

THE WAY OF THE CROSS: DISCIPLESHIP

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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.

‘Do you want to accompany Jesus closely- very closely? Open the Holy Gospel and read the Passion of Our Lord. Don't just read it, live it. There is a big difference. To read is to recall something that happened in the past, to live is to find oneself present at an event that is happening here and now, to be someone taking part in those scenes. Then allow your heart to open wide, let it place itself next to Our Lord.’

Well, this advice from St. Josemaria about accompanying Jesus in his Passion really is the tone of the entire book, *The Way of the Cross*. It's all about accompanying Our Lord using our intellect and our will, wanting to and seeking to be close to Jesus on the Cross and then opening our heart, loving Jesus, knowing him, and loving him in his Passion. And that's what we'll try to do in this meditation as we contemplate the death of Our Lord on the Cross.

St. Matthew describes this amazing, ineffable moment of the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross: ‘From the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*’ That is, ‘My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?’ And some of the bystanders hearing it said, this man is causing- is calling Elijah. And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him. And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.’ Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

Well, we ask St. Josemaria to intercede for us, to help us not just to read this Passion of Jesus but to live the Passion of Jesus, to partake, to share somehow in the Passion of Our Lord. We hear about the darkness over the land for those several hours while Our Lord is hanging on the Cross. St. Jerome says that, ‘The sun withdrew its rays because it couldn't dare to look on the spectacle of the Lord hanging on the Cross.’ St. Leo the Great says that, ‘For as long as the Creator was hanging on the Cross, the whole of creation groans in mourning.’ And it makes sense, this darkness over the whole land, while you, Lord Jesus, are redeeming the cosmos, redeeming the world, redeeming each one of us with your sacrifice on the Cross. Nature is in harmony with her maker. The creation is in harmony with the Creator.

Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. There's something very different about Our Lord's death compared to our death. In our case, we don't decide when we die. If you like, our life's spirit is withdrawn from us when that time comes. In the case of Our Lord, he decides when he will die, and he

does so with- with sovereign freedom. In the Gospel of John, we're told he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. It's when the time has come. He, the Lord of History, decides when that moment is. And it shows the depth of Our Lord's love that he didn't have to die for us, but he chooses to do so and when and how he chooses that as well.

What's it like to be there on Mount Calvary, on Golgotha, at the death of Jesus in the company of Mary and St. John the Apostle and the Holy Women? What's it like to be there at that moment when Our Lord finally dies? They've been they're keeping him company for hours watching Our Lord in extreme pain, watching him dehydrated, trembling, exhausted, struggling to breathe, listening to his last words which were very labored, very deliberate, very special. And now the Lord dies. This is an amazing moment. On the Cross, it's not that Jesus Christ pretends to die, he actually dies. Because if Our Lord didn't genuinely die, well then he wouldn't genuinely rise from the dead either.

It's good for us to take our time to contemplate Jesus in his Passion, like St. Josemaria recommends, to live this mystery, not just to read it, you know, not to be detached from it, but actually take part in it. The reality is the death of Our Lord and the Cross belongs, of course, the biography of Jesus but it also is part of my biography, of your biography as well - our lives, actually, and our salvation are incomprehensible without reference to the Cross. So many things in our lives, can't understand them if we leave aside the Cross of Jesus, the Passion of Jesus, and the Resurrection of Jesus - all central to us, really.

He yielded up his Spirit. One senses that at that moment of the death of Jesus there would be almost like a cosmic silence, you know, a few instants of sheer silence. Like there's nothing to be said, really. It's just a moment to contemplate, to worship, to make acts of atonement, of reparation, and of love. In fact, this cosmic silence, this silence of the whole of creation, is incorporated into the Liturgy, because when we read the Passion of Our Lord in the- in the Palm Sunday Mass and also in the Liturgy of Good Friday, at that moment of the reading of the Passion, the moment of the death of Christ, the whole congregation kneels and pauses in silence for a few instants.

And it makes total sense. There's nothing to be said here. It's just that attitude of *we adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.* And we express that just physically by kneeling and by being silent. How good it is for us to contemplate Jesus on the Cross. Also, Jesus who is now dead and limp on the Cross, not to be afraid to look on Our Lord, to look on his body. There's nothing grotesque about this. It's something profoundly human and very spiritual, too, because it leads us into the mystery of who God is. At the Last Supper, Jesus had said to the Apostle Philip, 'He who sees me sees the Father.' He who sees Jesus Christ on the cross sees all the love of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The love of God made flesh, the love of God made wounds for love of us.

So, it's good for us to take into our hands or even just in our mind's eye the figure, the person of Our Lord on the cross, and to contemplate him. From the soles of his feet to the crown of his head there is nothing healthy in him - wounds and bruises and swelling sores - not bound up, not anointed with oil, not in any

way treated. These words from Isaiah which were recorded by St. Josemaria in *The Way of the Cross* - he says, 'The body of Jesus is truly a portrait in pain, a portrait of suffering.'

Or a tableau of dollars or sufferings, as it says in Spanish. And each one of us, we do well, you know, to take our time, to look on the wounds of Our Lord - the wounds all over his body, from his head to his toes, the wound in his- in his arms, in his wounds, on the main trunk of his body from the scourging, from the beatings, the wounds in his wrists where he's nailed to the cross. We call to mind those prophetic words of Zechariah in the Old Testament prophecy: 'And if anyone asks him then, what are those wounds on your body? He will reply, these I received in the house of my friends.'

Very poignant, very true. These wounds, Lord, that we contemplate that show us the depth of your love for us, you receive them in the house of your friends, you receive them somehow, Lord, in my own house, I'm afraid. And we can make it a good Act of Contrition in the intimacy of our own prayer. Or, we could dwell on the feet of Christ nailed to the cross, those feet of which the prophet Isaiah spoke: 'How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace, who proclaims salvation, and tells Zion, our God reigns.' Your God reigns. How lovely on the mountains - those feet of Our Lord which had walked all over the Holy Land bringing good news and healing and salvation and joy to so many people. Well, now those feet are mercilessly nailed to the cross. And we could spend time just contemplating those feet, the feet of the man God, and that would speak volumes to our soul, really.

Or we could look up at the face of Jesus, as St. Josemaria says, again in *The Way of the Cross*, 'The beloved face of Jesus, which had smiled upon children and was transfigured in glory on Mount Tabor is now as it were hidden by sufferings.' This face of Our Lord, *Misericordiae Vultus*, as the Holy Father Pope Francis called Jesus, 'Jesus is the face of the Father's mercy.' It's a good thing to contemplate the face of Our Lord. In fact, isn't that what we're made for, ultimately, the beatific vision to contemplate the face of God. As the great St. John Paul II wrote, 'The Church pauses in contemplation of this bleeding face which conceals the life of God and offers salvation to the world. It conceals the life of God and offers salvation to the world.'

It's good for us to enter into this Passion, enter into this suffering, enter into Our Lord's heart as well, so as to share it in our own lives, so as to become agents of that salvation. Even though we're very poor and imperfect, Our Lord does want to war- work through us and reach people through us, and he will if we let him. In fact, it's one thing to contemplate all these physical signs of Our Lord's love, physical proofs of Our Lord's suffering. And then it's good, also, as it were to enter into Our Lord's heart and to consider all the spiritual, the psychological, the emotional wounds that have been inflicted on him.

As St. Alphonsus Liguori says, he says 'Oh, what an injustice never seen in the history of the world. The judge condemns the accused man at the very same time as he declares him innocent.' It's true, isn't it? Pilate washes his hand in the sight of the people, in that way declaring his belief that Jesus is innocent, and at the same time hands Our Lord over- hands Our Lord over for crucifixion. What an injustice, what an injustice.

Lord, you could have redeemed us in any way simply by a thought, a desire, the smallest movement of your will and yet you chose this amazing way, this way of- of extreme suffering, of identification with human misery. Again from St. Alphonsus, 'And why was it that when he could have redeemed those without suffering, he chose to embrace death on the cross to show us how much he loved us,' to show us how much he loved us. Lord, may I never get used to your love. May I never get used to the mystery of- of your Cross. And more than that Lord, I'm conscious that as a Christian I actually have a vocation to share in your suffering, to share in your Cross, and I ask you to give me the strength to be able to do that.

Long before your passion Lord, you had said to us and you say it to us today from the cross, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him take up his cross every day and follow me.' Lord, I really do want to be a follower of yours even though I am painfully conscious at times of my own inadequacies, the fact that I am so limited. And- and so often I don't live up to the ideals I would dearly love to live up to. And yet, Our Lord is saying to us, look, don't be afraid to share in my Passion so as to become a channel of salvation for others. It's not that you and I can save anybody, of course not. And yet, Our Lord, does want to work through us, unworthy instruments as we are.

The story is often told of a- a church in Berlin that was very, very badly damaged in the bombings and the fightings that took place a towards the end of the second World War. And the parish priest, the pastor in that church, was sifting through the rubble after the bombing had ceased and the place was in bits. And among all the destroyed bits of the church, he came across the remains of a beautiful crucifix. But the problem was that the arms had been blown off the crucifix. It was the body of Our Lord was intact, but without the arms, and arms- this crucified Lord without arms. And the story goes that the priest thought about it and re-erected when he got the church refurbished, rebuilt. He put up that crucifix without any arms. He hung it up on the wall, and underneath he put a plaque with- with a few words between quotation marks as if Jesus on this cross was now speaking to the passerby, to the person who is looking at it. And the few words between quotation marks on the- the plaque below the cross read: 'You are my arms.' You are my arms.

It's true, in so far as you and I share in Our Lord's Passion, to that extent we are his disciples and to that extent we are his apostles. And insofar as we share in Our Lord's Passion, we are in a position to help others to meet him, to bring all those graces of salvation to others, to be channels of that grace. Our Lord invites us to that. If anyone wants to be a follower of mine they- then take up his cross every day and follow me. It's true that most of the time our sharing in Our Lord's Passion won't be in very dramatic ways. For most of us, it will be in the little things of each day - maybe tiredness and work or a boring job that we have to do or family difficulties which are present practically in every family I guess from time. Our ill health, lack of energy, lack of motivation, a low mood. Whatever it might be, you know, where is the cross, where the Lord is offering us his presence and his salvation today? Let's embrace that cross and that way, you know, we do bring Our Lord to others.

Often nowadays people ask the question, and it's a very good question - maybe it's one of the great questions - how can we spread the faith? How can we share the Gospel effectively with people, you know,

what's the way? And we know there are many good projects for evangelization and many good ideas and books written about it and podcasts and all kinds of programs on the internet. And all of that is very good, very necessary, and- and even probably, thinking, how can we speak the language of young people today? How can we communicate effectively with a very secularized culture? And it's important and necessary to ask those kinds of questions. But what is always effective, unquestionably, is the cross. When we suffer with Christ, even if it's in little, ordinary daily things, that is very effective for the apostolate, that is essential to evangelization, to bringing people to him.

Normally, it will be in little things, occasionally in more serious things or more dramatic things, we might say. The story is told in the biography of St. John Marie Vianney, the holy Curé of Ars, that great priest who brought, you know, thousands of souls to God that, well, he was attracting just by his holiness, I suppose, thousands of people to his little village called Ars, not too far from Lyon in France. And some of the priests in the neighboring parishes were frankly getting jealous of the success of the Curé of Ars, whereas others were trying as well to see how could they imitate him and how they could be successful, as it were, in- in bringing many people to Our Lord. And sometimes they asked him, well- look, what should we do? Like, how can we, how can we bring people to Our Lord? How can we be effective channels of his grace? And seemingly the Curé of Ars asked them, 'Well, have you tried sleeping on boards? Have you fasted? Have you done corporal mortifications?' So, he was putting it up to them, that really, the way of evangelization in fact is always the way of the cross. It's always the way of the cross.

Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And we pause in contemplation of this God man who hangs dead on the cross and what we see there is the ultimate obedient person, obedient unto death, even death on the cross. It's true. Our Lord is the outstanding example of obedience, and by his *yes* to God he undoes the *no* of our first parents Adam and Eve and- and the *no* of, I suppose, every sinner, because when we sin, one way or another, we're always kind of saying *no* to Our Lord, be it in a little thing or in a big thing, whereas the whole of redemption, the whole of salvation is a question of saying *yes* to God.

And that's what Our Lord does through his- through his saving obedience. By one man's disobedience, everyone died. By one man's obedience, all were saved. St. Paul, in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, develops this theology, you might say, of the new Adam - that Jesus Christ, you Lord, you're the new Adam, as opposed to the old Adam - the old Adam and- and the old Eve, we might say, brought death, mortality, and sin into the world by their disobedience, by their lack of trust in God. And the new Adam, Jesus Christ, by his obedience, by his trust in the Lord - into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit - he reverses the effects of Eden, of the Original Sin, and opens for all of us the gates of Heaven. Into your hands, I commend my spirit, Lord - I really do trust in you.

The Fathers of the Church- the great spiritual and saintly writers of the first centuries, they- they talk about this, you know - Christ is the old Adam. Excuse me, Adam in the Garden of Eden is the old Adam; Christ on Calvary is the new Adam just as Eve was the mother of all the living in the old dispensation, but through her disobedience, she facilitated death coming into the world. So, now Our Lady is the new Eve

who stands by her Son on the cross. Just as there was a tree in the Garden of Eden which bore a fruit of death, the fruit that our first parents ate. So too, there is a tree in the different garden, the garden on the top of Mount Calvary, Golgotha, and that's the Tree of Life from which all new life flows.

This is, really, I suppose all about the immense fruitfulness of the Cross. That the Cross is full of fruitfulness. And- and it's a constant source of life, it's- it's like a fountain of life for the world. And we could reflect on that, you know, to be a disciple of Our Lord is to share in the fruitfulness of the Cross. That's why, very often, you know, when perhaps people are trying to bring forward some work of evangelization or of apostolate they'll ask sick people, especially to pray for that. St. Josemaria was exemplary in this regard when the Lord showed him back in 1928 that he wanted him to found the Work, to found Opus Dei, this little family within the much greater family of the Church. Well, he felt very- I mean, he felt totally at a loss from a human point of view because he was poor, he was young, he didn't have influence or contacts. How was he to begin a whole new way within the Church? And as he said himself years later, he went the only way that one can go and that is to the sick and the poor. And that is why he went to the hospitals of Madrid, to people who are dying of tuberculosis in great numbers of that time. And he asked them, you know, please pray for a special intention of mine. Please pray for this work, for Opus Dei. And many of them offered their sufferings for the Work. That's always been the way in the history of the Church - not just in Opus Dei, everywhere. It's like St. Paul says, 'when I am weak then I am strong.'

So maybe when we feel a bit weak or we're going through a tough time or we find something difficult in our work or in our family or in- whatever- our social relationships, whatever else, maybe that's a very good moment, maybe that's when we are most effective for the salvation of souls - not when we feel like we are effective, but when we feel like we're not effective. Maybe that's the moment. When I am weak then I am strong. This is- this is the great mystery we see- we see on the Cross.

Pope John Paul says in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 'God does not cease to be at work. His essential work will always remain the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. This is the ultimate word of truth and of love. This is also the unending source of God's action in the Sacraments as well as in the other ways that are known to him alone. His is an action which passes through the heart of man and through the history of humanity.' That's a beautiful way of putting it, that Our Lord's action on the cross, this action of obedience, of self-giving, of sacrifice, of love, is what gives effectiveness to the whole of history, that what you Lord Jesus are doing on the cross and what you've done on the cross, what's made present every day in the holy sacrifice of the Mass, that one saving mystery is active all the time in history through the Church. In a special way in the Sacraments, but also in the life of every one of your disciples. If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, let him take up his cross every day and follow me.

So, think about the crosses you and I have to offer to Our Lord. Maybe they're not very big, maybe they're just the daily things - having to get up at night to feed the children or to look after a sick child or maybe having a chronic illness of some kind, be it serious or not so serious, or maybe just coping with the Covid pandemic and all the restrictions and the anxieties going with that - if anyone wants to be a follower of

mine, let him take up his cross every day. And we can say to Our Lord in our prayer - Lord, I'm weak. I'm poor. I'm not good at this but I really do want to take up your Cross. I really do want to shoulder it with joy, with a smile on my lips even though at times I don't feel like doing it. I do want to share in your Cross for the salvation of the world.

St. Josemaria says in *The Way of the Cross*, 'the more you belong to Christ the more grace you will obtain to be effective in this world and to be happy in eternity. But you must make up your mind to follow the way of self-surrender, the cross on your shoulders with a smile on your lips and a light in your soul.' You must make up your mind.

Well, we turn to St. Joseph in this Year of St. Joseph, and we turn as always to Our Blessed Lady who is the one who most shares in the Passion. She has true compassion with Jesus. We ask Mary and Joseph, and indeed, we ask St. Josemaria too, of course, to intercede for us that we may make up our minds to follow the way of self-surrender - the cross on our shoulders, with a smile on our lips, and with the light in our soul.

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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