

ALL FOR LOVE: EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son 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 beg your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

We begin our prayer with these words that St. Josemaria used to begin his prayer every day, “My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here,” he would repeat, putting himself in the presence of God. They can help us to focus and to get rid of all the worries that we may have right now, because it is time to recollect ourselves and place ourselves before our Father God so that we can have and carry out a loving conversation with him.

Today is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. It is a Feast that goes far back in history when in the year 628, the emperor Heraclius had recovered the Holy Cross of Jesus, he had found that again, and he tried to carry it into Jerusalem, when all of a sudden, as he entered the gate, rocks fell from the wall and blocked the passage. And it was revealed to him by an angel, that it is not proper for him to enter into Jerusalem, that he cannot carry the Cross of Jesus with all his regalia, with all his jewels and crowns and robes, that he had to carry it with a humble attitude.

And he had to take all those fancy clothes off and wear sackcloth and ashes. And only then can he carry the Cross of Jesus, and all the obstacles in carrying the Cross would disappear, would be overcome. Well, that's what happened. He got rid of all his fancy accoutrements, and he carried the Cross, like a humble servant of the Lord, like Our Lord had carried the Cross; for the first time, being a servant. Sometimes, we too suffer many crosses throughout our lives: an illness, a contradiction at work, perhaps a misunderstanding from someone we love.

Maybe we get into a fight with a friend, we break up with a girlfriend, boyfriend. And this causes a lot of suffering in my life, in the life of many people. But it is when we decide to accept the Cross with humility, that suffering acquires a new meaning, that it ceases to be oppressive, and it can be an opportunity to actually co-redeem with Our Lord. These crosses don't have to be big crosses, like the one- like the ones I just mentioned; they could simply be small things, small things that somehow get us upset: somebody cuts us in traffic, or there's a change of schedule that I was not counting on, or the bus was late or little things like that, perhaps make us lose our temper or lose our presence of God.

These are opportunities to accept the Cross of Jesus with humility, to carry the Cross like Jesus did, as a servant, to co-redeem. What does it mean to carry the Cross with humility? We have to ask ourselves that question. Listen to what Our Lord says in the Gospel, when he invites us, you and me, to come very close to him. He says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened," and I think you and I perhaps can count ourselves among those people at times, "and I will give you rest," he says. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls." And he concludes with these words: "For my yoke is easy and my burden light."

It is paradoxical how suffering could actually be useful. Suffering in itself does not make sense. It is something that- that causes us to think, to question why, why we are in this world, why we live, why we should continue to live. Sometimes suffering can be a big sign of contradiction. However, the Lord has not come to get rid of suffering, we continue to suffer all the time, but he has come to give it meaning with his Cross. He has come to give it the meaning of love. He himself said it, "There is no greater love than this, than for someone to die for his friend."

When we add meaning to suffering, then it disappears. Then the suffering disappears. In fact, St. Augustine says as much. He says that there is, in his opinion, no suffering so great that can be diminished- that it *cannot* be diminished to nothing out of love. When we love, everything ceases to be a contradiction, everything now has meaning. And that is what St. Josemaria teaches us as well. St. Josemaria can be a great example for us to live our crosses in an ordinary way. And I think primarily that he can help us in three ways.

In the first sense, we can learn from his life in embracing hidden crosses, and not making a big deal out of it, to embrace the Cross in a hidden way, without a spectacle, as he used to say. Somehow, he learned this early on in his life when he was just a young kid. In fact, right before making his First Communion, he went to the barber, because it was customary at the time to make your First Communion with a certain hairdo that had curls for boys at that age. And he went to the barber, and the barber used this hot curler that burned him. And it actually inflicted a- quite a heavy wound, because it was hot, and it hurt him- hurt him a lot.

However, he reflected, and he thought, "If I tell my mother, well, not only will the barber lose his job," and he didn't want to do that, "but he would lose all the credit that Our Lord was giving to him." He saw this pain and suffering that he suffered from the barber as an opportunity to unite himself to the Cross of Our Lord. He saw it as Our Lord asking him to be generous, and to not say anything, and to offer it up, because the following day, he would be receiving Our Lord for the first time in the Blessed Sacrament.

And in fact, that's what he did. And his mother was so surprised that after a while when she discovered the scar, that he hadn't said anything. And of course, the little boy St. Josemaria couldn't hold it in at that point and revealed to her why he didn't say anything: because he wanted to offer a small hidden sacrifice to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

How beautiful is that? To have a child at that age, be so in tune with what it means to suffer out of love. “Lord, the next time I suffer some contradiction, I want to see it, help me to see it, help all of us to see it as an opportunity to unite ourselves to your Redemption, to the Redemption of all souls, that it's not just me, it's not about me anymore. It is really a gift that you make to the Church through me, and that I cannot drop the Cross, I need to help you carry it.” And I want to do that as St. Josemaria used say later on in his life, “as Simon of Cyrene.” We have to be another “Simon of Cyrene” helping you to carry the Cross.

There's another aspect of how St. Josemaria carried the Cross, and that- that is, we could say, his tenacity, the way he *embraced* the Cross in a struggle. He always struggled, but in a positive way; it was not a negative struggle. It was the struggle, as he would characterize it, of an athlete. He would often compare our struggle to carry the Cross with the struggle of an Olympic medalist, perhaps, in trying to overcome himself and improving his time or the height of his jump, or his- or whatever he was working on.

And he struggled in a positive way with you know, gladly taking advice from his coach, gladly focusing, gladly trying again, even if he failed many times. That's the struggle that we need to have when we carry the Cross. It is a- we cannot give up. We cannot simply throw our arms up in the air and say, “I can't do it.” No, we can do it because we have all the grace of God in the world to do it, and we also have our own human strength that comes from the- from fostering the virtue of fortitude, the human virtue, fortitude, which is then elevated by grace, which we need to persevere to the end.

One example of this in St. Josemaria's life is during the Civil War in Spain. As you know, the conflict forced a lot of the clergy to hide- go into hiding, and they were unable to practice their faith publicly. If they were to practice their faith, they may have been killed or imprisoned. And St. Josemaria one time preached a recollection for some people who were in hiding. After the recollection, they had breakfast in the house that a woman had and she was sponsoring the- the recollection and, and she offered some things afterwards.

And as they were eating, she noticed that St. Josemaria (you can only imagine how hungry he was because of the- of the rations that they had been subjected to during the war), he served himself this orange, and he grabbed this orange. And as soon as he grabbed it, he kind of put it back. It was kind of a struggle. This is what the biographer says. Even so, the landlady was impressed by the priest's conversation and manners during breakfast. What really struck her memory was that he caressed an orange and then mortifying his hunger, he left it there, eloquently forgotten on the table.

After breakfast, Doña Matilda reverently reclaimed it. That orange, says an eyewitness, is still kept by that family 40 years later. Well, this is a small example of St. Josemaria's struggle to mortify himself, which is to embrace the Cross personally. To give up an orange, which was nothing, he could have taken it, it would not have made any difference, perhaps. But what was going through his mind, we can only imagine that he was thinking, “No, I have to give this up. This family needs the orange. I'm just here as a guest. They're going through a war, they're going through rations themselves, I need to give it up for someone else.”

He gave meaning to that little bit of suffering, which was to give up this orange- this, you know, thirst that he had or hunger that he experienced at that time. And he gave it up. And it was so eloquent, an example of his struggle, his tenacity, his fortitude, to say no to himself in order to say yes to others, out of love for God, and yes, ultimately, to Our Lord Himself.

Well, we too, have to foster this virtue of fortitude, of tenacity, so that we can persevere to the end, because we're going to have crosses all the time. But what's important here is our attitude to the Cross: Are we going to embrace it with humility? Or are we going to reject it with pride? We know that if we try to carry the Cross with pride, we will end up falling like Heraclius entering Jerusalem. There will be obstacles that will not be able to be overcome.

We have to try, but letting Our Lord help us. And we count on his grace in order to be able to struggle against our defects, against our disordered tendencies, our passions that can get in the way. But when we do that, when time and again, we try, and we try, and we try, and we ask Our Lord for the grace to deny ourselves in some small thing every day, then he will give us the grace to be able to persevere.

What is another characteristic that we can learn from St. Josemaria and how he carried the Cross? Well, we can point to his joy in carrying the Cross. His joy was extraordinary. It was supernatural. It was really beautiful. When he carried the Cross, when he had to- when he experienced big contradictions, like calumny in his life. Many times, people spoke badly of him or badly of Opus Dei. He forgave always, but he never became sad; or at least he struggled not to give into sadness, because he knew that it was Our Lord who was dealing with him as with a son- as a son, as a son of God.

In fact, sometimes when everything would go right, his prayer at the end of the day would be something like this: "Lord, are you upset at me? Are you abandoning me? Because you have not given me the Cross. Everything has gone almost too well, and I have not experienced the assault of mortification, the little sting today. Everything has gone right. Don't you love me anymore?" This is a very daring prayer. It's daring, because how many of us would actually be praying the opposite: "Lord, take away this Cross from me."

But one of the things we have to learn is that Our Lord, as it says in the in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, "Our Lord scourges and chastises every son whom he receives, for whom the Lord loves he chastises." It is a beautiful reality that we have to come to terms with, that Our Lord is not punishing us when he allows us to suffer. What he's doing is actually- he's loving us, as he loved his Son, as he loved Jesus Christ Himself.

He's actually showing a special type of love because he is allowing us to experience what his own Son experienced in a more perfect way than perhaps other people who are not suffering as much as we are. This realization, coming to terms with it, gives us peace: that we are not afflicted and abandoned, that- that we are loved. And love gives meaning to that suffering to the point that again- makes it disappear. It makes it disappear.

This is the beautiful reality of the Cross. When It is carried with the right attitude, with a humble and loving attitude, then it becomes light: "Take my yoke upon you and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden light." The Cross becomes, as St. Josemaria used to say, "a Cross without a Cross," when we carry it this way.

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who will be beatified in a couple of weeks, wrote an introduction to the *Way of the Cross* of St. Josemaria, and he writes these words, quote, "The Way of the Cross is not a sad devotion. St. Josemaria taught many times that Christian joy has its roots in the shape of a Cross. If the Passion of Christ is a way of pain, it is also a path of hope leading to certain victory. And as he explained in one of his homilies, you should realize that God wants you to be glad, and that if you do all you can, you will be happy, very, very happy, although you will never for a moment be without the Cross. But that Cross is no longer a gallows. It is the throne from which Christ reigns. And at his side, his Mother, our Mother too, the Blessed Virgin, will obtain for you the strength that you need to walk decisively in the footsteps of her Son."

We can turn to Our Lady who is always next to the Cross of Jesus. In fact, tomorrow, September 15, we will be celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. This Feast is next to the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross not simply out of some blind coincidence; it is there placed next to the Feast of the Cross because Our Lady is always next to her Son, and especially at the Dark Hour. As St. Josemaria used to say, "She was not there at the great miracles or in the great triumphal moments as when he entered into Jerusalem and every woman claimed him King and Messiah. But she is certainly there at the foot of the Cross."

How was she able to do that? She herself had a history with coming to terms with the Cross. If you recall, Mary had a very tough life. She said yes at the moment that the angel came to her but also very shortly thereafter she had to give birth to Our Lord in a stable, a very uncomfortable situation. And then she had to take him to Egypt and then come back with uncertainty as to where to go, and so forth. She had to meditate upon all these events of Our Lord's life and come to terms with them in her prayer.

Only if we pray can we find that meaning of love in the Cross, which is what Our Lady did. That is why she is able to persevere with the other holy women and St. John at the foot of the Cross. We entrust this big intention to her so that we too can embrace the Cross humbly with great tenacity, and joyfully, in whatever Our Lord has in store for us.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations which you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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