

THE WAY OF THE CROSS: CHRIST'S FALLS

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask you for pardon of my sins and grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

May you seek Christ; may you find Christ; may you deal with Christ; may you fall in love with Christ, and then may you bring him everywhere. Those are words that St. Josemaria at times, especially as a young priest, would write on the flyleaf of a book about Christ - a life of Christ - or perhaps a book about the Passion when he was giving it to somebody. He'd add in those words, almost like a wish or a prayer, for the person to whom he was giving that book. And- and in some way those words sum up the whole Christian life and they sum up the journey towards holiness.

May you seek Christ; may you find Christ; may you deal with Christ; may you listen to him; may you speak to him; may you live with him; may you love Christ, or may you fall in love with Christ; and, may you bring him everywhere.

I suppose those different stages are verbs; they're not all distinct, they're not watertight compartments. They all run into one another seeking Our Lord, finding Our Lord, loving Our Lord, speaking with Our Lord, and sharing Our Lord with everybody around us - that all happens at one in the same time. And that's what we're doing now in this period of prayer, basing ourselves above all on the contemplation of the Way of the Cross. Indeed, I guess St. Josemaria's work published posthumous- posthumously, *The Way of the Cross*, forty years ago, is a testimony to his constant desire, really, to help people to get to know and love Our Lord.

The Christian life is not, as we know, a series of rules nor is it simply a moralism of some kind, nor is it just a tradition that we inherit. The Christian life is a living relationship with a living person - Christ. As Joseph Ratzinger said many years ago in a homily: 'He is a person and he seeks the person. He has a face and he seeks our face.' Well, Jesus, in this period of prayer I actively want to be sought by you, to be met by you, to be loved by you. And for my part, I would like to seek you out and get to know you and deal with you and love you, and then in a very natural way to share you with others, to offer this friendship that you give me to others also.

It's true, isn't it, that the Passion of Our Lord, the suffering of Christ, is a supreme revelation of who God is. If, as St. John says in his letter, God is Love, well that's shown in a supreme way, in a very tangible way, in the Passion, in the Way of the Cross, and all that that involves. That's why for us Christians, the Sign of the Cross is so special. The crucifix, the cross, and our making the Sign of the Cross which we use in all kinds of circumstances. We could say the Sign of the Cross seals the beginning and the end of our lives. The ceremony of baptism, for example, begins with the priest and the parents and the godparents tracing the Sign of the Cross on the forehead of the one to be baptized, on the child normally. And when we're dying and we're about to leave this world, we're normally given the blessing of God with the Sign of the Cross. And then throughout our lives as we enter a church, often we make the Sign of the Cross. As we pass by a cemetery we might make the Sign of the Cross. Maybe when we begin our work or we are having a meal we might make the Sign of the Cross. It's very powerful, that sign. It's not a magic gesture, it's a profession of faith in Christ who has loved us and given himself for us.

Jesus, we are seeking you out now in the mystery of your Cross, in the power of your Love, and we do so guided by St. Josemaria in his work, the Via Crucis, *The Way of the Cross*: 'The heavy cross cuts and tears into Our Lord's shoulders. The crowd has swollen into a multitude, and the legionaries can scarcely contain the angry, surging mob which, like a river has burst its banks, flows through the streets and alleyways of Jerusalem. The worn out body of Jesus staggers now beneath the huge Cross. His most loving heart can barely summon up another breath of life for his poor wounded limbs. To right and left, Our Lord sees the multitude moving around like sheep without a shepherd. He could call them one by one by their names, by our names. There they are, those who were fed at the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, those who were cured of their ailments, those he taught by the lakeside, on the mountain and in the porticoes of the temple. A sharp pain pierces the soul of Jesus; Our Lord falls to the ground exhausted.'

We try and contemplate you, Lord, as you fall to the ground crushed- crushed by our sins, by evil, by our ingratitude, by our lack of sensitivity. It's good for us to meditate on this Station of the Cross. Well in fact, there are three Stations of the Cross which- which speak of falls of Our Lord on the way up to Calvary.

What's it like to see an adult who falls or has fallen on the ground? It's normally quite shocking, really. It's one thing for a child to fall. Normally, a child would fall and hopefully just bounce up again if it's not a serious fall. When an adult falls, it's always a bit dramatic, a bit sad. It shows, I suppose, the ultimate helplessness, really, of human beings that, for all our adulthood, or being grown up. We are extremely precarious, we are poor, we are weak, we are dependent.

And what does it mean for the man God, for Jesus Christ, to fall on the ground? What does that mean? Well, it certainly shows, I guess, how small Our Lord has come- has become for us; how little, you could say, God has become. Pope Benedict XVI, in a number of his homilies, especially at Christmastime, he would speak about how God is so great that he can become small. This is the greatness of Our Lord. When

we see Our Lord falling on the ground, we see ourselves in our own weaknesses and our own moments of falling and our own precariousness, be that spiritual or physical, where we- we do fall. And Our Lord does it, Our Lord falls too. He lets himself fall.

Why- why do you do this, Lord? Why do you fall? Well, it's pure love. It's the solidarity which comes from his Love. You, Lord Jesus, are like us in everything except sin and you freely embrace all that is ours except sin and therefore, you embrace this weakness, this vulnerability, and you also embrace death itself and in doing so, you empty death of its sting. In this meditation, considering the Falls of Jesus, maybe we could focus in our prayer on how our Lord is solidarity with us- lives out solidarity with us. He does things out of solidarity with us. Our Lord taught with a human mind, with human hands he worked, and with a human heart he loved, as Vatican II tells us. We could say, with the human body and with the human mind and with the human heart, Our Lord also suffers for us out of pure love. This solidarity of God with man, which goes beyond anything that needs to be done, it's like what St. Josemaria might term this *madness* of love of Our Lord.

Lord, you really don't have to go so far. As Thomas Aquinas says in his famous hymn to the Eucharist, just a single drop of your blood would have been more than enough to save the whole world, but you go well beyond that. You let yourself be battered, you let yourself fall on the ground so that you and I, when we are fallen on the ground, psychologically when we're down maybe, or physically when we're not well, or spiritually when we fall in, as well, perhaps, through our own stupidity or our lack of- of virtue or whatever it might be, we're not alone. The Lord has gone there for us and to be with us.

There was once an old lady in a hospital and she was dying, and the priest gave her a crucifix to hold in her hands and to kiss if she wanted, something which often brings great comfort to people who are ill or dying. And because she was near to death and at the same time very lucid, the priest asked her, are you afraid? Are you worried about anything? And she said, looking at the crucifix, with great common sense she said: No, I'm not afraid. I say to him, Lord, if you have done *this* for me, what will you not do for me? Referring to Jesus on the cross, on the crucifix she held in her hands: Lord, if you have done this for me, what will you not do for me?

Maybe now is the moment, if we wish in the intimacy of our own prayer, to place in Our Lord's hands, in his heart, our frailties, our weaknesses, our fault, our precariousness. Lord, I ask you to take up these things which at times make me suffer, to sanctify them by your suffering, to help me to realize that I am not alone in these moments of whatever it is - suffering, insecurity, anxiety, pain - physical or moral - that you, Lord, have embraced. All of this out of sheer unconditional, unadulterated love for me.

Jesus Christ falls, he comes down, he becomes weak. He is so great that he can become small. All of this, of course, is- is at the heart of that great Christological hymn that St. Paul has in the second chapter of his

Letter to the Philippians. He says, he speaks of Christ Jesus who, 'though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.'

There we have the whole mystery of Our Lord's Paschal Mystery summed up in a few verses of St. Paul. Perhaps, that's one of those hymns that our brothers and sisters in the early Church used to sing during Mass, one of those Christological hymns. It's taught that some of them were- it's thought that some of them were sung at Mass. Here we have what in the Greek term is called the *kenosis* of Jesus, the self-emptying, the lowering, we might even say, the falling of Jesus which doesn't happen just on the streets on the way up to Calvary, but that's the whole dynamic of the Incarnation, that you, Lord, have lowered yourself out of love for us, out of solidarity with us. Our Lord is not some kind of abstract God who looks on- on our situation and on our sufferings and on our efforts with the cold clinic- in the clinical detachment. Our Lord is not sitting there with his arms folded. Our Lord is intimately involved in every aspect of our lives and we are intimately involved in his life. St. Paul says, 'In him we live and move and have our being so that those things that we- we find hard, considering now the Passion of Jesus, they are somehow part of his Passion, and his Passion also somehow is played out in our little passions, in our sufferings.'

But this *kenosis* of Jesus, this lowering of Jesus, doesn't begin just on the way of the cross. In fact, you could say it- it begins at the very outset of the Incarnation. By becoming man, Our Lord has lowered himself, he has fallen, you might say, down for us. There are those beautiful words of the Book of Wisdom which refer to Christmas night, you could say: 'While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful Word leapt from Heaven, from the royal throne into the midst of the land that was doomed.' It's funny, because it's that paradox, isn't it, that this is all-powerful, but it's just a word - doesn't seem very powerful. Also, it's done in an incredible- incredible discretion very quietly. Just as Bethlehem occurs very quietly, without any fanfare, by becoming small, gentle, humble, homeless, even destitute, Jesus Our Savior comes down, he falls down to us so that we can be raised up. This is what the Fathers of the Church called the *admirabile commercium* - the wondrous exchange, or the wonderful exchange, that by sharing in our humanity, Lord, you have enabled us to share in your divinity.

And this is amazing, isn't it, that again, quoting the Fathers of the Church, they say it in different ways, but more or less the concept is always the same that the Son of God became a Son of Man so that the children of men could become children of God. This lowering, this wondrous exchange between God and man involves the sharing in our sufferings, of Our Redeemer, of Christ, and that's from the very beginning. It begins in Bethlehem. It could be said that the Way of the Cross actually begins in Bethlehem. The cross is

already there, the suffering is already there. He came to his own people and his own people received him not. You could say Bethlehem happens under the Sign of the Cross, this grinding down of the Lord.

In fact, it's interesting that Christian iconography paintings have seen the link between Bethlehem, the manger, and the Cross and the altar. At times, in paintings of the nativity scene, Christ is seen to be lying not on a manger but on an altar. And in fact, the meaning of the word Bethlehem is *house of bread*. And we can bring to mind in this context precisely those prophetic words of Our Lord where he says, 'Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.'

You, Jesus, you are this little grain of wheat that's fallen into the ground of our world and died and bears immense fruit for the salvation of the world, you are the first fruits of our Resurrection. All this suffering of Jesus, it's important, I think, that we understand it in terms of solidarity with us because it could be misunderstood, and it has been misunderstood, also, you could say in the history of theology, in the history of Christian thought, that you know, people might say well, what kind of father is God the Father that he would require his Son to suffer so much? What's the meaning of this suffering? Why- why- why did he insist that his Son die on the cross? And that's the wrong end of the stick, we might say. It's not that God is an implacable and cruel father who is satisfied only by more and more suffering. On the contrary, it's rather that God, in his tender mercy, freely takes on our humanity with its vulnerability so as to be wounded, so as to suffer, so as to die, so as to be in solidarity with you and with me. We're not alone in our sufferings when we have sufferings. We're not alone in our death, when our death comes. And Christians' death, as we know, is a- is a new way of being conformed to Christ, a new way of loving Christ. We try and sanctify our daily life. We try and sanctify our work, our friendships, our sport, our rest - of all of that. We also try and sanctify our moments of illness, our falls - whatever form they take - and we also try and sanctify our death. That's a good thing to do and to the sacraments, also, that death can become mystically sharing in Our Lord's death.

Let us look then at Jesus who falls on the way to Calvary, pause in our prayer, not to be afraid to see Our Lord who probably was a strong man given his profession - a carpenter, strong builder, a man who would walk the length and breadth of the Holy Land. He wasn't weak. He was strong, presumably, but he is utterly battered, dehydrated, bruised, swollen, and his heart is broken, you might say, by our ingratitude, by being rejected by his people and abandoned by his most close friends, at least most of them with very few exceptions. And no wonder that he falls, no wonder that he falls. And I suppose the question now arises in our prayer, how do I react to those falls of Christ? How do I try to- to love him back or to make reparation?

We see this, of course, in the Stations of the Cross when that woman Veronica takes the initiative of going out and wiping the face of Our Lord. And tradition has it that Our Lord leaves and the imprint or the- the image of his face on that- on that piece of material. What a precious, precious image, what a precious piece of material that face of Christ, that face of Christ. You know, when we contemplate the Way of the Cross

and the Passion, especially during Lent, maybe that's a good devotion to nurture in our souls, a good habit - to look a lot at the face of Christ. Remember at the Last Supper, Philip the Apostle, he seizes the chance as it were and he says, 'Lord, show us the Father and then we'll be satisfied.' Suppose Our Lord had been talking so much all along about his Father and Philip is- Philip says, well, show us the Father, then we'll be satisfied, then we'll leave you in peace. And Our Lord's answer, 'Philip, he who has seen me has seen the Father.' He who has seen me has seen the Father.

Well, in his bull of indiction for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in 2016, the Holy Father entitled that encyclical, *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Face of Mercy - and in that document the pope spoke about the face that Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. So, like Veronica, we'd like to go up, Lord, and to see your face, treasure your face, to see your face looking upon us and loving us.

All this suffering of the Lord, how do we respond? Well, surely by making reparation, by trying to love back, by trying to complete in our own lives and our own selves what is lacking for the sake of Christ's body, which is the Church. And reparation, obviously, is an important part of Lent. We can live it out in- in the different aspects of Lent, the three pillars of Lent which are prayer, sacrifice, and alms. They can all be given a sense of reparation, for sure, little corporal modifications we might do during Lent, depriving ourselves of food or comfort or different things like that. Or, I don't know, spending less time on the phone or being more patient in our work. Normally, our reparation will be in little things. It won't necessarily be anything dramatic, and yet Our Lord treasures and appreciates those little acts of love. A little act of love is- is worth so much in Our Lord's eyes.

Sometimes too, there can be more dramatic opportunities for reparation and for love. Once there was a lady who was very ill and she was really- she had lost her spirit, really, and she just turned her face in against the wall and wouldn't talk to anybody. And everyone tried speaking to her - her family, her friends - encouraging her, asking her to keep up her fight. And then one day a doctor went to see her and he realized that all his medical arguments weren't working. He was trying to get her to react- try and get her to- to fight, to lift her spirit. And he knew that she was a Catholic, he knew that she was a Christian like he was, and he started speaking to her about the Passion of Our Lord. And he said to her, you know Simon of Cyrene- Simon of Cyrene- do you remember Simon of Cyrene, the Way of the Cross? Well, now if you want, you can be Our Lord's Simon of Cyrene. And that unlocked that woman. That- that was the grace she needed, that was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that- that really helped her and- and changed her life, and she saw her suffering and her illness as a way of being in solidarity with Our Lord who is always in solidarity with us.

But this solidarity of Jesus with us and our solidarity with him, it is important, I guess, to stress that it's normally lived out in fairly ordinary ways. Lent for most of us were not be a dramatic period. We'll try and do little things with a bit more love and that can be a sure act of reparation. And reparation is not something

negative; it's not something that- that draws us down or leaves us sad. Rather, quoting St. Josemaria, 'Let us drown evil in an abundance of good, that we never get disheartened with our own sins or the sins of others or the state of the world or the difficulties in the life of the Church, not at all. Our- our- our- our role is to drown evil in an abundance of good, so that if we think there are difficulties or there's a lack of vocations. Well, let's pray more for vocations, well let's drown evil in an abundance of good. Or, if we feel challenged by our own weaknesses, our own sins, again quoting St. Josemaria: 'Let us grow in the face of difficulties.' Difficulties are permitted to us by the Lord so that we may grow- that we may grow- grow in love of Lord - love of the Lord, and in one another.

We can finish this meditation, if we wish, by turning to Our Blessed Lady who is the one who most intimately shares in the Passion of Our Lord. St. Bernard, in one of his homilies, talks about the concept of compassion, co-passio, cum-passio. Our Lady who shares in yeah- in a unique way in Our Lord's love, in Our Lord's self-giving. And we ask you, Our Mother, to bless us as we continue on our Lenten journey, to intercede for us and to help us as we meditate on the Stations of the Cross to come to terms, once again, with the depth and the height and the breadth of the love of God in Christ Jesus. And as we look upon Christ who has fallen on the ground, we do so in your company, knowing that you followed along the Way of the Cross. We ask your Mother to help us, please, to understand a little bit more deeply what it means to say that Jesus Christ is God in solidarity with us.

I give you thanks, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask you for help to put them into effect. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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