
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. VII

Sunday of Holy Cross



Above: Pilgrims in Jerusalem carry a cross in procession on Holy (Good) Friday

“Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (Mark 8:34)

Taking up your cross

The Holy Cross is celebrated three times throughout the year: the 14th Sept., 1st Aug., and on the third Sunday of Lent. All three days are triumphant celebrations because we cannot look upon Jesus’ crucifixion without remembering what happened next: the empty tomb and Resurrection. And so a cruel method of execution is transformed into *the* symbol of victory for Christians. We cross ourselves in prayer, we decorate our churches and ourselves with crosses, we joyfully process holding crosses and we sing in hymns *“through the Cross, joy has come to all the world”*.

If we too can look upon the Cross – Christ’s execution – and still see victory in it, still confess Jesus’ lordship, still ask Him for help, then like the thief on His right side we will be saved (Lk 23:39-43). But now the ‘difficult’ part: the thief who Jesus saved was not saved from suffering on the cross. He still hung there until the time came when his legs were broken and he asphyxiated. Jesus’ disciples were not saved from earthly suffering and, moreover, they were promised it. We too, as His disciples, are told: “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me.” As Theophan the Recluse puts it: *“It is impossible to follow the Lord as a cross-bearer without a cross, and everyone who*

follows Him unfailingly goes with a cross.” What is this cross? **Our cross consists of all sorts of inconveniences, burdens and sorrows that come along with living as a Christian.**

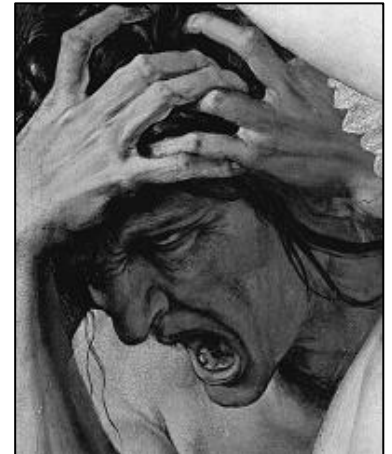
Many saints, referring to Jesus’ own teachings, were quite clear that a life of ease and comfort were bad signs as to our spiritual health. We all suffer from various sicknesses (passions) of the soul: gluttony, avarice, anger, laziness, pride etc. and when these go unhealed we can often get a reasonable measure of material success. When we try to let Christ into our hearts by ‘kicking out the world,’ the world ‘kicks back.’ When we attempt to detach ourselves from a purely material way of living to come closer to God (as we do during Lent), there is a certain amount of ‘tearing’ and associated pain. Although a ‘logical’ consequence of our turning to God, our crosses are not made by Him: *“No matter how heavy a cross a man may carry in life, it is still just wood, which man himself made, and it always grows from the soil of his heart”* (Ambrose of Optina). Yet, just as we can look at the Crucifixion and remember the Resurrection, so too must we look on our own suffering and remember the resurrection that is promised us. God allows us to spiritually share in His crucifixion without physically dying so that we can have spiritual resurrection in this life too.

God has **compassion** on us. Compassion literally means ‘co-suffering’. God became man and experienced all that we may suffer, both internally and externally: hunger, poverty, insults, death of loved ones, physical pain, abandonment, anguish, betrayal. Therefore He knows our own pain and will not allow more than we can bear. *“So rejoice as you feel the cross upon yourself, for it is a sign you are following the Lord on the path of salvation that leads to Heaven. Endure a bit. The end and the crowns are just around the corner!”* (Theophan the Recluse)

The Eight Deadly Passions – **Sorrow**

Whilst we may gain some pleasure, albeit temporary, in gluttony lust or avarice, sorrow brings no joy whilst we suffer from it. It is a ‘passion’ (suffering) in the true sense of the word. Yet we read much in spiritual writings about the need for sorrow over our sins in order to lead us to repentance. Why, then, is it also called a passion – something which wounds us and hinders our spiritual life? *“Godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret; but the sorrow of the world worketh death.”* (2 Cor 7:10). Godly sorrow leads to repentance and prayer (for others); this produces joy at God’s subsequent mercy & miracles. Sorrow at anything else is, potentially, un-Godly – “sorrow of the world”. This could be sadness at being passed over for

promotion, not being as good at something as we'd like, or general dissatisfaction. This could also be described as "envy", which is how sorrow was translated when the deadly passions of the East became the deadly sins of the West. Yet sorrow may also include sadness due to physical illness, a loved one's death, or an unhappy family life. It can be sorrow over our kids, or lack of kids; sadness due to a difficult marriage, or from being alone. The desert saints even recognized the phenomenon of a sudden, unexplained sadness. It is not for us to feel guilty over our sorrow, but be aware of what it does to us over time: *"as a moth doth by a garment, and a worm by the wood, so the sadness of man consumes the heart"* (Prov. 25:20, LXX)



Signs of sorrow: The 'deadliness' of sorrow lies not in the feeling of sadness itself, but in what sustained sorrow leads to: resentment, irritability, envy, complaining and lack of gratitude. This can develop into bitterness, hatred, blaming others, loss of faith in God, despair, even suicide. As well as 'worldly sorrow' there is a type of deathly sorrow that comes from dissatisfaction in spiritual matters. This might happen if we have a 'bad thought', see or hear something we wish we hadn't, or generally see ourselves as far from the spiritual heights of Christ and His Saints. This sorrow is worldly insofar as it doesn't lead to repentance (change), but regret, guilt and despair that we will never be saved. What follows is shame before God, wasted time thinking how much we lingered on particular thoughts, an unwillingness to confess, or else finding no peace when we do. *"Thus we live a life that is bitter, disquieted and of little fruit."* (Nicodemus the Hagarite)

How to combat sorrow: Sorrow over our sins and at the suffering of others is Godly when it naturally encourages our turning to God and an 'eternal' perspective. *"We shall overcome sorrow if we keep our eyes fixed on eternal things to come, enduring joyfully and unmoved, cast down neither by the troubles of this present life nor elated by its prosperity – regarding both the one and the other as transitory and soon to flee away."* (John Cassian) Worldly sorrow, however, does not necessarily lead to repentance or prayer in such a straightforward way. But it can. Much of our frustration and sadness comes from a feeling of helplessness; yet we do not *need* to pull ourselves out of our own depression, nor should we. *Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he **will** sustain thee... because he cares for thee* (Ps 55:22 & 1Pet 5:7). We often forget God in worldly matters, or else think it unseemly to ask

Him, yet we should ‘do all things in the name of the Lord’ (Col 3:17). Whatever our sorrow, **let go and let God**. In prayer, or even a wordless heartfelt cry to God, we can find an answer. It may be we get humbled over how petty our trouble was, but even then, our new perspective brings comfort. We are never alone in our sorrow, and even if we only have one friend, then He is the best of comforters: *Nothing escapes Thee, my God... not even a tear-drop nor part of a drop* (Simeon the New Theologian). By always turning them over to God, all of our sorrows – whatever their cause – can become ‘Godly’ or ‘blessed’, and then, as Jesus Himself promises: *“you shall be comforted”* (Matt 5:4).

NB: The Samaritans offer a safe place to talk any time you like; please see <https://www.samaritans.org/>

A Thought for Mid-Lent: On Giving Up on Repentance

“When Moses and Aaron began to intercede before Pharaoh to let their people go, the answer to this was increased work for the Israelites, to the point they cried out against their intercessors: *‘ye have made our savour abominable before the Pharaoh’* (Ex. 5:21). This is exactly what the soul of a repentant sinner experiences. When the fear of God and one’s conscience – the inner Moses and Aaron – begin to inspire a soul to rise up onto its feet and shake off the yoke of sinful slavery, joy passes through all its members. But the enemy does not sleep. He heaps mountains of mental obstacles, such as thoughts that sin is insurmountable, and he brings in fear from all sides: fear for our own prosperity, external relationships, influence, even our own life. It even happens that one stops, having only just begun. **Be inspired!** *The Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and the holy God shall be glorified in righteousness* (Is 5:16). God is stronger than the enemy. Cry out to Him and you will hear the same thing Moses heard: *‘Now thou shalt see what I will do to Pharaoh.’* (Ex 6:1) The enemy does not have power over a soul; he can only frighten it with illusory terrors. Do not give in. Endure and go forth, bravely saying: I will not give in, even unto death, and I will go where the Lord calls me, with the spirit of repentance now acting in me.”

- St Theophan the Recluse (Thoughts for each day of the year)

“O Lord all-merciful, in the multitude of Thy mercies blot out the multitude of my sins, and count me worthy with a pure soul to behold and kiss Thy cross during the present week of abstinence, for Thou lovest mankind” (Vespers on the 3rd Sunday of Lent)