What you feel is the product of your sense nature.

It is a fact of experience that we do not have complete dominion over our sense nature. Feelings come unwanted and remain even after we wish to be rid of them. In the moral order, this rebellion of our sense desires against our intellectual nature is called 'concupiscence.' Before Adam and Eve sinned, they were free from concupiscence and had their feelings under perfect control. However, in our own case, because of original sin our sense nature is attracted to all sorts of objects no matter whether they are good or evil. This involuntary attraction is not formally sinful in the slightest degree. Only in an analogous sense can it be called sinful, for by its drawing power it acts as temptation that inclines men to sin.

What we say here of rebellious feelings not in conformity with God's will is equally true of temptations against faith or against purity. Your rule for judging such thoughts should be this: 'Do I want to think of this or not?' If you can truthfully say that you do not want a rebellious, blasphemous, or unchaste thought – no matter how attractive it may feel – you need merely disregard the temptation, treating it with absolute contempt. Because of this disregard, the feeling will usually disappear of its own accord because it ceases to receive attention.

In all matters of this kind, it is essential to draw your attention into some legitimate, interesting channel. You can easily perceive why it is dangerous to try to fight directly against thoughts of unchastity, complaints against God, or doubts against faith. The more attention you concede such thoughts, the stronger they are to tempt you. That is why the discreet and actually the braver method of action is to conquer them by flight. The testimony of psychologists is very clear: certain types of thoughts should be banished by oblique defense rather than frontal attack.

It is somewhat imprudent to judge yourself according to this norm: 'Did I take pleasure in an illicit thought?' The difficulty in applying this standard to your conduct lies in your inability to find what degree of pleasure was voluntary, to what extent you perhaps consented to it. More safe and reliable is the rule we have already set down: 'Did I want it or not?'

Perhaps this further consideration of judging our thoughts seems to have taken us far afield from our glimpse of Joseph's perfect conformity to God's will. In reality, we have been considering explicitly all that would be implicitly included in Joseph's method of acting.

Since Joseph was so great a saint, he obeyed God in complete peace of heart. We, however, must take more elementary means, which Joseph in his heights of generosity did not have to employ, in order to keep our service of God from becoming a burden, which it should not be. In Saint Paul's words, our service should be reasonable.

All the generosity in the world will be of little avail if we fail to use prudent helps. Our service of God can and should be made at least as attractive as the sin and the selfishness, which attempt to draw our hearts with the alluring glitter of their fool's gold.

For example, in the very instance of conformity with God's will, which we have been considering, let us suppose that you begin bravely to accept every incident God permits to befall you. While

following your high ideals in yeoman fashion, rebellious thoughts of one sort or another come into your mind. If you thereupon stop all your progress and concentrate on obliterating these thoughts (out of a mistaken notion that by direct attack you could be free of them), the struggle is exhausting. It would eventually become so one sided that your entire campaign of following God's will in your daily life would be discarded out of discouragement and disgust. On the other hand, sheer contempt and lack of notice of such temptations would prevent their further effectiveness against you.

Very often, the devil does not use violent temptations against good folk who try to serve God as best they can. Such people are too generous, too alert, to fall into an open pit. But they are a prey to a snare – discouragement; and the best hook on which to hang discouragement (as Satan knows from long experience with the human race) is the idea of failure.

On the road to Egypt Joseph might have given in to this discouragement as a result of his apparent failure. After all, who was he? What success had he achieved? God had chosen him to be the foster father of Jesus Christ, God made Man. He was the husband and the guardian of the virgin Mother of God; but to correspond with that dignity what had he accomplished? He was only a carpenter in moderate circumstances at best. When Jesus was born, he could offer Him not even moderate comfort. For some reason or other, despite his best efforts he could find only a stable for the Christ Child.

He was a member of the Holy Family; that was true. Was he worthy to be the foster father of God Incarnate or the husband of the Blessed Virgin, of her who was chosen to be the Mother of God? Amid such sanctity, any human being might feel that he is the worst sinner or at least potentially the most craven of souls. And, of all things, Joseph had authority over these two holiest! He, the carpenter of Nazareth, had been made the head of this Holy Family, and he was only Joseph, a failure.

Of course, Joseph did not reason in this fashion. He could have done so had he been like ourselves. In these reasonings of false humility, we see the virus of discouragement grow out of the thought of failure. In God's eyes, there is only one kind of grave failure, and that failure is the loss of one's soul. If you save your soul, you are essentially a success. In God's sight, no matter how you may have failed in temporalities, you are a success.

In advising someone else it is a very simple thing to dispose of the problem of failure by saying that faintheartedness comes from wounded pride, and that discouragement could be avoided if one were perfectly humble. But it is an entirely different matter to feel in yourself the crippling, crushing burden that weighs down your heart and converts every sweet joy and pleasure into galling reminders of apparently unattainable happiness and satisfaction.

The reasons can be so many. A man starts early in life to found a business. It fails. A woman enters on a promising marriage. She meets sickness, estrangement, or worse. Parents may sacrifice everything they have and everything they are for the sake of their children. The children callously run off into wild, unhappy marriages or lose the faith. All such tragedies cut down the promise of a lifetime at its root and seem to spell but one word: failure.

Of course, these are not ordinary occurrences, and they will probably never happen in your life; but you ought to remember the attitude Jesus and Mary and Joseph would have in order to help other people in difficult situations of this type. By means of your warmhearted sympathy, you can bring comfort and consolation to those in distress or bereavement, and you can thus accomplish a vast amount of good as an instrument of God's mercy and love.

Most people occasionally feel they are failures in the little things of life, such as the constant monotony of working for years without promotion, or simply the humdrum raising of a family. Yet as we have repeatedly insisted, this so-called humdrum raising of a family can be a very holy, happy experience; and the spirit of faith and unselfishness in family life is lavishly rewarded by the love and gratitude it evokes in others.

For some persons the idea of failure occurs in their spiritual life. They have been waging a gallant struggle against strong temptation or a strong habit, which they never completely overcome. After months and years of successfully making more and more progress, they still feel discouraged. The thought strikes them, 'Why try any more? You're still tempted. You're a failure.'

To such false reasonings there is only one answer needed, just as Joseph would have answered the false difficulties put to him on the road to Egypt: 'Sacred Heart of Jesus, I trust in You.' The fact is that temptation in itself is never sinful. To resist temptation steadfastly is a great virtue.

Perseverance in doing good should have but one result – buoyant inspiration and zest for the future.
