

THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS

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FIRST STATION: JESUS IS CONDEMNED

WHY did Pilate condemn our Lord to the Cross? He knew our Lord was innocent of the crimes brought against him; he knew more: he realised in some way our Lord was not merely man. The Romans believed in gods appearing in human form, in goddesses having human sons, and so on. Quite clearly Pilate was awed by the presence of Christ. Yet he condemned him! There were two reasons for this awful sin: first, Pilate's evil life, his horrible cruelty, had raised up against him many enemies, and given them a handle to bring about his disgrace with the Roman Emperor. The background of Pilate's life was wrong. The second cause was self-love. When Blessed Henry Suso had a vision of his Dominican master in glory he was told that to attain holiness there must be the renunciation of self. From this station I learn that I may sin suddenly and gravely against my Lord unless my life in general is true and spiritually healthy; and that the more I have of self-love the more I shall prefer self to God and his will. Pilate sought to save himself by sacrificing Jesus, but in the end he came to ruin and disgrace. Had he attempted to save Jesus, he himself would be one of the saints, perhaps a martyr. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God.'

SECOND STATION: HE TAKES THE CROSS

Long before the Passion our Lord predicted it in detail. He went up to Jerusalem for that last Passover quite deliberately, into the garden of Gethsemani fully aware of what would happen there so he *took* the Cross: this was more than receiving it. He knew that if he was lifted up on the Cross he would draw all men unto himself, and thus he would be the Way and the Door to the Father. Our Lord loved his cross. May I learn to love the cross God sends me: it will bring me closer to God, and with it I shall serve others more fully. Only those who have suffered

or sorrowed can ever really help those in pain or grief. Those who have a cross become crucified; so they become like Christ. Controversy wins few converts to God, but the impression made by men and women marked with the wounds of Christ will move many to become the servants of God.

THIRD STATION: HE FALLS

We are told that Jesus needed help on this Way of Pain, and that justifies our believing there were falls on the exhausting journey. There were falls, and there was the final arrival at Calvary. Most of us can remember some sudden fall while we were running, or walking fast. There was the sudden jolt, and then we remained still for a moment at the suddenness of the shock. But we got up, and went on. There are falls of sin, some so sudden. Few escape such an experience. The spiritual failure is the person who stays on the ground, perhaps in the gutter, but the victor is the one who gets up, however painful the effort, and bravely continues. Our Lord promises the crown of life to those who persevere to the end. There is no disqualification because of falls on the way. The grace of final perseverance comes only in response to prayer. 'Holy Mary . . . pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death.' That is a sure way to attain the great grace.

FOURTH STATION: HE MEETS HIS MOTHER

The Mother who was soon to stand at the foot of the Cross must have followed her Son, or met him at some junction of roads. Amid the sea of cruel faces what must have been the comfort of just one loving expression and the knowledge it gave of unfailing loyalty? Our Lady might have avoided the scenes of horror, but then she would have lost her opportunity of consoling her Son. Sometimes we have the opportunity of giving some service terribly repugnant to human nature, but asked for by another's need; sometimes all we can do is to give a look of compassion. When we so serve we are renewing in our Lord the refreshment he gained when he saw his Mother's face in a street in Jerusalem. In our hour of need may we

have some sight of that Mother's face, for in it we shall also see the likeness of her Son.

FIFTH STATION: SIMON IS MADE TO HELP

Simon was probably a man of some wealth, as the Gospels tell us he was returning to Jerusalem from a visit to his property. We hear later of his sons, while his wife is mentioned by St Paul as one of his helpers—indeed, as a second mother to him. The Roman soldiers would have a grim satisfaction in laying hold on a resident of position and giving him work fit for a slave. St Matthew says Simon was forced to give this help. Tradition tells us he lived to become a bishop and a martyr. The first cross-bearer may not have made a good start, but how well he ended. Perhaps he was the first convert that bitter day, soon to be followed by the thief and the centurion. The Way to Calvary is already a triumphal procession. If we have some great struggle in giving up our will to God's, our salvation will depend on coming to God, even with our rebellious will, in prayer; to make contact with God even in protest. As the king of old extended his sceptre in token of favour, so will our Lord touch us with his cross, and we shall find we are following him solely because of love. He is the Lord who commanded us to love our enemies. Even when I am the enemy of Christ he loves me. What is his love when I am his friend?

SIXTH STATION: VERONICA WIPES JESUS'S FACE

Of old the Psalmist had exclaimed with great longing: 'Thy face, O Lord, will I seek'. In this incident of the Passion Veronica seeks and finds, but in sorrow and compassion. The most beautiful of the sons of men is passing by disfigured, and his sacred face is as of one stricken with grief. Yet even so, 'we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. The Fathers of the Church say that Adam and Eve were created according to the likeness of God, as regards the soul, and according to the likeness of God-made-man in face, while mystics have been shown in visions of heaven that the saved shall have a common resemblance to the features and expression of Christ our Lord. Adam and

his successors have lost this likeness by sin, but grace can restore it. The expression of the face is moulded by the thoughts of the mind—by the influence of the entire soul. We must bring the fair linen of the soul to our Lord that he may impress his likeness upon it. This we do by devotion to the Passion and by devotion to the suffering members of Christ. In that way we shall acquire the look of God-in-Christ. Then his disfigured face will appear in ours as beautiful; his look of humiliation will become in our case dignity; his expression of sorrow will be seen in us as joy.

SEVENTH STATION: HE FALLS

This Station shows our Lord fallen a second time. In the Crib of Bethlehem he lay there in the weakness of a newborn Babe; now he is seen again in weakness. We may thank him for this showing of true human frailty, for it brings him close to us. Holy Scripture puts it this way: 'It behoved him to be made like unto his brethren. . . . For in that wherein he himself has suffered and been tempted he is able to succour them also that are tempted. . . . For we have not a High Priest who cannot have compassion on our infirmities: but one tempted in all things like as we are, without sin.' A Christ immune from weakness would be very glorious, but also very inhuman, so in his love he divested himself of his rights and took upon him a nature capable of knowing pain and experiencing death. To sufferers and those in grief he can say, 'Come unto me'; we can go to him unafraid, for we see wound marks in his strong hands. Christ is the Consoler because first he was the 'Man of Sorrows'.

EIGHTH STATION: HE SPEAKS TO THE WOMEN

All through the Passion there is a remarkable prominence of the service of holy womanhood to our Lord. In the house of Simon the Leper at Bethany the rites of the Passion began. Mary anoints the feet of Christ, and dries them with her tresses. Said Christ our Lord: 'She is come beforehand to anoint my body for the burial'. At the trial before Pilate the only human voice raised on behalf of our Lord was that of Pilate's wife; at the foot of the Cross were our Lady and

Mary Magdalen, and close by other women. The Resurrection morn begins with the little procession of women hastening to the tomb to complete the anointings. Now a group of unnamed women show their love in sorrow and weeping as their Master passes by to die. They weep for him; he sorrows for them and for their children. All through Christian history there has been this consecration of womanhood to our Lord. Some have served him in home life, some in the cloister. A great history of charity could be written by recounting the dedication of womanhood in nursing the sick, in serving lepers, in caring for the unwanted aged, and in countless other ways of selfless forms of work. Our Lord chose a woman for his sole human parent; that woman resembled him more closely in character than any other human being, and he was more like her in features and expression than anyone else. Womanhood has never forgotten this.

NINTH STATION: HE FALLS

Again he falls, and for a while lies prone on the rough ground. Our Lord came not only to save us; he came to offer reparation and expiation to his Father for our sins, lukewarmness, and omissions. So, as he nears Calvary, he falls in lowly worship, like the priest prostrate before the Altar on Good Friday, and he falls with the cross upon him. The cross weighs us down in humble worship before the throne of God. Therefore we begin Mass with the *Confiteor*, and the priest bows deeply as he acknowledges his sins before God, the Court of Heaven, and all his fellow worshippers. Our worship should include the spirit and practice of expiation. Expiation is one of the chief activities of the souls in Purgatory. We should begin that activity now. The Christian who has never known the meaning of penance and expiation has also missed the deepest experience of the spiritual life. When St Peter of Alcantara appeared in glory to St Teresa immediately after his death he told her that the exceeding joy he now knew was the reward for his life of penance. Expiation is the surest means for securing immediate entrance into heaven when we die. The Way of the Cross is the way of expiation. Those who follow it come, with Christ, to the state of final glory.

TENTH STATION: HE IS STRIPPED

Only one Gospel, that of St Luke, omits the incident of the dividing of our Lord's clothes among the soldiers, and only one Gospel, that of St John, tells in detail of one garment in particular, the seamless robe, for which the soldiers dived. St John was profoundly sacramental; he had, too, the mind of a mystic, so for him miracles are always 'signs'—events that reveal something more than the power of the miracle-worker. In his Apocalypse John gives in detail another sight of robes—the great multitude in white robes, robes, so the angel guide told him, which had been washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Thus, the robes of glory are associated with the Passion. So, as we contemplate this scene in the Passion, and then look up to heaven, we see that Christ our Lord renounced his seamless robe that we might be clad in festal white, the robe of innocence and purity. He bought our robes with his. Then there is the meaning of the seamless robe as the sign of the unity of Christ's Church, a meaning adopted by St Cyprian. The robe of Christ was too valuable to be rent; even the rough soldiers saw that, so it was to be a prize. The Church's unity is a gift from the cross, and we should prize it, even as the great sacrament of the Passion, the Mass, is *the* sacrament of unity and the memorial of the Passion.

ELEVENTH STATION: HE IS NAILED TO THE CROSS

Our Lord is now nailed to the cross. Our Lord willed to be fixed to the cross, as a religious is bound to the religious life by the three vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience; Christ and cross become as one. It is the Crucified with whom we have to deal so long as this world lasts—the Christ of mercy and of the everlasting intercession. So the cross is set up in every Catholic church, and there is the sign of hope for every sinner, and the inspiration for every saint. Think of the crowd watching the crucifixion—howls of derision, cries of blasphemy. But when the sacrifice of the Lamb of God is completed that same multitude leave Calvary beating their breasts in contrition and sorrow; a criminal in agony becomes gentle, penitent; a stern centurion is moved to confess: 'Truly this is a son of God'.

The day will come when our Lord will be on his throne of judgment; let us seek him now on his throne of mercy. His feet are now nailed, so we knew where to find him; his arms are upraised in prayer for us outstretched in patient appeal and loving welcome. In a church at Florence a large figure on a cross stooped down to embrace a young knight who on that day, a Good Friday, had been about to kill his brother's murderer. In deep sorrow the knight sought forgiveness at the foot of the crucifix. He is now a canonised saint.

TWELFTH STATION: HE DIES

In proclaiming his Mother's universal motherhood our Lord has conferred on his dear ones his royal gifts. He says this brief complin: 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit', and then, with a loud cry of victory, dies. Soon a soldier will drive a spear into the still heart, and blood and water will stream through the open wound. Death has come to him who is the resurrection and the life. There was a rock once struck by the rod of Moses, and it yielded streams of fresh water for a people dying of thirst. Now the chief corner-stone is struck by the spear, and evermore there will flow from it the waters of sanctification by which we are cleansed from all sin, and the precious blood enriching us with the life of Christ and filling our veins with divine Royalty. At the foot of the Cross I too accept death, and unite my dying with the dying Lamb of God. Then I shall also be united to the Christ of the resurrection. My tomb shall also be the scene of resurrection; my spirit shall be in the keeping of God. Because Jesus died for me, my dying will be a 'falling asleep in the Lord', a sleep which has its awakening in light perpetual.

THIRTEENTH STATION: HE IS TAKEN FROM THE CROSS

The sacred body is now lowered from the cross, and the Mother of Sorrows receives it. Her face is lined with grief, but it is a face of holy peace. Her Son had fulfilled the desire of his heart and was now for ever the Saviour of the World; and she had accepted the Sword of Sorrow into the sheath of her heart. At the gates of Eden the cherub's swords flamed in awful warning. Now those flames are quenched

in the heart of Mary, and the gates of Heaven are now for ever open wide. In the Holy Sacrifice the great Oblation is renewed, and when the body of Christ is brought to us from the altar, it is the body instinct with resurrection life. Jesus and Mary paid a great price for our communions. Do not let us forget this, and neglect the precious opportunity offered to us at Mass. 'Behold the Lamb of God' the priest cries aloud from the Altar, and that Lamb of Sacrifice desires his rest—in your hearts. He desires to come; the priest is there to bring him to you, but only you can say: 'Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly.'

FOURTEENTH STATION: HE IS ENTOMBED

The triumphs of the cross continue. The rich man Joseph of Arimathea, and the timid Nicodemus, face the incensed Pilate and win from him the gift of Christ's body. Joseph gives that body a resting-place in his own private tomb, hewn out of rock in his garden. That tomb becomes the junction where death and resurrection meet; it shall confound the plans of the High Priests, and is for ever a place of triumph. The very shroud-clothes shall witness to their inability to hold the body of Christ captive. The inscription over the tomb of Christ is this: 'He is not here: He is risen'. Those words should be remembered at the graves of our dear ones, for 'death is swallowed up in victory'. We lay the still body in the grave, but not there is the immortal soul. God is not the God of the dead but of the living: those who though dead to the world live unto God. Our faith teaches us to pray for those souls, to have Masses offered for them, to offer our suffrages for them. All that speaks of souls wholly alive, the objects of love and the recipients of the divine mercies. We are in a great communion. Every Mass we offer has a conscious effect on the Holy Souls, comforts them and aids their entrance into heaven. We thank our Lord for his death and burial, for now we shall see at every grave the angels of Easter morning, and we know that all who weep as the Magdalen did in Joseph's garden, shall hear the word of sweet recognition, the greeting that shall give a joy never to be taken from us. Good Friday ends at the tomb, and there Easter begins.