

SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY

TO

HOLY SATURDAY

THE PURIFICATION OF THE SENSES AND THE PRACTICE OF
ABNEGATION — THE STRUGGLE AGAINST SIN —
HUMILITY, OBEDIENCE, AND ACCEPTANCE OF
THE CROSS — THE PASSION OF JESUS

A NEW PROGRAM

SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, I come to You with a keen desire to learn how to respond to Your invitations.

MEDITATION

1. The time of Septuagesima is somewhat like a prelude to Lent, the traditional time for spiritual reform. That is why the liturgy presents us today with a program which we must put into effect in order to bring about within ourselves a new, serious conversion, so that we may rise again with Christ at Easter. The Collect of today's Mass, while reminding us that we are sinners, invites us to sentiments of profound humility, "to the end that we, who are justly afflicted because of our sins, may through Thy mercy, be freed from them." The first step toward conversion always consists in humbly recognizing that we need to be converted. The lukewarm must become fervent, the fervent must reach perfection, the perfect must attain heroic virtue. Who can say that he does not need to advance in virtue and in sanctity? Each new step effects a new conversion to God, *conversio ad Deum*. In the Epistle (*i Cor 9,24-27—10,1-5*) St. Paul urges us to undertake this ceaseless spiritual labor. To reach sanctity and heavenly glory we must never tire of running and striving, as those who run in the stadium struggle and exert themselves "to receive a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible one. I, therefore, so run... not as one beating the air," says the Apostle, "but I chastise my body and bring it into subjection!" This is the first point in the program : a generous struggle to overcome ourselves, to conquer evil and achieve goodness; denial of self by humility; denial of the body by physical mortification. Only those who struggle and exert themselves will win the prize. Therefore let us also run in such a way as to obtain the reward.

2. The Gospel (*Mt* 20, 1-16) gives us the second part of the program for this liturgical season : not to remain idle, but to labor assiduously in the Lord's vineyard. The first vine to be cultivated is our own soul. God comes to meet us with His grace, but He does not will to sanctify us without our cooperation. On this Sunday the great invitation to sanctity is repeated to every soul. God in His love seeks out His scattered, idle children and gently reprimands them : "Why stand you here idle?" St. Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi says that "God calls us at various times, because creatures differ in state. In this variety we see God's greatness and benignity, which never fail to call us by means of His divine inspirations, in no matter what stage or situation we may be." Blessed are those who, ever since their youth, have always heard and followed the divine invitation! But each hour is God's hour ; and He passes by and calls us, even to the very last hour. What a consolation, and at the same time what an incentive to respond at last to the Lord's appeal : "Today if you shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts!" (*Ps* 94,8).

In addition to the vineyard of our soul, we must also consider the vineyard of the Church, where so many souls are waiting to be won to Christ. No one can consider himself dispensed from thinking of the welfare of others. However lowly our place in the Mystical Body of Christ, we are all members of it; consequently, each one of us must work for the welfare of the others. It is possible for everyone to carry on an efficacious apostolate by example, prayer, and sacrifice. If, up to now, we have done but little, let us listen today to the words of Jesus : "Go you also into My vineyard." Let us go and embrace generously the work which the Lord offers us; let us consider nothing too difficult when there is question of winning souls.

COLLOQUY

Bless, O Lord, this new liturgical season which opens today. By penetrating its spirit may I be disposed, with Your aid, for a serious reform of my spiritual life. Grant me sincere humility, that I may know my misery and see myself as I am in Your eyes, free from those false lights which arise from self-love, deceiving me and leading me to think I am better than I am. If I wish to consider my wretchedness

at Your feet, it is by no means in order to become discouraged : " In my trouble I call upon You, my God, and from Your holy temple, You hear my prayer. . . . You are my strength, O Lord, my support, my refuge, my Redeemer. You are my help in time of trouble. He who knows You, hopes in You, for You do not abandon the one who seeks You. From the depths of the abyss, I cry to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice. If You will mark our iniquities, O Lord, who can stand it? But with You there is mercy, and by reason of Your law, I trust in You, O Lord!" (Mass of the day).

Infuse into me, O Jesus, new strength to take up more eagerly the course which will lead me to win the incorruptible crown of sanctity. " And since nature opposes what is good, I promise to declare a merciless war against myself. My weapons for the battle will be prayer, the practice of the presence of God, and silence. But, O my Love, You know that I am not skilled in handling these arms. Nevertheless, I will arm myself with sovereign confidence in You, with patience, humility, conformity to Your divine will, and supreme diligence. But where shall I find the aid I need to fight against so many enemies in such a continual battle? Ah! I know! You, my God, proclaim Yourself my Captain, and raising the standard of Your Cross, You lovingly say, 'Come, follow Me; do not fear' " (T.M. Sp).

O my Lord, I will no longer resist Your invitation. May today sound for me the decisive hour of a response filled with generosity and perseverance. You call me. Here I am. I come to Your vineyard, O Lord, but if You are not with me to sustain me in my work, I shall accomplish nothing. O You who invite me, help me to do what You ask of me.

THE NECESSITY FOR INTERIOR PURIFICATION

PRESENCE OF GOD - Purify my soul, O Lord, so that it may be filled completely with Your light and Your love.

MEDITATION

1. St. John of the Cross compares the soul to a glass window with a ray of sunlight shining on it. If the glass is dirty, "the ray cannot illuminate it, nor transform it completely into its light; its illumination will be in proportion to its clearness. If, on the other hand, it is absolutely clean and spotless, it will be illuminated and transformed in such a way as to appear to be the luminous ray itself, and to give the same light" (*AS II*, 5,6). God is the divine Sun shining upon our souls, desiring to invade them and penetrate them, completely transforming them into His light and love. Before He does this, however, He waits until the soul resolves to free itself from every "creature stain," that is, the stains of sin and inordinate attachments. As soon as God finds that a soul is free from mortal sin, He immediately fills it with His grace. This precious gift is the first step in the great transformation which the Lord desires to bring about in us. The more we become purified of all sin and imperfection, and of even the slightest attachment; that is, in proportion as we conform our will to the will of God, not only in serious matters of obligation but even in the least details of perfection, the more capable we become of being entirely penetrated and transformed by divine Grace.

Grace, the gift of God which makes the soul a participant in the divine nature, is poured forth into the soul in proportion to its degree of interior purity, which always corresponds to its degree of conformity with God's will. Therefore, the soul that wishes to be totally possessed and transformed by divine Grace, must in practice strive to conform fully to the will of God, according to the teaching of St. John of the Cross, "so that there may be nothing in the soul that is contrary to the will of God, but that in all and through all its movement may be that of the will of God alone" (*AS I*, 11,2).

2. God not only illumines our soul with the rays of His divine Grace, but He Himself, Unity and Trinity, takes up His abode within us, according to the promise of Jesus : " If anyone love Me... We will come to him, and will make our abode with him " (*Jn 14, 23*).

Even if we possess but one single degree of grace, God dwells in us and invites us to live in real union with Him; nevertheless, He does not give Himself completely to us; He does not consummate us in His unity nor transform us completely into Himself as long as He finds in us the slightest thing contrary to His will. The smallest imperfection is opposed to the will of God because God cannot desire the slightest imperfection and, *a fortiori*, He cannot admit to perfect union with Himself a soul who keeps any trace—no matter how insignificant—of opposition to His infinite perfection. The basis of all perfect union is total conformity of will and affection. As long as we love and desire, even in small details, anything that God cannot love or desire, our will is not fully conformed to the divine will, and these two wills, God's will and our own will, cannot become one, " that is, the will of God become also the will of the soul " (J.C. *AS I*, 11,3).

As long as we do not attain this perfect union of wills, God, although He dwells in us, will not communicate Himself fully to our soul. Hence St. John of the Cross teaches that " the soul disposes itself for union... by purity and love, that is, by renouncement and perfect detachment from all things for God's sake alone. " When the soul is thus disposed, God bestows on it " that supernatural favor by which all the things of God and the soul are one in participant transformation, and the soul seems to be God rather than soul, and is indeed God by participation, although its natural being is as distinct from the Being of God as it was before... even as the window has a nature distinct from that of the ray by which it is illumined " (*AS II*, 5, 8-7).

COLLOQUY

O my God, for what great things have You created me! You have created me to know You, to love You, to serve You—and not as a slave, but as Your child, Your friend, living in intimacy with You, sitting at Your table, enjoying Your presence. O Jesus, You have said, " I will not now call you

servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doth. But I have called you friends, because all things whatsoever I have heard of My Father, I have made known to you" (*Jn 15,15*).

You have revealed to me the great mystery of a God who deigns to love me as His child, to establish His dwelling in my soul, to invite me to a more intimate friendship and union with Him. You Yourself asked for this union for me at the Last Supper : " As Thou, Father, in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us" (*ibid. 17,21*). To be one with God, to be consumed in the Unity of the Most Holy Trinity! O Jesus, how sublime is the ideal You propose to me, how wonderful the invitation you offer me! Yes, Your words apply also to me, a creature of sin and misery. Why should I delay, remaining among the base things and vanities of this earthly life? Why should I, like a reptile, be content to crawl on the ground, when You invite me to soar like an eagle and give me wings with which to do so? Alone I can do nothing and would struggle in vain to free myself from the bonds of sin, to detach myself from creatures and from myself; all my efforts would be useless because my natural weakness constantly tends to drag me down. But Your grace and love are the wings on which I can fly to perfect union with You. With such an ideal, how could I think it hard to undertake and carry out a work of profound purification and total detachment?

O God, make me understand clearly that " real love consists in detaching oneself from everything that is not You" (*J.C. AS II, 5,7*). From everything, not only from this thing or that, but from everything, for love is by nature totalitarian, and perfect union demands perfect harmony of wills, desires, and affections.

My God, what profound purification I must undergo in order that You may be able to unite me to Yourself, who art infinite perfection!

VOLUNTARY ATTACHMENTS

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, I place myself in Your presence, begging You to enlighten my soul so that I may see what are the obstacles to my union with You.

MEDITATION

I. "To be perfectly united to God by love and will, the soul must first be cleansed of all appetites of the will, even the smallest" (*J.C. AS I*, 11,3). In the language of St. John of the Cross, *appetites* are disordered inclinations or affections for oneself or creatures, tendencies which are, according to their seriousness, more or less contrary to the divine will. God wishes us to love ourselves, as well as all created things, in the measure assigned by Him, with a view to His pleasure and not to our own selfish satisfaction. These inclinations or appetites always give rise to venial sins, or at least to deliberate imperfections, when one willingly yields to them, even though it be only in matters of slight importance. The will of the soul which freely assents to these failings, slight though they be, is stained by this opposition to the will of God; for this reason a perfect union cannot exist between its will and God's. Moreover, if these imperfections become habitual and the soul does not try to correct them, they form a great obstacle to divine union; and according to St. John of the Cross, "they prevent not only divine union but also advancement in perfection" (*ibid.*). He gives a few examples of these unmortified "habitual imperfections": the habit of talking too much, unrestrained curiosity, attachment to little things—whether persons or objects—such as food and so forth, which the soul refuses to give up. There is also the attachment to one's comfort, to certain sensible satisfactions, little vanities, foolish self-complacency, attachment to one's own opinion or reputation. There is a real mushroom-bed of "appetites" and disordered inclinations from which the soul will not free itself, precisely because it is attached to the meager selfish satisfaction which it finds in these wretched things. It is "attached" to them; that is why it cannot make

the decision to give them up completely. These are precisely the "habitual voluntary appetites" of which St. John of the Cross says, "One single unmortified appetite is sufficient to fetter the soul" (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, when it is a question of imperfect inclinations arising solely from human weakness, of those which do not get beyond the stage of "first movements" in which the will has no part, "either before or after," but rather tries to repress as soon as it notices them, "these do not prevent one from attaining divine union" (*ibid.*, 11,2). It is the will that counts and it must be completely free from the slightest attachment.

2. "The least of these imperfections to which the soul is attached or accustomed is more of a barrier to increasing and advancing in virtue than if one fell every day into several imperfections and isolated venial sins not the result of bad habits" (*ibid.*, 11,4). It is not so much these "isolated falls," due to inadvertence or weakness, which hinder the soul's advancement, as it is the little venial faults and even simple imperfections caused by habitual voluntary attachments which the soul does not take the trouble to uproot. Even though they are slight, they nevertheless constitute bonds which attach it to earth. "For it comes to the same thing whether a bird be held by a slender cord or by a stout one, since, even if it be slender, the bird will be as well held as though it were stout for so long as it breaks it not and flies not away. It is true that the slender one is the easier to break; still, easy though it be, the bird will not fly away if it be not broken. And thus the soul that has attachment to anything, however great its virtue, will not attain to the liberty of divine union" (*ibid.*).

St. John of the Cross has only one thing to say about renouncement and detachment: renounce everything, be detached from everything. If this demand seems unreasonable, let us remember that it is pure evangelical doctrine, that it asks nothing more than what Jesus proposes to us when He says, "Renounce thyself." He asks us to renounce ourselves not only in this or that matter, but in everything that might prevent us from following Him: "For he that will save his life shall lose it, and he that shall lose his life for My sake, shall find it. If thy hand or thy foot scandalize thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee" (*Mt* 16,

25 - 18,8). Jesus teaches us in these words that, for the salvation and sanctification of our soul, we must give up everything that might become a stumbling block to us. It is precisely in this thorough renunciation, in this "losing" of self in everything—even in what is dearest to us and if it were necessary, even to the extent of sacrificing our life—that we find the road to salvation and sanctity.

COLLOQUY

"Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved Thee. Thou wert within me, and I looked outside; I sought Thee, and miserable as I was I longed for creatures, I was detained by the wonderful works of Thy hands. Thou wert with me, but I was not with Thee, though that which kept me far from Thee could exist only in Thee. Thou hast called and cried to me in my deafness. Thou hast shone as lightning, brilliant enough to drive away my blindness. Thou hast scattered Thy perfume; I breathed it, and now I sigh for Thee. I have tasted Thee, and now I hunger and thirst for Thee. Thou hast touched me, and I burn with desire for Thy peace" (St. Augustine).

My God, give me the light necessary to recognize in myself all that keeps me from union with You. Grant me the light to recognize all the attachments which still bind me to creatures, and especially those which are most displeasing to You because they proceed directly from pride and self-love. In the secrecy of my heart You teach me sweetly and gently, You show me clearly that I am still far from conforming my will to Yours, in all things and for all things. I love and desire so many trifles, so many imperfections which You neither love nor desire because they are contrary to Your infinite perfection. Give me strength to wage a constant and courageous battle against them. You know, O Lord, that I have great need of Your help, for I am too attached to myself to be capable of struggling against my disordered affections, of giving up so many little pleasures which feed my egotism. I love myself too much to sacrifice what separates me from You. Then, let me present myself to You, O Lord, as a sick person to a surgeon; plunge the knife into my soul, cut away and destroy all that displeases You and that is not in accord with Your will.

THE ESSENCE OF DETACHMENT

PRESENCE OF GOD - Help me, O Lord, to understand the meaning of that total detachment which is the indispensable condition for perfect union with You.

MEDITATION

1. "The soul has only one will, and if it occupies itself or encumbers itself with anything, it will not remain free, solitary, and pure, as is required for divine transformation" (*AS I*, 11,6). This teaching of St. John of the Cross is in perfect harmony with the fundamental precept of Jesus : "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with all thy strength and with all thy mind" (*Lk* 10,27). If the heart is occupied with inordinate attachments to self or creatures, it is clear that it cannot love God with all its strength, which is divided between God and self, between God and creatures. The precept of charity proposed to all Christians requires the radical renunciation of every attachment which is not conformable to the will of God, or which is not consistent with the love of God. Total detachment is the logical result of Jesus' commandment and the indispensable means of perfectly fulfilling it.

This is why St. John of the Cross insists that if the soul wishes to possess God, it must strip itself of all that is not God.. This is why it must give up every satisfaction or attachment which does not lead to God. This is the meaning of his statements : "In order to enjoy everything [that is, to enjoy God, who is everything], do not seek to enjoy anything [do not seek any inordinate pleasure]. In order to possess everything, do not desire to possess anything. When you stop at anything, you do not reach the *all*" (*AS I*, 13,11.12). When the soul, through some disordered attachment, stops at any creature, it interrupts its progress toward God : the nothingness of the creature prevents it from reaching the *all* of God.

2. The essence of total detachment does not consist in effective material separation from creatures, a thing which,

in its absolute form, would be impossible on this earth. Those who are cloistered, and even hermits, cannot escape certain dealings with their neighbors, nor get along without the necessities of life. Besides, wherever one is he carries with him his own person, his "self"; nevertheless, detachment from self is always the point of departure. It is clear, however, that it can never be a question of complete material detachment, but only of affective, spiritual detachment.

The doctrine of total detachment does not require that everyone abandon all things materially, but that each one, in whatever surroundings he finds himself, know how to keep his heart free from all attachment. "In order to enter into this divine union, all the affections living in the soul must die, whether they are many or few, large or small; and the soul must remain free from them, and as detached as if it were not made for them, nor they for it" (*J.C. AS I, 11,8*).

However, it will be impossible to attain this affective detachment, that is, the death of all inordinate affection for self and creatures if, at least to a certain degree, we do not practice effective or material detachment. If we cannot give up all useless preoccupation with creatures, we shall never reach interior detachment. Likewise, the soul who, by consecrating itself to God, has separated itself materially from people dear to it or has already given up so many things, must not think that all is accomplished. It will always have to be vigilant in order to keep itself free from all attachments. Whether we live in the world or in solitude, whether we possess much or little, we must always strive for the essence of detachment, which is detachment of heart and mind.

This is the teaching of St. Paul : "Let those who have wives be as if they had none...those who buy, as though they possessed not, and those who use this world, as if they used it not" (*1 Cor 7,29-31*).

COLLOQUY

O Lord, why should the idea of total detachment frighten me since it is the means of finally arriving at loving You with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my strength, since it is the path which leads me to union with You,

infinite beauty and charity, Triune God, the beginning and end of all things?

“O blessed detachment from all that is mean and perishable, to what a sublime state will you not raise me? You love me, my God, and for those who love You, Your love is no insignificant thing! Why, then, should I not return Your love with all my strength? It would really be a happy exchange, O my God, giving You my love and receiving Yours. I know indeed that You can do everything, and that I can do only what You enable me to do. But what do I do for You, my Lord and Creator? I make some feeble resolutions which really amount to nothing. But if You wish me to gain everything by this nothing, I shall not be so foolish as not to listen to You!” (*T.J. Way*, 16).

O Lord, with Your help I wish to set to work immediately to refuse no sacrifice, to spare no fiber of my heart in order to detach myself completely from everything that might tie me to earth. These sacrifices and detachments will pain my weak human nature, but You will enable me to see that, even though they make my heart bleed, it is nothing in comparison with the immense treasure which they purchase for me, which is the attainment of You, my God, You who are *All*.

O Lord, do not permit my cowardly heart to tarry amid earthly things; do not permit me to divide my affection, little as it is, between You who are All and creatures who are nothing, between You, my God, and my egoism, which is nothing but sin and misery. Perhaps I think “it is a small favor to have the grace to consecrate myself wholly, without reservation, to You who are the All” (*ibid.*, 8)? Oh! how I long, O Lord, for this supreme favor of total detachment which will give me the liberty of loving You with all my strength!

If You, O Lord, have already granted me the grace to renounce earthly things, to abandon life in the world and to consecrate myself to Your service, what gratitude I owe You! Do not permit me, I beg of You, to be so blind as to believe that because I have left the world, I have nothing else to do. What a mistake it would be, after making such big sacrifices, to attach myself to miserable trifles, which are not worthy of a soul consecrated to You!

THE WAY OF THE "NOTHING"

PRESENCE OF GOD - Show me, O Lord, the narrow path that leads to true life, to union with You.

MEDITATION

1. If you wish to start resolutely on the road of total detachment—the only sure road to divine union—you must “put the axe to the root of the tree”; that is, you must break off and pull up the root of your attachments—that inordinate tendency to enjoy, or to seek satisfaction in yourself, in your pride, or in other creatures. It is true that you were created to enjoy, but *to enjoy God*. However, God is not present to your senses, while your “self” and the things of earth are so close to you. Hence instead of looking beyond yourself and all creation in order to reach God, instead of making use of creatures to help you rise toward the Creator, you pause and seek your happiness in them. You pause with an inordinate affection, and for this grain of satisfaction, you bind your heart to earth and become incapable of union with God, the only source of real happiness. This inordinate desire for pleasure is the thing which turns your desires and affections toward creatures, instead of fixing them on God. This is the root of every attachment, no matter how slight.

In order to mortify completely this inordinate tendency, St. John of the Cross says, “If something is presented to the senses, which is not solely for the honor and glory of God, give it up, and deprive yourself of it for the love of Jesus Christ, who, while on earth, had and desired nothing but to do the will of His Father” (*AS I*, 13,4). The Saint does not mean that you must live without any pleasure or satisfaction; this would be impossible, as man is created for happiness. However, he does tell you to renounce all the pleasures which are displeasing to God and to put all your pleasure and satisfaction solely into accomplishing the will of God, giving Him pleasure and procuring His glory. This was Jesus’ life; He could say, “I do always the things that please Him” (*Jn* 8,29).

2. If your way of acting or speaking satisfies your self-love, but you know that it does not please God, then you must give it up. If a conversation, a friendship, or a comfort pleases you, but you doubt whether it is pleasing to God, you must give it up. If your will urges you to do anything which may be even slightly contrary to the will of God, you must refrain from doing it. In all these cases St. John of the Cross continually says : "nothing, nothing, nothing." Nothing for the satisfaction of pride or selfishness, nothing for the pleasure of the senses, or even of the mind or will—if it is not in perfect agreement with the will of God. There is only one choice : to live for self or to live for God.

If you act for your own selfish satisfaction, even in small matters, you will never be able to live totally for God. If, for example, you are unwilling to combat and overcome your pride which has been offended, and you are impatient or cross with someone, it is evident that you prefer to act for the satisfaction of self rather than to please God, for God loves virtue and not defects. You must always substitute for the tendency to seek your own satisfaction the desire to seek God's satisfaction and pleasure. This is what St. John of the Cross means when he suggests detachment, not as an end in itself, but as a means of becoming more closely united with God, not to leave you in a vacuum, but to direct you quickly to God. The same line of conduct was proposed by Jesus : "Renounce thyself," He says to you. And to what purpose? To walk in His path, to follow Him until you have attained perfect union with Him. The end is union, the road is abnegation or total detachment; we must not forget that it was of this road that Jesus said, "How narrow is the gate and strait is the way that leadeth to life" (*Mt 7,14*).

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, You have created me for Yourself, to love You and to enjoy You, infinite Good, ineffable Beauty; do not permit me to lose sight of this sublime end toward which I must tend; do not permit me to wander among the wretched satisfactions that vain, feeble creatures can offer me.

"O my Lord, what poor use I have made of creatures! Pardon me, O Lord! Henceforth I do not want to use anything unless it is for Your glory and according to Your

holy will, as Your Son Jesus did. O my God, if in the past I have turned aside from You, who are my Beginning, my End, and my supreme Good; if I have turned toward myself and creatures, preferring their will and mine to Yours, I here and now promise to renounce, entirely and forever, the world and myself, and to give myself wholly and forever to You. O my God, I give myself to You as my Beginning; take complete possession of me. May I always abide in You! Be the beginning and end of all my actions. O my God, I give myself to You as my End, my Center, my supreme Good. Draw me to You! Make me tend continually toward You. Be my delight, my glory, my treasure, my all!" (St. John Eudes).

O Lord, teach me to make use of all things with perfect purity of intention, without desiring to draw any selfish satisfaction from them.

"But how harsh it sounds to say that we must take pleasure in nothing, unless we also speak of the consolations and delights that this renunciation brings in its train. Oh, what a great gain it is, even in this life" (*T.J. Way*, 12). Yes, Lord, I understand Your words; I must surrender my own will and many little personal satisfactions; but in exchange I shall know the joy of doing Your will, of giving You pleasure and satisfaction, You who are my God and my All.

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RULES FOR DETACHMENT

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, my blindness and weakness have further need of Your light and strength, in order that I may follow generously the way of "nothing."

MEDITATION

1. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like to a merchant seeking good pearls, who when he had found one pearl of great price, went his way and sold all that he had, and bought it" (*Mt 13,45-46*). The pearl of great price is

union with God; if we wish to acquire it, we must sell *all* that we possess; that is, we must detach ourselves from every inordinate appetite. Hence St. Teresa of Avila, in speaking of detachment, says that "when it is practiced perfectly, it is *everything*" (*Way*, 8). Of course, the spiritual life is not simply detachment, nor does it end there; but detachment practiced with perfection leads effectively to its goal : union with God. God alone can bring us to this union, but He will not do so unless, like the merchant in the Gospel, we *sell* everything, that is, unless we renounce even the smallest attachment to self or to creatures.

These are the golden rules proposed by St. John of the Cross for total detachment : The soul must always be inclined "not to the easiest thing, but to the hardest; not to the tastiest, but to the most insipid; not to things that give the greatest pleasure, but to those that give the least; not to restful things, but to painful ones; not to consolation, but to desolation; not to more, but to less; not to the highest and dearest, but to the lowest and most despised; not to the desire for something, but to having no desires" (*AS I*, 13,6). In this way we shall gradually become accustomed to subduing this inordinate desire for pleasure, which is at the base of all attachments. It is like going against a current; hence it is a hard, tiring task which can be accomplished only by strength of will. We must oppose the inclinations of nature and make ourselves do what is repugnant to nature. This is, however, a sweet task for a soul in love with God; it knows that everything it refuses to self is given to God and that, when it has reached the point of renouncing self in everything—of *selling* everything—God Himself will give it the precious pearl of divine union.

2. "The soul must *embrace* these acts wholeheartedly and strive to subject its will thereto. For if it undertakes them wholeheartedly, in a short time it will find great delight and consolation in them, working with *order* and *discretion* (*ibid.*, 13,7). St. John of the Cross asks two things of the soul that desires to enter upon the way of the "nothing." First of all, he demands decision and generosity; for anyone who has not the courage to renounce himself in everything will never reach total detachment and union with God. At the same time, he also demands "order and discretion." The Saint does not expect us always and in everything to choose what

is most difficult, painful, or tiring—which would be impossible, both because of the circumstances in which we live and because of our physical constitution, which always needs a certain amount of relaxation—but he does ask that we be disposed to this choice, that is, we must cultivate a desire for it. He wants us to develop within ourselves the inclination and habit of doing what is opposed to our own tendencies, so that when the opportunity occurs, we can do so without being hindered by our natural repugnance. At the beginning of the spiritual life it is especially necessary to proceed with discretion and to act according to the advice of the confessor and superior, particularly with regard to corporal mortification. It is most important that we make a firm decision to bend our will by this practice of renunciation, that we never give up on account of cowardice, and that, when we have to allow ourselves a little relaxation, because of expediency or duty, we do so with detachment, that is, with a will detached from the pleasure we may find in it.

It is clear that we shall never attain the goal if we do not gain mastery over our attachments and resolve, once and for all, to put them all to death. It means real death to selfish and worldly satisfactions, but this death will give birth to life. Jesus said, “unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.... He that hateth his life in this world, keepeth it unto life eternal” (*Jn 12,24.25*).

COLLOQUY

O Lord, in the light of Your teachings even the hard and bitter way of total detachment becomes desirable, and everything invites me to undertake it courageously. You know, however, that I am weak and that my nature rebels at everything that is difficult, wearisome, or disagreeable; You know that it is always inclined to the things that require the least effort, to all that is easy, agreeable, and consoling. But Your love is all powerful, O Lord, and You, who through love made me out of nothing, can once again by the same love change my tastes, my inclinations. I well know that nothing but Your love can inspire me to enter upon this road and give me the courage to undertake this fundamental reform of myself. Your love alone, O Lord, is the magnet

which draws me toward total renunciation. Your love alone will attract me and will be my reward. O God, deign to draw me ever more powerfully, because my weakness tends to stop me, to hold me back; this is exactly what I fear.

"Why, O Lord, should I be preoccupied with my fears and lose courage in the face of my weakness? You give me to understand that I must fortify myself in humility, and convince myself that I can do very little alone, and that without your help I am nothing. I shall put all my confidence in your mercy, and shall distrust my own strength, convinced that my weakness is caused by my self-reliance. You teach me not to be astonished at my struggle, for when a soul wishes to give itself over to mortification, it encounters difficulties on all sides. Does it wish to give up its ease? What a hardship! To scorn a point of honor? What a torture! To endure harsh words? Intolerable suffering! In short, it becomes filled with extreme sadness, but as soon as it is resolved to die to the world, every anguish is at an end" (*T.J. Con.*, 3).

You died for me, O Lord. For love of You make me die to myself, to my desires, to my satisfactions. I shall die to myself in order to live for You, to attain to union with You.

THE NIGHT OF THE SENSES

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, strengthen my desire for union with You, so that I may have the courage to face, for love of You, the total purification of my senses.

MEDITATION

1. "In order to attain to divine union with God, the soul must pass through the dark night of mortification of the appetites and the denial of pleasure in all things" (*J.C. AS I*, 4,1). St. John of the Cross calls the total mortification of the senses the "dark night," because the soul that renounces every irregular attachment to creatures and

to the pleasure it might find in them, remains "unoccupied and in darkness" (*ibid.*, 3,1) as far as the senses are concerned.

It is to help us enter this night, through which we must pass in order to attain to union with God, that the Saint tells us to mortify our inordinate tendencies toward sensible satisfactions.

However, it is evident that even if we sincerely wish to mortify our senses, we cannot always avoid seeing agreeable things, listening to interesting news, eating appetizing food, and so forth. Sometimes sensible satisfactions will be imposed on us by the necessities of life, by the duties of our state, or even by our superiors. It is absolutely necessary, even in these cases, that our soul remain wholly free from all attachment to creatures and to sensible satisfactions. It will suffice to desire not to have this pleasure, and promptly to "mortify our senses, voiding them of such pleasure," depriving them of everything, "as though they were in darkness" (cf. *ibid.*, 13,4).

In other words, we should not stop at the selfish enjoyment of what pleases our senses, but try to raise our heart at once to God by offering Him the enjoyment we feel and which He permits for the renewal of our strength, so that we may be able to take up again with greater generosity the practice of mortification. In this way even natural joys will help to bring us to God and to increase our love. This is what St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus called "to rejoice for Love."

This is the pure doctrine of St. Paul, who said, "Rejoice in the Lord always"; and again, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all to the glory of God" (*Phil* 4,4 — *1 Cor* 10,31). If, on the contrary, we stop at the enjoyment of sensible things, we shall never be able to enter the night of the senses.

2. "The soul ordinarily enters this night of the senses in two ways: the one is active, the other passive. The active way consists in that which the soul can do, and does of itself, in order to enter therein. The passive way is that wherein the soul does nothing, and God works in it, and it remains, as it were, patient" (J.C. *AS I*, 13,1). The active way includes everything that we can do on our own initiative to rid ourselves of every affection for and attachment to creatures. For example, it is in our power to apply

ourselves to the practice of poverty, corporal mortification, penance, and chastity—all of which are virtues that detach the soul from the goods of earth and the satisfaction of the senses. If we want to do all that we can to enter the night, we must practice these virtues generously, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, our divine model, who wished to give us an example in everything.

But no matter how much we do, our own practices will never be sufficient to destroy completely all the roots of attachments. If we examine ourselves carefully, we shall see that, even in the practice of voluntary mortification, a little complacency may enter in because of what we have chosen, which is to our liking and according to our wishes. In order that our purification be complete, the work of God must intervene, that work which will bring us passively into the night of the senses. He does this by means of trials and contradictions both exterior and interior. It is a time of submission rather than of action; we must be as a patient in the hands of the surgeon; we must accept with humility and docility all that God permits, without trying either to escape the trial or to lessen or change it.

In the *Ascent of Mt. Carmel* St. John of the Cross gives the picture of a soul which, "kindled in love with yearnings, sings of the happy fortune which befell it to pass through the dark night." In fact, to be brought into the passive night is one of the greatest graces the soul can receive, because then God himself is preparing and disposing it for divine union. If we wish to obtain this grace, we must do everything we can to enter the active night, that is, we must practice renunciation and total detachment.

COLLOQUY

O Lord, deign to come to me with Your grace and inflame me with Your love, that I may be able to plunge enthusiastically into the dark night which is to prepare me for union with You. Night does not please my nature which loves the light, the sun, the full radiant daylight. But with Your help, and for love of You, why should I not be willing to deprive my senses of all satisfactions and to annihilate them in the night, when all it amounts to is the giving up of a few worthless trifles in order to have the enjoyment of You,

in whom are all light, all joy, all happiness? Can I not then, O Lord, for love of You, bear a little darkness, cold, want, or poverty? Alas! How often have I been so blind as to prefer the wisp of immediate pleasure which creatures give me and which vanishes as quickly as darkness before the sun, to the less obvious but much more profound, true, and lasting satisfaction which is found in You by one who is firmly determined to put all his pleasure in You alone!

“O Lord, Father most merciful, receive, I beg You, Your prodigal child! I have suffered enough; I have long enough been the slave of Your enemies, which You put beneath Your feet; I have been long enough the plaything of false flatterers. I know that I must turn to You. When I knock at Your door, let me find it open; show me the way to come to You. All I know is that I must despise unstable and temporary goods to seek those that are stable and eternal.

“O Lord, keep far from the heart of Your servant the thought that any kind of joy will bring happiness! On the contrary, there is a joy which is not granted to the wicked, but to those who honor You unselfishly. You are their joy. All happiness consists in this : to rejoice in You, because of You and through You; there is no other. He who believes that any other happiness exists is pursuing a strange and false joy ” (St. Augustine).

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THE DIVINE SEED

SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, I am here before You. Grant that my heart may be the good ground, ready to receive Your divine word.

MEDITATION

1. Today Jesus, the divine Sower, comes to scatter the good seed in His vineyard the Church. He wishes to prepare our souls for a new blossoming of grace and virtue.

"The seed is the word of God." Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, eternal Utterance of the Father, came to sow this word in the hearts of men; it is, as it were, a reflection of Himself. The divine word is not a sound which strikes the air and disappears rapidly like the word of men; it is a supernatural light which reveals the true value of things; it is grace, the source of power and strength to help us live according to the light of God. Thus it is a seed of supernatural life, of sanctity, of eternal life. This seed is never sterile in itself; it always has a vital, powerful strength, capable of producing not only some fruits of Christian life, but abundant fruits of sanctity. This seed is not entrusted to an inexperienced husbandman who, because of his ignorance, might ruin the finest sowing. It is Jesus Himself, the Son of God, who is the Sower.

Then why does the seed not always bring forth the desired fruit? Because very often the ground which receives it does not have the requisite qualities. God never stops sowing the seed in the hearts of men; He invites them, He calls them continually by His light and His appeals; He never ceases giving His grace by means of the Sacraments; but all this is vain and fruitless unless man offers God a good ground, that is, a heart, well prepared and disposed. God wills our salvation and sanctification, but He never forces us; He respects our liberty.

2. Today's Gospel (*Lk 8,4-15*) mentions four categories of people who receive the seed of the divine word in different ways. It compares them to the hard ground, to the stony soil, to the earth choked with thorns, and lastly, to the good fertile field.

The hard ground : souls that are frivolous, dissipated, open to all distractions, rumors, and curiosity; admitting all kinds of creatures and earthly affections. The word of God hardly reaches their heart when the enemy, having free access, carries it off, thus preventing it from taking root.

The stony ground : superficial souls with only a shallow layer of good earth, which will be rapidly blown away, along with the good seed, by the winds of passion. These souls easily grow enthusiastic, but do not persevere and "in time of temptation fall away." They are unstable, because they have not the courage to embrace renunciation and to make the sacrifices which are necessary if one wishes to remain

faithful to the word of God and to put it into practice in all circumstances. Their fervor is a straw fire which dies down and goes out in the face of the slightest difficulty.

The ground covered with thorns : souls that are preoccupied with worldly things, pleasures, material interests and affairs. The seed takes root, but the thorns soon choke it by depriving it of air and light. Excessive solicitude for temporal things eventually stifles the rights of the spirit.

Lastly, *the good ground* is compared by Jesus to those " who, with a good and upright heart, hearing the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit in patience." The good and upright heart is the one which always gives first place to God, which seeks before everything else the kingdom of God and His justice. The seed of the divine word will bear abundant fruit in proportion to the good dispositions it finds in us : recollection, a serious and profound interior life, detachment, sincere seeking for the things of God above and beyond all earthly things, and finally, perseverance, without which the word of God cannot bear its fruit in us.

COLLOQUY

O Jesus, divine Sower, rightly do You complain of the arid, sterile ground of my poor heart! What an abundant sowing of holy inspirations, interior lights, and grace You have cast into my heart! How many times You have invited me to come to You by special appeals, and how many times have I stopped, after following You for a short time! O Lord, if only I could understand the fundamental reason for my spiritual sterility, my instability and inconstancy in good! Will Your light fail me? No, for You are continually instructing and admonishing my soul in a thousand ways. Oh! if so many souls living in error and not knowing You had received but a hundredth part of the light which You have given me so profusely, how much fruit would they not have drawn from it!

Will Your grace fail me? Is not Your grace my strength? O Lord, I see that neither Your light nor Your strength will fail me; what I lack is the perseverance which can faithfully withstand temptations, difficulties, and darkness; which can face courageously the sacrifices and austerity of the Christian life. It is easy to make sacrifices and to renounce oneself for a

day, but it is hard to keep on doing it always, every day of our life. Is this not the reason that You said, O Lord, that the good heart brings forth fruit "in patience"?

O Jesus, who endured with invincible patience Your most sorrowful Passion and death, give me the patience I need to keep up the struggle against my passions and my self-love, patience to embrace with perseverance all the sacrifices required by total detachment, to be able to live without personal satisfactions and pleasures, to do everything that is repugnant to me, that hurts me, that crosses me and is displeasing to my self-love.

O Lord, You know that I desire total purification because I long for union with You; but You cannot purify me entirely if I cannot accept patiently Your work : the trials, humiliations and detachments that You prepare for me. O Jesus, divine Sufferer, give me Your patience; make me, like Yourself, humble and patient.

EVANGELICAL POVERTY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, for my sake You embraced a life of extreme poverty; make me realize the great value of this virtue.

MEDITATION

1. One day a scribe approached Jesus and said to Him, "Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou shalt go." Jesus answered him, "The foxes have their holes, and the birds of the air have their nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (*Mt 8,19.20*).

To one who is willing to follow Him, Jesus immediately presents a picture of His life, a life that is extremely poor and without the smallest comfort. Anyone who has not the courage to share, at least to a certain degree, His earthly poverty will have no part in His eternal wealth. No one can

serve two masters at the same time : God and riches. " You cannot serve God and mammon " (*Mt* 6,24). If you are attached to wealth, ease and material comfort, in vain will you try to give your whole heart to God; it will always be the slave of worldly goods. That is why the rich young man, after asking what he should do to obtain eternal life, went away sadly when Jesus answered, " Go, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor," for " he had great possessions." He was a good young man; from his youth he had kept the commandments and he sincerely longed for eternal life, so much so that, " Jesus looking on him, loved him " (*Mk* 10,21.22). And yet, attachment to his possessions kept him from following Jesus. This is the story of many souls who, after having accomplished much in the service of God, stop and turn back because they lack the courage to detach themselves from the goods of earth. In commenting on this fact and speaking to His disciples, Jesus said, " How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God " (*ibid.* 10,24.25). Reflect that in these words Jesus was speaking not only of the man who is " rich " because he has great possessions, but more especially of the one who is " rich " because he is attached to what he possesses.

2. Riches do not in themselves constitute an obstacle to eternal salvation and sanctity, but they become an obstacle when a person makes himself their slave. We do not have to own very much in order to be the slave of worldly goods; it is necessary only to possess something with " attachment," even if the object in question is of little or no value. The Apostles were poor and possessed very little; yet when Jesus invited them to follow Him, He required them to give up even that little. The soul is freed from slavery to earthly goods not so much by material poverty as by " poverty of spirit," that is, poverty of affections, of attachments, however slight.

St. John of the Cross tells us that this poverty alone constitutes the " night of the soul," that is, permits the soul to enter the night of the senses : " for we are not treating here of the lack of things, since this implies no detachment on the part of the soul if it has a desire for them; but we are treating of detachment from them with respect to taste and desire, for it is this that leaves the soul free and void of them, although it

may have them" (*AS I*, 3,4). For this reason the Saint teaches that we should "not seek the best of temporal things, but the worst"; yet this material poverty which is good, and even necessary to a certain degree, is not sufficient. He at once adds that we must "desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to everything that is in the world, for Christ's sake" (*ibid.*, 13,6). This is the spiritual poverty which, by freeing the soul from all desire and affection for worldly goods, completes and gives value to material poverty. In fact, if after renouncing the superfluous, the comforts and the conveniences of life, we still remain attached to them by affection, our material renunciation will amount to very little. "For it is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them, for it is these that dwell within it" (*ibid.*, 3,4).

COLLOQUY

"O gentle Lord Jesus Christ, most rich in love, experience has taught me that there is nothing in life more wearisome than to burn with earthly desires, for the love of riches is an insatiable hunger which so tortures the soul by the ardor of desire that it does not find solace even when it obtains what it covets. The acquisition of wealth causes great fatigue; the possession of it brings great fear; its loss occasions great sorrow.

"One who loves riches cannot love You, O Lord, but perishes with the things that are perishable, and he who relies on them with affection, vanishes with them in sadness. He who finds them, loses his peace; when he lies awake at night, he tries to think of ways to add to them; if he sleeps, he dreams of thieves; during the day he is anxious and troubled; at night his fears increase, and thus he is always miserable" (Ven. Raymond Jourdain).

How unfortunate I should be, O Lord, if the love of worldly things prevented me from following you closely! Oh! how little does my life resemble Yours! What a difference in our tastes and desires! You, the King of heaven and earth, could have surrounded Yourself with grandeur, since all riches were created by You. You could have had many servants to carry out Your orders, yet You wanted none of these; instead You chose, for the first place of Your stay on

earth, a stable, and for the last, a hard cross. And I, who am but dust and ashes, with no right to possess anything, because I have nothing of myself and receive everything from Your generosity, would I claim a life of comfort, filled with so many desires for material well-being?

O Lord, do not permit the love of temporal goods to be an obstacle, to become a wall between You and me. Union of love demands resemblance; love either finds two beings similar or makes them so. I love You, O Lord, but my love is still weak; strengthen it, so that it may be able to destroy every attachment which hinders me from following You closely and becoming like You.

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VOLUNTARY POVERTY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, deign to show me the treasures concealed in voluntary poverty and the duties which proceed from it.

MEDITATION

1. St. Thomas teaches that in order to arrive at the perfection of charity it is necessary for the heart to be completely detached from the things of the world, that it may concentrate all its affections on God. "He who possesses temporal goods, by the very fact that he possesses them, is inclined to love them. Consequently, the fundamental basis for the acquisition of perfect charity is voluntary poverty, that is, the free renunciation of all one's possessions, as the Master said in St. Matthew : 'If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give it to the poor, and come, follow Me!'" (II^a II^{ae}, q.186, a.3).

This is particularly realized in the religious life by the vow of poverty. However, even those who are living a life of consecration to God in the world may embrace voluntary poverty as a means of tending to perfection. The Church makes it a matter of obligation for all who belong to Secular Institutes precisely because the state of perfection requires a

serious obligation of poverty. The members of these Institutes "must make a vow or a promise of poverty, by which they relinquish the free use of their material goods" (Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*). The essence of voluntary poverty consists in this renunciation of the *free and independent use* of temporal goods. In fact, only one who renounces the free use of temporal goods can, according to St. Thomas, "live without possessing anything of his own." By making the vow of poverty, man attains the freedom necessary to follow Jesus in the way of perfection.

2. If you have made a vow of voluntary poverty, you know that you have given up the freedom to use temporal goods as you wish. Even if the Rule of your Institute permits you to have certain things, you cannot use them as an owner; the vow of poverty has taken this power away from you. You cannot dispose of anything on your own authority, not even what is necessary for life, but you must govern yourself in all things according to the norms of your Constitutions and must depend on your superiors.

The Rules of the various Orders and Religious or Secular Institutes are not equally strict concerning the use of temporal goods. Some more austere Rules forbid the free use of objects, even if they are of very little value; others, less rigorous, allow a greater liberty. But if you wish to practice your vow to perfection, adopt the rule of *never using or disposing of anything with a spirit of ownership*. The more you live as if you really owned nothing—even a book, or a piece of clothing, or a bit of bread—the more you will become like Jesus and be free to follow Him as one of His intimate friends.

Another consequence of the vow or promise of voluntary poverty is the spontaneous acceptance for the love of God of living conditions like those of the really poor. The poor person is obliged to do without comforts, to economize, to work for his living. You, therefore, should readily and willingly renounce what is superfluous or merely convenient; you should not allow anything to be wasted; and, above all, you should subject yourself to a life of hard work. This is to be done, not in a spirit of avarice, nor in view of gain, but purely as an exercise of virtue.

If some day it happens that you lack something necessary, thank Our Lord, who thus offers you a choice occasion for practicing real poverty.

COLLOQUY

O Lord, what great treasures are contained in holy poverty. "Poverty is a good which contains within itself all the good things in the world. It is a great domain—I mean that he who cares nothing for the good things of the world has dominion over them all. What do kings and lords matter to me if I have no desire to possess their money or to please them, especially if by so doing, I should cause the least displeasure to You, my God? And what do their honors mean to me if I have realized that the chief honor of a poor man consists in his being truly poor? True poverty, which is embraced for love of You, O Lord, brings with it a great dignity; it impresses everyone because its only care is to be pleasing to You" (*T.J. Way*, 2).

I praise You, O Lord, because You have given me the grace to embrace holy poverty, which frees me from all preoccupation with material things and delivers me from earthly slavery! Thus I, miserable creature that I am, have the great honor of serving You alone, the King of heaven and earth.

O Lord, grant me the favor of preserving the sweet bonds of holy poverty which draw me away from the world to bind me to You. Grant that, in conformity with the obligations undertaken by my profession, poverty may really be "the arms inscribed on my banner; grant that I may observe it in all things and everywhere : in my dwelling, my dress, my words, and much more in my thoughts" (*ibid.*). Yes, even in my thoughts, so that my desires will not, if only for a single moment, bring me back to the things I have given up for love of You.

I understand and confess, O my God, that every time I have complained about some privation or hardship, every time that I have been demanding or have desired a life of greater ease, I have withdrawn from the ideal and the effective practice of voluntary poverty. In the same way, I have also withdrawn from You and have returned to the slavery of material things. How foolish, O Lord, to divide my heart between You, who are All, and the nothingness of earthly creatures!

THE SPIRIT OF POVERTY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, I contemplate You on the mountain, instructing the crowds on the spirit of poverty. I, too, approach You, eager to hear Your words.

MEDITATION

i. "Opening His mouth, He taught them, saying : Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt 5,2,3*).

Thus begins the Sermon on the Mount; then Jesus explained several times how this poverty of spirit is to be understood. "Lay not up to yourselves treasures on earth : where the rust and moth consume, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven : where neither the rust nor moth doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also" (*ibid., 6,19-21*).

Consider that Jesus addressed these words not only to the Apostles, but also to His disciples and the crowds that followed Him, proving that although everyone is not called to make the vow of poverty—family life does not permit this—the practice of the "spirit of poverty" is incumbent upon all, namely, that affective detachment from the goods of earth which enables one to use these goods with moderation and detachment. Those who, like fathers and mothers of families, have the obligation to administer goods and to increase them by honest work, must do so rightly, taking care that these material affairs do not make them neglect their own spiritual good and their duties to God. "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul" (*ibid., 16,26*)? The spirit of poverty also demands that they who have few possessions and live in material want accept their condition serenely and patiently, seeing in it an invitation to imitate Jesus' life of poverty more closely.

Consider furthermore that when the divine Master said, "Sell what thou hast and give it to the poor," He joined

the exercice of charity to that of poverty. If we detach our hearts from earthly goods, the spirit of poverty will make us generous toward the needy.

2. "Be not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat, nor...what you shall put on. Is not the life more than the meat : and the body more than the raiment? Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them.... And for raiment, why are you solicitous? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.... And if the grass of the field, which is today, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, God doth so clothe : how much more you, O ye of little faith?" (*Mt 6,25-30*). Jesus does not forbid our providing for the morrow; on the contrary, He says through His Apostle, "If any man will not work, neither let him eat" (*2 Thes 3,10*). But Jesus does not wish the solicitude which would engulf us entirely in temporal affairs; this would indicate not only an excessive attachment to earthly things, but also a lack of confidence in divine Providence. The divine Master tells us that, if God has given us the more essential things — our life and our body — He will also give us the less essential things, that is, food and clothing, which are the means of preserving our life and our body.

The spirit of poverty will not be lasting and profound unless it is based on confidence in divine Providence. It is only when we trust in God and in His word, which will never fail, that we shall have the courage to put aside all excessive preoccupation with temporal affairs. Then the words of Jesus will be accomplished in us : "Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you" (*Mt 6,33*).

In every state of life and in the practice of every profession, the principal care of the Christian must be to serve God and to tend toward Him; everything else is secondary. St. Teresa of Jesus said to her daughters, "You have given up a regular income; give up worry about food as well, or you will lose everything.... Let us not fail God, and let us have no fear that He will fail us" (*Way, 2*).

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, the spirit of poverty is such a great treasure! When we possess it, we rely not on human means, but we place all our trust in Your divine Providence. I beg You to give me a great love for this precious treasure. It is so noble that it has You, O sovereign God," for its servant (cf. St. Francis).

O Lord, cure me of my excessive solicitude for the necessities of life. In the silence of my heart I seem to hear Your gentle reproach : "For after all these things do the heathens seek. For your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things ." (*Mt 6,32*).

Yes, Lord, You know my needs, and since You are no stranger to me, but a Father, You are bound to provide for all my wants. O Lord, strengthen my faith in Your word. May my confidence equal that of St. Francis of Assisi, who was so certain of You that he did not hesitate to give his father not only his money, but even his clothes and to go about the world deprived of everything, happier and more secure in his poverty than the rich in their wealth. O blessed poverty! You do not abandon, O Lord, him who trusts in You; You are kind and generous to him who has given up everything for love of You, and who trusts completely in your heavenly Providence.

O Jesus, if I cannot actually leave all material goods and concerns, grant that I may at least renounce all exaggerated solicitude for them and preoccupation with them. May my only concern be to love and serve You with all my strength, to seek friendship, intimacy, and union with You.

One day You said to St. Catherine of Siena, "Think of Me and I will think of you." Deign to repeat these words to me and fix them in my mind and heart, so that no care for material things will be able to distract me from You.

CHASTITY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, lover of virgins, make me understand the beauty of perfect chastity.

MEDITATION

1. "Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? But if any man violate the temple of God, him shall God destroy. For the temple of God is holy, which you are" (*1 Cor 3,16.17*).

The grace of Baptism consecrates the body of a Christian, makes it the temple of the living God and a member of Christ. Hence every Christian has the duty of respecting his body, a duty which demands the virtue of chastity according to his state in life. Sins of impurity profane the body, the temple of God, and make the members of Christ "the members of a harlot" (*ibid. 6,15*).

Outside of marriage, absolute continence is demanded of everyone without distinction. Conjugal chastity limits marital pleasure to the ends of marriage itself. Even as poverty frees us from slavery to earthly goods and regulates their use, so chastity frees us from the slavery of our senses and moderates their use. Hence the virtue of chastity is not restricted to those who are consecrated to God, but is a serious obligation for every Christian. Chastity of the body is not enough; we must also practice chastity of thought, desire, and heart, for Jesus has said, "The things that come forth from the heart...defile a man. From the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries" (*Mt 15,18.19*). Chastity of body, therefore, calls for chastity of heart. Jesus strongly insists on this interior purity. "The light of thy body is thy eye. If thy eye be single, thy whole body shall be lightsome. But if thy eye be evil, thy whole body shall be darksome" (*ibid. 6,22.23*).

2. "He that is without a wife, is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God.... The virgin thinketh of the things of the Lord, that she may be

holy both in body and in spirit" (*1 Cor 7,32.34*). Perfect chastity, chosen as a state of life and embraced by a vow, frees one from the cares and solicitude which are inevitable in married life and which divide the heart between God and human affections.

Jesus said that there are some who have renounced having a family "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt 19,12*). The essential value of the vow of chastity consists precisely in this renunciation which a person voluntarily imposes on himself in order to give himself wholly to God—body and soul, heart and mind—all must be consecrated to Him and reserved for Him alone.

One who embraces the married state becomes a collaborator with God in the transmission of life to others; one who consecrates himself to God by a vow of chastity becomes His collaborator in the transmission of the life of grace to others. The person who is consecrated to God sacrifices material fecundity for a far superior, spiritual fecundity, natural paternity or maternity for supernatural paternity or maternity. St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus described her vocation to Carmel thus: "To be Thy spouse, O my Jesus...and by my union with Thee to be the mother of souls" (*St*, 13).

Such is the fruitfulness of virgins, the "chaste generation" whom Jesus calls to the total renunciation of the licit joys of marriage in order to make them intimate collaborators in His work of redeeming and sanctifying the world. The vow of chastity does not shut souls up in a sterile life, but by binding them wholly to God, it opens up to them the sublime fertility of the apostolate. "Perpetual virginity is a pure host offered to God, a holy victim; it is a flower which gives honor and joy to the Church, and it is a great source of power" (Pope Pius XII, *Allocution*, September 1951).

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, all my hope is based on Your great mercy. Give me what You command, and command what You will. You command that we be continent. Someone has said that no one can be continent unless God grants it, but it is true wisdom to know from whom this gift comes. Continence brings us recollection and the restoration of that unity which we have lost in giving ourselves to too many things. He

loves You less who loves, together with You, anything which he does not love for You. O love, ever burning and never extinguished, O charity, O my God, inflame me! You command me to be continent; give me what You command and command what You will" (St. Augustine).

O Jesus, make me understand that there is no greater honor for man than the one You do him when You deliver him from the "tribulation of the flesh" (*i Cor 7,28*) and invite him to give himself entirely to You in the bond of perfect chastity. O holy bond which unites to God, who is infinite purity, a base creature, and raises him to the level of sharing in the immaculate splendor of divine virginity! O holy bond, which establishes an indissoluble union between God and man, which presents souls "as pure virgins to the one Man, Christ" (cf. *2 Cor 11,2*), to be espoused to Him in faith and love!

O Jesus, Spouse of virgin souls, You who have said, "All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given" (*Mt 19,11*), give me a better understanding of the great value of perfect chastity. What more sublime gift could I ask for and receive from You?

O Jesus, You who by calling me to perfect chastity have freed me from the cares of a family and from earthly affections, grant that I may not become egotistical, but may share in the most direct and intense way Your solicitude and Your life of immolation and sacrifice for the salvation of men and the glory of the Father. You want me to be a virgin that I may collaborate more intimately with You in the sublime work of redemption; and in the measure in which I give myself fully and generously to You, You will give me the gift of spiritual fecundity. O Jesus, tighten the bonds of my union with You, for this union will enable me to bring forth many souls to Your love and grace!

MODESTY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, Spouse of Virgins, teach me how a soul consecrated to You should live.

MEDITATION

1. Perfect chastity presupposes an absolute dominion of spirit over matter. However, there is in us a disordered tendency toward sensible pleasure which is opposed to this dominion; even souls consecrated to God bear the treasure of chastity *in earthen vessels* (*2 Cor 4,1*), in the fragile vessel of flesh, which is attracted by satisfactions of the senses. The vow of chastity does not remove these tendencies; consequently, it does not dispense us from continual vigilance. "One who makes a vow to God of perfect chastity must struggle by prayer and penance, in order to preserve its integrity" (Pope Pius XII)—by prayer because no one can be chaste unless God grants it to him, by penance and mortification because the body must be subject to the spirit.

It is modesty which *moderates* and regulates all our actions, both interior and exterior, according to our vocation. St. Paul recommends this virtue to all Christians : "Let your modesty be known to all men" (*Phil 4,5*). Souls consecrated to God are obliged to observe modesty more strictly, because they are called by their state in life to preserve the treasure of absolute chastity intact; therefore, they need to practice *mortification* of the senses more assiduously and delicately. They must be like men who, possessing material treasures of great value, take all necessary measures and precautions to protect them from thieves. "Brethren, be sober and watch," says St. Peter (*1 Pt 5,8*), for the enemy is always lying in wait.

The vow of chastity, by consecrating the body to God, also consecrates the senses. For this reason they must be freed from the base things of earth in order to be wholly employed in the service of God.

2. The more a soul aspires to the total gift of self and intimate union with God, the more its conduct must be

imbued with perfect modesty—modesty of countenance, gait, gesture, and manner. “Be modest in every action or conversation” (*M*, 4), St. Teresa of Avila instructs her daughters. St. Teresa Margaret of the Heart of Jesus “kept such a perfect restraint and guard over her faculties and senses that she refused herself every glance and every word which did not in some way have reference to God” (*T.M. Sp*). The golden rule of St. John of the Cross was *to use the senses solely for the service and glory of God and to raise the heart to Him* (cf. *AS I*, 13,4), which, in practice, means using them only as they are required for the accomplishment of one’s duties or for an honorable and just purpose; “with this exception all must be left free for God” (*SM II*, 38). Therefore the soul must carefully guard its sight and hearing from vain curiosity, images, and news; for these encumber it uselessly and give entrance to impressions which are not entirely pure and holy.

One who without necessity desires to see, hear, and taste everything is like a man who leaves the door of his house open to any intruder. The senses are the doors of the soul; we must guard them and not endanger the treasure of chastity.

Modesty, however, is not only a weapon of defense for chastity; it is the bulwark of the interior life. Only a soul who knows how to guard the senses is capable of recollecting itself interiorly in order to live in intimacy with God. By detaching the senses from earthly things, modesty concentrates and fixes them on God. “We put to death the curiosity of our eyes when, turning them away from all useless things, we fix them on ourselves, on the movements of our heart, and on the heart of Jesus” (*T.M. Sp*). This is the positive value of modesty. Only one who loves God very much can impose such a discipline on himself.

COLLOQUY

“If I could only love You more ardently, O my God, my Help, my Defense, my sweet Hope! Let me embrace You, O Sovereign Good, without whom nothing good exists for me; let me find all my delight in You, the source of perfection, without whom nothing is perfect!

"Open my ears to Your words, more penetrating than a two-edged sword, that I may hear Your voice. So illumine my eyes, O incomparable light, that they will never again turn toward earthly vanities, but may seek You alone, O invisible Good! Draw me, O sweetest perfume of my life, so that I may run in the fragrance of Your ointments! Purify my sense of taste, that I may know and savor Your great sweetness, O Lord, that sweetness which You have reserved for those who are filled with Your holy love. By Your sweetness, dissipate and destroy my concupiscence, so that I may desire nothing but You, and not be seduced and deceived by worldly vanities, so as to regard what is bitter as sweet and what is sweet as bitter, darkness as light and light as darkness. Let me escape the snares set by the enemy of our souls, who fills the world with his deceits.

"O my sweet Lord, the world is filled with the snares of concupiscence. Who can avoid them all? Only he from whom You remove the pride of life, the concupiscence of the flesh, irreverence, and obstinacy of soul. Oh! how happy is the soul to whom You give this grace, for he will pass unharmed through the midst of so many enemies!" (St. Augustine).

O my sweet Lord, I renew with all my heart the consecration of my senses to You. I consecrate to You my eyes, that they may seek only Your Face and the things that lead to You; I consecrate to You my tongue, that it may be worthy to sing Your praises and may never utter a word displeasing to You; I consecrate to You my ears, that they may listen to Your voice alone and hear only what is necessary for Your service; I consecrate to You my sense of smell, of taste, of touch, that they may take delight in You alone, O Spouse of virgins! I repeat with St. Agnes, "In loving You, O Christ, I am chaste; in touching You, I am pure; in possessing You, I am a virgin!" (RB).

CHASTITY OF HEART

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, show me how pure my heart must be if I am to be admitted to intimacy with You.

MEDITATION

1. The heart of a person consecrated to God should be "a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up" (*Ct* 4,12), because it cannot admit any other affection than one which has God for its object or one which refers to Him. Of course this does not exclude the love of neighbor in general, nor that which one owes to one's own family, but it does exclude all purely natural love. In other words, the affections of a soul consecrated to God must be wholly supernaturalized; that is, it must love creatures in reference to God, because they are His and belong to Him. When instead, it allows itself to be guided in its affections by human motives, such as congeniality, sympathy, or self-interest, it is not for God that it loves these creatures, but for itself, for the satisfaction it finds in them; its love is not supernatural, but human. These human affections ravage a heart that has been consecrated to God, just as the little foxes, spoken of in the Canticle, ravage the vines.

After having broken, for the love of God, our sacred family ties, after having renounced the right to have families of our own, is it not the height of folly to let our heart be chained by creatures who have no claim to it, or by affections which are not holy? We must reply to their invitations with the fortitude of St. Agnes : "God has put a sign on my face, that I may admit no other lover. It is to Him alone that I plight my troth" (*RB*).

"It is sad," says St. John of the Cross, "to see certain souls...that are laden with wealth...and spiritual exercises...and yet, because they have not the resolution to break with some whim or attachment or affection...they never make progress or reach the port of perfection....God has granted them to break other and stouter cords of affection, but they have not shaken off some childish thing, and fail to attain to so great a blessing" (*AS I*, 11,4.5).

2. God is jealous of a heart which has been consecrated to Him and He will not admit it to intimacy with Himself as long as He finds it occupied with some affection which prevents it from concentrating on Him all the love of which He has rendered it capable. St. Teresa of Jesus says, "As He refuses to force our will, He takes what we give Him but does not give Himself wholly to us until He sees that we are giving ourselves wholly to Him" (*Way*, 28). "God will not have a divided heart; He wants all or nothing" (*T.M. Sp.*).

If we do not give our hearts entirely to God, we cannot enjoy divine intimacy. Jesus said, "Blessed are the clean of heart : for they shall see God" (*Mt 5,8*). This vision, this enjoyment of God, is in a certain way anticipated even in this life for those who keep the integrity and purity of their heart for Him. St. Thomas says, "A heart which is free from thoughts and affections alien to God is like a temple consecrated to the Lord, in which we can contemplate Him even in this world" (*Commentary on St. Matthew*). A pure heart, like a limpid eye, can comprehend God and to a certain degree penetrate the depths of His infinite mystery. For this reason theologians teach that the gift of understanding corresponds to the beatitude "blessed are the clean of heart." By this gift the Holy Spirit enables the soul to read within, "*intus legere*," that is, to penetrate divine truths. One who loves ardently, desires to know the loved one more and more, not only exteriorly, but also intimately, sharing his thoughts and secrets; he is willing to sacrifice every other satisfaction in order to attain his end.

If you wish to know your God, if you wish to enter into an intimate and deep friendship with Him, you must offer Him a pure heart, free from all human affection. "Take no heed of creatures if thou wilt keep the image of God clearly and simply in thy soul, but empty thy spirit of them and withdraw far from them, and thou shalt walk in the divine light" (*J.C. SM I*, 25).

COLLOQUY

O Jesus, divine sweetness, change all the consolation of earth into bitterness for me, for I do not wish creatures to possess even a single atom of my heart. If I knew that a single fiber of my heart vibrated for human affection, I would

hasten to tear it out and throw it away, no matter how much suffering it might cost.

But You know my weakness and how tempted I feel in moments of discouragement, of loneliness, of abandonment to seek a little understanding and affection from creatures. "Oh! then, I beg You, grant that I may find nothing but bitterness in earthly friendships; otherwise, with a heart like mine, I could easily be caught and my wings clipped (T.J.C. St, 4).

O Lord, illumine the hidden and innermost recesses of my heart; if You find there the least affection which is not for You, reveal it to me and give me the grace to renounce it forever.

You want all, and I want to give You all. In giving all to You, my heart is only returning what is already Yours, for You have given it to me, and I should be incapable of loving if You had not put a spark of Your infinite charity in me. O Lord, it is only just that this spark should return to You, and that it should requite Your love, O infinite Love, who have created me out of nothing and enabled me to return love for love. By reaching up to You and coming in contact with You, O immense furnace of Charity, my love insignificant as it is, will increase immeasurably and pour itself out over all the earth, embracing all creatures in the munificence of a pure, supernatural love, so that it may bring them to You, their beginning and their end.

O Jesus, guardian of virgins, guard my heart, make it so pure and transparent that it will become worthy to gaze upon the splendor of Your Face.

I do not know You yet, my Lord, for, since I still love and enjoy creatures, my interior eye has not the clearness necessary for contemplating You. And because I do not know You, I do not love You as much as I should, and I have very little enjoyment of You. Behold how great is my misery! Come Yourself and purify my heart, so that I may know You fully, and knowing You fully, really love You with all my strength.

PREDICTION OF THE PASSION

QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, give me light to understand the mystery and the value of Christian suffering.

MEDITATION

1. Lent is approaching and our thoughts turn spontaneously to the sorrows of Jesus. Today's Gospel (*Lk 18,31-43*) brings us an announcement of the Passion.

The prediction is clear : "The Son of Man... shall be delivered to the Gentiles, and shall be mocked and scourged and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will put Him to death; and the third day He shall rise again." However, as on other occasions, the Apostles "understood none of these things, and this word was hid from them." They did not understand because they imagined that Jesus' mission was like an earthly conqueror's and that He would re-establish the kingdom of Israel. Since they dreamed only of triumphs and of occupying the first places in the kingdom, any allusion to the Passion upset and scandalized them.

To those who dream only of prosperity and earthly glory, the language of the Cross is incomprehensible. Those who have a purely material ideal of life find it very difficult to understand any spiritual significance, and especially that of suffering. St. Paul said that Christ Crucified was "unto the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness" (*1 Cor 1,23*). Rebuking St. Peter, who at the first mention of the Passion had exclaimed, "Lord, be it far from Thee, this shall not be unto Thee," Jesus had said, "Go behind Me, Satan...because thou savorest not the things that are of God, but the things that are of men" (*Mt 16,22.23*). To human wisdom, suffering is incomprehensible; it is disconcerting; it can lead one to murmur against divine Providence and even to lose all trust in God. However, according to the wisdom of God, suffering

is a means of salvation and redemption. And as it was necessary "for Christ to have suffered these things, and so to enter into His glory" (cf. *Lk* 24,26), it is also necessary for the Christian to be refined in the crucible of sorrow in order to attain to sanctity, to eternal life.

2. It was not until after the descent of the Holy Spirit that the Apostles fully understood the meaning of the Passion; then, instead of being scandalized, they considered it the greatest honor to follow and to preach Christ Crucified.

The human eye has not sufficient light to comprehend the value of the Cross; it needs a new light, the light of the Holy Spirit. It is not by chance that in today's Gospel, immediately after the prediction of the Passion, we find the healing of the blind man of Jericho. We are always somewhat blind when faced with the mystery of suffering; when it strikes us in what we hold most near and dear, it is easy to get lost and to grope our way like blind men through uncertainty and darkness. The Church invites us to repeat today the blind man's prayer of faith : "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The world is often astonished at the sufferings of the good, and instead of encouraging them in their reliance on God, seeks to turn them from Him by urging them to defiance and false fear. Our passions themselves, our innate tendencies toward pleasure, often cry out to us and try, by a thousand pretexts, to prevent us from following Jesus Crucified. Let us remain steadfast in our faith, like the poor blind man. He was not disturbed by the crowd that tried to keep him from approaching Jesus, and he did not give up when the disciples remonstrated with him and wanted him to be quiet; he only shouted his prayer "even more loudly."

Let us cry to the Lord from the bottom of our hearts : "*De profundis clamo ad te, Domine; Domine audi vocem meam!*" (*Ps* 129). Let us ask, not to be exempt from suffering, but to be enlightened as to its value. "Lord, that I may see!" As soon as the blind man recovered his sight, he immediately followed Jesus, "glorifying God!" The supernatural light which we seek from the Lord will give us the strength to follow Him and to carry our cross as He did.

COLLOQUY

"O Jesus Christ, Son of the eternal Father, our Lord, true King of all things! What didst Thou leave in the world for Thy descendants to inherit from Thee? What didst Thou ever have, my Lord, save trials, pains, and insults? Indeed Thou hadst only a beam of wood to rest upon while drinking the bitter draught of death. Those of us, then, my God, who desire to be Thy true children and not to renounce their inheritance, must never flee from suffering. Thy crest is five wounds!... So that too must be our device if we would inherit His kingdom! Not by ease, nor by comfort, nor by honor, nor by wealth can we gain that which He purchased for us by so much Blood. O you who come of illustrious lineage, for the love of God open your eyes. Behold those true knights of Jesus Christ, the princes of His Church, St. Peter and St. Paul: never did they travel by the road you are taking. Can you be imagining that a new road is to be built for you? Do not think that for a moment" (*T.J. F.*, 10).

O my Jesus, the Cross is Your standard; I should be ashamed to ask to be delivered from it. From one evil only I ardently beg You to preserve me: from any deliberate sin, however slight. O Lord, I beg You by the merits of Your sacred Passion to keep all sin far from me. But as for other evils—bodily or spiritual sufferings, physical pain or mental anguish—I beg Your light and strength: light to understand the hidden meaning which they have in the plans of Your divine Providence, light to believe firmly that every sorrow or trial, every pain or disappointment, is planned by You for my greater good; strength not to let myself be influenced by the false maxims of the world or led astray by the vain mirage of earthly happiness, strength to accept suffering of any kind with courage and love.

CORPORAL MORTIFICATION

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus Crucified, grant that my love for You may make me willing to crucify my flesh with You and for You.

MEDITATION

1. As a result of original sin, man no longer has complete dominion over his senses and his flesh; therefore he is filled with evil tendencies which try to push him toward what is base. St. Paul humbly admits : "I know that there dwelleth not in me, that is to say, in my flesh, that which is good.... For the good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do" (*Rom 7,18.19*).

God certainly gives us the grace to overcome our evil tendencies; but we must also use our own efforts, which consist in voluntary mortification : "They that are Christ's have crucified their flesh, with the vices and concupiscences" (*Gal 5,24*). The purpose of corporal mortification is not to inflict pain and privation on the body for the pleasure of making it suffer, but to discipline and control all its tendencies which are contrary to the life of grace. The Apostle warns us : "If you live according to the flesh, you shall die : but if by the Spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live" (*Rom 8,13*). We must curb ourselves in order to avoid falls; we must prune the useless or harmful branches in order to avoid deviation; we must direct toward good the forces which, left to themselves, might lead us into sin. For these reasons mortification, although it is not an end in itself nor the principal element in the Christian life, occupies a fundamental place in it and is an absolutely indispensable means toward attaining a spiritual life. No one can escape this law without closing off all access to eternal salvation, to sanctity. St. Paul, who had done and suffered much for Christ, did not consider himself dispensed from it, and said, "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection : lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway" (*1 Cor 9,27*).

2. St. Teresa warns us that "if prayer is to be genuine it must be reinforced with this practice [of mortification] : for prayer and self-indulgence do not go together" (*Way*, 4). It would be an illusion to think that we can reach intimacy with God without the serious exercise of physical mortification. In this regard, we must take care that love of our own body and of our physical welfare does not cause us to reject all penitential practices under the pretext that they will ruin our health. In reality, there are many corporal mortifications which, without the slightest danger to our health, have the great advantage of keeping our spirit of generosity on the alert by the voluntary acceptance of a little physical suffering. If we are to be generous in this respect, we must "rid ourselves of all inordinate love for our body" (*ibid.*, 10), that is, of all excessive preoccupation about our health; and we must put aside all anxiety about food, clothing, rest and comfort. "This body of ours," says St. Teresa, "has one fault : the more you indulge it, the more things it discovers to be essential to it... and if there is any reasonable pretext for indulgence, however little necessity for it there may be, the poor soul is deceived and prevented from making progress" (*ibid.*, 11).

Anyone who wants to advance on the road to sanctity and union with God must be ready to sacrifice everything, even in the physical order, to the point of "giving up his skin and everything else for Christ," as St. John of the Cross says. He teaches, however, that in these matters we must always depend on our superiors or confessors; "corporal penance without obedience is no more than the penance of beasts" (*DN I*, 6,2), because it prefers a material practice to obedience "which is penance of the reason and discretion," and is, therefore, the sacrifice most pleasing to God.

COLLOQUY

" This servant of Thine, my God, can no longer endure such trials as come when she finds herself without Thee; for if she is to live, she desires no repose in this life, nor would she have Thee give her any. This soul would fain see itself free : to eat is a torment; to sleep brings only anguish. It finds itself in this life spending its time upon comforts, yet nothing can comfort it but Thee; it seems to be living against nature,

for it no longer desires to live to itself, but only to Thee" (*T.J. Life*, 16).

O Lord, help me, I beg You, to free myself from the slavery of the body! Teach me to conquer its extravagant demands and to mortify its pretensions. You have given me this body of flesh, in order that I may serve You on earth. Grant that it may not become an obstacle to me and hinder the generous, total gift of my whole self to You.

How far I am, O God, from the austerities and mortifications of the saints! "Do I, perhaps, think they were made of iron? No : they were as frail as I. O Lord, help me to understand that once I begin to subdue my miserable body, it will give me much less trouble" (*Way*, 11). Why should I be terrified by the fear of losing my health?

Sickness and health, life and death, all are in Your hands, my God; everything depends on You. I now make a firm resolution to entrust all solicitude to You, and to keep but one occupation : to love You and serve You with all my strength. Help me, O Lord, to gain the mastery over my body and to conquer it completely, so that I may attain that magnificent liberty of spirit which allows the soul to devote itself undisturbed to the exercise of a deep interior life.

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WITH JESUS CRUCIFIED

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, I place myself at the foot of the Cross, help me to understand how necessary it is to suffer in order to resemble You.

MEDITATION

1. For the soul who aspires to union with God, penance is not only a means of subjecting the flesh to the spirit, but also a means of being assimilated to Christ Crucified, in order to reproduce and prolong His Passion in its own body.

"Love makes equality and similitude" (*J.C. AS I*, 4,4) : he who truly loves has a spontaneous desire to share in the sufferings of the loved one; it is the same with real lovers of the Crucified. St. Mary Magdalene dei Pazzi exclaims, "It is not fitting to be a delicate member of a Head crowned with thorns and crucified, nor the unmortified bride of a suffering Spouse." It is an honor for a wife to be able to share in the entire life of her spouse. For a soul consecrated to God, it is an honor to be able to share, even in a small way, in the Passion of Christ; such a soul glories in it. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world" (*Gal* 6,14).

Although mortification of the spirit is certainly more important than that of the body, we must not forget that, in order to save the world, Jesus was willing to embrace both in the most complete manner. His whole life was a cross and a martyrdom; it ended with the sacrifice of Calvary, where His spiritual and physical immolation reached its height. As for the mortification of the senses, "It is certain," says St. John of the Cross, "that He died as to sense, spiritually, during His life, besides dying naturally, at His death. For...in life He had not where to lay His head, and at His death, this was even truer.... Wherefore, as it seems to me, any spirituality that would fain walk in sweetness and with ease, and flees from the imitation of Christ, is worthless" (*AS II*, 7,10.8).

2. St. Teresa Margaret of the Heart of Jesus wrote : "Remember that when you entered religion, you proposed to express in yourself the life of the Crucified" (*Sp*). To express the life of the Crucified means to live His Passion, to associate ourselves with His sufferings, to unite ourselves to His intentions—the glory of the Father and the salvation of souls. "I...fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ in my flesh, for His Body, which is the Church" (*Col* 1,24). This is another motive which has urged the saints to generous corporal mortification. Nothing is lacking in the Passion of Christ; He Himself said on the Cross, "all is consummated" (*Jn* 19,30). All was accomplished in Him, our Head, but it must now be accomplished in us, His members. Jesus wills to continue His Passion in us so that we may be associated with Him in the work of redemption; He wills to make us His collaborators in the most

sublime of His works, the salvation of souls. Jesus, who could have accomplished His work alone, willed to need us in order to apply the infinite merits of His Passion to many souls.

Mortification, and even physical suffering, is therefore a requirement of a life of union with Christ; the more generous the soul is, the more it will participate intimately in the interior life and apostolic work of Jesus. We cannot be intimate with Christ if we do not suffer with Him, if we do not ascend the Cross with Him. "Let Christ Crucified be sufficient for thee, and with Him suffer and rest" (*J.C. SM II*, 13).

Suffering has a supernatural value only when it is borne with Christ and for Christ. It is Jesus who sanctifies suffering; apart from Him it is worth nothing and is of no use. But if it is embraced for love of Him, it becomes precious coin, capable of redeeming and sanctifying souls; it becomes a continuation of the Passion.

COLLOQUY

"O much desired Passion! Who desires you, loves you and is glorified in you? O eternal Truth, You tell me that Your Passion is neither desired nor loved by anyone who loves himself, but only by one who has stripped himself of self and clothed himself with You, O Crucified Christ; by means of Your light he sees in the Cross the greatness of Your charity. O gentle, quiet Passion, which in the calmness of peace allows the soul to traverse the waves of the angry sea! O delectable, sweet Passion! O wealth of the soul, true joy, our glory and our beatitude; the soul which is glorified in you acquires your fruit. O Word, the soul which takes shelter in Your Passion is dead to sensuality and tastes the sweetness of Your charity.

"O my God, my Love, permit me one question : When the world was languishing in sickness, You sent Your only Son to be its physician...and now what means will You use to revive again this world which lies once more in death? I see that You give the name of Christ to Your servants and that by means of them You want to take away death and give back life to the world. And in what way? They must walk bravely in the footprints of the Word and work for

Your honor and the salvation of souls with love and burning desire; to this end they should bear patiently all pains, anxieties, reproaches, and disgrace. O wonderful Restorer, give us many ‘ Christs ’ who will spend their lives in vigils, tears, and prayers for the salvation of the world ” (St. Catherine of Siena).

O Lord, You know the profound desire of my heart : to assimilate and unite myself to You in order to live Your life alone. If sublime states of prayer and flights of the spirit are not for me, the Cross is my share. You offer it to me, and I embrace it with all my heart. I know that what is easily within my reach, what I encounter every day, what is most suitable and proportioned to my misery, is suffering, for no human life is without sorrow. Lord, grant that in every suffering, physical as well as moral, I may recognize and embrace Your Cross, so that I may be intimately associated with Your Passion, for the salvation of souls. Now that You are glorified at the right hand of the Father, You can no longer suffer. Deign, then, to suffer in me and to use my poor humanity to continue Your work of redemption.

94

ASH WEDNESDAY

PRESENCE OF GOD - I place myself in Your presence, O Lord; illumine with Your light the eternal truths, and awaken in my soul a sincere desire for conversion.

MEDITATION

1. “ Dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return ” (*Gn 3,19*). These words, spoken for the first time by God to Adam after he had committed sin, are repeated today by the Church to every Christian, in order to remind him of two fundamental truths—his nothingness and the reality of death.

Dust, the ashes which the priest puts on our foreheads today, has no substance; the lightest breath will disperse it. It is a good representation of man’s nothingness : “ O Lord,

my substance is as nothing before Thee" (*Ps* 38,6), exclaims the Psalmist. Our pride, our arrogance, needs to grasp this truth, to realize that everything in us is nothing. Drawn from nothing by the creative power of God, by His infinite love which willed to communicate His being and His life to us, we cannot—because of sin—be reunited with Him for eternity without passing through the dark reality of death. The consequence and punishment of sin, death is, in itself, bitter and painful; but Jesus, who wanted to be like to us in all things, in submitting to death has given all Christians the strength to accept it out of love. Nevertheless, death exists, and we should reflect on it, not in order to distress ourselves, but to arouse ourselves to do good. "In all thy works, remember thy last end, and thou shalt never sin" (*Sir* 7,40). The thought of death places before our eyes the vanity of earthly things, the brevity of life—"All things are passing; God alone remains"—and therefore it urges us to detach ourselves from everything, to scorn every earthly satisfaction, and to seek God alone. The thought of death makes us understand that "all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone" (*Imit. I.*, 1,4).

"Remember that you have only one soul; that you have only one death to die...then there will be many things about which you care nothing" (*T.J. M.*, 68), that is, you will give up everything that has no eternal value. Only love and fidelity to God are of value for eternity. "In the evening of life, you will be judged on love" (*J.C. SM I.*, 57).

2. Today's liturgy is an invitation to penance. During the imposition of the ashes we chant : "Let us change our garments, and cover ourselves with sackcloth and ashes; let us fast and weep before the Lord." It is an invitation to the corporal penance which is especially prescribed for this season; but it is immediately followed by the invitation to be converted : "Let us atone for the sins we have committed." The end of physical mortification is spiritual penance—humility, recognition of our faults, compunction of heart, and the reform of our lives.

This is the predominant thought of the day. We read in the Epistle (*Jl* 2,12-19), "Thus saith the Lord : be converted to Me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts, and not your gar-

ments." Compunction and conversion of heart hold the first place, because the corporal penance that does not proceed from a contrite heart has no value. On the other hand, corporal penance prepares the soul for conversion, insofar as it is the means of reaching it. We read in the Preface, "O God, by fasting You repress sin, elevate the soul, and give it strength and recompense." One who wishes to reach the goal, which is the renewing of the spirit, must embrace willingly the means which leads to it, namely, corporal penance. At the same time, he must remember that compunction of heart gives value to corporal penance, which in its turn engenders and gives expression to compunction of heart. These two elements are never separated.

The Gospel (*Mt* 6,16-21) says further that all penance must be accomplished sincerely and joyfully, without vain ostentation, "When you fast, be not as the hypocrites, sad. For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast." Vanity and pride make even the most austere penitential practices useless and sometimes even sinful; they destroy their substance and value, and reduce them to mere externals, empty of all content. Hence when you mortify your body, take care to mortify your self-love still more.

COLLOQUY

"O Jesus, how long is man's life, although we say that it is short! It is short, O my God, since by it we are to gain a life without end; but it seems very long to the soul who aspires to be with You quickly.... O my soul, you will enter into rest when you are absorbed into the sovereign Good, when you know what He knows, love what He loves, and enjoy what He enjoys. Then your will will no longer be inconstant nor subject to change...and you will forever enjoy Him and His love. Blessed are they whose names are written in the Book of Life! If yours is there, why are you sad, O my soul, and why are you troubled? Trust in God, to whom I shall still confess my sins and whose mercies I shall proclaim. I shall compose a canticle of praise for Him and shall not cease to send up my sighs toward my Savior and my God. A day will come, perhaps, when my glory will praise Him, and my conscience will not feel the

bitterness of compunction, in the place where tears and fears have ceased forever.... O Lord, I would rather live and die in hope, and in the effort to gain eternal life, than to possess all creatures and their perishable goods. Do not abandon me, O Lord! I hope in You, and my hope will not be confounded. Give me the grace to serve You always and dispose of me as You wish" (*T.J. Exc.*, 15 - 17).

If the remembrance of my infidelities torments me, I shall remember, O Lord, that "as soon as we are sorry for having offended You, You forget all our sins and malice. O truly infinite goodness! What more could one desire? Who would not blush with shame to ask so much of You? But now is the favorable time to profit from it, my merciful Savior, by accepting what You offer. You desire our friendship. Who can refuse to give it to You, who did not refuse to shed all Your Blood for us by sacrificing Your life? What You ask is nothing! It will be to our supreme advantage to grant it to You" (*ibid.*, 14).

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DEATH

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, You have created me for Yourself; grant that I may live and die for love of You.

MEDITATION

1. Today, the Thursday following Ash Wednesday, we find in the liturgy another reference to death. "Take order with thy house, for thou shalt die" (*Is* 38,1-6). The Church wishes us to become familiar with this thought, "less being suddenly surprised by the day of death, we should seek time for penance and not find it" (*RM*). In the Gospel Jesus spoke of death as coming like a thief in the night, when we least expect it; but for the watchful Christian who lives according to the words, "Be you then also ready" (*Lk* 12,40), death will not be a surprise, because it will always find him "with his loins girt and lamp burning," like those faithful servants who were waiting for their master,

" that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open to him immediately " (*ibid.* 12,35.36). At that moment there will be no complaint, no fear or anxiety, because one who has always lived in expectation of the coming of the Lord will not be afraid to open the door to Him at His arrival. He will go to meet Him with great joy, give Him a loving welcome, and with all the ardor of his soul pronounce his last " Ecce venio, " behold, I come (*Ps* 39,8).

Although death is the last, it is not the only coming of the Lord in the life of a Christian; it is preceded by many other comings whose special purpose is to prepare us for this last. Death will then be for us in the fullest sense a coming of grace. From the moment of our Baptism until the end of our life, we experience a continual succession of comings or visits from our Lord; each Sacrament we receive, each inspiration, each increase of grace is a divine visit to the soul, by means of which God always possesses it more and more, dwelling in it more fully and intimately. One who has never hesitated to open his heart to all these visits from our Lord, who has always welcomed them faithfully and lovingly, who has followed all the impulses of grace with docility, has nothing to fear from this last coming. Then the words of Jesus will sound sweetly in his ears : " Well done, good and faithful servant... enter thou into the joy of thy Lord " (*Mt* 25,21).

2. St. John of the Cross, in speaking of those who have reached the state of transforming union by love, declares that their death is caused more by the impetus of divine love than by natural causes. " Although they seem to die from an illness or because of old age, their spirits are wrested away by nothing less than some loving impulse and encounter, far loftier and of greater power and strength than any in the past, for it has succeeded in breaking the web and bearing away the precious jewel of the soul " (*LF* 1,30). This is indeed " dying of love, " a precious, blessed death, the true nuptial meeting of the soul with God which brings it immediately into the Beatific Vision. It is the way holy souls die, those souls who are prevented from seeing God face to face only because they are still imprisoned in their body.

Closely related to this death of love which is so glorious and blessed, there is another, accessible to all who sincerely love God and His holy will. As the essence of sanctity consists

in always doing the will of God lovingly, even when it imposes great sacrifices and painful renuncements, so too, the essence of a holy death consists in submitting oneself lovingly to this supreme sacrifice, accepting it willingly as the last expression of God's will. The deeper and more wholehearted the loving resignation with which we accept death, the more truly can it be called a death of love, precisely because it is embraced out of love for God.

God is the absolute master of our life; as we should live for love of Him, striving to conform in everything to His holy will, so that it becomes in everything and for everything the supreme norm of all our actions, so should we know how to die for love of Him, and accept death from His hand at the hour and under the circumstances ordained by Him. "For whether we live, we live unto the Lord," said St. Paul; "or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Therefore, whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (*Rom 14,8*). Whether we are in life or in death, we are the Lord's, and because we are His, we should have no desire but to live and die according to His holy will. If during our life we try to carry out God's will with the greatest love, we can surely hope that God will give us the final grace to accept death with great love also.

COLLOQUY

"O Jesus, agonizing on the Cross, be my model at the hour of death. Although You are the Creator and Restorer of life, You willed to undergo death and accepted it willingly in order to expiate my sins. Death had no claim on You; You are the fountain of life and immortality, in whom and by whom all creatures have life; yet You willed to subject Yourself to death in order to resemble me and to sanctify my death.

"O death, who will henceforth fear you, since the Author of life bears you in His bosom, and without doubt, everything in Him is life-giving. I embrace you, I clasp you in my divine Savior's heart; there, like a chick under the wing of the mother hen, I shall peacefully await your coming, secure in the knowledge that my most merciful Jesus will sweeten your bitterness and defend me against your rigors.

" O Jesus, from this moment I wish to employ all my powers in accepting all the circumstances and pains of my death; from this moment I desire to accept death in the place, hour, and manner in which it may please You to send it. I know very well that I must suffer and be ground by the teeth of tribulations, sorrows, privations, desolations, and sufferings in order to become bread worthy to serve at Your celestial banquet, O Christ, on the day of the general resurrection. I well know that if the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die, it brings forth no fruit; therefore, with all my heart, I accept the annihilation of death in order to become a new man, no longer mortal and corruptible, but immortal and glorious " (St. Francis de Sales).

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THE PROOF OF LOVE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus Crucified, make me understand that the Cross is the greatest proof of love.

MEDITATION

I. After the Incarnation, the Cross of Jesus is the greatest proof of His love for man. Similarly, mortification, which is suffering eagerly accepted for the love of God, is one of the greatest proofs of love that we can give Him. It means freely giving up a satisfaction or a pleasure in order to impose on ourselves, for love of God, something which is contrary to our own natural inclinations; we thus prove that we prefer to satisfy God rather than ourselves. Every act of voluntary mortification, whether physical or moral, says to God, " Lord, I love You more than myself! " And since a soul in love has an ardent desire to give proof of its love, it is very vigilant not to miss a single opportunity for renunciation.

It was in this sense that St. Teresa Margaret of the Heart of Jesus resolved " not to let a single occasion for suffering escape, as far as she was able—and always in silence between God and herself. " In fact, she made every effort " to find at each moment some occasion for suffering or bodily pain,

so as never to satisfy the slightest appetite or desire, and she sought ways to make even what was necessary, painful and wearying to her body" (*Sp*). Her ardent love for God found an outlet in this generous, untiring exercise of mortification.

Using a different expression, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus called this practice "scattering flowers," that is, profiting by every least opportunity to suffer in order to give God a proof of her love. Knowing that the value of mortification depends upon the generosity of the dispositions with which it is done, the Saint said, "I shall always sing, even should my flowers be gathered from the midst of thorns" (*St*, 13).

2. The value of voluntary mortification consists much more in the good will with which it is practiced than in the intensity of the suffering which is imposed, although the latter may contribute to it in the sense that a more painful mortification requires more good will.

The amount of suffering must be wisely proportioned, and limited to the physical strength of each one; but what must never be limited is the love, the spirit of generosity with which we perform each act of sacrifice. From this point of view, a slight mortification done with all the love of which a soul is capable has greater value than a painful penance performed in a material way, with no interior spirit. Hence before performing an act of mortification, especially when it concerns certain customary practices such as those which are used in Religious Institutes, it is necessary to arouse our good will and our sincere desire to suffer willingly for the love of God. This will prevent a mere mechanical performance of the act that has little or no value.

Loving contemplation of the Crucified was the soul of all the austerities of St. Teresa Margaret. "This humiliated, suffering God, of whom she was constantly thinking, was the One who gave her the interior strength to overcome every difficulty, however arduous, and to take on spontaneously so many labors and works of charity and mortification; it was He who gave her an insatiable desire for suffering" (*T.M. Sp*).

Contemplating Jesus Crucified, the soul feels that, even if it is mortifying itself much for love of Him, its sacrifices and renunciations amount to very little, and instead of

conceiving sentiments of vain complacency for the mortifications already practiced, it feels the need of humbling itself and of always doing more. "Have great love for suffering," says St. John of the Cross, "and consider it very little to attain the favor of the Spouse, who hesitated not to die for thee" (*SM II*, 15).

COLLOQUY

"O my Beloved, how shall I show my love, since love proves itself by deeds? I have no other means of proving my love than to strew flowers, and these flowers will be each word and look, each little daily sacrifice. I wish to make profit out of the smallest actions and to do them all for Love. For Love's sake I wish to suffer and to rejoice: so shall I strew my flowers. Not one that I see but, singing all the while, I will scatter its petals before You. Should my roses be gathered from amid thorns, I will sing notwithstanding; and the longer and sharper the thorns, the sweeter will grow my song" (*T.C.J. St.*, 13).

"O Lord, dispose of me according to Your will, for I am content with everything if only I am following You on the road to Calvary. The more thorns there are on this road and the heavier the Cross is, the more consoled shall I be, for I desire to love You with an effective love, with a patient love, with a love which is dead to self and entirely surrendered to You. O Lord, You on the Cross for me and I on the Cross for You! Oh! if I could but once understand how sweet and precious it is to suffer: to suffer in silence for You, O Jesus! O dear suffering! O good Jesus!" (*T.M. Sp.*). Yes, suffering is dear to me because it permits me to give God proofs of my love; because in the darkness of faith, in which I must live here below, it gives me the assurance of loving not only in words, but with a strong, effective love. O Jesus, now I understand why St. Teresa of Avila asked for only one thing: "to die or to suffer," professing to have no other reason for living except to suffer for love of You (*Life*, 40).

O Lord, may I too have such strong, true, and ardent love! Grant it to me, You who can give me all things, and who can, in one instant, transform this dry, cold heart into a furnace of charity.

THE SPIRIT OF MORTIFICATION

PRESENCE OF GOD - I come back to Your feet, O Crucified Jesus, desirous of understanding more thoroughly the spirit of mortification.

MEDITATION

1. The spirit of mortification has more than a purely physical aspect of mortification; it also includes renunciation of the ego, the will, and the understanding. Just as in our body and in our senses we have unruly tendencies toward the enjoyment of material things, so also in our ego there are inordinate tendencies toward self-assertion. Love of self and complacency in our own excellence are often so great that, even unconsciously, we tend to make "self" the center of the universe.

The spirit of mortification is really complete when, above all, we seek to mortify self-love in all its many manifestations. The Pharisee who fasted on the appointed days, but whose heart was so puffed up with pride that his prayer amounted to nothing more than praise of himself and scorn of his neighbor, did not have the spirit of mortification and hence was not justified before God. There is little value in imposing corporal mortifications on ourselves if we then refuse to yield our opinion in order to accommodate ourselves to others, if we cannot be reconciled with our enemies, or bear an injury and a cutting word with calmness, or hold back a sharp answer.

"Why," asks St. Teresa of Jesus, "do we shrink from interior mortification [of our ego, our will, and judgment] since this is the means by which every other kind of mortification may become much more meritorious and perfect, and may be practiced with greater tranquillity and ease?" (*Way*, 12). As long as mortification does not strike at our pride, it remains at the halfway mark and never reaches its goal.

2. The true spirit of mortification embraces, in the first place, all the occasions for physical or moral suffering

permitted by divine Providence. The sufferings attendant on illness or fatigue; the efforts required by the performance of our duties or by a life of intense labor; the privations imposed by the state of poverty—all are excellent physical penances. If we sincerely desire to be guided by divine Providence in everything, we will not try to avoid them, or even to lighten them, but will accept wholeheartedly whatever God offers us. It would be absurd to refuse a single one of those providential opportunities for suffering and to look for voluntary mortifications of our own choice. Likewise, it would be foolish for those in religious life to omit the least exercise imposed by the Rule in order to do a penance of their own choosing.

It is exactly the same in the moral order. Do we not sometimes try to avoid a person whom we do not like, but with whom the Lord has brought us into contact? Do we look for every means of avoiding a humiliation or an act of obedience which is painful to nature? If we do, we are running away from the best opportunities for sacrificing ourselves and for mortifying our self-love; even if we substitute other mortifications, they will not be as effective as those which God Himself has prepared for us. In the mortifications offered to us by divine Providence, there is nothing of our own will or liking; they strike us just where we need it most, and where, by voluntary mortification, we could never reach.

In order to arrive at sanctity, a certain specified amount of voluntary penance is not required of all; this varies according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the advice of superiors, and each one's physical strength. All, however, must have that truly deep spirit of mortification which can embrace with generosity every opportunity for renunciation prepared or permitted by God.

COLLOQUY

O Lord, You who have sought for adorers in spirit and in truth, preserve me, I beg You, from the pharisaic spirit against which You fought while on earth, and which is so opposed to You, who are infinite Truth and Simplicity. Grant that while mortifying my body, I may mortify my pride even more, or better, mortify it Yourself.

You who know the secret places in my heart, the most deeply hidden instincts of my self-love, prepare for me the most effective medicine for purifying, healing, and transforming me. You alone know where this most harmful microbe nests; You alone can destroy it. But how often, alas, in the varying circumstances of my life, I have not recognized Your hand, Your work; and I have tried in so many ways to escape the physical and moral sufferings, the mortifications, humiliations, and difficulties which You Yourself had prepared for me.

How blind I am, O Lord, and how poorly do I recognize Your ways, which are so different and remote from my limited human views. Give me, O God, that supernatural sight which can judge events in Your light, and which can penetrate the true meaning of the sufferings which You place in my path. Intensify this light in proportion to the obstacles You prepare for me to strike my "ego," my pride, my opinions, my rights, because it is then above all that I am terribly blind, and groping in the dark, I reject the medicine You offer. I may lack, O Lord, the means of carrying out the purification of my ego, so foolish and so proud. But nothing is lacking to You, You who are the All, and whose infinite mercy utterly surpasses my misery. I confess, O Lord, that I have often strayed like a lamb which, leaving its shepherd, has taken a wrong path. But I desire to return once more, and I come back with complete confidence because I know that You never tire of waiting and of pardoning. Here I am, Lord; I place myself in Your hands. Mortify me, purify me as You wish, for whenever You afflict, it is to heal, and wherever You mortify, life increases.

THE GREAT COMBAT

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, I withdraw in spirit with You into the desert; teach me how to fight the triple concupiscence of the flesh, pride, and avarice.

MEDITATION

1. On this day, which is the real beginning of Lent, the Church invites us to the great combat, the struggle against sin which will bring us to the Easter resurrection. Our model is Jesus, who although exempt from the incitements of concupiscence, willed to be tempted by the devil *for us*, in order to have "compassion on our infirmities" (*Heb 4,15*).

After forty days of rigorous fast, while He is feeling the pangs of hunger, Jesus is tempted by Satan to change stones into bread. No one can undertake a serious program of penance or mortification without feeling its discomforts; but that is the time to resist the insinuating voices which invite us to condescend to the demands of nature; that is the time to reply with Jesus, "not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" (Gosp. : *Mt 4,1-11*). Man's life is far more dependent on the will of God than on material food. If we are convinced of this truth, we shall have the courage to submit to privations, trusting in divine Providence for our sustenance.

Jesus was next tempted to pride. "If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down...and in their hands the angels shall bear thee up." Such a miracle would have aroused the admiration and enthusiasm of the people, but Jesus knew that His Father had chosen an entirely different way for Him—the way of humiliations rather than of triumphs, the way of the Cross and of death. Because He had no desire to escape from this way, He resolutely rejected the suggestion to pride. The best means of conquering temptations to pride and vanity is to choose exactly what humiliates us and makes us appear little in the eyes of others.

The devil returns to the attack and tempts Jesus to

avarice : "All these will I give thee, if falling down thou wilt adore me." But Jesus replies, "The Lord thy God shalt thou adore and Him only shalt thou serve!" He whose heart is firmly anchored in God will never let it be drawn away from His service by an attraction for, or envy of, earthly things. But if this strong adherence to God is weakened or lost, the temptations to avarice will often succeed in making even those stray who have a special vocation to be "serving God alone."

2. Jesus was tempted because He willed it. We, however, are tempted without willing it, and often against our will. The temptation of Jesus was wholly exterior, for it found no echo within Him; on the contrary, our nature, wounded by the triple concupiscence of the flesh, of pride, and of avarice, is not only an easy prey for the assaults of the devil, but is itself the source of many temptations. It is impossible for us to live without temptations; our virtue does not consist in being exempt from them but in being able to overcome them. It is a struggle which none can escape; God even wishes this struggle to be the price of eternal life. "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he hath been proved, he shall receive the crown of life" (*Jas 1,12*).

Let us learn from Jesus how to conduct ourselves in temptations. Primarily, He teaches us to have a great confidence in God. Jesus would not satisfy His hunger, nor impress men by means of a brilliant miracle, nor accept kingdoms and wealth because, in a spirit of perfect filial confidence, He had entrusted everything to the Father's care—His life, His mission, and His glory. Those who will fully trust in God and who rely on His divine Providence, will not be easily enticed by the vain flattery of the devil, the world, or the flesh, because they know that only God can give true blessings and real happiness.

We should extend the practice of this confidence to the moment of temptation. If God permits us to be tempted, He does not permit us to be tempted beyond our strength, and, accompanying every temptation, there is always a special actual grace sufficient to overcome it. Therefore, instead of being disturbed by the violence of the struggle, let us use faithfully the grace God always gives and turn to Him in humble, confident prayer.

COLLOQUY

" Lord God, our Father, Life by which all live, without which everything would be as dead, do not abandon me to evil thoughts and to pride; take away from me all concupiscence and do not give me as prey to an irreverent and foolish spirit; but take possession of my heart, that I may always think of You.... Help me now, my Redeemer, I beseech You, so that I will not fall before my enemies, caught in the snares which they set for my feet to abase my soul; but save me, strength of my salvation, that I may not become a laughing-stock to Your enemies who hate You. Rise, O Lord, my God, my strength, and Your enemies will be dispersed; those who hate You will flee before Your face.

" As wax melts in the fire, so do sinners vanish before Your face. I shall hide myself in You, and rejoice with Your children, satiated with all Your good things. And You, O Lord God, Father of orphans, protecting Mother, spread your wings, that under them we may take refuge from our enemies " (St. Augustine).

I entrust myself to You, my God and Savior! I wish, particularly in times of struggle, to take refuge in You with redoubled confidence, for " You are my defense and will deliver me from the nets of the fowler and from all misfortune. You will cover me with Your wings and I shall be safe. Your fidelity will surround me like a shield, and I shall fear neither the terrors of the night nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the plague that roams in darkness, nor the attacks of the noonday devil. You are my hope, Lord; You are my refuge, O Most High! You have commanded Your angels to watch over all my paths, and they will bear me in their hands lest my feet strike against a stone " (cf. Ps 90,3-12).

CONVERSION

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, You have created me for Yourself; grant that, with all my strength, I may tend toward You, my last end.

MEDITATION

1. In the Epistle of today's Mass (*Ez 34,11-16*), we read : "For thus saith the Lord God : Behold I Myself will seek My sheep, and will visit them...and will deliver them out of all the places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.... I will bring them to their own land, and I will feed them in the mountains of Israel.... There shall they rest on the green grass." This is the program which the Lord wishes to accomplish in our souls during the holy season of Lent, in order to lead us by means of it to a life of higher perfection and closer intimacy with Him. He stretches out His hand to us, not only to save us from dangers, but also to help us climb to those higher places where He Himself will nourish us.

The point of departure which will make the realization of this divine plan possible is a new conversion on our part : we must collect our powers, desires, and affections, which have been scattered and are lingering in the valley of the purely human; putting them all together, we must make them *converge* on God, our one last end. In this sense, our Lenten *conversion* should consist in a generous determination to put ourselves more resolutely in the way of perfection. It means a new *determination to become a saint*. The desire for sanctity is the mainspring of the spiritual life; the more intense and real this desire is in us, the more it will urge us to pledge ourselves totally. In this first week of Lent, we must try to arouse and strengthen our resolution to become a saint. If other efforts in the past have been unsuccessful or have not entirely reached the goal, this is no reason for discouragement. *Nunc coepi*—"now have I begun," or rather : "now I begin"; let us repeat it humbly, and may the experience of our past failures make us place our trust in God alone.

2. St. Thomas teaches that "in the pursuit of the end, no limits should be set" (*II^a II^{ae}*, q.184, a.3). Sanctity is the end of the spiritual life; that is why we must propose it to ourselves, not in a reduced, restricted manner, but in all its fullness—fullness which speaks to us of intimate union with God, of the complete invasion of grace, and of entire conformity to the divine will, to the extent that it becomes the only motive of all our actions; for when the soul becomes totally purified of everything contrary to God's will, "then the Lord will communicate His supernatural Being to it, in such a way that it will seem to be God Himself and to have what God possesses" (*AS II*, 5,7). Sanctity is the plenitude of love and grace; it is transformation in God by love, it is deification by grace.

What measure of love and grace must we attain? That depends primarily upon God's designs on our soul and then on our cooperation. Now on our part, the secret of reaching the goal is never to stop : first, because even if we were to grow in love indefinitely, we would never be able to love God as much as He is to be loved; secondly because we do not know to what degree of sanctity God is calling us. Furthermore, God does not let Himself be outdone in generosity, and the more we give ourselves to Him in the exercise of intense love, the more He will give Himself to us by grace.

The measure of loving God is to love Him "without measure"; if we should not set a limit to love, neither should we set one to our *conversion*. The Lord said, "Be converted to Me with all your heart" (*Jl* 2,12). This is the indispensable condition for loving God with our whole heart. The cases where total conversion is reached in an instant by a very special grace are rare; ordinarily, we do not arrive at it except by a daily progressive conversion. And if, in this conversion—as in the whole work of sanctification—the initiative is always from God, who prevents us with His grace, our cooperation is nevertheless required; hence we must strive every day with renewed diligence to "be converted to God with all our heart." Let this be our program for Lent.

COLLOQUY

"O Lord of my soul and my only 'good'! Why do You not wish that the soul should enjoy at once the consolation of arriving at this perfect love as soon as it has decided to love You and is doing all it can to give up everything in order to serve You better? But I am wrong : I should have made my complaint by asking why we ourselves have no desire to arrive at it, for it is we alone who are at fault in not at once enjoying so great a dignity. If we attain to the perfect possession of this true love of God, it brings all blessings with it. But so niggardly and so slow are we in giving ourselves wholly to God that we do not prepare ourselves to receive this benefit.... So it is that this treasure is not given to us in a short time because we do not give ourselves to God entirely and forever.... O my God, grant me the grace and the courage to determine to strive after this good with all my strength. If I persevere, You, who never refuse Your help to anyone, will strengthen my courage until I come off with victory. I say courage, because the devil, with so many obstacles, tries to make us deviate from this path" (cf. T.J. *Life*, 11).

Grant, O Lord Jesus, by the infinite merits of Your passion, that I may be converted to You with all my heart. Do not permit me to be discouraged by the continual return of my egotistical tendencies, or by the incessant struggle which I must maintain against them. Make me clearly understand that, if I wish to be completely converted to You, I can never make peace with my weaknesses, my faults, my self-love, my pride. Make me understand that I must sacrifice everything to Your love, and even when I have sacrificed everything I must still say : "I am an unprofitable servant," O Lord, because everything is as nothing, compared with the love which You deserve, O infinitely lovable One!

100

SIN

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus Crucified, give me the grace to understand the great malice of sin.

MEDITATION

1. The essence of Christian perfection consists in union with God by charity. While charity, by conforming our wills to God's, unites us to Him, grave sin, which directly opposes His will, produces the opposite effect. In other words, charity is the force uniting man to God, and sin the force drawing him away. Serious sin is therefore the greatest enemy of the spiritual life, since it not only injures it, but destroys it in its constituent elements : charity and grace. This destruction, this spiritual death, is the inevitable result of sin, the act by which man voluntarily detaches himself from God, the one source of life, charity, and grace. As the branch cannot live if it is separated from the trunk, neither can the soul live if separated from God.

God, the cause of every being, is always present in the soul of the sinner in the same way in which He is present in all creatures; yet He is not there as a Father, as a Guest, as the Trinity which offers Itself to the soul to be known and loved. Hence, the sinner, though created to be the temple of the Blessed Trinity, has voluntarily made himself incapable of dwelling with the three divine Persons and has barred his own road to union with God. He has, so to speak, obliged God to break all ties of friendship with him because he has preferred the temporal, fleeting good of a miserable creature—a selfish satisfaction, an earthly pleasure—instead of the sovereign good. This is the malice of sin which rejects the divine gift and betrays its Creator, Father, and Friend. "Oh! why can we not realize that sin is a pitched battle fought against God with all our senses and the faculties of the soul; the stronger the soul is, the more ways it invents to betray its King" (*T.J. Exc*, 14).

2. If we wish to have a better understanding of the evil of mortal sin, we must consider its disastrous effects. One

single sin instantly changed Lucifer, the angel of light, into an angel of darkness, into the eternal enemy of God. A single sin deprived Adam and Eve of the state of grace and friendship with God, taking away all their supernatural gifts and condemning them to death together with the rest of mankind. One single sin was enough to make an abyss between God and man, to deprive the whole human race of any possibility of union with God.

The Passion of Jesus is a further proof of the great malice and the destructive power of sin. The lacerated members of Christ, His sorrowful death on the Cross, proclaim that sin is a form of deicide. Jesus, the most beautiful of the sons of men, through sin, became the "despised and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows.... He was bruised for our sins," so that "from the sole of His foot unto the top of His head, there is no soundness therein" (*Is* 53,3-5 – 1,6). Sin made Christ a martyr and brought Him to His death; still we must understand that Christ went to His Passion and death "because it was His own will" (*ibid.* 53,7), for by means of it, He wished to vanquish death and restore divine friendship to man.

Jesus, our Head, invites us, His members, to unite with Him in His work of destroying sin : to destroy it in ourselves down to the very roots, that is, in our evil inclinations, and to destroy it likewise in His other members by allowing Him to work in us. This is the law of solidarity, for the misfortune of one is the misfortune of the others; each sin is a burden on the whole world and disturbs the equilibrium of God's plan. Therefore, every Christian, and more especially, every soul consecrated to God, must throw himself ardently into the battle against sin and fight it with the proper weapons : penance, expiatory prayer, and most of all, love. When the love of charity is perfect, it destroys sin more efficaciously than the fire of purgatory. In this we see why the saints were able to convert so many souls. God used the fire of their charity to do away with sin in sinners.

COLLOQUY

"O my God and my true Strength! How is it, Lord, that we are cowards in everything save in opposing Thee?"

To this the children of Adam devote all their energies. Were not reason so blind, the combined energies of all men put together would not suffice to make them bold enough to take up arms against their Creator and maintain a continual warfare against One who in a moment could plunge them into the depths. But because reason is blind, they act like madmen courting death, for they imagine that this death will bring them new life : they act, in short, like people bereft of reason. O incomprehensible Wisdom! In truth Thou needest all the love which Thou hast for Thy creature to enable Thee to endure such folly, and to await our recovery, and to seek to bring it about by a thousand kinds of means and remedies.

“ It amazes me when I consider how we lack the effort to take in hand a very small thing, and how we really persuade ourselves that, even if we so desire, we cannot flee from some occasion of sin and avoid something which imperils our soul, and yet that we have effort and courage enough to attack so great a Sovereign as art Thou. How is it, my Good? How is this? Who gives us this strength?

“ O Lord, what hardness of heart! Oh, what folly and blindness! We are distressed if we lose anything, the merest trifle. Then why are we not distressed at losing that great Treasure which is the Majesty of God, and a kingdom in which our fruition of Him will be endless. Why is this? Why is this? I cannot understand it. Do Thou, my God, cure such great folly and blindness.... The loss of so many souls hurts me so much that I am beside myself. I cry to Thee, Lord, and beseech Thee to give me the means of contributing to the winning of souls by my prayers, since I am not good for anything else.... It seems to me that I would willingly sacrifice a thousand lives to save even one of the many souls which are being lost! I believe, Lord, that You treasure one soul that we gain for You by our prayers and works, thanks to Your mercy, more than all other services that we can render You ” (*T.J. Exc, 12 - 14 - F, 1 - Way, 1*).

101

VENIAL SIN

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, inflame me with Your holy zeal, so that I will no longer be able to tolerate in myself the slightest thing which is displeasing to You.

MEDITATION

1. Venial sin, like mortal sin, goes counter to God's will, although with less serious deviation. While it does not destroy charity, it is opposed to it and therefore diminishes its fervor and vigor, hindering its development. This is the disastrous effect of deliberate venial sin committed with the realization that it is displeasing to God.

Once venial sins of this kind become habitual, they decrease the soul's tendency toward God, and increase, on the other hand, its leaning toward self-satisfaction and creatures. Thus, little by little the soul loses its fervor, its sense of sin, and falls into tepidity, which is characterized by a certain indifference to venial sin. This puts it in danger of offending God in serious matters also. In this sense, venial sin may be compared to a disease of insidious languor, a kind of spiritual tuberculosis, which undermines the organism slowly but fatally. It is not unusual to meet souls who having at first surrendered themselves to God with sincere fervor, afterwards let themselves fall into continual carelessness, indifference, voluntary omissions, and laziness, because they have given in to selfishness and sought their own comfort. They become incapable of making the generous efforts required to advance on the way they have started. Their spiritual life is reduced to a kind of lethargy which is not yet death, but which has none of the freshness and vigor of a strong, healthy life. It lacks the fervor of charity, for this is continually being lessened by deliberate concessions to venial sin.

To put us on our guard against such a state, St. Teresa of Jesus declares, "Always be fearful if you do not feel sorry for the faults you commit, for even venial sin ought to fill you with sorrow to the very depths of your soul.... For the

love of God, take care not to commit any deliberate venial sin, even the smallest.... And can anything be small if it offends God?" (*Con 2 - Way 41*).

2. Quite different are the venial sins which we commit through frailty or inadvertence. Very often the soul is determined not to give in at any price; due to its weakness, however, it falls when temptation comes, especially if the attack is unexpected. Nevertheless, once aware of it, the soul feels sincere sorrow, repents at once, asks God's pardon, rises, and sets out again. Such sins cause no great harm to the soul; they are signs of its frailty and show that it has not yet reached spiritual maturity. Moreover, if the soul sincerely humbles itself after these falls, it will draw profit from them and a more profound knowledge of its own misery, which will make it mistrust its own strength entirely and place all its confidence in God alone. It will experience in a practical way the profound truth of the words of Jesus, "Without Me you can do nothing" (*Jn 15,5*). It is not unusual for God to permit these falls, and He does so precisely to give the soul this practical knowledge of its nothingness, and to anchor it firmly in humility, the foundation of all our spiritual life.

In regard to faults of this kind, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus felt that we can be sure "they do not grieve the good God," because they are not caused by a will intent on sin, by indifference or by coldness; they spring from the weakness of human nature.

If because of our weakness it is impossible for us to avoid these little daily venial faults of inadvertence or frailty, it is important to know how to detest them and to make generous reparation. As to deliberate venial sins, we should be firmly resolved not to commit them for anything in the world.

COLLOQUY

"*Peccavi, Domine, miserere mei!* Pardon, Father, pardon me, a miserable ingrate. I owe it to Your goodness that I am still Your spouse, even though I am unfaithful to You by my faults. *Peccavi, Domine, miserere mei.* O my soul, what are you doing? Are you not aware that God sees

you always? You can never hide yourself from His sight, for nothing is hidden from Him.... O eternal God, Father of all goodness and mercy, have pity on us because we are blind and in darkness, and I, more than anyone else, am miserable and to be pitied.... O true Sun, enter my soul and illumine it with Your brightness. Drive out the darkness and give me light; melt the ice of my self-love and kindle in me the fire of Your charity. *Peccavi, Domine, miserere mei*" (St. Catherine of Siena).

"May His Majesty be pleased to make us fear Him whom we ought to fear and understand that one venial sin can do us greater harm than all the forces of hell combined" (T.J. *Life*, 25). Indeed the real evil, the only one I have to fear, is neither temptation, nor trial, nor interior or exterior contradictions, nor the loss of material things or of health, but only what is contrary in any way at all to my union with You, my sovereign Good! This evil, I see, can be caused by one single venial sin, committed deliberately. O Jesus, I beseech You, through the merits of Your Passion, deliver me from this great evil, take away from me the wretched power to offend You, and if, because of my innate weakness, it is impossible for me to avoid these faults, grant that they may never be the consequence of my bad will. May my faults serve only to humiliate me, not to offend You.

Because of my weakness, I often fall. "Often I lose sight of what is my only care, and straying from Your side, allow my wings to be draggled in the muddy pools of this world. Then 'I cry like a young swallow,' and my cry tells You all, and You remember, O infinite Mercy, that You 'did not come to call the just, but sinners'" (T.C.J. *St*, 13).

IMPERFECTIONS

PRESENCE OF GOD - O my God, make me understand how necessary it is for the soul to be pure in order to be united to You who are infinite Perfection!

MEDITATION

1. While venial sin always consists in a more or less slight transgression of one of God's laws, imperfection is the omission of some good act to which we are not obliged by any law, but one which charity invites us to do. To illustrate : when I am aware of the possibility of performing a better act suited to my state, in accord with my actual capabilities, in harmony with my duties, and for the accomplishment of which I may reasonably believe that I am inspired by the Holy Spirit, I cannot deliberately refuse to do it without real actual imperfection. In this case, my *refusal* to perform a better act cannot be judged to be good, nor can it be justified by the thought that I am free to omit this better action since no law or commandment obliges me. This would be an *abuse* of that liberty which was given me by God for the sole purpose of making me capable of adhering to the good, uninfluenced by my passions. In fact, in the last analysis, my *refusal* to perform the better act always implies a lack of generosity, motivated by a little selfishness, laziness, meanness, or fondness for my own comfort, all of which are evidently contrary to perfection.

Viewed from this angle, it is clear that voluntary imperfection can never be conformable to the will of God, and that consequently, like sin, it is contrary to charity which tends to full conformity with the divine will. Hence, it is important for a soul striving for union with God to eliminate from its conduct every voluntary imperfection. In this sense, St. John of the Cross admonishes us : "For the soul to come to unite itself perfectly with God through love and will...it must not intentionally and knowingly consent with the will to imperfections." Furthermore, he teaches that attachment to even one habitual voluntary

imperfection suffices to impede the soul "not only from divine union, but also from progress in perfection" (*AS I*, 11,3).

2. If we wish to go into further detail, we can think of other types of imperfection. Let us consider, first of all, the breaking of a law which of itself does not bind us under pain of sin, as is generally the case with the Constitutions or Statutes of the various Religious Orders and Institutes. In this respect we must note that if there is no reasonable motive—proportionate and sufficient—to exempt us from one of these laws, these transgressions may very easily become venial sins through the absence of a morally good end. Indeed, St. Thomas teaches that man is always bound to act through a reasonable motive and for a good end. If the end is vitiated—as would be the case, for example, in breaking the rule of silence, of solitude, or of religious modesty, through curiosity, through regarding one's own convenience, or similar motives—the act becomes sinful; and in general there will be a question of "sins, at least slight ones, such as spiritual sloth, inconstancy, ingratitude and a certain hardness of heart which does not sufficiently esteem the help God gives us to do better" (Salamanticenses). Another form of imperfection is found in a certain lack of completeness in an act which is substantially good, but which is done, for example, with some reluctance, or without putting into it all the good will and fervor of spirit of which we are capable.

Every kind of imperfection in fact always comes from a want of effort, energy, and fervor in the spiritual life. It is always selfishness which, in one way or another, takes something away from God to satisfy the ego. We are too calculating, afraid of giving too much, and so selfishness clips our wings and keeps us from reaching full union with God.

COLLOQUY

Grant me, I beg You, O my God, a strong, generous charity, capable of destroying my selfishness down to its very roots. Oh! how well I understand that this self-love is the cause of so many of my little infidelities, of so many imperfections into which I habitually fall and which I do

not take care to correct, under the pretext that they are not sins!

These faults, however, are not without importance to a soul consecrated to You and bound to strive for perfection, to a soul called by You to sanctity and one whom You invite to complete union with Yourself. How can I pretend to be united to You, infinite Perfection, if I voluntarily commit so many and such great imperfections in my life? How can my will be entirely conformed to Yours, when I desire and love things that You do not desire and absolutely cannot love?

O Lord, I feel the weight of my egoism which drags me down. This self-love would like to possess everything without effort and flees with all its might from fatigue, sacrifice, and complete generous giving! I feel the weight of the flesh which is ever trying to lessen the measure of my giving, which postpones until tomorrow anything that is painful or distasteful, which makes a thousand excuses for avoiding an act of generosity!

I know all that, O Lord, and You know better than I these secret compromises of my self-love. But You also know that I want to love You with my whole heart and to give myself entirely to You. You know that my poor desires are sincere, even if they are not efficacious. Give me a real, effectual love, capable of overcoming all the opposition of self-love, and of demolishing all its plans. You who are infinite charity, consuming fire, kindle in my soul a spark of Your love that will destroy and consume my selfishness. If self-love is the weight which slows my progress toward You, grant that Your love will be a weight still heavier to draw me incessantly to You through a total gift of self, without reserve or limit.

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, cast a ray of light on my soul, so that I may be able to see myself as You see me and as You judge me.

MEDITATION

1. To insure an orderly and progressive growth in the spiritual life, *we must know ourselves*. We have to consider our sins, our weak points, our evil tendencies, as well as the progress we have already made, the favorable results we have attained, and our inclinations to good. This knowledge of our interior state is obtained through the *examination of conscience*. The examen considered in this way becomes one of the most important exercises of the spiritual life, since its object is to help the soul to rid itself of everything that might obstruct or delay its journey to God, and to stimulate it to quicken its pace toward Him. Just as we cannot wage war with an unknown enemy, or make conquest of an unknown region, in the same way it is impossible to fight the evil in ourselves if we have not previously identified it. We can never attain sanctity if we have not looked for an efficacious means of acquiring it. In other words, the examination of conscience attains its end when the soul who has faithfully practiced this exercise can say to itself : these are the inclinations which I must watch more carefully to avoid falling into sin; these, the weak points which I must strengthen; these are the virtues that I must practice most of all. In this way the soul will be able to formulate practical, firm resolutions which will then become the special subject of its subsequent examinations.

It is clear that we must first recognize and combat any tendencies which could lead us to mortal sin, but then, those that could bring us to venial sin or to simple voluntary imperfections must be similarly treated. Everything that constitutes a deliberate fault must be progressively and energetically rooted out of the soul which aspires to divine union.

2. Instead of trying to seek out all the faults it has committed, the soul living an interior life—one we assume to be free by now from mortal sin—should fix its attention on the degree to which its faults have been voluntary, even in the case of slight imperfections, because it is these deliberate faults that present the greatest obstacle to spiritual progress and to union with God. The soul must carefully investigate the cause of and the motive for these failures. It must realize that while its exterior faults are of various kinds—faults against charity, for example, or patience, or obedience, or sincerity—all of them, nevertheless, have one and the same cause, one common root which may be, for example, pride or sloth. It is precisely against this root of our sins and imperfections that we must direct our efforts, not simply to lessen it by mortification, but rather to fight it directly by the increase of the opposite virtues in ourselves. In other words, we must struggle against our dominant passion or fault; this is very important, for by aiming to destroy the evil at its root, we eliminate at the same time many actual faults.

When the soul has reached the point where it no longer has to reproach itself for deliberate faults and imperfections, it should turn its attention to those failures of surprise or inadvertence from which it has not yet succeeded in freeing itself, in spite of its sincere and often renewed resolutions. In these cases the soul, besides continuing the struggle against the root of its faults, will find it very useful to continually reinforce its firm purpose to overcome self. The more determined the soul is to correct its faults, the less voluntary will those be which escape it. They grow slighter and slighter and are often only the residue or the purely natural movement of habits once contracted but now detested.

Another important point that must not be overlooked in the examination of conscience is the remembrance of our duty to sustain and guard the desire for sanctity and to enliven our determination to do always what is most pleasing to God; here is the heart of the spiritual life, of generosity. It is also an excellent method to examine ourselves from God's point of view instead of our own, to ask ourselves if God is pleased with us and how He will judge our conduct.

COLLOQUY

" O God of my soul, what am I in Your presence! Have my acts ever been free from faults—my words, my will? But You, O Lord, are good and Your right hand is merciful.

" O Physician of my soul, show me the fruits of my avowal. I confess because the admission of my miseries awakens my heart and keeps it from slumber; but even while saying I am incapable of doing good, my soul awakes again in the love of Your mercy and the sweetness of Your grace, by which every sick soul feels strong and becomes aware of its weakness.

" I shall love You, O Lord, and return thanks to You and exalt Your Name because You have pardoned so many of my guilty acts. If my sins have melted away like ice, it is the work of Your grace and mercy. All the evil that I have not committed was likewise the work of Your grace. Was there any sin that I could not have committed, I who have loved evil with so light a heart? I confess that all my sins have been forgiven, both those that I committed as well as those that, with Your help, I did not commit" (St. Augustine).

O my God, You who by one single act of Your will created light—and light was made—speak again Your all-powerful creative word : *fiat lux*, and light will be created in my soul; and in Your light I shall be able to see myself as I really am in Your sight.

But light is not enough for me who am so weak and cowardly; I need strength, O Lord; I need a strong, resolute will to hate evil in all its forms, to have a horror of my self-love, my pride, my sloth, to renew and strengthen my resolution to overcome myself for love of You.

Yes, Lord, with Your help I wish to conquer myself, not for the vain satisfaction of thinking that I am doing better, but solely to give You pleasure, to avoid even the smallest thing that displeases You, to grow in Your love, to enter into closer union with You. O my God, infinite Perfection, envelop and penetrate my soul with the reflection of Your holiness, and just as the sun illumines, purifies and makes the earth fruitful with its rays, illumine, purify, and sanctify my whole being. Teach me to look at myself with Your eyes, to know myself as You know me, to consider my miseries in the light of Your infinite perfections, to open my soul to Your purifying, sanctifying light.

104

CONFESSiON¹

PRESENCE OF GOD - At the foot of Your Cross, O Jesus, I confess my sins. Pour over me Your Precious Blood that it may purify my soul.

MEDITATION

1. Penance is the sacrament of Christ's Precious Blood in which God—according to the eloquent words of St. Catherine of Siena—"has bathed us in order to cleanse the face of our souls from the leprosy of sin." If mortal sin only is the *necessary* matter of this sacrament, venial sin is sufficient matter, since all Catholic tradition insists on frequent confession, even when one has only venial sins to confess. However, those who confess weekly must take great care lest their confessions become a mere routine, instead of the really *vital acts* which would enable these souls to profit fully from all the graces offered by the sacrament.

"Do not despise the Blood of Christ!" exclaims St. Catherine of Siena. Certainly anyone who appreciates it will not approach the sacrament of penance lightly. To this end it is useful to recall that absolution is truly the pouring forth of the Precious Blood which, inundating and penetrating the soul, purifies it from sin, and restores sanctifying grace if it has been lost, or increases this gift if it is already present in the soul. The remission of sin and the imparting of grace are the fruits of the action of Jesus, expressed by the formula the priest pronounces in His Name : "I absolve thee." At that moment it is Jesus who is acting in the soul, either by remitting sin or by producing or increasing grace. It is well to remember that the efficacy of the absolution is not limited merely to sins that have already been committed, but that it even extends into the future. By means of the particular sacramental grace, the soul is strengthened beforehand against relapses and it is offered the fortitude to resist temptations and to carry out its good resolutions. The Blood of Christ is, in this sense, not only a remedy for the past, but also a

¹ See also Meditation 73.

preservative and a strengthening help for the future. The soul which plunges into it, as into a healthful bath, draws from it new vigor and sees the strength of its passions extinguished little by little. We see then the importance of frequent confession for a soul desirous of union with God, a soul which must necessarily aspire to total purification.

2. When the soul in the tribunal of penance has only venial sins to confess, it is not necessary that it preoccupy itself with confessing all of them, either as to their number or their kind. This completeness is necessary only when there is question of mortal sin. In other cases, however, it is much more profitable to fix the attention on deliberate faults first, then on those which are semi-deliberate—even if they are only simple imperfections—telling not only the faults themselves but also the motives behind them. Although this method is not required for the validity of the confession, it is certain that the soul will draw much profit from it since the accusation will have exposed the root of the evil. The soul will benefit too by its act of humility, which will be a stimulus to deeper repentance and will arouse in it a more ardent desire to amend its life, for this is the logical result of considering the motives—usually not noble ones!—from which our faults arise. Furthermore, an accusation of this kind helps the confessor to have a better knowledge of the penitent's weak points, and to suggest the most suitable remedies, a matter of special importance when direction is given with confession.

In addition to its accusation, the soul must also occupy itself with sorrow for its sins because they offend God, who is infinite Goodness. This should be a sorrow *ex amore*, springing from love, the repentance of the child who is more disconsolate over the displeasure given to a father who loves it so much and to whom it should return love for love, than over the thought of its guilt and the punishment it deserves. For the validity of the sacrament, sorrow is necessary; if it is lacking, the absolution will be null. However, the more perfect the contrition, the more effectively will the absolution erase not only the sin but also the temporal punishment which it has incurred. The Blood of Jesus will purify, renew, and enrich the heart of the penitent with fortitude, charity, and grace, in the measure of his contrition.

COLLOQUY

"Sweet Jesus, in order to clothe us again with the life of grace, You stripped Yourself of the life of Your body. The body which You stretched on the wood of the holy Cross is like a lamb which has been sacrificed and which is shedding its blood from every part of its body. In Your Blood, You have created us anew to the life of grace.

"Sweet Jesus, my soul ardently desires to be bathed and entirely submerged in Your Blood . . . since in Your Blood I find the source of all mercy; in Your Blood are clemency, fire, piety. In Your Blood, mercy abounds for our faults. In Your Blood, justice is satisfied and our hardness is melted; what is bitter becomes sweet and what is heavy becomes light. And since all virtues reach maturity in Your Blood, O Christ, inebriate my soul, engulf it in Your Blood, so that it will be adorned with real and solid virtues" (St. Catherine of Siena).

O Jesus, if just one drop of Your Precious Blood has the power to wipe out all the crimes of the world, what will it not do in me when You pour it so abundantly over my poor soul at the moment of absolution! O Jesus, revive my faith and give me a complete understanding of the immense value of the sacrament of Your Blood. Only Your Blood can wash away my sins, purify the stains on my soul, and heal and vivify it. Oh! grant that this salutary bath may cleanse my whole being and restore it entirely to Your grace and love!

Through the merits of Your passion, grant, O Lord, that I may always bring to the tribunal of penance a truly humble and contrite heart, an increasingly perfect sorrow for my faults, and a deeper and more sincere horror of anything that offends You, my God. Only if it finds no attachment to sin in me, will Your Precious Blood be able to penetrate the depths of my soul, renew it and vivify it wholly. O Jesus, grant that Your Precious Blood may bear its full fruit in me.

THE TRANSFIGURATION

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, grant that Your grace may triumph in me and make me worthy to participate in Your glorious Transfiguration!

MEDITATION

1. The soul of Jesus, personally united to the Word, enjoyed the Beatific Vision, which has as its connatural effect the glorification of the body. But this effect was impeded by Jesus, who, during the years of His life on earth, wanted to resemble us as much as possible by appearing "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (*Rom 8,3*). However, in order to confirm the faith of the Apostles who were shaken by the announcement of His Passion, Jesus permitted some rays from His blessed soul to shine forth for a few brief instants on Thabor, when Peter, James, and John saw Him transfigured : "His face did shine as the sun and His garments became white as snow." The three were enraptured by it, and yet Jesus had revealed to them only one ray of His glory, for no human creature could have borne the complete vision.

Glory is the fruit of grace · the grace possessed by Jesus in an infinite degree is reflected in an infinite glory transfiguring Him entirely. Something similar happens to us : grace will transform us "from glory to glory" (*2 Cor 3, 18*), until one day it will bring us to the Beatific Vision of God in heaven. But while grace transfigures, sin, on the other hand, darkens and disfigures whoever becomes its victim.

Today's Gospel (*Mt 17,1-9*) brings out the close connection between the Transfiguration and the Passion of Jesus. Moses and Elias appeared on Thabor on either side of the Savior. They conversed with Him, and as St. Luke explains, talked specifically about His coming Passion : "They spoke of His decease, that He should accomplish in Jerusalem" (*Lk 9,31*).

The divine Master wished to teach His disciples in this way that it was impossible—for Him as well as for them—to reach the glory of the Transfiguration without passing through suffering. It was the same lesson that He would give later to the two disciples at Emmaus : “Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and so to enter into His glory?” (*Lk 24,26*). What has been disfigured by sin cannot regain its original supernatural beauty except by way of purifying suffering.

2. In ecstasy before the vision on Thabor, Peter cried out with his usual eagerness, “It is good for us to be here,” and offered to make three tabernacles : one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elias. But his proposal was interrupted by a voice from heaven : “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him!” and the vision disappeared.

Spiritual consolations are never an end in themselves, and we should neither desire them nor try to retain them for our own satisfaction. Joy, even that which is spiritual, should never be sought for itself. Just as in heaven, joy will be the necessary concomitant of possessing God, so too on earth, it should be nothing but a means, enabling us to give ourselves with greater generosity to the service of God. To Peter, who wanted to stay on Thabor in the sweet vision of the transfigured Jesus, God Himself replied by inviting him to listen to and follow the teachings of His beloved Son. The ardent Apostle would soon learn that following Jesus meant carrying the Cross and ascending Calvary with Him.

God does not console us for our entertainment but rather for our encouragement, for our strengthening, for the increase of our generosity in suffering for love of Him.

The vision disappeared; the Apostles raised their eyes and saw nothing “*nisi solum Jesum*,” save Jesus alone, and with “Jesus alone,” they came down from the mountain. This is what we must always seek and it must be sufficient for us : Jesus alone, God alone. Everything else—consolations, helps, friendships (even spiritual ones), understanding esteem, encouragement (even from Superiors)—may be good to the extent that God permits us to enjoy them. He very often makes use of them to encourage us in our weakness; but if, through certain circumstances, His divine hand

takes all these things away, we should not be upset or disturbed. It is precisely at such times that we can prove to God more than ever—by deeds and not by words only—that He is our *All* and that *He alone suffices*. On these occasions the loving soul finds itself in a position to give God one of the finest proofs of its love : to be faithful to Him, to trust in Him, and to persevere in its resolution to give all, even if, by removing His gifts, He has left it alone. The soul may be in darkness, that is, subject to misunderstanding, bitterness, material and spiritual solitude combined with interior desolation. The time has come to repeat, “Jesus alone,” to come down from Thabor with Him, and to follow Him with the Apostles even to Calvary, where He will suffer, abandoned not only by men, but even by His Father.

COLLOQUY

“ You only do I love, my God. You only do I wish to seek and to follow; I am ready to follow You alone. I wish to be entirely at Your disposal. I beg You to order and command whatever You will, but cure me, open my eyes, that I may see Your slightest gesture. Cure me completely, that I may recognize You. Tell me which way to turn my attention in order to see You; and I hope that I shall be able to do all that You command me” (St. Augustine).

Permit me to follow you, O Jesus, not only to Thabor, but especially to Calvary. I am attracted by the light and splendor of Thabor; I want to see Your face, O my God, if only for an instant! Calvary is night, solitude, mournful sorrow which terrifies me, but in the darkness there stands a Cross on which I contemplate You, crucified for love. I glimpse Your face, not transfigured by glory, but disfigured by sorrow, the result of our sins!

O Jesus, destroy sin in me, the sin which has disfigured Your face and disfigured my soul created to Your image and likeness. But to bring about this destruction, I must share Your Calvary, Your Cross. Deign then, O Lord, to unite to Your Passion all the sufferings, little or great, of my life, that they may purify me and prepare me to rise from light to light, until I am completely transformed in You.

The light and glory of Thabor encourage me. Thank You, O Lord, for having allowed me, if only for a few moments, to contemplate Your splendor and to enjoy Your divine consolations. Fortified and encouraged by this, I come down from the mountain to follow You, *You alone*, to Calvary.

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HUMILITY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, You who were so humiliated for us, teach me how to practice true humility.

MEDITATION

1. Charity is the essence of Christian perfection, for charity alone has the power to unite man to God, his last end. But for us poor, miserable creatures, whom God wishes to raise to union with Himself, is charity the ultimate basis of the spiritual life? No. There is something deeper still which is, so to speak, the *basis* of charity, and that is humility. Humility is to charity what the foundation is to a building. Digging the foundation is not building the house, yet it is the preliminary, indispensable work, the condition *sine qua non*. The deeper and firmer it is, the better the house will be and the greater assurance of stability it will have. Only the fool "built his house upon the sand," with the inevitable consequence of seeing it crumble away very soon. The wise man, on the contrary, "built...upon a rock" (*Mt 7,24-26*); storms and winds might threaten, but his house was unshakable because its foundation was solid.

Humility is the firm bedrock upon which every Christian should build the edifice of his spiritual life. "If you wish to lay good foundations," says St. Teresa of Jesus to her daughters, "each of you must try to be the least of all" that is, you must practice humility. "If you do that...your foundation will be so firmly laid that your Castle will not fall" (cf. *Int C VII*, 4)

Humility forms the foundation of charity by emptying the soul of pride, arrogance, disordered love of self and of one's own excellence, and by replacing them with the love of God and our neighbor.

The more humility empties the soul of the vain, proud pretenses of self, the more room there will be for God. "When at last [the spiritual man] comes to be reduced to nothing, which will be the greatest extreme of humility, spiritual union will be wrought between the soul and God" (J.C. *AS II*, 7,11).

2. The soul who desires to reach the sublime heights of union with God must walk in the path of profound humility, for as the divine Master taught, only "he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (*Lk* 18,14).

The higher the ideal of sanctity to which we aspire, the more sublime the end toward which we tend, the more we will have to descend and excavate in ourselves the fertile abyss of humility. "*Abyssus abyssum invocat*" (*Ps* 41,8); the abyss of humility calls to the abyss of infinite mercy, of grace and of the divine gifts, for "God resisteth the proud, but to the humble He giveth grace" (*1 Pt* 5,5). We must humble ourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, sincerely recognize our nothingness, take account of our poverty; and if we wish to glorify ourselves, we must glory, like St. Paul, solely in our infirmities. It is only in our weakness, humbly acknowledged, that grace and divine virtue work and triumph (cf. *2 Cor* 12,9). Even if we are of the number of those good souls who sincerely desire to advance on the road to perfection, but who are relying too much on their own powers and personal initiative, we can apply to ourselves to great advantage the valuable warning that St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus gave a novice: "I see clearly that you are taking the wrong road; you will never reach the end of your journey. You want to scale a mountain, and the good God wills to make you descend.... It is Jesus who takes upon Himself to fill your soul according as you rid it of imperfections" (*C*).

The sublime ideal of union with God totally exceeds our capacities, which are those of weak creatures. If we aspire to it, it is not because we expect to reach it by our own efforts and initiative, but because we trust that God Himself, according to His promise, will come and lead us by the hand. But God will not act thus with a proud

soul. He stoops only to the humble; the more lowly He finds a soul, the closer He draws it to Himself. Humility deepens the soul's capacity to receive the fullness of divine gifts.

COLLOQUY

"O my God, You make me realize how far I must descend in order that my heart may serve as a dwelling-place for You : I must become so poor that I have no place whereon to lay my head. My heart is not wholly emptied of self, and that is why You order me to descend. Oh! I want to descend much lower, so that You will be able to rest Your divine head in my heart and know that there You are loved and understood. O sweet, divine Guest, You know my misery; that is why You come to me in the hope of finding an *empty tabernacle*, a heart wholly emptied of self. This is all You ask" (cf. T.C.J. L).

O Lord, help me to excavate in my poor soul that abyss of humility which will attract the abyss of Your infinite mercies. Help me to descend, although my pride seeks to rise. Help me to recognize and humbly confess my nothingness and my weakness, although my pride desires so much to have me esteemed as something great. Help me to glory in my infirmities, although my pride always tends to glory in what is not mine, but Your free gift. How true it is, O God, that grace follows an entirely different road from that of nature! Give me the strength to travel on this way with courage, to swim against the current, the muddy, treacherous current of my pride. How can I succeed if You do not come to help me? But I trust in You, Lord, because I know that You are always ready to uphold the weak who have recourse to You with trust; because I know that, if my pride is great, Your mercy is infinite and Your omnipotence is invincible; because I know that if "anyone is an inactive man that wants help, is very weak in ability and full of poverty, Your eye looks upon him for good, and lifts him up from his low estate and exalts his head" (cf. Sir 11,12,13).

O Lord, who is more "full of poverty" than I, who have not yet conquered my pride? Who then is in greater need of Your help?

OUR PLACE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O my God, help me to know You and to know myself! I know that You are He who is, and I am he who is not!

MEDITATION

1. Among all the creatures in which we take pleasure and toward which our nature seems to be attracted the most, *self* undoubtedly holds the first place. There is no one, no matter how limited in talents and good qualities, who does not love his own excellence, and who does not try, in one way or another, to make it shine forth to himself and to others. It is for this reason that we often spontaneously exaggerate our own worth, and as a result are demanding and pretentious. This makes us haughty and arrogant, as well as difficult in our relations with others. Humility is the virtue which keeps within just limits the love of one's own excellence. Whereas self-esteem often induces us to make ourselves too evident, or to occupy a place which is higher than our due, humility keeps us *in our own place*. Humility is truth : it tends to establish in truth both our intellect—by making us know ourselves as we really are—and our life, by inclining us to take, in relation to God and to men, our proper place and no other.

Humility makes us realize that, in the sight of God, we are only His little creature, entirely dependent upon Him for our existence and for all our works. Having received life from God, we cannot subsist even one moment independently of Him. He who gave us existence by His creative action, maintains life in us by His conserving action. In addition we cannot perform the slightest act without God's cooperation, in the same way that a machine—even a perfect one—cannot make any motion until it is started by the one who made it. It is very true that, unlike the machine, our acts are neither mechanical nor compulsory, but are conscious and free; yet, we cannot move even a finger without the concurrence of the divine Artist.

It follows then that everything we possess in the order of being—qualities, gifts, capacities—and everything we have accomplished in the order of action, is not ours, but all, in one way or another, are gifts of God, all are acts performed with God's help. "What hast thou that thou hast not received? And if thou hast received it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (*1 Cor 4,7*).

2. In the supernatural order, where everything depends on grace, the words of Jesus, "Without Me you can do nothing" (*Jn 15,5*), are more strictly verified. Although in Baptism, sanctifying grace raised us to the supernatural order, and the infused virtues made us capable of producing supernatural acts, still St. Paul says : "No man can say the Lord Jesus, but by the Holy Ghost" (*1 Cor 12,3*). In order to perform even the tiniest supernatural act we need God's help; we need actual grace which prevents us by its inspirations and accompanies us in the act until it is accomplished.

The great theologian, who has profoundly studied Catholic doctrine, has as absolute a need of actual grace in order to put into practice the most insignificant point of Catholic doctrine or to produce a single act of the love of God as does the peasant who knows nothing beyond his catechism. Even a saint, one who has received so many favors and divine lights and has attained to heroic virtue, cannot perform the smallest virtuous act without the help of actual grace. How total then must be our dependence upon God! We are very far from the truth if, trusting in our own knowledge or long practice in the spiritual life, we believe that our lights or our virtues are sufficient to make us act like good Christians. No, St. Paul warns us : "*sufficientia nostra ex Deo est*," our sufficiency is from God (*2 Cor 3,5*). Without God we cannot think, or speak, or desire any good, "for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to accomplish, according to His good will" (*Phil 2,13*).

Of ourselves, then, we have only the one capacity which belongs to our limited nature, injured by original sin : the capacity to fail in our duties and to sin. If we take away from ourselves what is of God, we will find that of ourselves we are nothing, or rather less than nothing, for nothingness is incapable of offending God, while we have this sad capability.

COLLOQUY

"O omnipotent Father, God of truth, God of love, permit me to enter into the cell of self-knowledge. I admit that of myself I am nothing, but that all the being and goodness in me comes solely from You. Show me my faults, that I may detest my malice, and thus I shall flee from self-love and find myself clothed again in the nuptial robe of divine charity, which I must have in order to be admitted to the nuptials of life eternal" (St. Catherine of Siena).

"Give me, O my God, a thorough knowledge of myself! Let me be really convinced that I am nothing and that You are everything! Do not let me think that I am anything more than the nothing I am. Let me do nothing more for myself, but all for You! Grant that no creature may think any more about me, do anything more for me, give me anything more, but let all be done for You and given to You. And may my nothingness be reduced to nothing in the eyes of all creatures and in Yours, my God, that You, the All, may be all, in all and through all" (St. John Eudes).

Reveal my nothingness to me, O Lord, reveal it so well that, not only shall I understand it, but I shall also have a practical, profound conviction of it. You know how painful that is to my proud nature! My intellect cannot resist the evidence of truth and is obliged to admit that I am nothing, have nothing, and can do nothing without You, yet my ego is always trying to attribute something to itself, to take the credit for this or that and to take as much pleasure in it as if it were its own. Help me, O Lord, to triumph over this pride which, as You see, steals Your gifts and makes my life sterile by preventing me from receiving the abundance of Your graces.

Grant that I may know my nothingness, O Lord, for the more I recognize it with simplicity and humility of heart, the more You will take pleasure in being my All—You are All, I am nothing; You, He who is and I, he who is not! Glorify Yourself then in my nothingness! May Your love and grace triumph in this nothing, but may Your mercy also triumph, for I am a nothing which has sinned.
Peccavi, Domine, miserere mei!

HUMILITY AND CONFIDENCE

PRESENCE OF GOD - Out of the depths of my misery I have cried to Thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice.... I trust in Thee.

MEDITATION

1. Christian humility does not lower, it elevates; it does not cast down, but gives courage, for the more it reveals to the soul its nothingness and abjection, the more it moves it toward God with confidence and abandonment. The very fact that in everything—in essence as in act, in the natural as in the supernatural order—we depend on Him, and that we can do nothing without Him, shows us that God wants to sustain us continually by His help and His grace. Consequently, the relations of a humble soul with God will be those of a child who confidently expects everything from its father. This is the lesson that Jesus wished to give His Apostles when they asked Him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven : "Amen, I say to you, unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt 18,3.4*). "To remain little," explains St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, "is to acknowledge one's nothingness and to expect everything from the good God, as the child expects everything from its father.... Even among the poor, a child, while he is very little, is given everything that is necessary, but when he has grown, his father no longer wants to support him, and says 'Go to work now! You can rely on yourself.' It is that I might never hear those words that I never wanted to grow up, because I felt incapable of earning my own living : *eternal life*" (*NV*).

To the soul who humbly acknowledges its poverty and turns toward God with complete confidence, He is a very tender Father who delights in showering His gifts upon it and in doing for it what it cannot accomplish by itself. Then the smallest soul—that is, the one most tho-

roughly convinced of its own nothingness—becomes the greatest, since it has the greatness of God Himself at its command.

2. God does not introduce a soul to a higher spiritual life, nor admit it to deeper intimacy with Himself, as long as it is not completely despoiled of all confidence in itself. When a soul practically forgets its nothingness, and still relies on its own strength, knowledge, initiative, or virtues—be it ever so little—God leaves it to itself. The failures which follow, the falls, the fruitlessness of its works—all reveal its insufficiency; and the more a soul insists upon trusting in itself, so much the more will the Lord prolong this experience of its nothingness.

In speaking of her definite, total conversion, St. Teresa of Jesus confesses that what prevented her from overcoming the last obstacles was really a remnant of confidence which she still had in herself. “I must have failed to put my whole confidence in His Majesty and to have a complete distrust of myself” (*Life*, 8). Confidence in God increases in proportion to our mistrust of ourselves; it becomes total when the soul, having acquired a thorough comprehension of its nothingness, has lost all faith in its own resources. The soul then realizes the truth of Jesus’ words : “When you shall have done all these things that are commanded you, say : We are unprofitable servants” (*Lk* 17,10). Even if the soul has had much experience in the interior life, in prayer and in virtue, it knows that it cannot rely on its own strength at all. It realizes that even if it has worked for the glory of God, it cannot depend on its own works; hence it will rely wholly and solely on God’s mercy and grace : *Non habeo fiduciam nisi in tua misericordia*. All its confidence rests on the infinite merits of Jesus, on the merciful love of the heavenly Father and on the workings of grace; and this confidence makes it more courageous, more daring than ever, because it knows that with God it can do everything.

“What pleases Jesus,” says the Saint of Lisieux, “is to see me love my littleness and poverty, the blind hope that I have in His mercy. This is my only treasure” (*L*).

COLLOQUY

" I admit, O Lord, that I am very weak; I have salutary proof of it every day. But You deign to teach me the knowledge which makes me glory in my infirmities. This is a very great grace, and only in it do I find peace and contentment of heart, for now I understand Your ways : You give as God, but You want humility of heart " (T.C.J. L).

O Lord, Your light penetrates my soul and makes me understand how far from Your ways are mine! Instead of being disturbed on account of my miseries and discouraged by my falls and failures, instead of pretending to succeed in everything and to accomplish great things, I must humbly accept the fact that I am weak, needy, and absolutely unable to get along without Your help.

How sweet it is, O my God, for a soul who loves You, to need You so much that it can do nothing without You! It is sweet for me, for in this way I learn that You wish constantly to take part in my poor life, that You want to sustain me always by Your grace, and that You will never of Yourself abandon me. To give me the fullness of Your divine help, You are only waiting for me to come before You with the humble, trusting attitude of a child who, not being able to rely on his own strength and resources, expects everything from his father. You wish me to be thoroughly convinced of my nothingness and to accept with love the fact that I am nothing so that You may be my All.

Deprive me, O Lord, of every remnant of confidence in myself. Every man is like the grass of the field which springs up today and tomorrow is not, and what greater foolishness is there than to rely on the strength of a blade of grass! Free me, O Lord, from such stupidity and place me, I beg of You, in the way of truth. O You who are Truth, sanctify me in the Truth, in the truth of my nothingness.

You alone are good, my God, and You alone can make me good. You alone are just and You alone can justify me. You alone are holy and You alone can make me holy. The less I expect from myself, the more I can and will expect from You : good-will and constancy, strength and patience, purity and goodness, virtue and sanctity. Hasten, O Lord, to come to my aid! My nothingness implores You, my misery sighs for You!

HUMILITY IN OUR FALLS

PRESENCE OF GOD - "I am a beggar and poor, but the Lord is careful for me. In the shadow of Thy wings will I hope" (*Ps 39,18 – 56,2*).

MEDITATION

1. If we contemplate our misery without raising our eyes to God, the Father of mercies, we will easily become discouraged. By examining ourselves thoroughly, we will see that discouragement always comes from two closely related causes. The first is that we depend upon our own strength; through it our pride is wounded and deceived when we fall. The second is that we lack reliance on God; we do not think of referring to Him in times of prosperity, nor do we have recourse to Him when we fail Him. In short, we act by ourselves : we try to succeed alone, we fall alone, and alone we contemplate our fall. The result of such conduct can only be discouragement. Indeed, how could we expect to find in ourselves the strength to rise again, when it was our very want of strength that made us fall? God does not want us to act by ourselves. "Woe to him that is alone," says Sacred Scripture, "for when he falleth, he hath none to lift him up" (*Eccl 4,10*). Woe to him who relies only on his own strength to put his good resolutions into execution. When he falls, he will not have the aid of God's might to lift him up; thus he will remain in his misery, confused and discouraged.

Just as we should not make good resolutions without counting on God's help to keep them, by the same token we should not view our failures without considering God's mercy at the same time, for as God is the only One who can help us persevere in good, so He alone can raise us up from evil.

That is why all the saints have taught that the knowledge of oneself must never be separated from the knowledge of God and vice versa. St. Teresa of Jesus says, "The soul must sometimes emerge from self-knowledge and soar aloft in meditation upon the greatness and the majesty

of its God. Doing this will help it to realize its own baseness better than thinking of its own nature, and it will be freer from the reptiles which enter the first rooms, that is, the rooms of self-knowledge" (*Int C I*, 2).

2. "True humility, however deep it may be, neither disquiets, nor troubles, nor disturbs the soul; it is accompanied by peace, joy, and tranquility.... It enlarges it, and makes it fit to serve God better." On the other hand, "false humility only disturbs and upsets the mind and troubles the soul, so grievous is it. I think the devil is anxious for us to believe that we are humble and, if he can, he will lead us to distrust God" (T.J. *Way*, 39).

Distress and lack of confidence lessen our capacity for loving and the devil's aim is to hold back souls on the road to love. He tries in this way to overcome those especially who would never give in to open temptations to sin. In this case we must react in a positive way and recall, as St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus teaches, that "what offends God and wounds His heart most is want of confidence" (*L*).

To be wanting in confidence in God's mercy, even after a grave fall, is never a sign of true humility but of insidious pride and diabolical temptation. If Judas had been humble he would have asked pardon and wept for his sins like Peter, instead of despairing. Humility is the virtue which keeps us in our place; and our place in God's sight is that of children who are weak and miserable, yes, but confident children.

When we fall into the same imperfections after so many good resolutions; when after many efforts we still do not succeed in correcting certain faults or in overcoming certain difficulties, and we find ourselves in one way or another far beneath what we ought or would like to be, let us have recourse to the infallible remedy of humility. "Humility," says St. Teresa of Jesus is "the ointment for our wounds" (*Int C III*, 2). Even if we seem to have used up all our strength, if we feel unable to do anything and see ourselves always prostrate, powerless to rise, there is still one possibility for us : to humble ourselves. Let us humble ourselves sincerely and with confidence; and humility will supply for all our miseries; it will heal all our wounds because it will attract divine mercy to them.

COLLOQUY

O Lord, my misery "does not surprise me. Nor does my utter helplessness distress me. I even glory in it, and expect every day to reveal some fresh imperfection. Indeed these lights on my nothingness do me more good than lights on matters of faith.

"What an illusion!... We wish never to fall? What difference does it make, O Lord, if I fall at every instant? It will make me realize my weakness and I shall derive great profit from it. You see what I am capable of, O my God, and so You will be obliged to carry me in Your arms. If You do not do so, it will mean that You are pleased to see me on the ground...but I shall not be disturbed. Full of love, I shall always lift up my suppliant arms to You. I cannot believe that You will abandon me.

"O Jesus, it is true that I am not always faithful, but I never become discouraged, I cast myself into Your arms, and like a little dewdrop, I sink deeper and deeper into Your chalice, O divine Flower of the field, and there I find all I have lost and much more besides.

"Yes, O my God, I am happy to feel little and weak in Your presence, and my heart remains in peace.... I am glad to feel so imperfect and to need Your mercy so much! When we calmly accept the humiliation of being imperfect, Your grace, O Lord, returns at once" (T.C.J. St - L - NV).

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HUMILIATIONS

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, humbled to abjection for me, teach me to humble myself for love of You.

MEDITATION

1. Many souls would like to be humble, but few desire humiliation; many ask God to make them humble and fervently pray for this, but very few want to be humiliated.

Yet it is impossible to gain humility without humiliations; for just as studying is the way to acquire knowledge, so it is by the way of humiliation that we attain to humility.

As long as we only desire this virtue of humility, but are not willing to accept the means thereto, are we not even on the true road to acquiring it. Even if in certain situations we succeed in acting humbly, this may well be the result of a superficial and apparent humility rather than of a humility that is real and profound. Humility is truth; therefore, let us tell ourselves that since we possess nothing of ourselves but sin, it is but just that we receive only humiliation and scorn. If we were really convinced of this truth, we would find it very just that all should humiliate us, treat us without consideration, and despise us. In fact, what honor and consideration does one deserve who has offended his Creator, when a single sin—even a venial one—is more deplorable and worthy of more contempt than the most miserable earthly condition, the poorest and lowest estate? The saints were so firmly convinced of this truth that they never found the humiliations which came to them too painful; they considered them, on the contrary, always less than they deserved. “I never heard anything bad said of me,” said St. Teresa of Jesus, “which I did not clearly realize fell short of the truth. If I had not sometimes—often, indeed—offended God in the ways they referred to, I had done so in many others, and I felt they had treated me far too indulgently in saying nothing about these” (*Way*, 15).

Bear your humiliations patiently, for man is tried in this crucible as gold in the fire (cf. *Sir* 2,4,5). If we feel the weight of our pride and wish to be rid of it, we must accept humiliations calmly—through them the Lord will crush our pride.

2. Before seeking humiliations on our own initiative, we should prepare to accept those which will come to us against our will. Whereas subtle pride might work its way into the lowly acts we impose upon ourselves—for example, the desire to appear humble—this danger is absolutely excluded from those which come from others in spite of ourselves. However, even in this case they must be willingly accepted in order to bear fruit. It is not the humiliation itself which makes us humble, but the act

of the will by which we accept it. St. Bernard teaches that being humble and being humbled are two different things. We can say that everyone, in one way or another, receives humiliations in this life. Not many, however, become humble because very few accept humiliation and submit to it patiently.

What profit do we draw from humiliations, if instead of accepting them, we oppose and resist them with resentment and vexation and become angry with the person who gives them to us?

It is true that these occasions are not agreeable to proud, sensitive nature; nevertheless, although we feel their bitterness, we must force ourselves to accept them graciously, making the words of the Psalmist our own : "It is good for me that Thou hast humbled me." If, in spite of all the repugnance and resistance of nature, we accept a humiliation by an act of the will, and assure God that we want to be content with it and to savor it thoroughly, we will gradually become humble. The hard, bitter bread of abasement will become, little by little, sweet and pleasant, but we will not find it agreeable until we have been nourished by it for a long time. Moreover, the most important thing is not the sweetness, but the willingness to accept everything that is humiliating. "Allow thyself to be taught, allow thyself to be commanded, allow thyself to be enslaved and brought into submission and despised, and thou shalt be perfect!" (*J.C. SM II*, 33).

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, how can a person like me, who deserves to be tortured by demons for eternity, be insulted? If I am badly treated in this world, is it not just? Really, Lord, I have nothing to offer You in this regard.... I know that I am so guilty in Your eyes that I feel that those who insult me are treating me too well, although they think they are offending me, not knowing me as well as You do" (*T.J. Way*, 36).

How true it is, O God, that the only thing that I, a sinner, receive by right is humiliation, insults, scorn. And yet, how troubled and excessively sensitive I am when anything hurts my pride; You know, O my God, how much I wish

to get rid of this propensity. I can truthfully say that with the help of Your grace I detest it, and that nothing is more hateful to me. Nevertheless, I have not the strength to accept the remedy You offer me. How shall I have the courage, Lord, to ask You for humiliations, when I have rejected them so often, changing them from medicine into occasions for new acts of pride?

Instead of seeing in humiliations the remedy You provide to cure my pride, how many times have I looked only at the creatures You used to humble me, and irritated by them, I have been indignant and rebellious, as if treated unjustly. How blind I am, O Lord, how far have I wandered from Your ways! Come to bring the light again into my soul, come to place me in the truth, come to set my feet anew on the good, safe way of humiliation.

I do not ask You for particular humiliations, but I do ask You to dispose my heart to accept those which, in Your infinite love and mercy, You have prepared for me from all eternity. In them, I see Your remedy, adapted to my pride; if up to the present I have often refused to taste it, help me now not to lose the smallest drop of it. I am ill, O Lord, and like the patient who wants the medicine which will cure him and who swallows it, bitter though it be, I too, with the help of Your grace, wish to accept and to drink to the very dregs every humiliation. But help me, O sweet Jesus, You who willed to know every form of abasement, for without You I shall only fail in my good resolutions.

III

HUMILITY OF HEART

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto Thine.

MEDITATION

1. Jesus expressed Himself only once in these words : "Learn of Me," and this was when He was speaking of humility. "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble

of heart" (*Mt* 11,29). Knowing how much the practice of real humility would cost our proud nature, He seemed to want to give us special encouragement. The example He gave in the extraordinary humiliations which made Him "the reproach of men, and the outcast of the people" (*Ps* 21,7), those humiliations by which, out of love for men, He was "made sin" (*2 Cor* 5,21) and the bearer of all our iniquities, even to being "reputed with the wicked" (*Mk* 15,28), is certainly the strongest stimulus and the most urgent invitation to the practice of humility.

Jesus speaks directly to us about humility of heart, because every virtue, every reform of life, if it is to be sincere, must come from the heart, whence come our thoughts and our actions. The exterior attitude and the humility of our words are useless unless accompanied by lowliness of heart; many times they are but the mask of a refined—and therefore all the more dangerous—pride. "First make clean the inside," said Jesus when He was branding the Pharisees' hypocrisy, "that the outside may become clean" (*Mt* 23,26). St. Thomas teaches that "an interior disposition to humility puts its seal upon the words, gestures, and acts, by means of which that which is hidden within is manifested on the outside" (*II^a II^{ae}, q.161, a.6).*

Therefore, to be truly humble, we must apply ourselves first of all to humility of heart and continue to deepen the sincere recognition of our nothingness, of our weakness. Let us acknowledge our faults and failings without trying to assign any other case for them than our misery; let us recognize the good that is in us as a pure gift of God and never claim it for our own.

2. Humility of heart is a virtue which is at the same time both difficult and easy. It involves hardship because it is totally opposed to pride, which is always urging us to exalt ourselves; it is easy because we do not have to look very far to find grounds for it; we find them—and how abundantly—in ourselves, in our own misery. However, it does not suffice to be wretched in order to be humble—only he is humble who sincerely acknowledges his own unworthiness and acts accordingly.

Man, proud by nature, cannot reach this acknowledgment without God's grace, but since God never refuses necessary grace to anyone, we have only to turn to Him

and ask Him with confidence and perseverance for humility of heart. Let us ask for it in the Name of Jesus who humbled Himself so much for the glory of His Father and for our salvation; "ask for it in His Name, and you will receive it" (cf. *Jn* 16,24). If in spite of our sincere desire to become humble, movements of pride, vain glory, or idle complacency arise in us, we must not become discouraged, but know and admit that they are the fruit of our fallen nature and use them as a new motive for abasing ourselves.

We should remember that we can practice humility of heart, even when we are not able to perform special exterior acts of humility, even when no one humiliates us and we are, on the contrary, the object of confidence, esteem, and praise. St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus said in like circumstances : "The remembrance of my weakness is so constantly present to me that there is no room for vanity" (*St.*, 11). Let us remember, then, that "reproaches do not make us more guilty, and neither does praise add anything to our holiness" (*Imit.* II, 6,3). We must humble ourselves within, the more we are praised by others. If humility of heart is practiced in this way, it will give us such a low opinion of ourselves that we will not be able to prefer ourselves to anyone; we will consider others better and more worthy of esteem, respect, and consideration than we are. Thus we will be in peace, undisturbed by the desire to be better than others, undisturbed by the humiliations which may come to us. The fruit of humility is interior peace, for Jesus has said : "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you shall find rest to your souls" (*Mt* 11,29).

COLLOQUY

O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, cure me of my pride, make my heart humble, infuse a little of Your profound humility into my soul. Since You know me better than I know myself, how could I, with my proud will, make my heart humble? A poor man cannot give wealth to himself, nor can a proud man give humility to his heart. Only Your infinite goodness can heal pride.

"This is the remedy to fix my gaze on You, Incarnate Word, hanging on the Cross. As soon as You see a humble

soul looking at You in this way, You are quickly moved to look at it, and the effect of Your divine glance is like that of a ray of sunshine on the earth : it warms it and prepares it to bring forth fruit. This is the way You act, O divine Word, who by the light of Your glance, drain my soul of all its pride, and consume it in Your fire. No one can acquire humility if he does not fix his gaze on You, O Word, on the Cross " (St. Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi).

" O divine Word, You humbled Yourself even unto death and willed to be treated as the least of men by sinners, by demons, and even by the Holy Spirit and by Your eternal Father. You did all this to glorify Your Father, to make reparation for the offenses committed against Him by our pride, to confound and destroy our arrogance and to teach us to detest vanity and to love humility. Oh! how truly can we see that pride dishonors God and is very displeasing to Him, since it was necessary for You, the Son of God, to be so humiliated in order to atone for such dishonor! We can truly say also that vanity is a monstrous thing, since in order to destroy it, You were willing to be reduced to such humiliation! Oh! how firmly must we believe that in the eyes of God humility is an infinitely precious treasure and a jewel most pleasing to Him, since You, His divine Son, willed to be so humiliated to make us love this virtue, and to urge us to imitate You in the practice of it, and thus merit the grace to perform its works!" (St. John Eudes).

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THE POWER OF JESUS

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, divine Strength, I come to You to seek support for my weakness, and infirmity.

MEDITATION

1. On the first Sunday in Lent, the Church showed us Jesus in His struggle with the devil, but while she presented

Him to us then in an attitude of humble defense before the devil's temptations, today we see Him in an attitude of attack which culminates in a glorious victory.

The Gospel (*Lk* 11,14-28) tells us that there was a poor man possessed by the devil and he "was dumb." By a single act of His divine power Jesus "cast out the devil," and when he went out, "the dumb spoke, and the multitudes were in admiration at it." But the enemy, as if to avenge his defeat, insinuates into the minds of the Pharisees the shameful calumny : "He casteth out devils by Beelzebub, the prince of devils." Jesus is accused of being possessed by the devil and of having received from the devil power to free the possessed man. Our Lord, however, wills to completely unmask the enemy and with clear logic replies that Satan cannot give Him such power, because thereby Satan himself would be helping to destroy his own kingdom. No, it cannot be so : Jesus drives out devils by "the finger of God," by divine virtue. If Satan is powerful and his satellites join with him in the struggle to rule over man, Jesus is still more powerful and will overcome him and snatch away his prey. He has come to destroy the kingdom of Satan and to establish the kingdom of God.

If in these days God still permits the devil to carry on his evil work against individuals and society, Jesus by His death on the Cross has already paid the price of our victory. This treasure is at our disposal. Through the virtue and grace of Christ, every Christian has the power to overcome the enemy's attacks. The triumph of evil should not disturb us, for it is only an apparent victory. The might of Jesus is stronger and He is the one and only victor.

2. We must work in union with Jesus that His victory over evil may be our own. In today's Gospel the Master Himself shows us several aspects of this collaboration.

"Every kingdom divided against itself shall be brought to desolation"; in these words Our Lord tells us that union is the secret of victory—union with Him above all, for without Him we can do nothing, but also union with our neighbor. If we would work for the triumph of good, let us collaborate—one heart and one soul—with our superiors and our fellow religious. We can often labor with much more efficacy in achieving good if we give up our own personal ideas and act in perfect harmony with

others. It may even be necessary sometimes to renounce opinions, plans, and ways which are better in themselves. Let us not be deceived; unity is always to be preferred. Division never leads to victory.

"He that is not with Me is against Me," Jesus adds. Christianity does not tolerate indifference. He who is not firmly on Christ's side, working with Him for the extension of His kingdom, by this very fact is opposed to Him and to what is good. He is an enemy of Christ and a partisan of evil. To omit the good one could do and ought to do is evil, and is consenting to the extension of evil.

The first condition necessary for victory over evil is active cooperation in the work of Christ in union with our brethren. The second condition is vigilance. Jesus warns us that the enemy of good is lying in wait. Even after he leaves a soul, he is ready to return, more powerful than before, "with seven other spirits more wicked than himself" if he finds the soul empty and open to his snares. To halt the approach of evil we must watch in prayer, filling our heart with God so that there will be no place in it for the enemy. And there is no place when the soul is wholly united to God through the acceptance and observance of His word, of His will. In fact, Jesus answered to the woman who praised His Mother: "Yea rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." Of course, the Virgin Mary is blessed because she gave birth to the Redeemer, but she is still more blessed through her perfect union with Him in the observance of His word. This blessedness is not reserved for Mary alone; it is offered to every soul of good will and constitutes the greatest guarantee of victory over evil, for one united to God becomes strong with His strength.

COLLOQUY

"My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for He shall pluck my feet out of the snare. Look Thou upon me, and have mercy on me; for I am alone and poor. Keep Thou my soul and deliver me: I shall not be ashamed, for I have hoped in Thee" (*Ps 24,15-20*).

"O eternal Trinity, O most high and eternal Trinity, You give us the Word, full of sweetness and love. O sweet

and loving Word, Son of God, if our nature is weak and capable of every evil, Yours is strong and disposed to good, because You have received it from Your eternal, all-powerful Father. O sweet Word, You have strengthened our weak nature by uniting it to Yourself. Our nature is fortified by this union, for the power of Your Blood takes away our weakness. We are also strengthened by Your doctrine, for he who follows it in truth, perfectly clothing himself with it, becomes so strong and capable of good, that he loses, as it were, the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit and can overcome every evil. So You, O eternal Word, substituted for our human weakness the strength of Your divine nature which You received from the Father; and this strength You have given to us by Your Blood and Your doctrine.

“O sweet Blood, You fortify and illumine the soul; in You it becomes angelic, because You cover it with the fire of Your charity so that it forgets itself entirely and can no longer see anything except You.

“O divine Truth, You give so much strength to the soul which clothes itself with You, that it never falters under the weight of adversity or beneath the burden of troubles and temptations, but in every struggle it gains a great victory. I am wretched because I have not followed You, O eternal Truth; hence I am so weak that in every least tribulation I fall” (St. Catherine of Siena).

THE LOWEST PLACE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, You who said, “The Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister” (*Mt 20,28*), teach me to love the lowest place.

MEDITATION

1. Jesus has proved to us not only in words, but also by example, that He came not to be ministered unto but to minister. This example He gave on the eve of His Passion,

as if to leave it to us as a testament, together with His last and most precious instructions. Before instituting the Holy Eucharist, Jesus like a common slave, "began to wash the feet of the disciples," and when He had finished, said : "I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you do also," for "the servant is not greater than his lord; neither is the apostle greater than He that sent him" (*Jn* 13,15.16). The instruction is clear : to be true disciples of Jesus, we must humble ourselves as He did. Note that here it is not only a question of humbling ourselves before God, but also before our neighbor. To consider ourselves servants in our relations with God is not difficult, but to do so in dealing with others will call for real effort. It is harder still to let ourselves be treated like servants without any attention or consideration, and even by those who are our inferiors. Yet Jesus, infinitely superior to all, willed to be treated not only as a servant, but as a slave and even as a malefactor.

Just as humility makes us recognize our place of inferiority and absolute dependence before God, so too does it assign us to the "lowest place" in relation to our neighbor. "Woe to you, because you love the uppermost seats in the synagogues" (*Lk* 11,43), said Jesus to the Pharisees, condemning their desire for the first places, for honorable duties and positions, and He added, "When thou art invited, go, sit down in the lowest place" (*Lk* 14,10). As far as we are able, wherever we are, we must seek the last place doing so with such simplicity and naturalness that no one who notices us will come and invite us to go up to the first place. We must expect that invitation only from God, and not in this life but in the next.

2. At the Last Supper, Jesus wanted to give the Apostles a further lesson in humility. While they were arguing about which of them should be considered the greater, He warned them : "He that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is the leader, as he that serveth," since I also "am in the midst of you as he that serveth" (*Lk* 22,26.27). Whenever Jesus speaks of our relations with our neighbor, He always insists that each of us should take the place of him who ministers, considering himself the servant of the others. When He showed them a little child as a model of perfection He said, "If any man

desire to be first, he shall be the last of all, and the minister of all" (*Mk* 9,34). This teaching He repeated when He put His disciples on guard, lest they imitate the proud attitude of the Pharisees : "He that is the greatest among you shall be your servant" (*Mt* 23,11). The idea is clear : for those who follow Christ the privileged place of honor is that of servant, and the divine Master insists that those who occupy important positions must be the most zealous to become the servants of all.

If we hold some authority, we must remember that it has been given not to honor us, but for the service of others. If we are not elevated above the common level, we should do nothing to exalt ourselves to a prominent position. Finally, if our status is an inferior one, we should occupy it gladly, never attempting to leave it. By assigning us to a lowly position, God Himself has taken care to make us practice humility, and this is one of the greatest graces He has given us. Let us try to correspond to it by exercising this virtue faithfully.

"The only thing for which you will not be envied," said St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, "is the lowest place; therefore, the lowest place is the only one where there is no vanity and affliction of spirit" (*C*).

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, when You were a pilgrim here below, You said, 'Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' My soul finds its rest in seeing You, the powerful Monarch of the Heavens, clothed in the form and nature of a slave, humbling Yourself to wash the feet of Your Apostles. Then I recall the words You spoke to teach me how to practice humility : 'I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you do also.... The servant is not greater than his lord.... If you know these things, you shall be blessed if you do them' (*Jn* 13,15-17). With the help of Your grace, O Lord, I understand these words which came from Your gentle, humble heart; and with the help of Your grace I wish to put them into practice. "I want to abase myself humbly and submit my will to others, not contradicting them nor asking if they have the right to give me orders. No one

had this right over You and yet You were obedient, not only to the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph but even to Your executioners.

"O Lord, You could not humble Yourself any more in order to teach me humility. That is why I want to respond to Your love by putting myself in the lowest place and by sharing Your humiliations, so as to be able to share the kingdom of heaven with You hereafter. I beg You, divine Jesus, send me a humiliation every time I try to put myself above others. But Lord, You know my weakness; every morning I make a resolution to practice humility, and every evening I acknowledge that I still have many failures. I am tempted to be discouraged by this, but I know that discouragement also has its source in pride. That is why I prefer to put my trust in You alone, O my God. Since You are all-powerful, deign to create in my soul the virtue for which I long" (T.C.J.).

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THE HIDDEN LIFE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, hidden God, teach me the secret of the hidden life.

MEDITATION

1. During His life on earth, Jesus chose to conceal His divinity under the veil of His humanity. Except on very rare occasions—and this is especially true during the thirty years preceding His apostolate—He never allowed His greatness, His wisdom, or His omnipotence to be manifest. Later, during the years of His public life, He willed to adapt Himself to the Apostles' imperfect way of living and acting, He who was infinitely superior to them. Jesus is truly the hidden God and teaches us by His example the value of the hidden life.

To imitate Jesus' humility perfectly, we must share in His hidden life, veiling, as He did, everything, in us that might attract attention or praise from others, whatever

might single us out or make us noticed, fleeing as far as we are able from every mark of distinction. "*Ama nesciri et pro nihilo reputare*," love to live unknown and reputed as nothing (*Imit.* I, 2,3); by doing this we will become more like Jesus who, being God, willed to take "the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man" (*Phil* 2,6.7). Jesus Himself has taught us how to practice the hidden life, insisting that we do our good works in secret, only to please God, and without ostentation. He tells us also to guard the secret of our interior life and our relations with Him : "When thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber and shut the door"; to conceal our mortifications and penances : "When thou fastest, anoint thy head and wash thy face"; not to display our good works : "When thou dost give alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth," for those who do their good works before men, to be seen by them, "have received their reward" and will receive no further one from their heavenly Father (cf. *Mt* 6,1-18).

2. "Work for the sole end of pleasing God, never looking for any human praise" (*Sp*). This was the program of St. Teresa Margaret of the Heart of Jesus, the saint of the hidden life. Because she wanted to reserve for God alone the gift of her whole being, she tried to hide from the eyes of others the riches of her interior, her heroic virtues; and she succeeded in this to such an extent that her life was the perfect realization of the maxim : "To live alone with God alone." The soul who is ever looking for approbation, praise, and the esteem of creatures does not live alone with God. Its interior life cannot be very profound, nor its relations with God very intimate. Such a soul is still living on the surface. Thus, preoccupied as it is with the effect it is producing and with what others may be thinking or saying about it, it easily lets itself be influenced in its actions by human respect and the desire to attract the good will and the esteem of others. As a result, simplicity will often be lacking in its conduct as well as a pure intention and perhaps even sincerity. The supernatural is still too bound up with the natural to be able to dominate its life, and indeed it very often acts not to please God and to give Him glory, but to please others, to win their affection, to gain a more or less honorable position.

When "we observe in ourselves a desire for something brilliant," said St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, "let us humbly take our place with the imperfect and know that we are weak souls who must be sustained every instant by God" (cf. *C.*). The Saint also asked : "O Jesus, grant that no one may think about me, that I be forgotten and trodden underfoot like a little grain of sand" (*St*, 8). The interior soul wishes to be known and loved by God alone; therefore, it hides itself from creatures.

COLLOQUY

"O Jesus who has said, 'My kingdom is not of this world,' You teach me that the only kingdom worth coveting is the grace of being 'unknown and esteemed as naught' and the joy that comes from self-contempt.... Ah! like You, I want my face to be hidden from all eyes; I want no one here below to esteem me! You wanted 'neither beauty nor comeliness.... Your look was as it were hidden and despised, whereupon we esteemed You not.' I too, wish to be like You, without comeliness and beauty, unknown to every creature.

"Yes, all must be kept for You with jealous care, because it is so sweet to work for You alone! Then the heart is filled with joy and the soul with gladness! Grant that no one may think of me, that my very existence may be, as it were, unknown to all; only one thing do I desire : to be forgotten and counted for nothing. Yes, I want to be forgotten, not only by creatures, but even by myself, so as to be totally reduced to nothingness and to have no other desire than Your glory, my Jesus—that is all! My own, I abandon to You" (*T.C.J. St*, 7—*NV-L*).

O Lord, to be forgotten by people, to work without having my labor known, to spend in silence and self-effacement a humble life in which nothing appears great, nothing is worthy of attention—all this will thoroughly mortify my pride. This will be a powerful remedy for my innate desire to make myself important.

I confess, O Lord, and You already know, that unlike the saints, I am far from desiring to be forgotten and ignored. I often use little ways of drawing attention to myself and of putting myself forward. But You know, Jesus, that I am

ill, and You also know that I wish to be cured by modeling my life on Yours. It is only in order to be like You that I can accept and love effacement; it is only to merit Your love, Your glance, Your intimacy, that I can renounce the good will and esteem of creatures. O Jesus, increase my desire to live for You alone, and I will find it sweet to live unknown to men.

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TO BE HIDDEN FROM MYSELF

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, totally consecrated to the glory of the Father through complete forgetfulness of Yourself, teach me how to forget myself.

MEDITATION

1. In order to enter the fullness of the hidden life, it is not enough to hide oneself from the attention of others; we must also hide from ourselves, that is, forget ourselves, avoiding all excessive concern about ourselves. We can be preoccupied with self not only from a material point of view, but also from a spiritual point of view. To be overly concerned about one's spiritual progress, about the consolations which God gives or does not give, about the state of aridity in which one may be—all this is often the sign of a subtle spiritual egoism, a sign that the soul is more occupied with itself than with God. We must learn to forget ourselves, to hide from ourselves, by refusing to examine too minutely what is happening within our soul, and by not attaching too much importance to it, renouncing even the satisfaction of wanting to know the exact condition of our own spiritual life. It is well to understand that God often permits painful, obscure states just because He wants the soul to live hidden from itself. This was the aim of St. Teresa Margaret's program of self-effacement; she intended not only "to live, as it were, hidden and unnoticed" among her sisters, but "to be, in a certain manner, hidden and

unknown to herself, to die to herself without knowing it and without feeling any pleasure in this mystical spiritual death, burying in Christ, in a very subtle way, every thought and personal reflection, even in the spiritual and eternal order." This is what complete forgetfulness of self explicitly proposes to one who renounces even the spiritual satisfaction of recognizing his own immolation. But in order to avoid turning one's thoughts inward, the soul must focus its aspirations elsewhere; hence the *negative* exercise of not thinking of itself must accompany the *positive* exercise of fixing its *center* in Christ, of "burying in Christ" every thought, every preoccupation with self, even in the spiritual order. No one can succeed in turning away from himself unless he concentrates all his attention on the object of his love. St. Teresa Margaret completely forgot herself; her thoughts were absorbed "in Christ," her one Well-Beloved.

2. A soul entirely oblivious of self is also completely disinterested. It no longer serves God in a mercenary spirit, with more regard for the reward which it may receive than for His glory, but it is "at His service," according to St. Teresa's beautiful expression, "*gratuitously*, as great lords serve their king" (*L*). This should be the attitude of an interior soul called by God to a life of intimacy with Him. Such a one should act not as a hireling, but as a daughter or a spouse. Here we have one of the most beautiful fruits of the hidden life. St. John of the Cross teaches that "more pleasing to God is one good work, however small it be, that is done in secret with no desire that it be known, than a thousand that are done with the desire that they be known to men. For he that with purest love does such works for God's sake, not only cares nothing to have men see him, but does them not even that God Himself may see him. Such a man, even though God were never to know it, would not cease to render Him the same services, with the same joy and purity of love" (*SMI*, 20). We find this same delicate thought in St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus: "If the good God Himself were not to see my good deeds (which is impossible), I would not be disturbed. I love Him so much that I would want to please Him, without His knowing that it is I who am doing it" (*C*).

This total purity of intention makes the soul act for God alone and never for personal interest, even of a spiritual

nature. God will certainly reward our good works, but concern about this is wholly abandoned to Him as long as the soul is intent only on giving Him pleasure. The hidden life thus finds its culminating point in a complete disinterestedness, not only concerning human rewards and praises, but also in regard to spiritual consolations; our soul seeks God alone and God alone is sufficient for us. Even if, apparently unaware of our love and our services, He leaves us in aridity and abandonment, we do not worry nor stop on this account, since the one motive which actuates us is to please God alone.

COLLOQUY

O my God, teach me how to forget myself, to bury every preoccupation, all excessive care of myself in You. Why do I wish to serve You, O Lord? Why do I desire to love You and to advance in the paths of sanctity? Would it be for my own interest or foolish self-complacency? Oh! how mean the spiritual life which would have such vain and low aims! No, my God, You have created me for Your glory, and I humbly ask to be able to live for it alone, without personal interest or satisfaction!

Is not the honor You do me sufficiently great when You allow such a miserable, wretched creature to consecrate its life to glorifying You—when a poor worm like me can procure glory for You, O God most high, O infinite Perfection? What more could I wish, O Lord? Would it be better to please creatures than the Creator, to satisfy myself rather than God? O Lord, I wish to serve and please You alone, to give pleasure to You alone; this will be my only satisfaction, the only reason for my joy. I understand that if You lead me by an obscure and arid road, if You often permit the darkness to deepen around me, it is only because You want to teach me to serve You with a pure intention, seeking nothing but Your satisfaction, not my own. If You allow me to continue to practice the interior life and virtue without seeing any results, if You veil my eyes to my slight progress, it is to establish my soul in humility. If I had more light, or if the workings of Your grace were more evident in me, perhaps I would glorify myself and halt my progress toward You, the one object of my affection.

O Lord, how admirable are Your ways! Blessed be this interior obscurity which protects me from the dangers of spiritual pride! No, my God, I do not ask You to change my path; on the contrary, I beg You to continue to lead me in the same way, the road of complete self-effacement, veiled not only from the eyes of others, but even from my own. And if, by Your grace, there is anything good in me, it will be for Your pleasure and not mine; if I were to take satisfaction in it, everything could be ruined in a moment. Keep me, then, in the shadow of Your wings, teach me how to serve You out of pure love; show me how to forget myself entirely, to hide all concern for myself in You, to put my soul into Your hands with complete abandon. In order to gain it for You, I give it up to You, I want to lose it in You; in You I shall find it again clothed in Your beauty.

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TO BE HIDDEN WITH CHRIST IN GOD

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, help me to hide from creatures in order to enter into intimacy with You.

MEDITATION

1. When we speak of the hidden life of Jesus, we do not mean only His self-effacement in the eyes of men, from whom He concealed His divinity, thus avoiding their praise. Besides these exterior relations with creatures, we must penetrate into the secret places of His heart where, hidden from human eyes, another life goes on, a secret one of much greater sublimity. It is His interior life, a life of intimacy with the Trinity. Jesus' sacred soul, personally united to the Word, unceasingly enjoys the Beatific Vision. It sees the Word, the subject of all its activity. It sees the Father, the cause of its Being. It sees the Holy Spirit, who dwells in it as "His chosen temple," and who, by covering it with the flame of His love, draws it toward God in the perfect accomplishment of His will. Externally Jesus lives with

men, deals with them as if He were one of them, but His real life, His existence as the Son of God, is lived hidden from all human sight, with the Trinity and in the Trinity. The imitation of Jesus' hidden life has for its ultimate end the participation in His interior life; that is, to be hidden "with Christ in God," in order to enter with Him the sanctuary of the Most Holy Trinity. St. Teresa Margaret expressed this in her ardent desire to "emulate by faith, insofar as it is possible for a creature, the hidden, *interior* life and activity of the intellect and will of the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ, hypostatically united to the Word" (*Sp*).

The practice of the hidden life has, therefore, two aspects : the first, negative and mostly exterior, consists in hiding ourselves from the eyes of others and even from our own and in dying to glory and worldly honors. The second, which is positive and entirely interior, consists in concentrating on God in a life of intimate relations with Him. The first aspect is the condition and measure of the second : the more a soul is able to hide from creatures, and even from itself, the more capable it will be of living "with Christ in God," according to the beautiful expression of St. Paul : "You are dead : and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (*Col 3,3*).

2. "My God, I desire to enclose myself forever within Your most loving Heart, as in a desert, so that in You, with You, and for You I may live a hidden life of love and sacrifice." In these words St. Teresa Margaret expressed her ideal of a life hidden with Christ. After long practicing the exterior, negative aspect of effacement, concealing itself from the eyes of creatures with constant fidelity, the soul is free and ready to hide itself with Christ in God. It no longer wastes its energy looking for esteem or human satisfactions; from this point of view creatures have become as nothing to it. It can say that "created things, its own as well as others', no longer give it the least worry or trouble; it is just as if they did not exist" (*T.M. Sp*). Thus the soul arrives at that sovereign liberty of spirit which permits it to concentrate itself wholly upon God. Exteriorly its conduct shows nothing extraordinary, or rather, the very care it takes to hide from the eyes of others makes it very often go unnoticed, and most people consider it a soul of little worth. But in its secret heart a very rich interior

life, known only to God, is developing. United to Jesus—in Him, with Him, by Him—it participates in His Trinitarian life. This means that it attains the plenitude, the end of the Christian life—for grace has been given to us in order to make us sharers in the divine nature, in the life of the Triune God. To this end the Word became Incarnate. By dying on the Cross, Jesus merited grace for us. He grafted us into Himself so that He could take us with Him into the bosom of the Trinity, from which sin had barred us. Not through our own merit or ability, but only through our union with Christ—our Mediator, our Bridge, our Way—can we penetrate with Him and by Him into the intimate life of God, into the life of the Trinity. Faith and charity which Jesus merited for us together with grace, enable us to enter into relations with the three divine Persons, to the extent that we can really live “hidden with Christ in God.”

A life hidden in God is the great attraction of interior souls, and to attain it, they are very happy to hide from their own eyes and the eyes of others, fleeing every shadow of earthly glory. O blessed self-effacement which introduces the soul to the “*vita abscondita cum Christo in Deo!*”

COLLOQUY

“O Jesus, I wish to strive solely to become a perfect copy of You, and since You lived a hidden life of humiliations, love, and sacrifice, henceforth mine must be the same; therefore I now wish to enclose myself forever in Your most lovable Heart, as in a desert, so as to live there in You, with You, and by You, that hidden life of love and sacrifice..... Since You inspire me to become as much as possible like You, all my efforts will tend toward that end. I shall imitate You especially in those virtues which are most pleasing to Your most lovable Heart—humility and purity of intention, interior as well as exterior—always working with a spirit of simplicity” (T.M. Sp).

O Jesus, deign to open Your loving Heart to me too, and permit me to take refuge in it, so that I may live hidden in God with You. Exterior things, fame, earthly glory, have no longer any attraction for me; is it not all vanity, a simple succession of circumstances which will soon cease

to be? The only life which attracts me and which will last forever, beyond all earthly contingencies, is that of intimate union with You. And this is the great treasure which You offer me by the merits of Your Passion. I contemplate You on the Cross, O Jesus, Your side rent by the lance, as if to tell me that Your death has opened the door of Your Heart to admit me into the sanctuary of Your interior life. Your death has, in fact, grafted my poor human life onto Yours and made it share in Your divine life, a life of intimate relations with the Trinity. This is true living and life eternal! I aspire to it, not by my merits, but by those of Your Passion. O Jesus, grant that I may seek my joy, my good, only in this participation in Your interior life, and put all my glory in it. Yes, let all my glory be within, in the secrecy of my life hidden with You in God.

117

TRUE GLORY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, who, for love of me, accepted the disgrace of death on the Cross, teach me what true glory is, and grant that for love of You I may learn how to overcome my desire for honor.

MEDITATION

1. St. Teresa of Jesus declares, "However slight may be our concern for our reputation," if we "wish to make progress in spiritual matters," we must "put this attachment right behind us," for "if questions of honor" prevail, we "will never make great progress or come to enjoy the real fruit of prayer," which is intimacy with God. The Saint also says that the reason why many people who have devoted themselves to the spiritual life, and are deserving on account of so many good works, "are still down on earth" and never succeed in reaching "the summit of perfection," is "punctiliose about their reputation. And the worst

of it is that this sort of person will not realize that he is guilty of such a thing, the reason being that the devil tells him that punctiliousness is incumbent upon him" (*Life*, 31 – *Way*, 12).

Attachment to our honor is expressed in all those susceptibilities, large or small, arising from our attitude of soul that wishes to affirm our personality, hold on to the esteem we receive from others and make our own point of view prevail. This shows up concretely in various schemes—more or less conscious and petty—to obtain or to keep certain privileged and honorable positions where our own views, which we always think are good, will prevail. By this means, we hope to make manifest our capabilities, our works, and our personal merits—so great and worthy of consideration in our own eyes. All this remains more or less disguised by the fact that we have—or think we have—the intention of acting with an eye to good. We decide, therefore, that what we do is legitimate. Yet we are not aware that this way of acting, though apparently done to defend the good, prevent scandals, and further good works, is only a defense of our own pride. This truth is made evident, for on similar occasions, when like circumstances have been resolved, we do not take as much trouble to defend the honor and the works of others as we would have done if these had been our own. A soul that allows itself to be preoccupied with such things is, as St. Teresa of Jesus says, bound to earth by "a chain which no file can sever. Only God can break it, with the aid of prayer and great effort on our part" (*Life*, 31).

2. To find out if we are really detached from sensitiveness about honor, we should not rely on the desires which sometimes come to us during prayer and make us think that we are ready to bear any kind of humiliation or scorn. Instead we must find out what our attitude is at the critical moment when something wounds our pride. Then it will be easy to see that "we refuse to be thwarted over the very smallest matter of precedence: apparently such a thing is quite intolerable" (T.J. *Way*, 16). These more or less sharp reactions of our sensitiveness show us clearly that we are very far from crushing underfoot our concern about honor. Our awareness of these failings will be the starting point for correcting them, for the greatest obstacle to acquiring

the virtues is the belief that we have already gained them and that it is no longer necessary, therefore, to practice them.

"God, deliver us," exclaims St. Teresa, "from people who wish to serve You yet who are mindful of their own honor" (*ibid.*, 12). We are trying to serve two incompatible masters at the same time—God and our own pride. Everything that a soul does to serve its ego and to defend its honor is taken away from the service of God, from the pure, sincere seeking of His honor and glory. Even if we sometimes seem to have real rights, it is only by sacrificing them, at least as far as our own person is concerned, that we shall attain to the liberty of spirit necessary for a deep interior life. Preoccupation with the defense of our rights continually distracts us from our ideal of union with God, deprives us of interior peace, and finally, involves us in so many worldly cares that it will often be an occasion of failing in charity and even in justice toward our neighbor. For it is very difficult, if not impossible, to keep up the defense of our own rights without more or less injuring the rights of others.

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, art Thou our example and our Master? Thou art, indeed. And wherein did Thy honor consist, O Lord, who hast honored us? Didst Thou perchance lose it when Thou wert humbled even to death? No, Lord, rather didst Thou gain it for all.... God grant that no soul be lost through its attention to these wretched niceties about honor, when it has no idea wherein honor consists.... O Lord, all our trouble comes from not having our eyes fixed upon Thee, we stumble and fall a thousand times and stray from the way" (*ibid.*, 36–16).

"We are trying to attain to union with God. We want to follow the counsels of Christ on whom were showered insults and false witness. Are we, then, really so anxious to keep intact our own reputation and credit? We cannot do so and yet attain to union, for the two ways diverge. When we exert our utmost efforts and try in various ways to forego our rights, the Lord comes to the soul" (T.J. *Life*, 31).

O Jesus, grant that my honor may consist solely in intimate union with You, in the effort to become more

and more like You. Although You were God and had the right to be treated and honored as God, You willed to be treated like the lowest of men! You wished no other right than to fulfill the will of the Father, to die on the Cross for His glory and our salvation. In the light of Your example, I have a better understanding of the meanness of my pride which, in order to defend foolish rights, loses itself in so much confusion and so many fruitless discussions. O Lord, why should I confine myself to crawling on the ground among the thorny roots of my passions, when You have created me to soar in the heavens? Oh! help me to free myself from the vain pretenses of my ego which, like a heavy weight, continually try to drag me down; help me to get rid of this great load, and to rise toward You, my God, in a sure flight!

118

NOT EXCUSING ONESELF

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, who willed to be silent before him who condemned You to death, teach me the art of not excusing myself.

MEDITATION

1. In any failure, fault, or personal error, our ego instinctively tries to excuse itself. It is the tactic of pride—which is not willing to admit its mistakes and schemes—to hide them under more or less false pretexts, always finding some way to blame them on other people or on circumstances. Adam and Eve acted in this way after their sin; it is also the instinct of anyone who commits a fault. Herein lies great danger for the soul, because it is impossible for us to correct our faults if we are not willing to acknowledge them. It requires great courage to tear down these ingenious but inconsistent constructions of self-love, to expose our failings and look them squarely in the face, just as they are, without blaming them on anyone but ourselves. “When we commit a fault,” said St. Thérèse

of the Child Jesus, "we must not attribute it to a physical cause, such as illness or the weather, but we must attribute it to our own lack of perfection.... Occasions do not make man weak, but they do show what he is" (*C*).

Excusing our faults may satisfy our pride; but in reality, it is voluntarily blinding oneself and making oneself incapable of seeing the true situation. Thus our poor soul is not only unable to advance, but is condemned to grope in the dark with no possibility of escape. On the other hand, if we sincerely recognize our faults, we have already taken the first step toward correcting them. Yet it is not enough to avoid excusing ourselves interiorly; we must also guard against exonerating ourselves before others. In other words, after acknowledging our failings before God, we must also confess them before men, accept a correction humbly, and repair the bad example we may have given. At the same time, it would be of little value to receive an accusation or a reproach silently, if the soul—even at the cost of great struggle and effort—did not also avoid excusing itself interiorly.

2. Rebukes very often annoy us because we think they are not entirely in proportion to our faults and failings. We do not realize that this is one of the inevitable consequences of human limitations; only God who reads our hearts can judge our acts with perfect justice. Men see but the exterior, and therefore, even when it is their duty to correct us, they do not always evaluate correctly, but may often make mistakes either by excess or by deficiency. If we are willing to accept only the observations which perfectly correspond to our faults, we will very often be in danger of making excuses, protesting, giving explanations, and if we cannot do this outwardly, we shall do it at least interiorly. Thus we will lose the benefit we could have derived from the corrections, had we received them with humility of heart.

St. Teresa of Jesus urges souls eager to arrive at union with God to great generosity on this point, telling them to accept, without excusing themselves, every correction or rebuke, even if not wholly deserved, and even if wholly unjust. "It takes great humility," said the Saint, "to find oneself unjustly condemned and be silent, and to do this is to imitate the Lord, who set us free from all our sins....

The truly humble person will have a genuine desire to be thought little of, and persecuted, and condemned unjustly, even in serious matters. For if we desire to imitate the Lord, how can we do so better than in this? And no bodily strength is necessary here, nor the aid of anyone save God." And then she adds very shrewdly : " Properly speaking, we can never be blamed unjustly, since we are always full of faults.... If we are not to blame for the thing that we are accused of, we are never wholly without blame in the way that our good Jesus was" (*Way*, 15).

" But Jesus held His peace" (*Mt* 26,63), says the Evangelist, in showing us Our Lord before the Tribunal. A soul who aspires to intimate union with Jesus must know how to unite itself to His silence even when accused most unjustly. When special reasons — such as avoiding scandal or causing displeasure to someone — require that excuses be made, they will be limited to what is strictly necessary, with careful weighing and pondering so that the grace of the humiliation may not be lost.

COLLOQUY

O Lord, I pray that Your light will be so abundant in me that it will disperse, like fog before the sun, all those excuses by means of which my self-love tries to cover my failings and faults. Enable me to recognize all my defects and to judge them as You do. Rule over my heart so that it will not try to find subtle reasons for manufacturing excuses for my faults. And if, because of my weakness, I fall easily, grant that I may at least confess it humbly to You and to others. Take away from my conscience the mask of vain, pitiful excuses which prevents me from seeing myself as You see me and know me, as I really am in Your eyes. Then, O Lord, give me the humility necessary to accept with good will the corrections of others. With Your gentleness extinguish my sensitiveness which is ever ready to burst into flame and to be resentful, and grant me the grace to imitate Your meekness and humility in the presence of Your judges.

" O Lord, when I think in how many ways Thou didst suffer, and in all of them undeservedly, I know not what to say for myself or what I am doing when I make

excuses for myself. Thou knowest, my God, that if there is anything good in me it comes from no other hands than Thine own. Should I desire that no evil be spoken of a thing so evil as myself, when they have said such wicked things of Thee, who art good above all other good? It is intolerable, my God; nor would I that Thou shouldst have to tolerate anything displeasing to Thine eyes being found in Thy handmaiden. For see, Lord, I am blind, and I content myself with very little. Do Thou give me light and make me truly desire that all should hate me, since I have so often left Thee, who hast loved me with such faithfulness.

"What is this, my God? What does it matter to us if we are blamed by all, provided we are without blame in the sight of the Lord?" (*T.J. Way*, 15).

119

THE MULTIPLICATION OF THE LOAVES

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, true Bread of eternal life, appease my hunger.

MEDITATION

1. Today there is a pause of holy joy and spiritual comfort which the Church, like a good mother, gives us in the middle of the Lenten austerity so that we may renew our strength. "Rejoice, O Jerusalem," the Introit of today's Mass sings, "and all you who love her, leap with joy and be filled with the abundance of her delights." What are these delights? The Gospel (*Jn* 6,1-15) answers the question by the narrative of the multiplication of the loaves, the great miracle by which Jesus meant to prepare the people for the announcement of a much more startling miracle, the institution of the Holy Eucharist, in which He, the Master, would become our Bread, the "living Bread which came down from Heaven" (*ibid.* 6,41) to nourish our souls. This is the cause of our joy, the source of our

delight. Jesus is the Bread of life, always at our disposal to appease our hunger.

Although Jesus appreciates spiritual values much better than we, He does not forget or despise the material necessities of life. Today's Gospel shows Him surrounded by the crowd which had followed Him to hear His teachings. Jesus thinks of their hunger, and to provide for it, performs one of His most outstanding miracles. With His blessing, five loaves of bread and two fishes suffice to feed five thousand people, with twelve basketfuls left over.

Jesus knows that when a person is tormented by hunger or material needs, he is unable to apply himself to the things of the spirit. Charity likewise requires of us this understanding of the bodily necessities of others, a practical understanding which translates itself into efficacious action. "If a brother or sister be naked and want daily food, and one of you say to them, 'Go in peace' ... yet give them not those things that are necessary for the body, what shall it profit?" (*Jas 2,15.16*).

The Apostles had suggested to the Master that He dismiss the crowd "that they may buy themselves victuals" (*Mt 14,15*). Jesus did not agree but provided for them Himself. We, too, must strive, as far as we are able, to show ourselves solicitous for the needs of others.

2. Before performing this miracle, Jesus asked Philip, "Whence shall we buy bread wherewith to feed these people?" And the Evangelist observes, "He said that to try him, for He knew what He was about to do." There is no difficulty in our lives for which God does not know the solution. From all eternity He has foreseen it and has the remedy for each case, no matter how complicated the situation may be. However, sometimes in difficult circumstances He seems to leave us alone as if the outcome were to depend on us, but He does this only to test us. He wants us to measure our strength against the difficulty—which makes us more aware of our weakness and insufficiency—and He wants us also to exercise our faith and our confidence in Him. The Lord never really abandons us unless we forsake Him first. He only hides Himself and covers His actions with a dark veil. This is the time to believe, to believe firmly, and to wait with humble patience and complete confidence.

The Apostles tell Jesus that a young boy has five loaves and two fishes, that this is very little, in fact, nothing at all for feeding five thousand men. But the Lord asks for this nothing and uses it to accomplish a great miracle. It is always thus : the all-powerful God, who can do everything and create from nothing, when dealing with His free creatures, will not act without their help. Man can do but very little; yet God wants, asks for, and requires this little as a condition of His intervention. Only the Lord can make us saints, as only He could multiply the small supplies of the young boy; still He asks for our help. Like the boy in the Gospel, we too must give Him everything in our power; we must offer Him each day our good resolutions, renewed faithfully and lovingly, and He will bring about a great miracle for us also, the miracle of our sanctification.

COLLOQUY

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who, on the Cross, with Your arms extended for the redemption of all men, drank the chalice of unspeakable sorrows, deign to help me today. Poor am I, but I come to You who are rich; in my wretchedness I present myself to You, the All-merciful. Ah! grant that I may not leave You, empty and deceived. I come to You hungry; do not let me go away fasting. Weak, I approach You; do not turn me away unstrengthened! And, if I sigh with hunger, grant me the grace to be nourished” (St. Augustine).

Yes, I hunger for You, true Bread, living Bread, Bread of life. You know what my hunger is—hunger of the soul, hunger of the body—and You will to provide for the one as well as for the other. By Your teaching, by Your Body and Blood, You strengthen my spirit; You strengthen it abundantly, withholding nothing, except what I myself keep by the coldness of my love, the smallness of my heart. You have set a rich and abundant table for me, beyond anything imaginable, which I have only to approach in order to be fed. You not only welcome me, but You Yourself become my food and drink when You give Yourself wholly to me, wholly in Your divinity, wholly in Your humanity.

In Your infinite goodness, You have even set a table for my body, and Your Providence feeds it, clothes it, and maintains it in life like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. You know my needs, my pains, my preoccupation with the past, the present, and the future; and You provide for everything with a paternal love. O Lord, why do I not confide in You, why do I not cast all my cares on You, certain that You will find a remedy for all of them? I entrust my life to You, the life of my body, my earthly life with all its needs and its labors, as well as the life of my soul with all its necessities, its pains, its hunger for the infinite. Only You can fill up the emptiness in my heart, only You can make me happy. You alone can bring about my ideal of sanctity—union with You.

120

THE VALUE OF OBEDIENCE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus most obedient, make me understand the value of obedience.

MEDITATION

1. St. John of the Cross has said, "God wants from us the least degree of obedience and submission, rather than all the works we desire to offer Him" (*SM I*, 13). Why? Because obedience makes us surrender our own will to adhere to God's will as expressed in the orders of our superiors; and the perfection of charity, as well as the essence of union with God, consists precisely in the complete conformity of our will with the divine will. Charity will be perfect in us when we govern ourselves in each action—not according to our personal desires and inclinations—but according to God's will, conforming our own to His. This is the state of union with God, for "the soul that has attained complete conformity and likeness of will (to the divine will), is totally united to and transformed in God supernaturally" (*AS II*, 5,4).

The will of God is expressed in His commandments, in the precepts of the Church, in the duties of our state in life; beyond all that, there is still a vast area for our free choice, where it is not always easy to know with certitude exactly what God wants of us. In the voice of obedience, however, the divine will takes on a clear, precise form; it comes to us openly manifest and we no longer need to fear making a mistake. Indeed, as St. Paul says, "There is no power but from God" (*Rom 13,1*), so that by obeying our lawful superiors, we can be certain that we are obeying God. Jesus Himself, when entrusting to His disciples the mission of converting the world, said, "He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me" (*Lk 10,16*).

He teaches us here that ecclesiastical superiors represent Him and speak to us in His Name. Furthermore, St. Thomas points out that every lawful authority—even in the natural order, such as the civil and social spheres—when commanding within the just limits of its powers manifests the divine will. In this very sense, the Apostle does not hesitate to say, "Servants, be obedient to them that are your lords...as to Christ...doing the will of God from the heart" (*Eph 6,5,6*).

2. One of the greatest obstacles to full conformity of our will to God's is our attachment to our own desires and inclinations. Obedience, because it asks us to be governed by the will of another, is the best way of accustoming ourselves to renounce our own will, of detaching us from it, and of making us cling to the divine will as revealed in the orders of our superiors. The stricter the form of obedience to which we submit—that is, the more it tends to govern not only some particular detail but our whole life—the more intense will its practice be, and the more surely will it make us conform to the will of God. This is the great value of obedience : to unite man's life with the will of God : to give man in every circumstance, the opportunity to govern himself, not according to his weak, fragile will, which is so subject to error, blindness, and human limitations, but according to the will of God. This divine will has such goodness, perfection, and holiness that it can never be mistaken nor will what is evil; it aims only at the good—not the transitory good, which today is and tomorrow is not—but the eternal, imperishable good.

Obedience makes us this happy exchange : renunciation of our own will for God's will. For this reason the saints loved obedience. It is said of St. Teresa Margaret of the Heart of Jesus that, not only did she obey orders promptly, but she experienced intense pleasure in doing so—her whole aspect expressing the joy she found in obeying. If it is costly to nature to give up one's own will, to renounce a plan, a project, or a much cherished work, the interior soul will not stop at this act of renunciation, but will realize that by suffering and struggling to overcome itself, it will be carried much further. The soul is fixed in the will of God which comes hidden in the voice of obedience and it tends toward this will with all its strength, for to embrace the will of God is to embrace God Himself.

COLLOQUY

“ Oh! how sweet and glorious is this virtue of obedience, which contains all the other virtues! Because it is born of charity, and on it the rock of holy faith is founded, it is a queen, and he who espouses it knows no evil, but only peace and rest. The tempestuous waves of evil cannot hurt him because he sails in Your holy will, O my God.... He has no wish which cannot be satisfied because obedience makes him desire You alone, O Lord, who know his desires and can and will fulfill them. Obedience navigates without fatigue, and without danger comes into the port of salvation. O Jesus, I see that obedience conforms itself to You; I see it going with You into the little boat of the holy Cross. Grant me, then, O Lord, this holy obedience anointed with true humility. It is straightforward and without deceit; it brings with it the light of divine grace. Give me this hidden pearl trampled underfoot by the world, which humbles itself to submit to creatures for love of You ”
(St. Catherine of Siena).

O Lord, I have only one life; what better way could I use it for Your glory and my sanctification, than to submit it directly to obedience? Only by doing this shall I be certain that I am not wasting my time or deceiving myself, for to obey is to do Your will. If my will is very imperfect, Yours is holy and sanctifying; if mine has only the sad power to lead me astray, Yours can make holy my life and all my

acts—even the simplest and most indifferent—if they are accomplished at its suggestion. O Lord, the desire to live totally in Your will urges me to obedience and compels me to love and embrace this virtue, in spite of my great attachment to my liberty and independence.

O holy, sanctifying will of my God, I want to love You above everything else; I want to embrace You at every moment of my life; I do not want to do anything without You or outside of You.

121

COME, FOLLOW ME

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, obedient even unto the death of the Cross, teach us to follow Your example.

MEDITATION

1. Jesus said to the young man who was aspiring to perfection, "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor,"—the evangelical counsel of poverty—"and come follow Me" (*Mt 19,21*),—the counsel of voluntary obedience, according to St. Thomas. To follow Jesus means to imitate His virtues, among which obedience certainly ranks first. Jesus came into the world to accomplish the will of His Father : "It is written of Me that I should do Thy will, O God" (*Heb 10,7*). Several times during His life He said it expressly : "I came down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him that sent Me" (*Jn 6,38*); and He declared that His food, His sustenance, the support of His life, was the fulfilling of His Father's will (cf. *ibid. 4,34*). But Jesus also wanted to express concretely His dependence on His heavenly Father, by submitting Himself to those creatures who in the natural order had authority over Him as man. Thus he lived for thirty years subject in all things to Mary and Joseph, recognizing His Father's authority in theirs. "He was subject to them," the Gospel says (*Lk 2,51*), as it summarizes in these few

words the long years of the private life of the Savior. Later, during His public life, and especially during His Passion, Jesus always gave an example of obedience to constituted authority, civil as well as religious, even subjecting Himself to His judges and executioners and making Himself, according to the words of St. Paul, "obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross" (*Phil 2,8*). Having come into the world through obedience, Jesus wanted to live in obedience and through obedience. He embraced death, repeating in the Garden of Olives: "Father...not My will but Thine be done" (*Lk 22,42*). To follow Jesus in the life of perfection means that we must voluntarily embrace a life of total dependence. St. Thomas concludes from this that obedience belongs to the essence of the state of perfection.

2. To follow Jesus means to carry out fully His invitation: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself" (*Mt 16,24*). Now the greatest act of renunciation that man can make is just this sacrifice of his liberty by submission to obedience in all things. In fact, "nothing is dearer to man than the freedom of his own will, for this is what makes him master over others; because of this freedom, he can use and enjoy other goods and is master of his acts. Even as a man by abandoning his wealth or his kinsfolk renounces them, so by surrendering the freedom of his own will, by which he is master of himself, he renounces himself" (St. Thomas, *The Perfection of the Spiritual Life*). For this reason the vow of obedience is the greatest and most meritorious sacrifice man can offer to God.

To permit our life to be ruled by another—in this the sacrifice of obedience consists. Every man is free, having received his liberty from God; therefore, he has the right to govern himself according to his own judgment and personal views.¹ Hence anyone who promises obedience uses his freedom to renounce this right, *voluntarily* offering it as a free holocaust for the service, worship, and glory of God. As the holocaust of the chosen people was a victim entirely consumed in honor of God, no part of it being spared, similarly the vow of obedience immolates the *whole* man to the honor of God. Obedience then makes a sacrifice

¹ This does not dispense him from conforming his personal views and his own judgment to God's.

of our being to its depths, or to be more exact, it sacrifices everything selfish in it—our attachments to our opinions, inclinations, and our personal demands. In this sense, nothing helps to free us from love of self, to strip us of ourselves as much as obedience. At the same time, far from destroying our personality, obedience makes use of it in a most glorious and sublime way, by enabling it to surrender itself in order to adhere entirely to God, to His holy, sanctifying will.

COLLOQUY

“ O Jesus, You would not have one that loves You well take any other road than that which You Yourself took ” (cf. T.J. F., 5). And now I have decided to follow You, to walk in Your footsteps on the path of holy obedience, a way hollowed out in the solid rock of Your example, of Your most humble submission, of Your ineffable subjection. “ O God, You who reign over the angels, You whom the principalities and powers obey, were subject to Mary, and not only to Mary, but also to Joseph because of Mary. For God to obey a creature is humility without a parallel. O Lord, You abase Yourself, and I, shall I exalt myself? O my soul, if you disdain to imitate the example of a man, it will certainly not be unworthy of you to imitate your Creator. If perhaps you cannot follow Him wherever He goes, at least follow Him to the point to which He willed to descend for you ” (cf. St. Bernard).

O Jesus, grant that I may follow You in the way of obedience; give me a profound spirit of faith so that I shall always be able to recognize Your voice and will in the command of obedience. “ Teach me, O Lord, to abandon myself with confidence to Your words : ‘ He who hears you, hears Me. ’ Teach me to forget my own will; You appreciate this sacrifice very greatly because it makes You Master of the free will which You Yourself have given me. I wish to offer You this gift in its plenitude, with no reservation whatever. Grant that I may be faithful to this resolution and then, in spite of the repugnances and opposition of nature, I shall succeed in conforming myself to what You command; in short, whether it costs me pain or not, I shall succeed in submitting myself. I know indeed, O Lord, that You will not fail to help me, and in subjecting my

reason and will for love of You, You will teach me how to become master of them. Once I am master of myself, I shall be able to consecrate myself perfectly to You by offering You a pure will, for You to unite to Your own" (cf. T.J. F, 5).

122

FREE SACRIFICE OF LIBERTY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, divine Lamb, immolated voluntarily for the glory of the Father, make me understand the great value of voluntary immolation.

MEDITATION

i. The vow of obedience has been excellently defined as the "free immolation of liberty" (Pius XII, *Alloc. Congr. Relig.*, Dec., 1950). This definition stresses the idea of the *freedom* of our immolation. It involves no nonchalant passivity, but an intense, noble activity, consisting in the *voluntary* renunciation of one's own will by *voluntarily* submitting oneself to the will of God as expressed in the commands of our superiors. This is very far from the idea of a mechanical, material, or forced obedience, submitted to from necessity—an obedience by which man acts like a machine, or like a servant who submits himself to his master only because he cannot do otherwise. Under these circumstances, there is only the name and the outward appearance of obedience. What is wholly lacking is the inner content : the formal act which consists precisely in the free, and therefore conscious, renunciation of our own wills, in order to adhere to God's will manifested in the orders of our superiors. Obedience will not be a perfect holocaust unless it contains this double element : *free renunciation of self and free adherence to the divine will*. This offering will be pleasing and precious in the eyes of God far more than the "oblation of victims" (*1 Sm 15,22*). If this twofold interior element is lacking, the exterior act of obedience can suffice to keep us

from breaking the vow or the promise made, but it loses its profound value and will never succeed in detaching a man from his own will and casting him into God's will.

When we are satisfied with material, forced obedience, we do not complete the interior act of self-renunciation; though there is the external fulfillment of an order, we are keeping our own will interiorly. Therefore, we cannot say that we have realized the immolation of our liberty, and not even that we have freely embraced the divine will. Such obedience is senseless for a soul that aspires to union with God; it is an attempt to attain the end without making use of the means, to exchange the precious metal of true obedience for a cheap pewter coin. St. Teresa of Jesus tells us that there is "no path which leads more quickly to the highest perfection than that of obedience.... Obedience brings us the sooner to that happy state of union with God" (*F*, 5). She is evidently speaking only of that obedience which is "the free immolation of liberty," which has no desire for any other liberty than to do God's will.

2. A "free immolation" always implies full knowledge and awareness on the part of the one who makes it; it is the same with the act of obedience. If we make a vow or promise of obedience, we must try always to keep alive the sense of responsibility for this contract we have made.

When we pronounced the formula of our profession, we intended to offer our will as a holocaust to God, and to be guided by His representative. Therefore, when given commands—and especially those most unlike our own personal ideas or orders which for one reason or another are more painful to us—we should be vigilant lest it happen that we take back in practice what we have offered by our vow, which would be to commit robbery in our holocaust. Our will has been consecrated, sacrificed on the altar of the Lord, it is no longer ours, hence we have no freedom to take it back. We should, instead, use our liberty to live our offering in its totality day by day, that is, to constantly renew the immolation of our freedom before every disposition of obedience. Blessed obedience, which permits us to actualize our holocaust! "If you give Him your will in any other way," wrote St. Teresa of Jesus to her daughters, "you are just showing Him a jewel, pretending to give it to Him and begging Him to take it; and then, when He puts

out His hand to do so, taking it back and holding on to it tightly" (*Way*, 32). Unfortunately, this inconsistency is always possible. Although we have sacrificed our will by our vow, it still remains in our hands, and our fidelity to our vow depends on our own will. It is necessary then to have great determination to overcome our repugnance to embrace the will of God as expressed in the commands of our superiors.

"Obedience is the burden of the strong" (Pius XII, *Allocution to the Discalced Carmelites*, September, 1952), and rightly so, because it requires strength to renounce oneself; but this burden of sacrifice is sweet to the soul enamored of God's will, for in His love it will always find the strength to renounce itself.

COLLOQUY

O Lord, is there any finer or greater ideal than that of attaining total conformity of my will with Yours, so that it is no longer my own will but Yours that directs, guides, and governs me in all my movements and actions?

Oh! how sublime is this state of perfect conformity to Your divine will! You tell me through St. Teresa : "There is no better way of acquiring this treasure than to dig and toil in order to get it from this mine of obedience. The more we dig, the more we shall find; and the more we submit to men for love of You, and have no other will than that of our superiors, the more completely we shall become masters of our wills and bring them into conformity with Yours. This is true union with You, my God, the union which I desire; I do not covet those delectable kinds of absorption which it is possible to experience and which are given the name of union. They may be union if the result of them is what I have described; but if such suspension leaves behind it little obedience and much self-will, it seems to me that it will be a union with love of self, not with the will of God. May His Majesty grant that I myself may act according to my belief" (T. J. F., 5).

O Lord, You know my will's dislike of submission, of renouncing itself in subjection to the will of another. There is in me a very strong love of liberty and independence, which inclines me to seek a thousand pretexts and means for

avoiding the necessity of submitting. But You also know that there is nothing in the world that I love, seek for and desire as much as Your will. In order to live in Your will, to have the certitude and joy of acting in all things according to Your divine will, I am ready with Your help to make every sacrifice to immolate my liberty fully. O Lord, increase my love for Your holy will, enkindle in me a passion for Your will, and then increase in my soul a love for obedience, that golden channel through which the precious treasure of Your will comes to me.

123

SUPERNATURAL OBEDIENCE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, teach me to see only You in my superiors.

MEDITATION

1. An excellent instruction from St. John of the Cross says : "Never look upon your superior, whoever he may be, with less regard than upon God Himself" (*P*). If we do not have this supernatural spirit which makes us see God in the person of our superior, our obedience cannot be supernatural. It is necessary to be animated by this motive alone : I obey because my superior represents God for me and speaks to me in His Name; my superior is another *Christ* to me : *Hic est Christus meus*. This is my Christ.

We should not obey through the motive of human confidence in the person of our superior : because he is intelligent, prudent, capable, because he understands or likes us, and so forth. That is human obedience, the fruit of human prudence—an act good in itself but not supernatural. Neither should we obey because what we are told to do is the most perfect; again this is not the real reason for obedience. We must obey only because God wills whatever our superior commands. The one exception is an order involving sin, which of course God cannot want, or a command not conformable to the Rule or Constitutions which we have

embraced. In either case, obedience would be unlawful. Apart from these exceptions no limit should be put to our obedience. We need not hesitate through fear that the superior is asking something less perfect. Even if he commands what is objectively less perfect than its alternative (for instance, to take some rest instead of working), it would nevertheless be the more perfect thing for us. By the simple fact that the superior has expressed an order, it is clearly the fulfillment of that, and not something else, that God wants from us at the moment. It could very well be that in the abstract we see the possibility of performing an action more perfect than what we have been told to do, and that our idea is better than our superior's. But in reality there is no doubt about it : nothing can be more perfect for us than what God commands by means of our superior.

2. Since the motive of human confidence in our superior is a defective basis for our obedience, we must found it on supernatural confidence, on trust that springs from the recognition of the divine government working through the superiors God has given us. Even if our superiors were less upright or less virtuous, we would have no reason to fear. Faith teaches us that God controls and rules everything and that no human will can escape His divine dominion. Let us suppose that our superior is wrong and orders us to do something—either good in itself or indifferent—from a less upright motive. God always knows how to make use of him for the benefit of our soul; even his imperfect intentions are utilized by God to make us do what He wants of us. This is certain : God directs us by means of our superiors and they are not independent of Him. He uses them as instruments which He employs at His pleasure. Hence we must have recourse to our superior with confidence, since through him we contact God, and we are obeying God when we obey him. Such obedience is entirely supernatural and places us in direct contact with the divine will.

By acting otherwise, St. John of the Cross warns us, "you would do yourself the immense harm of lowering your obedience from the divine plane to the human.... And your obedience will be all the more vain and sterile, the more you feel irritated at the hostile attitude of your superior

or more pleased with his easy or pleasant disposition. For I tell you that the devil has ruined the perfection of a great multitude of religious by causing them to consider these characteristics, and their obedience is of very little worth in the eyes of God, because they have considered these things and not paid sole respect to obedience.

“If you want your obedience to have full value, fasten your glance only on God, whom you are serving in your superior” (*P*, 12).

COLLOQUY

O Lord, increase my spirit of faith, so that I will see You in the soul of my superior. May I repeat, spontaneously and sincerely, in his presence, *Hic est Christus meus!* Only by this way of obedience will a life of continual contact and uninterrupted intimacy with You be possible. If I find You present and living in the Sacrament of the Altar under the veil of the Eucharistic species, always ready to welcome and nourish my soul, I can also, but in a different way, find You hidden in the person of my superior, through whom You speak to me, always ready to disperse my doubts, to manifest Your holy will, and to direct and guide me along the road You have chosen from all eternity for my sanctification.

O Lord, why should I stop at the human appearances of my superiors? Such an attitude will only serve to keep me from finding You in them and recognizing Your will in theirs. Help me, O God, to pass over all the human aspects of obedience and to put myself in contact with You and Your divine will. Just as in the Eucharist I do not halt at the created species of bread and wine, so I ought not in obeying to consider the person of my superior, but only Your will, which reaches me under the appearance of a human order or command. O Jesus, what a great mystery! The Eucharist gives me Your Body, Your Blood, Your divinity—such is the power of the Sacrament which You have instituted. Obedience gives me Your will and makes me communicate with it—such is the power of the authority which You have established.

Once I have understood this profound truth, how can I still dare to argue or hesitate at the commands of my superiors? “It would be a terrible thing if God were to be

telling us plainly to go about His business in some way, and we would not do it but stood looking at Him because that gave us greater pleasure. A fine way it is of advancing in the love of God to tie His hands by thinking that there is only one way in which He can benefit us" (T.J. F., 5). No, Lord, grant that I may never act thus. I shall follow You wherever You lead me by means of holy obedience.

124

BLIND OBEDIENCE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, who out of love for me were willing to submit to Your own creatures, teach me to obey blindly.

MEDITATION

1. When we see God in our superior we obey without argument or futile reasoning and with no delay : *Christus jubet, sufficit*, Christ commands, that is enough. What more do I want, when I know that the orders of my superior are those of God Himself? Even if the thing commanded is hard or painful, my certitude that Our Lord expects it of me will give me the strength to undertake it promptly, without offering the least resistance.

Of course there may be cases where there is good reason to think an order has been imposed without taking into consideration facts which, if overlooked, might be prejudicial to the superior himself; then it is well and sometimes even necessary to bring it to his attention. Neither is there any imperfection in asking for explanations when the order does not seem clear or when it places us in a very embarrassing position; however, this must be done with humility, without insistence and with readiness to submit oneself to the decision of the superior. We must have the firm determination not to reason or debate about an order, not to inquire into the motives which might have made the superior give a certain command. If we begin to argue about obedience, we put difficulties in the way of obeying; therefore, we must stop

all rationalizing, even interiorly, if we wish our obedience to be a pleasing sacrifice to God. It would be worse still to discuss our feelings with others or to criticize the superior's decisions; acting in such a way, we should create difficulties in obedience for others as well as for ourselves.

If we want to offer our entire being to Our Lord, we must completely renounce our own way of thinking, for however good it may be, it will always be infinitely inferior to God's, and God will accomplish His will in us only when we carry out the orders of our superior.

2. In declaring that our superior manifests the will of God for us, we certainly do not mean that everything he thinks, says, or wishes is thought, said, or wished by God. Certainly not. But we must understand that when the superior—in virtue of his office—gives a legitimate order, the command is a sure manifestation of God's will. Blind obedience is obedience which goes beyond all personal judgment or opinion and adheres to the superior's orders, solely because in them is recognized the divine will. This obedience is *blind* because the intellect is deprived of its own light when it is not permitted to consider its personal judgment, to inquire into the superior's reasons, or to discuss his orders; it is *blind* because it is based only on a motive of faith, for by faith we know God's will is manifested through our superior. Even as faith is an "obscure" knowledge, we can say that the obedience it inspires is "deprived of natural light" and is therefore blind. In other words, blind obedience is not based on reasoning that involves human motives, but it is based on the unique motive of faith which knows that one who hears the superior hears God. "He who hears you, hears Me."

In a case where the opinion of the subject might be better than the superior's, blind obedience does not require the denial of one's own judgment to the point of affirming the contrary—an affirmation which would not be conformable to truth. It simply demands that we give up the right to direct our actions according to our own opinion; we decide that we must obey *just the same*, because it is certain that God wants what the superior has ordered and not what seems better to us, and perhaps is so objectively.

One who, under the pretext of doing the more perfect thing, departs from the way of obedience, leaves at the same

time the sure path of God's will to enter upon the perilous and treacherous road of his own will. It is certain that a soul consecrated to God can do nothing agreeable to Him outside of holy obedience. "The actions of a religious," says St. John of the Cross, "are not his own but belong to obedience, and if he withdraw them from obedience, he wilt have to account them as lost" (*P*, 11).

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, how different are Thy ways from our clumsy imaginings! When once a soul has resolved to love Thee and has resigned itself into Thy hands, Thou wilt have nothing of it save that it shall obey Thee and find out for itself how it may best serve Thee and desire to do so. It has no need to look for paths or to choose them, for its will is Thine. Thou, my Lord, takest upon Thyself the task of guiding it in the way which is the greatest benefit to it. And even though our superior has no mind to our soul's profit... Thou, my God, hast a mind to our profit, and dost dispose the soul and prepare things for it to do in such a way that, without knowing how, we find ourselves so much more spiritual and so greatly benefited that we are astonished" (*T.J. F*, 5).

"O my God, from how much disquiet do we free ourselves when we make the vow of obedience! Having nothing for a compass but the will of our superior, we are always sure of following the right path, and need not fear that we will be misled, even when it may appear that our superiors are mistaken. But when we cease to consult the unerring compass, immediately our soul goes astray in barren wastes, where the waters of grace quickly fail. O Jesus, obedience is the compass You have given me to direct me safely to the eternal shore. What a joy it is for me to fix my glance upon You and then to accomplish Your will" (*cf. T.C.J. St*, 9).

O Lord, I want to apply myself to obedience with unshakable confidence in Your divine Providence which rules, guides and directs everything, making all things work together in an ineffable manner for the good of my soul. I wish to apply myself to obedience without the slightest hesitation, binding myself to You and to Your divine will.

DIFFICULTIES IN OBEDIENCE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, teach me the secret of humble obedience which submits to every superior and every command.

MEDITATION

1. Although obedience is precious because it places our whole life in God's will, nevertheless, in practice it has its difficulties and these arise chiefly because the command itself does not come directly from God but through His representatives. Thus it often happens that we fail to see God in our superiors and to recognize His authority in them. For example, when, as often happens in religious life, we have as our superior a former colleague or perhaps even a former pupil, younger and less experienced than we, one whose weaknesses and defects we know only too well, we could easily be tempted to have insufficient respect for his authority and his commands. Then a life of obedience becomes especially difficult : it is hard for us to obey, we do not have recourse to the superior with childlike trust, and what is worse, we justify this attitude to ourselves. Here we are making a great mistake in perspective; we forget that, no matter who the superior is, he is invested with authority which comes from God, authority placed on him solely because he has been called to this office. This authority is unchangeable and has the same force whether the superior is old or young, experienced and virtuous or inexperienced and less virtuous. Basically, if we find ourselves in these difficulties, we must lay the blame on our lack of a supernatural spirit, a spirit of faith. We are judging spiritual matters according to natural standards and from the point of view of human values, which makes it impossible for us to live a life of real obedience, a life entirely based on supernatural values and motives. We must learn how to rise above human views concerning the person of our superior—his good qualities or his faults, his actions in the past, and so forth—to look upon him only as the representative of God and of His divine authority. It is true, we often

find it absolutely necessary to use all our strength and efforts to do this if we do not wish to lose the fruit of a life of obedience. It is certain that the more we force ourselves to see in our superiors the authority which comes from God, so much the more perfect and meritorious our obedience will be, and God Himself will guide us by through them.

2. Very often, if not always, a want of supernatural spirit is accompanied by a want of humility. It is painful to self-love to depend upon and submit to others; it is hard to subject our own affairs to the judgment and rule of someone else and to acquiesce to his decisions. It is particularly difficult if the superior seems to be, at least in some respects, our inferior in age, culture, experience, or ability; then the "ego," its pride hurt, rebels vigorously, hiding its resistance under a thousand excuses. This, too, is a grave error because, although it is true that the superior may be our inferior in some ways, we must not consider this, but only the fact that he is always superior in relation to us—because God has made him so. He is superior because God has placed him over us; he is superior because God has given him the mission to direct us in His place; his personal qualities or defects do not affect the office of superior which God has conferred upon him. Certainly a superior, on his part, should endeavor to acquire, if he does not already possess them, the virtue and capability required by his office. But this is his affair; our duty, as subjects, is to do but one thing : to submit with filial humility, to allow ourselves to be guided and governed. It is strictly a question of humility, because after all, humility means humbling ourselves, putting ourselves in the right place, the place of a subject in relation to a superior, which is always that of humble dependence. Let us reflect on the obedience of Jesus, and in it we shall see the attitude of humility carried to its utmost : although He was God, "He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men.... He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross" (*Phil 2,7.8*). What is our self-abasement, our submission to our superiors and our dependence on them compared to this profound humiliation of Jesus, who although He was God willed to become man, to live as man, subjecting Himself to His own creatures?

Let us be convinced that if our obedience is faulty, it is almost always because we are wanting in humility.

COLLOQUY

" My sweet Savior, can I see You obedient to Your creatures for love of me, and refuse to be obedient out of love for You to those who represent You? Can I see You obedient unto death, the death of the Cross, out of love for me, without lovingly embracing this virtue and the Cross on which You consummated it?

" I will force myself to the utmost of my power to imitate Your example, and for love of You, obey all creatures—my superiors, equals, or inferiors—in all things, without argument, murmuring, or delay, but joyfully and lovingly. Therefore, I will not question the reasons why I am told to do this or that; I will not think about the way in which the order is given to me, or the person who gives it. I will consider Your will alone, letting myself be moved like You in any direction, by anyone, in agreeable or disagreeable, suitable or unseemly circumstances. It matters not! Grant me the obedience You desire.

" O Jesus, who willed to make reparation for Adam's disobedience and mine at the cost of Your life; O Jesus who by Your death acquired for me the grace of knowing how to obey, I wish to live longer only to sacrifice my life by perfect, continual obedience" (St. Francis de Sales).

" O Lord, You desire to infuse obedience into our hearts, but You cannot because we will not recognize that You speak and work through our superiors, and also because we are attached to our own will" (St. Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi).

JESUS PERSECUTED

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF THE PASSION

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, help me to enter into the mystery of Your Passion; deign to associate me with it, so that I may participate in Your Resurrection.

MEDITATION

1. Today Passiontide begins, a time especially consecrated to the remembrance and loving contemplation of the sorrows of Jesus. The veiled crucifix and statues, the absence of the *Gloria* in the Mass and the *Gloria Patri* in the responsories of the Divine Office,—are all signs of mourning by which the Church commemorates Our Lord's Passion. Pope St. Leo exhorts us to participate “in the Cross of Christ, in order that we also may do something which will unite us to what He has done for us, for as the Apostle says, ‘if we suffer with Him, we shall be glorified with Him.’” Therefore, we must not only meditate on Jesus' sufferings, but also take part in them; only by bearing His Passion in our heart and in our body (cf. 2 Cor 4,10) shall we be able to share in its fruits. So it is that in the liturgy of this season the Church repeats more insistently than ever : “If you hear the voice of the Lord, harden not your hearts.” The voice of the Lord makes itself heard these days, not by words, but by the eloquent testimony of deeds, by the great events of the Passion—a mystery which gives us the most convincing proof of His infinite love for us. Let us, therefore, open our heart to the sublime lessons of the Passion : let us see how much Jesus has loved us and how much we ought to love Him in return; let us learn that, if we wish to follow Him, we, too, must suffer and bear the Cross with Him and after Him. At the same time, let us open our heart to a lively hope; for our salvation is in the Passion of Jesus. In today's Epistle (*Heb* 9,11-15) St. Paul presents to us the majestic figure of Christ, the Eternal High Priest, who “by His Blood, entered once into the holies,

[that is, heaven] having obtained eternal redemption." The Passion of Jesus has redeemed us; it has opened once again our Father's house to us; it is then the motive for our hope.

2. The Gospel (*Jn* 8,46-59) narrates an instance of the pressing hostility of the Jews, an evident prelude to the Passion of Jesus. In their hardened hearts they had absolutely refused to acknowledge the mission of the Savior; as a result, they schemed in a thousand ways to oppose His teachings and to belittle Him before the people by declaring Him a liar and one possessed by the devil. Their animosity had increased to the point where they decided to stone Him : "They took up stones therefore to cast at Him." Jesus' death was already decreed by the Jews, but the hour fixed by His Father had not yet come, so "Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the Temple."

This passage in the Gospel allows us to consider the conduct of Jesus in the presence of His persecutors : we see zeal for their souls, meekness, personal disinterestedness, and total abandonment to God. St. Gregory the Great wrote : "Consider, beloved brethren, the meekness of the Lord. He, who had come to remit sins, said, 'Which of you will convince Me of sin?' He, who by virtue of His divinity, could justify sinners, does not disdain to prove by reasoning that He is not a sinner."

The calumnies continued : "Thou art a Samaritan and hast a devil." The divine Master answered, always with meekness, only what was necessary to testify to the truth : "I have not a devil, but I honor My Father, and you have dishonored Me." Then He placed His reputation and His cause in the hands of God. "I seek not My own glory; there is One that seeketh and judgeth." In the meantime, throughout all the discussions, He did not cease to instruct and to enlighten minds, attempting to draw them away from error. Always forgetful of Himself, He thought only of the good of souls. It was precisely in these painful circumstances that Jesus gave us precious instruction : "He that is of God, heareth the words of God.... If any man keep My word, he shall not see death forever." Let us gather these lessons from the lips of our persecuted Master, and keep them in our heart with a jealous care. In our day, too, the world is filled with His enemies, those who oppose His doctrine and

despise His Passion. Let us, at least, believe in Him and be His faithful friends.

COLLOQUY

“Praise be to You, O most merciful God, who willed to redeem us and restore us by the Passion, the sufferings, the scorn, and the poverty of Your Son, when we were wretched outcasts and condemned prisoners. I run to Your Cross, O Christ—to suffering, scorn, and poverty; with all my strength I desire to be transformed in You, O suffering God-Man, who loved me so much that You endured a horrible, shameful death for the sole purpose of saving me, and to give me an example, so that I would be able to endure adversity for love of You. It is the perfection and true proof of love to conform myself to You, O Crucified One, who for my sins willed to undergo a cruel death, delivering Yourself entirely to tortures, as a victim. O my suffering God, only by reading the book of Your life and death shall I be able to know You and to penetrate Your mystery. Grant me, then, a profound spirit of prayer, a pious, humble, attentive prayer, springing not only from my lips, but also from my heart and soul, so that I shall be able to understand the lessons of Your Passion!

“In this book, I see Your infinite goodness and mercy, which made You take upon Yourself our condemnation, our scorn, our sufferings, rather than leave us in such a wretched state. I see the unlimited bounty, the care, the diligence You showed to save us and lead us back to the heavenly kingdom. I see the infinite wisdom by which You redeemed us, saved us, and glorified us in an ineffable manner, through Your mercy, without harming Your justice. While You died a painful death, You vivified everything and destroyed that death common to us all.

“Yet more, in the book of Your Cross I see Your infinite meekness, by which, although being cursed, You did not curse nor avenge Yourself, but on the contrary, You pardoned and won heaven for the very ones who were crucifying You” (St. Angela of Foligno).

THE VALUE OF SUFFERING

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus Crucified, teach me the science of the Cross; make me understand the value of suffering.

MEDITATION

1. The Passion of Jesus teaches us in a concrete way that in the Christian life we must be able to accept suffering for the love of God. This is a hard, repugnant lesson for our nature, which prefers pleasure and happiness; however, it comes from Jesus, the Teacher of truth and of life, the loving Teacher of our souls, who desires only our real good. If He commands suffering to us, it is because suffering contains a great treasure.

Suffering in itself is an evil and cannot be agreeable; if Jesus willed to embrace it in all its plenitude and if He offers it to us, inviting us to esteem and love it, it is only in view of a superior good which cannot be attained by any other means—the sublime good of the redemption and the sanctification of our souls.

Although man, by his twofold nature, is subject to suffering, God willed to exempt our first parents from it by their preternatural gifts; but through sin, these gifts were lost forever, and suffering inevitably entered our life. The gamut of sufferings which has harassed humanity is the direct outcome of the disorder caused by sin, not only by original sin, but also by actual sins. Yet the Church chants : *O happy fault!* Why? The answer lies in the infinite love of God which transforms everything and draws from the double evil of sin and suffering the great good of the redemption of the human race. When Jesus took upon Himself the sins of mankind, He also assumed their consequences, that is, suffering and death; and this suffering, embraced by Him during His whole life, and especially in His Passion, became the instrument of our redemption. Pain, the result of sin, becomes in Jesus and with Jesus, the means of destroying sin itself. Thus a Christian may not consider pain only as an undesirable burden from which he must necessarily recoil,

but he must see in it much more—a means of redemption and sanctification.

2. Suffering is the disagreeable feeling which we experience when something—a situation, a circumstance,—does not correspond to our inclinations, our needs, or our hopes, which does not harmonize with them or gratify them, but on the contrary, contradicts and opposes them. Whereas all men are subject to this misery, the Christian alone possesses the secret of accepting it into his life without destroying the harmony or the happiness which he can enjoy on earth. This secret consists precisely, for a Christian, in attuning all kinds of suffering to his personal aspirations, which, for him, can never be limited to an ideal of earthly happiness. This harmony is possible, for that which appears to be opposition and disagreement from one point of view, often turns into profit when seen in a different light. Thus, for example, physical suffering, cold, hunger, illness, while unpleasant to the body, can be very useful for the attainment of a moral or supernatural good, such as the acquisition of virtue, or progress in holiness. If, from a purely human viewpoint, some sufferings seem inopportune and useless, they are never so when regarded supernaturally. "To them that love God, all things work together unto good" (*Rom 8,28*). Even the greatest calamity, private or public, can become a precious and most effective means of elevating the soul. Every kind of suffering can then be made conformable to the highest ideals of the Christian : eternal salvation, sanctity, the glory of God, the good of souls. But this congruity is impossible without love; or rather, it will be possible only in proportion to our love, for it was by love alone that Jesus transformed the Cross, a terrible instrument of torture, into a most efficacious instrument for the glory of God and the salvation of mankind. It is the same for us : charity, the love of God and of souls, will enable us to accept any kind of suffering, harmonizing it with our loftiest aspirations. In this way, suffering finds a place, a very important place, in our life, without destroying our peace and serenity. On the contrary, our spirit is dilated under an increasingly generous inspiration, unto an ever greater love. As a result, we shall be happy, even while we are experiencing pain. Behold how Jesus has transformed suffering; behold the value conferred on it by His Passion.

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, You do not like to make us suffer, but You know it is the only way to prepare us to know You as You know Yourself, to prepare us to become like You. You know well that if You sent me but a shadow of earthly happiness, I should cling to it with all the intense ardor of my heart, and so You refuse me even this shadow...because You wish that my heart be wholly Yours.

"Life passes so quickly that it is obviously better to have a most splendid crown and a little suffering, than an ordinary crown and no suffering. When I think that, for a sorrow borne with joy, I shall be able to love You more for all eternity, I understand clearly that if You gave me the entire universe, with all its treasures, it would be nothing in comparison to the slightest suffering. Each new suffering, each pang of the heart, is a gentle wind to bear to You, O Jesus, the perfume of the soul that loves You; then You smile lovingly, and immediately make ready a new grief, and fill the cup to the brim, thinking the more the soul grows in love, the more it must grow in suffering too.

"What a favor, my Jesus, and how You must love me to send me suffering! Eternity itself will not be long enough to bless You for it. Why this predilection? It is a secret which You will reveal to me in our heavenly home on the day when You will wipe away all our tears.

"Lord, You ask me for this suffering, this sorrow.... You need it for souls, for my soul. O Jesus, since You have made me understand that You would give me souls through the Cross, the more crosses I meet, the more ardent my thirst for suffering becomes.

"I am happy not to be free from suffering here; suffering united with love is the only thing that seems desirable to me in this vale of tears" (T.C.J. L, 32,50,23,40,58,224 - St).

PATIENCE

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, meek and divinely patient, teach me the secret of true patience.

MEDITATION

1. Patience is the virtue which makes us accept for love of God, generously and peacefully, everything that is displeasing to our nature, without allowing ourselves to be depressed by the sadness which easily comes over us when we meet with disagreeable things.

Patience is a special aspect of the virtue of fortitude which prevents our deviating from the right road when we encounter obstacles. It is an illusion to believe in a life without difficulties. These are usually all the greater and the more frequent as our undertakings are more generous. Great works, magnanimous and heroic virtues, always grow in the midst of difficulties. In the presence of these, fortitude has a double function : to *face* them and to *bear* them. Many difficulties are surmounted and overcome by an act of courage; others, on the contrary, cannot be mastered. We must learn to *bear* with them, and this is the role of patience—an arduous task, because it is easier to face obstacles directly, than to support the inevitable oppositions and sufferings of life, which, in time, tend to discourage and sadden us.

Only by fixing our glance on Jesus, the divinely patient One, can we learn to practise patience. When we see Him who came into the world to save us, living from the first moment of His earthly existence in want, privation, and poverty, and later in the midst of misunderstanding and persecution; when we see Him become the object of the hatred of His own fellow citizens, calumniated, doomed to death, betrayed by a friend, and tried and condemned as a malefactor, our souls are stirred : we realize that we cannot be His disciples unless we follow the same road. If Jesus, the Innocent One *par excellence*, bore so much for love of us, can we, sinners who are deserving to suffer, not endure

something for love of Him? Whatever the total of suffering in our lives, it will always be very small, and even nothing, compared with the infinite sufferings of Jesus; for in His Passion Christ not only endured the suffering of one life or of several human lives, but that of *all* mankind.

2. Whoever wishes to become patient, must, first of all, look at the motives for suffering in the profound light of faith. This superior illumination will make the soul understand that everything that happens in life is always permitted by God, and is solely for its good. It is true that very often suffering and hardships come to us through secondary causes; but that makes little difference when we realize that everything comes from our loving Father in Heaven, who uses these painful circumstances to help us to become more virtuous. If we wish to live only for God, we must never stop to consider the human causes of our sufferings, we must accept all from His hands, simply repeating : "*Dominus est!*" It is the Lord!

This acceptance does not prevent us from feeling, even deeply feeling, the weight of suffering—Jesus, also, felt it in His agony in the Garden of Olives—but it does help us to be undisturbed, to preserve peace and serenity, to maintain self-control and, consequently, to be patient.

In order to begin to practice patience, we must try to bear daily annoyances and sufferings resignedly, without complaint, knowing that divine Providence does not permit any trial that will not be a source of good for us. In the beginning, and even for a long time, we may experience a great repugnance for suffering. Nevertheless, if we try to accept it as we should, with constancy, peace, and submission to the divine will, we shall gradually be cognizant of the great spiritual profit that flows from it; we shall feel more detached from creatures and from ourselves, and closer to God. Then shall we come to value suffering spontaneously; and later, having experienced its spiritual fruitfulness more completely, we shall finally come to love it.

But let us have no illusions : the love of suffering is the summit of patience; it is the fruit of patience brought to perfection. To reach this height, we must begin with a much humbler practice; that is, the peaceful and uncomplaining acceptance of everything that makes us suffer.

COLLOQUY

O Jesus, for love of You and with Your help, I wish to suffer in peace all the contradictions of my life. "Your thoughts are not our thoughts, Your ways are not our ways. You offer us a cup so bitter that our feeble nature cannot bear it. But I do not want to draw back my lips from the cup prepared by Your hand. You have taught me the secret of suffering in peace. *Peace* does not mean *joy*, at least not sensible joy; to suffer in peace, all I have to do is to will all that You will.

"To be Your spouse, I must be like You; and You are all covered with blood and crowned with thorns. You wish to make me like You; then, should I fear that I cannot carry the Cross without weakening? On the way to Calvary, You fell three times; and I, a poor little child, do I not wish to be like You? Should I not wish to fall a hundred times to prove to You my love, rising up again with more strength than before my fall?

"It is very consoling for me to remember that You, the God of might, knew our weaknesses, that You shuddered at the sight of the bitter cup which earlier You had so ardently desired to drink.

"O Jesus, what it costs to give You what You ask! But what happiness that it does cost! Far from complaining to You of the crosses You send me, I cannot fathom the infinite love which has moved You to treat me so. O Lord, do not let me waste the trial You send me, it is a gold mine I must exploit. I, a little grain of sand, want to set myself to the task, without joy, without courage, without strength, and all these conditions will make the enterprise easier; I want to work for love.

"In spite of this trial which robs me of all sense of enjoyment, I can still say: 'You have given me, O Lord, a delight in Your doings.' For is there any greater joy than to suffer for Your love, O my God? The more intense and the more hidden the suffering, the more do You value it. And even if, by an impossibility, You should not be aware of my affliction, I should still be happy to bear it, in the hope that by my tears I might prevent or atone for one sin against faith" (T.C.J. L, 63,51,184,59 - St, 9).

THE DAILY CROSS

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus Crucified, help me, by the merits of Your Cross, to carry my cross daily.

MEDITATION

1. "He that taketh not up his cross, and followeth Me, is not worthy of Me" (*Mt 10,38*). By these words, the divine Master expressly declares that one of the indispensable conditions for being His disciple is to carry the cross. The word *cross*, however, should not make us think only of special sufferings, which, while not excluded, are not generally our portion. First of all, we must think of those common daily disagreeable things which are part of everyone's life and which we must try to accept as so many means to progress and spiritual fruitfulness.

It is often easier to accept, in a burst of generosity, the great sacrifices and sufferings of singular occurrence, than the little, insignificant sufferings, closely connected with our state of life and the fulfillment of our duty : sufferings which occur daily under the same form, with the same intensity and insistence, among endless and unchanging circumstances. These may include physical ailments caused by poor health, economic restrictions, the fatigue attendant upon overwork or anxiety; they may be moral sufferings resulting from differences of opinion, clash of temperaments, or misunderstandings. Herein lies the genuine cross that Jesus offers us daily, inviting us to carry it after Him—an unpretentious cross, which does not require great heroism, but which does demand that we repeat our *Fiat* every day, meekly bowing our shoulders to carry its weight with generosity and love. The value, the fruitfulness of our daily sacrifices comes from this unreserved acceptance, which makes us receive them just as God offers them to us, without trying to avoid them or to lessen their weight. "Yea, Father, for so hath it seemed good in Thy sight" (*Mt 11,26*).

2. Jesus calls our sufferings a *cross* because the word cross signifies instrument of salvation; and He does not want

our sorrows to be sterile, but to become a cross, that is, a means of elevating and sanctifying our souls. In fact, all suffering is transformed, changed into a cross as soon as we accept it from the hands of the Savior, and cling to His will which transforms it for our spiritual advantage. If this is true for great sufferings, it is equally true for the small ones; all are part of the divine plan, all, even the tiniest, have been predisposed by God from all eternity for our sanctification. Therefore, let us accept them with calmness, and not allow ourselves to be submerged by things which are unpleasant; let us leave them where they belong, in the place they really occupy in the divine plan, that is, among the instruments by means of which we can attain our ideal of sanctity and union with God. If these annoyances are an evil because they make us suffer, they are also a good, because they give us an opportunity of practicing virtue; they purify us and bring us near to the Lord. However, to understand the value of the cross is not equivalent to bearing it; we need fortitude as well. If we let ourselves be guided by Jesus, He will certainly give it to us and will support us in our daily struggles and sufferings, leading us by the path He Himself has chosen, and to the degree of sanctity He has determined for each one of us. We must have an immense confidence, advance with our eyes closed, and forget ourselves completely. We must accept the cross which Our Lord offers us and carry it with love. If, with the help of grace, we succeed in sanctifying all our daily sufferings, great and small, without losing our serenity and confidence, we shall become saints. Many souls are discouraged at the thought of suffering, and try in every way to avoid it because they do not have enough confidence in the Lord, and are not fully convinced that *all* is planned by Him, down to the last detail, for their real good. Every suffering, whatever its dimensions, always conceals a redemptive, a sanctifying grace; and this grace becomes ours from the moment we accept the suffering in a spirit of faith, for love of God.

COLLOQUY

" I see You, O Jesus, my Guide, raising the standard of the Cross and saying lovingly to me : ' Take the cross I hold out to you, and no matter how heavy it seems to you, follow

Me and do not doubt.' In response to Your invitation, I promise You, O my heavenly Spouse, to resist Your love no longer. I see You as You once made Your way to Calvary, and I long to follow You promptly.

"As a spouse will not be pleasing to her bridegroom if she does not apply herself very diligently to the work of becoming like him, so, O Jesus, my Bridegroom, I resolve, now and forever, to take every care to imitate You and to crucify myself wholly with You.... I shall consider the cloister, my Calvary; the regular observance, my cross; and the three vows, my nails. I do not wish for any consolation except what comes from You, not now, but in heaven; what does it matter whether I live a happy life, so long as I live a religious life. I willingly surrender my heart to affliction, sadness, and labor. I am happy in not being happy, because fasting in this life precedes the eternal banquet which awaits me.

"All this is very little, O my God, to gain You, who contain every good. No trial should seem hard nor should I turn back because of the difficulties I might find; I wish to accept bitterness and all kinds of crosses with readiness" (cf. T.M. *Sp*).

"O Lord, is there, among all Your works, one which would not be directed toward the greatest good of the soul whom You consider as Yours, since she put herself at Your service, to follow You everywhere, even to the death of the Cross, resolved to help You bear Your burden and never to leave You alone?.... I shall trust in Your goodness.... Lead me wherever You wish; I no longer belong to myself, but to You. Do with me, O Lord, what You wish; I ask only the grace never to offend You. I want to suffer, O Lord, because You, too, have suffered" (cf. T.J. *Life*, 11).

SUFFERING AND ABANDONMENT

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, teach me to suffer with simplicity, without useless concentration on self, but in total abandonment to Your divine will.

MEDITATION

I. The secret of learning to suffer in a virtuous way consists chiefly in forgetting oneself and one's sorrows and in abandoning oneself to God.

The soul that is absorbed in its own sufferings and concentrates its whole attention on them, becomes unable to bear them serenely and courageously. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof" (*Mt* 6,34), said Jesus, thus teaching us to bear calmly, day by day, moment by moment, whatever sorrows and crosses God places in our path, with no thought of what we suffered yesterday, no worry about what we shall have to endure tomorrow. Even when our suffering is intense, let us not exaggerate it, nor attach too much importance to it; let us not foster a morbid tendency to nurture our sorrow, to ponder over it, weighing and analyzing it under every aspect. To act in this way would result in the paralysis of our spirit of sacrifice, of our ability to accept and to act, and would make us useless to ourselves and to others. One who is oversensitive and preoccupied with his own suffering, often becomes insensible and indifferent to the suffering of others.

In order to resist these selfish tendencies which have been rightly defined by Father Faber as "the worm of Christian sorrow," we must forget ourselves, go out of ourselves and our own sufferings, become interested in the sufferings of others and endeavor to alleviate them. This is a very effective way to regain in times of discouragement the strength to bear our own crosses. We should be mindful of the truth that we are never alone in suffering; that if our sufferings are great, there are always those who suffer incomparably more than we. Our troubles, often enough, are but a drop compared to the sea of sorrows in which

mankind is engulfed, and are practically nonentities in comparison with the Passion of Jesus.

Those who are overly concerned with their own troubles eventually become exasperated by them. Drowned in their sorrows, they stifle every impulse to generosity. By contrast, those who know how to forget themselves, maintain their equilibrium, and take greater thought for others than for themselves. They are always open to charity and generosity toward God and their neighbor. These are simple souls who, because they are unmindful of themselves, can bear suffering magnanimously and derive much profit for their own sanctification.

2. Despite all our efforts to escape our own misery and to forget our troubles, we may go through moments of such profound anguish, such impenetrable darkness, that our poor soul does not know how to emerge from it—especially when the horizon, instead of becoming brighter, grows darker and more threatening. At such times there is only one thing to do : to make a leap in the dark, abandoning ourselves entirely into God's hands. We are so helpless and weak that we always need some place of refuge; if we are to forget ourselves and stop thinking about our own concerns, we shall need someone who will sustain and think of us. This Someone is God, who never forgets us, who knows all about our sufferings and our needs, who sees how weak we are, and who is always ready to come to the aid of those who take refuge in Him. Of course, we can look for a certain amount of consolation and help from creatures, but let us not deceive ourselves; people will not always understand us, nor will they always be at our disposal. But if we turn to God, we shall never be disappointed; even if He does not alter our situation or take away our troubles, He will console our hearts interiorly, in secret and in silence, and will give us the strength to persevere.

"Cast thy care upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee" (*Ps 54,23*). This is the attitude of abandonment which we should have in times of suffering, and which we should intensify as our sorrows increase. If our spirit of abandonment is proportionate to the depth of our sufferings, then we shall not lose their merit.

Many souls exaggerate their sufferings, dramatizing them because they cannot see God's paternal hand in them,

because their faith in His divine Providence is not sufficiently strong; and therefore, they are unable to abandon themselves to Him with complete trust. If our life and all its events, even the most painful ones, did not rest in God's hands, we should have reason to fear; but since everything is *always in His hands*, our fears are groundless and we should not be dismayed. A soul who is confident in God and abandons itself to Him can remain calm in the midst of great trials, can accept even tragic occurrences with simplicity, and suffer serenely and courageously, because it is always supported by God.

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, grant that I may never cease to turn to You, and to look only at You. In consolation or desolation I shall run to You, stopping at nothing else; I shall run so quickly that I shall have no time to look at anything, nor to see the things of earth, because my pace will be so rapid. Therefore, out of love for You, I shall spurn pleasure, repose, dependence upon the judgment of men, satisfaction in their approval, dread of physical discomfort, sadness of spirit, and success or failure. In a word, I shall spurn everything that is not God.

"I realize that my crosses have been permitted and willed by You, my God, to teach me to trust in You in spite of everything.

"O God, be my sole strength in fear, weakness, and distress; be my confidant, or rather my confidence. Divine Guest, dwelling within me, on the throne of my heart, abide with me as my protector; You alone have dominion and power over my whole being; You alone are its love!

"Why should I worry or fear? All is Yours, O God, and You will take care of my wants and provide for them. You are infinite Love, and You love the works of Your hands more than they can know and love themselves. Who would dare question Your power, or the loving, providential care You bestow on Your creatures from all eternity, and with the efficacy of Your love?

"I believe that all You do and permit is for my good and my salvation, and I abandon myself to Your guidance with love and trust, and without anxiety, fear, or calculation" (Bl. M. Thérèse Soubiran).

THE SEVEN SORROWS OF MARY

PRESENCE OF GOD - Permit me, O Mary, to remain near the Cross, that I may share with you in the Passion of Jesus.

MEDITATION

1. We find in Simeon's prophecy the first explicit announcement of the part the Blessed Virgin was to have in the Passion of Jesus : " Thy own soul a sword shall pierce " (*Lk* 2,35). This prophecy was fulfilled on Calvary. " Yes, O Blessed Mother," says St. Bernard, " a sword has truly pierced your soul. It could penetrate Your Son's flesh only by passing through your soul. And after Jesus had died, the cruel lance which opened His side did not reach His soul, but it did pierce yours. His soul was no longer in His body, but yours could not be detached from it." This beautiful interpretation shows us how Mary, as a Mother, was intimately associated with her Son's Passion.

The Gospel does not tell us that Mary was present during the glorious moments of the life of Jesus, but it does say that she was present on Calvary. " Now there stood by the Cross of Jesus, His Mother, and His Mother's sister, Mary of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen " (*Jn* 19,25). No one had been able to keep her from hastening to the place where her Son was to be crucified, and her love gave her courage to *stand* there, erect, near the Cross, to be present at the sorrowful agony and death of the One whom she loved above all, because He was both her Son and her God. Just as she had once consented to become His Mother, so she would now agree to see Him tortured from head to foot, and to be torn away from her by a cruel death.

She not only accepted, she offered. Jesus had willingly gone to His Passion, and Mary would willingly offer Her well-beloved Son for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity and the salvation of men. That is why the sacrifice of Jesus became Mary's sacrifice, not only because Mary offered it together with Jesus, and in Him, offered her own Son; but also because, by this offering, she completed the most

profound holocaust of herself, since Jesus was the center of her affections and of her whole life. God, who had given her this divine Son, asked, on Calvary, for a return of His gift, and Mary offered Jesus to the Father with all the love of her heart, in complete adherence to the divine will.

2. The liturgy puts on the lips of Our Lady of Sorrows these touching words : " O you who pass by the way, attend and see if there be any sorrow like to my sorrow " (*RM*). Yes, her grief was immeasurable, and was surpassed only by her love, a love so great that it could encompass that vast sea of sorrow. It can be said of Mary, as of no any other creature, that her love was stronger than death; in fact, it made her able to support the cruel death of Jesus.

" Who could be unfeeling in contemplating the Mother of Christ suffering with her Son? " chants the *Stabat Mater*; and immediately it adds, " O Mother... make me feel the depth of your sorrow, so that I may weep with you. May I bear in my heart the wounds of Christ; make me share in His Passion and become inebriated by the Cross and Blood of your Son. " In response to the Church's invitation, let us contemplate Mary's sorrows, sympathize with her, and ask her for the invaluable grace of sharing with her in the Passion of Jesus. Let us remember that this participation is not to be merely sentimental—even though this sentiment is good and holy—but it must lead us to real compassion, that is, to *suffering with Jesus and Mary*. The sufferings God sends us have no other purpose.

The sight of Mary at the foot of the Cross makes the lesson of the Cross less hard and less bitter; her maternal example encourages us to suffer and makes the road to Calvary easier. Let us go, then, with Mary, to join Jesus on Golgotha; let us go with her to meet our cross; and sustained by her, let us embrace it willingly, uniting it with her Son's.

COLLOQUY

" O Mary, Mother of Jesus Crucified, tell me something about His Passion, for you felt and saw it more than all the others who were present, having contemplated it with the eyes of your body and soul, and given it all the attention

possible, O you who love Him with such great love" (St. Angela of Foligno).

"O Mary, grant that I may stand with you near the Cross; permit me to contemplate with you the Passion of your Jesus, and to have a share in your sorrow and tears. O holy Mother, impress deeply in my heart the wounds of the Crucified; permit me to suffer with Him, and to unite myself to your sorrows and His" (cf. *Stabat Mater*).

"O Queen of Virgins, you are also the Queen of Martyrs; but it was within your heart that the sword transpierced you, for with you everything took place within your soul.

"Oh, how fair you are to behold during your long martyrdom, enveloped in a majesty both strong and gentle; for you have learned from the Word how those should suffer who are chosen as victims by the Father, those whom He has elected as associates in the great work of the redemption, whom He has known and predestinated to be conformed to His Christ, crucified for love.

"You are there, O Mary, at the foot of the Cross, standing, in strength and courage; and my Master says to me, "Ecce Mater Tua." Behold your Mother. He gives you to me for my Mother! And now that He has returned to His Father, and has put me in His place on the Cross so that I may fill up those things which are wanting of the sufferings of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the Church, you are still there, O Mary, to teach me to suffer as He did, to let me hear the last song of His soul which no one but you, O Mother, could overhear" (E.T. II, 15).

That my desire for suffering will not be sterile, help me, O sweet Mother, to recognize in each daily suffering the Cross of your Jesus and to embrace it with love.

LOVE OF THE CROSS

PRESENCE OF GOD - Again I come to You, O my Crucified God, with the desire to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of the Cross.

MEDITATION

1. The Cross is suffering viewed in the supernatural light of faith as an instrument of salvation and sanctification, and therefore, as an instrument of love. Seen in this light, the Cross is certainly worthy of love; it is the outstanding means of our sanctification. Our union with God cannot be accomplished except through suffering. St. John of the Cross has explained the means by which the soul is to be purified, *scraped* to the bottom in order to reach this life of divine union. A program of total mortification is required to break all our bonds, for we have within us many obstacles which keep us from being entirely moved by God; and the accomplishment of this work is impossible without suffering. But *active suffering*, that is, the mortifications and penances inspired by our personal initiative, is not sufficient. We especially need *passive suffering*. In other words, the Lord Himself must make us suffer, not only in our body, but also in our soul, because we are so *covered with rust*, so full of miseries that our total purification is not possible unless God Himself intervenes directly. To plunge us into passive suffering is, therefore, one of His greatest works of mercy, a proof of His exceeding love.

When God acts in a soul in this way, it is a sign that He wants to bring it to very high perfection. It is precisely in these passive purifying sufferings that the concept of the cross is realized preeminently. In *The Living Flame of Love* (2,27), St. John of the Cross asks why there are so few souls who reach the plenitude of the spiritual life; and he answers : "It is not because God wants to reserve this state for a few privileged souls, but because He finds so few souls disposed to accept the hard task of purification. Therefore, He stops purifying them, and they condemn themselves to mediocrity and advance no farther." It is impossible to

become united to God without these spiritual sufferings, without bearing this "burden" of God. Suffering and interior desolation alone enlarge the powers of the soul and make it capable of embracing God Himself.

2. "O souls that seek to walk in security and comfort in spiritual things! If you did but know how necessary it is to suffer and endure in order to reach this security!" (J.C. *LF*, 2,28). Suffering is requisite not only for the good of the soul, but also that the soul may be able to glorify God and prove its love for Him. It is not a question of attaining perfection in order to enjoy it—for the perfect soul never thinks of self—but that the soul may be wholly dedicated to the glory of God. It is in this sense that we read on the summit of the *Mount of Perfection* : Only the honor and glory of God dwell on this mountain." Even as the Cross of Jesus was for Him the great means of rendering to the Father the glory that sinful man had refused Him, so should it be in regard to our cross : by means of suffering, we should expiate and repair our faults and the faults of others, in order to give God all the glory due Him.

In addition, as the Cross of Jesus was the supreme proof of His love for us, our cross too, should be the finest proof of our love for Him. The Son of God has revealed His infinite love for us by His death on the Cross; in like manner, the reality of our love is made apparent by the acceptance of sufferings out of love for Him. The Cross is, therefore, both the instrument and the work of love, as much that of God's love for us as that of our love for Him.

The more God sanctifies us, the more He proves His love for us and gives us the opportunity of glorifying Him; but He sanctifies us only by means of the Cross—the great Cross of Jesus to which we must unite our little cross.

Our sanctification, then, is proportionate to our experience of the Passion of Christ. Sufferings are, even in this sense, a proof of God's love for us. If we understood all this, how we should love the Cross!

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, the road of trials is the way by which You lead those You love, and the more You love them, the more

trials You send them, since You admit to Your friendship only souls that love the Cross.... If You asked me whether I should prefer to endure all the trials in the world up to the end of time, and afterwards to gain a little more glory, or to have no trials and to attain one degree less of glory, I should answer that I would most gladly accept all the trials in exchange for a little more fruition in the understanding of Your wonders, for I see that the more we know You, the more we love and glorify You.

"No, I do not wish to make anything of passing troubles, when it is a question of procuring some glory for You who suffered so much for us.

"If I want to know, O my God, how You act toward those who beg You from the bottom of their heart to accomplish Your will in them, I have only to ask Your glorious Son, who addressed the same prayer to You in the Garden of Olives.... You fulfilled this wish in Him by giving Him up to all kinds of sorrows, insults, and persecutions, leaving Him finally to die on the Cross. This is what You gave the One whom You loved above all others. As long as we are in this world, these are Your gifts. You proportion them according to Your love for us; You give more to those You love more, and less to those You love less. You also give according to the courage You find in each of us, and according to our love for You, for if we love You much, we shall be able to suffer much for You; whereas if we love You only a little, we will suffer little" (*T.J. Way*, 18 - *Life*, 37 - *Way*, 3;32).

O my God, increase my love, dilate my poor heart and make it able to endure much for love of You. I shall willingly accept suffering, in order to prove to You the reality of my love.

THE TRIUMPH OF JESUS

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OR PALM SUNDAY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, I want to follow You in Your triumph, so that I may follow You later to Calvary.

MEDITATION

1. Holy Week begins with the description of the triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His Passion. Jesus, who had always been opposed to any public manifestation and who had fled when the people wanted to make Him their king (cf. *Jn* 6,15), allows Himself to be borne in triumph today. Not until now, when He is about to die, does He submit to being publicly acclaimed as the Messiah, because by dying on the Cross, He will be in the most complete manner Messiah, Redeemer, King, and Victor. He allows Himself to be recognized as King, but a King who will reign from the Cross, who will triumph and conquer by dying on the Cross. The same exultant crowd that acclaims Him today will curse Him in a few days and lead Him to Calvary; today's triumph will be the vivid prelude to tomorrow's Passion.

Jesus enters the holy city in triumph, but only in order to suffer and die there. Hence, the twofold meaning of the Procession of the Palms : it is not enough to accompany Jesus in His triumph; we must follow Him in His Passion, prepared to share in it by stirring up in ourselves, according to St. Paul's exhortation (*Ep* : *Phil* 2,5-11), His sentiments of humility and total immolation, which will bring us, like Him and with Him, "unto death, even to the death of the Cross." The palms which the priest blesses today have not only a festive significance; they also "represent the victory which Jesus is about to win over the prince of death" (*RM*). For us too, they must be symbols of triumph, indicative of the victory to be won in our battle against the evil in ourselves and against the evil which roams about us. As we receive the blessed palm, let us renew our pledge to conquer with

Jesus, but let us not forget that it was on the Cross that He conquered.

2. Jesus submits to being borne in triumph, but with what meekness and humility! He knows that His enemies are hiding among the people who are singing the hosanna, and that they will succeed in changing that hosanna into *crucify Him!* He knows it, and He could impose Himself upon them in all the power of His divinity; He could unmask them publicly and disclose their plans. However, Jesus does not wish to conquer or to rule by force; His kingdom is founded on love and meekness. The Evangelist says this very aptly : "Tell ye the daughter of Sion : Behold, thy King cometh to thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass" (*Mt 21,5*). With the same meekness, He, the Innocent One, the only true King and Conqueror, will consent to appear as a criminal, a condemned and conquered man, a mock king. In this way, however, from the throne of the Cross He will draw all things to Himself.

As the joyful procession advances, Jesus sees the panorama of Jerusalem spread out at His feet. St. Luke says (19,41-44) : "When He drew near, seeing the city, He wept over it, saying, 'If thou also hadst known, and that in this thy day, the things that are to thy peace!... Thy enemies...shall not leave in thee a stone upon a stone because thou hast not known the time of thy visitation.' " Jesus weeps at the obstinacy of the holy city which, because it has not recognized Him as the Messiah and has not accepted His Gospel, will be destroyed to its foundations. Jesus, true God, is also true man, and as man He is moved with compassion because of the sad fate which Jerusalem has prepared for itself by its obstinate resistance to grace. He goes to His Passion and will even die for the salvation of Jerusalem, but the holy city will not be saved because it has not wished to be, "because it did not know the time of its visitation." This is the story of so many souls who resist grace; it is the cause of the most profound and intimate suffering of the benevolent heart of Jesus. Let us give Our Lord the joy of seeing us profit to the full by the merits of His sorrowful Passion, by all the Blood which He has shed. When we resist the invitations of grace, we are resisting the Passion of Jesus and preventing it from being applied to us in its plenitude.

COLLOQUY

"O Jesus, I contemplate You in Your triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. Anticipating the crowd which would come to meet You, You mounted an ass and gave an admirable example of humility in the midst of the acclamations of the crowd who cut branches of trees and spread their garments along the way. While the people were singing hymns of praise, You were filled with pity and wept over Jerusalem. Rise now, my soul, handmaid of the Savior, join the procession of the daughters of Sion and go out to meet your King. Accompany the Lord of heaven and earth, seated on an ass; follow Him with olive and palm branches, with works of piety and with victorious virtues" (cf. St. Bonaventure).

O Jesus, what bitter tears You shed over the city which refused to recognize You! And how many souls, like Jerusalem, go to perdition on account of their obstinate resistance to grace! For them I pray with all my strength. "My God, this is where Your power and mercy should be shown. Oh! what a lofty grace I ask for, O true God, when I conjure You to love those who do not love You, to answer those who do not call to You, to give health to those who take pleasure in remaining sick!... You say, O my Lord, that You have come to seek sinners. Here, Lord, are the real sinners. But, instead of seeing our blindness, O God, consider the precious Blood which Your Son shed for us. Let Your mercy shine out in the midst of such great malice. Do not forget, Lord, that we are Your creatures, and pour out on us Your goodness and mercy" (T.J. *Exc*, 8).

Even if we resist grace, O Jesus, You are still the Victor; Your triumph over the prince of darkness is accomplished, and humanity has been saved and redeemed by You. You are the Good Shepherd who knows and loves each one of His sheep and would lead them all to safety. Your loving heart is not satisfied with having merited salvation for the whole flock; it ardently desires each sheep to profit by this salvation.... O Lord, give us then, this good will; enable us to accept Your gift, Your grace, and grant that Your Passion may not have been in vain.

THE SUPPER AT BETHANY

MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Lord, with Mary of Bethany I wish to pay my humble, devout homage to Your sacred Body before it is disfigured by the Passion.

MEDITATION

1. The Gospel for today (*Jn* 12,1-9) tells us of this impressive scene: "Jesus therefore, six days before the Pasch, came to Bethany . . . and they made Him a supper there; and Martha served. . . . Mary, therefore, took a pound of ointment of right spikenard, of great price, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair." Martha, as usual, was busy about many things. Mary, however, paid attention only to Jesus; to show respect to Him, it did not seem extravagant to her to pour over Him a whole vase of precious perfume. Some of those present murmured, "Why this waste? Could not the ointment have been sold . . . and the price given to the poor?" And they murmured against her (cf. *Mk* 14,4-5). Mary said nothing and made no excuses; completely absorbed in her adored Master, she continued her work of devotion and love.

Mary is the symbol of the soul in love with God, the soul who gives herself exclusively to Him, consuming for Him all that she is and all that she has. She is the symbol of those souls who give up, in whole or in part, exterior activity, in order to consecrate themselves more fully to the immediate service of God and to devote themselves to a life of more intimate union with Him. This total consecration to the Lord is deemed wasteful by those who fail to understand it—although the same offering, if otherwise employed, would cause no complaint. If everything we are and have is His gift, can it be a waste to sacrifice it in His honor and, by so acting, to repair for the indifference of countless souls who seldom, if ever, think of Him?

Money, time, strength, and even human lives spent in the immediate service of the Lord, far from being wasted, reach therein the perfection of their being. Moreover, by this consecration, they conform to the proper scale of values. Giving alms to the poor is a duty, but the worship and love of God is a higher obligation. If urgent works of charity sometimes require us to leave His service for that of our neighbor, no change in the hierarchy of importance is thereby implied. God must always have the first place.

Jesus Himself then comes to Mary's defense : " Let her be, that she may keep this perfume against the day of My burial." In the name of all those who love, Mary gave the sacred Body of Jesus, before it was disfigured by the Passion, the ultimate homage of an ardent love and devotion.

2. In St. John's Gospel it is clearly stated that the murmurings about Mary's act were uttered by Judas Iscariot. The sinister face of the traitor appears darker still beside that of the loyal Mary : physically, he is still numbered among the Twelve, but spiritually, he has been cut off from them for a long time. Ever since the previous year, when the Master had told them about the Eucharist, Judas was lost. Referring to him on one occasion, Jesus had said, " Have not I chosen you twelve; and one of you is a devil " (*Jn* 6,71). Judas had been chosen by Jesus with a love of predilection; he had been admitted to the group of His closest friends and, like the eleven others, had received the great grace of the apostolate. In the beginning, he must have been faithful; but later, attachment to worldly things and avarice began to take possession of him, so as to completely chill his love for the Master and transform the Apostle into a traitor. Because of His divine foreknowledge, Jesus had expected the treachery; and yet, since Judas had been originally worthy of His trust, He had placed him on an equal footing with the other members of the apostolic college. Subsequently, although he had already become a liar, Jesus continued to treat him like the others, showing him the same love and esteem. This was very painful to the sensitive heart of Jesus, but He would not act otherwise, He wished that we might see with what love, patience, and delicacy He treats even His most stubborn enemies. How many times must the Master have tried to enlighten that darkened mind! Certainly, He was thinking of Judas when He

mind! Certainly, He was thinking of Judas' worldly goods : " You cannot serve God and mammon.... What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of His own soul? " (*Mt* 6,24—16,26). However, these words, which should have been an affectionate reprove to the traitor, did not touch him. Judas represents those souls who have received from God graces of predilection, but who prove to be unworthy of them, because of their infidelities. Consecrated souls must, therefore, be very faithful to the grace of their vocation and must not permit the slightest attachment to take root in their hearts.

COLLOQUY

Here are two paths, Lord, as diametrically opposed as possible : one of fidelity and one of betrayal, the loving fidelity of Mary of Bethany, the horrible treachery of Judas. O Lord, how I should like to offer You a heart like Mary's! How I should like to see the traitor in me entirely dead and destroyed!

But You tell me : " Watch ye, and pray that you enter not into temptation! " (*Mk* 14,38). Oh! how necessary it is for me to watch and pray, so that the enemy will not come to sow the poisonous germs of treason in my heart! May I be faithful to You, Lord, faithful at any cost, in big things as well as in small, so that the foxes of little attachments will never succeed in invading and destroying the vineyard of my heart!

" Lord Jesus, when I meditate on Your Passion, the first thing that strikes me is the perfidy of the traitor. He was so full of the venom of bad faith that he actually betrayed You—You, his Master and Lord. He was inflamed with such cupidity that he sold his God for money, and in exchange for a few vile coins delivered up Your precious Blood. His ingratitude went so far that he persecuted even to death Him who had raised him to the height of the apostolate.... O Jesus, how great was Your goodness toward this hard-hearted disciple! Although his wickedness was so great, I am much more impressed by Your gentleness and meekness, O Lamb of God! You have given me this meekness as a model. Behold, O Lord, the man whom

You allowed to share Your most special confidences, the man who seemed to be so united to You, Your Apostle, Your friend, the man who ate Your bread, and who, at the Last Supper, tasted with You the sweet cup, and this man committed this monstrous crime against You, his Master! But, in spite of all this at the time of betrayal, You, O meek Lamb, did not refuse the kiss of that mouth so full of malice. You gave him everything, even as You gave to the other Apostles, in order not to deprive him of anything that might melt the hardness of his evil heart" (cf. St. Bonaventure).

O Jesus, by the atrocious suffering inflicted on Your heart by that infamous treachery, grant me, I beg of You, the grace of a fidelity that is total, loving, and devoted.

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THE MEEK LAMB

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, give me the grace to penetrate the abyss of sorrow made by sin in Your heart, so full of meekness.

MEDITATION

1. In the Epistle of today's Mass, Jeremias (11,18-20) speaks to us as the suffering Savior : "I was as a meek lamb that is carried to be a victim." This sentence expresses the attitude of Jesus toward the bitterness of His Passion. He knew every one of these sufferings in all their most concrete particulars; His heart had undergone them by anticipation, and the thought of them never left Him for an instant during the course of His life on earth. If the Passion, in its historical reality, took place in less than twenty-four hours, in its spiritual reality it spanned His entire life.

Jesus knew what was awaiting Him, His heart was tortured by it; and yet He not only accepted but ardently desired that hour, "His hour"; and He gave Himself into

the hands of His enemies with the meekness of a lamb being led to the slaughter. "I have left My house," He says again through the mouth of Jeremias. "...I have delivered My beloved soul into the hands of My enemies" (*RB*). Judas betrayed Him, His enemies dragged Him before the tribunal, they condemned Him to death, they tortured His body horribly; but Jesus, even in His Passion, remained always God, remained always the Master, the Lord. "I have power to lay down My life and to take it up again," says the liturgy in today's Vespers (*RB*). Jesus went to His Passion "because it was His own will" (*Is* 53,7). He willed it because, as He Himself said, "This is the command which I have received from My Father" (*Jn* 10,18).

However, His ardent desire for the Passion did not prevent Him from tasting all its bitterness. "The sorrows of death have encompassed me.... Insults and terrors I have suffered from those who called themselves my friends.... God of Israel, because of You, I have suffered opprobrium, and shame has covered my face" (*RB*). Let us try to sound the depths of these sacred texts which we read in today's liturgy, in order that we may have a better understanding of the most bitter Passion of Christ.

2. Today at Mass we read the Passion as recounted by Mark, Peter's disciple (14,32-72—15,1-46). No other Evangelist has described so minutely the denial of Peter; it is the humble confession which the chief of the Apostles makes of himself through the mouth of his disciple. During the Last Supper, when Jesus predicted that the Apostles would desert Him that very night, Peter had protested with all the vigor of his ardent temperament: "Although all shall be scandalized in Thee, yet not I!" In vain did the Master foretell his desertion, outlining it in detail: "Even in this night, before the cock crows twice, thou shalt deny Me thrice." An overweening confidence in himself had blinded Peter to the truth of Jesus' words, to the possibility of his own weakness. "Although I should die together with Thee, I will not deny Thee." Peter was sincere in his protestation, but he sinned through presumption; the practical experience of human misery and frailty, by which no one, even the most courageous, can remain faithful to duty without divine aid, was lacking to him. His initial steps along this road would be taken in Gethsemane,

when he, like the others, would be unable to watch "one hour" with the Master. Further, at the time of Jesus' arrest, he would flee away trembling with fear. But these two episodes would not be enough to cure him of his presumption; he would need a third, the saddest of all.

In the courtyard of Caiphas' palace, where, having recovered from his first fright, Peter had gone to watch the turn of events, he was recognized by a maid as a disciple of Jesus. Seized by the fear of being involved in the Master's trial, he denied the accusation immediately, saying, "I know Him not." Having fallen once, he had difficulty in recovering himself, and when questioned again, he made a second, even a third denial. "As he was yet speaking, the cock crew, and the Lord turning, looked on Peter." That crowing of the cock, and much more, that look full of love and sorrow, made him enter into himself, "and going out, he wept bitterly" (*Lk 22,62*). The blindfold of presumption fell from his eyes; and Peter, who sincerely loved Jesus, acknowledged his weakness, his fault. The loving glance of the Master had saved him. Because Peter no longer relied on himself, Jesus could rely upon him and would entrust His flock to him. The lesson is clear. As long as a soul depends solely upon itself, it is not ready to be sanctified, nor to cooperate efficaciously in the sanctification of others.

COLLOQUY

"O Lord of my soul, how quick we are to offend You! But how much quicker are You to forgive us! What am I saying, Lord! 'The sorrows of death have encompassed me.' Alas! What a great evil is sin, since it could put God Himself to death with such terrible sufferings! And these same sufferings surround You today, O my Lord! Where can You go that You are not tortured? Men cover You with wounds in all Your members.

"Christians, this is the hour to defend your King and to keep Him company in the profound isolation in which He finds Himself. How few, O Lord, are the servants who remain faithful to You!... The worst of it is that there are some who profess to be Your friends in public, but who sell You in secret. You can scarcely find one in whom You

can trust. O my God, true Friend, how badly does he repay You who betrays You!

"O true Christians, come to weep with your God! It was not only over Lazarus that He shed tears of compassion, but over all those who, in spite of His call, would never rise from the dead. At that time, my Love, You saw even the sins that I would commit against You. May they be at an end, and with them, those of all sinners. Grant that these dead may come to life. May Your voice, Lord, be strong enough to give them life, even if they do not ask it of You. Lazarus did not ask You to bring him back to life, and yet You restored life to him at the prayer of a sinner. Here is another sinner, my God, and much more culpable than she was. Let, then, Your mercy shine forth! I ask it of You in spite of my wretchedness, for those who will not ask" (*T.J. Exc.*, 10).

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THE MAN OF SORROWS

WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

PRESENCE OF GOD - O suffering Jesus, grant that I may read in Your Passion Your love for me.

MEDITATION

1. Today's Mass contains two lessons from Isaías (62,11 – 63,1-7 – 53,1-12) which describe in a very impressive way the figure of Jesus, the Man of Sorrows. It is the suffering Christ who presents Himself to us, covered with the shining purple of His Blood, wounded from head to foot. "Why then is Thy apparel red, and Thy garments like theirs that tread in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the Gentiles there is not a man with Me." All alone Jesus trod the winepress of His Passion. Let us think of His agony in the Garden of Olives, where the vehemence of His grief covered all His members with a bloody sweat. Let us think of the moment when Pilate,

after having Him scourged, brought Him before the mob, saying : "Behold the Man!" Jesus stood there, His head crowned with thorns, His flesh lacerated by the whips; the brilliant red of His Blood mingled with the purple of His cloak, that cloak of derision with which the soldiers had clothed their mock king. Christ was offering Himself as a sacrifice for men, shedding His Blood for their salvation, and men were abandoning Him. "I looked about and there was none to help; I sought, and there was none to give aid" (*RM*). Where were the sick whom He had cured, the blind, who at the touch of His Hand had recovered their sight, the dead who were raised to life, the thousands whom He had miraculously fed with bread in the wilderness, the wretched without number who in countless ways had experienced His goodness? Before Jesus there was only an infuriated mob clamoring : *Crucify Him! Crucify Him!* Even the Apostles, His most intimate friends, had fled; indeed one of them had betrayed Him : "If he that hated Me had spoken great things against Me, I would perhaps have hidden Myself from him! But thou, a man of one mind, My guide, and My familiar, who didst take sweetmeats together with Me" (*Ps 54,13.14*). We read these words today, as on all the Wednesdays of the year, in the psalms of Terce. To this text which is so deeply expressive of the bitterness Jesus felt when betrayed and abandoned by His own, there is a corresponding response at Matins : "Instead of loving Me, they decried Me, and returned evil for good, and hate in exchange for My love" (*RB*).

As we contemplate Jesus in His Passion, each one of us can say to himself, *dilexit me, et tradidit semetipsum pro me*, He loved me, and delivered Himself for me (*Gal 2,20*); and it would be well to add, "How have I repaid His love?"

2. Jesus is singularly worthy of the gratitude and fidelity of men. No one has ever done more for them than He; yet no one has suffered more than He the bitterness of ingratitude and treachery.

Let us review for a moment the prologue of St. John's Gospel, which presents Jesus to us in all His divine Majesty, in the eternal splendor of the Word, the "true light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world." Compare it then with the lesson from Isaías (2nd lesson of the Mass), which describes the opprobrium and ignominy

to which His Passion has reduced Him. The result should be a deeper understanding of the two great truths that emerge : the exceeding charity with which Jesus has loved us, and the enormous gravity of sin.

Of Him, the Son of God, it was written : "There is no beauty in Him, nor comeliness : and we have seen Him, and there was no sightliness that we should be desirous of Him : despised and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows.... His look was, as it were, hidden." He has no beauty, He who is the splendor of the Father. He seeks to hide His face, He, the sight of whose face is the beatitude of the angels and saints. He is so disfigured that He seems like a leper, so abject that no account is made of Him. To this pitiable condition our sins have reduced Him. "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows"—infirmities and sorrows are the consequences of sin—"He was wounded for our iniquities and bruised for our sins.... The Lord took all our iniquity upon Himself."

The consideration of the horror of sin should throw into relief the other great truth of the Passion; namely, the inexpressible love of Christ. This love made Him willingly accept His Passion; and having accepted it because "He willed it," He did not evade His enemies, but freely gave Himself into their hands. Let us recall the moment when Jesus, by His divine power, cast to the ground the soldiers who had come to arrest Him, and having said that, if He wished, He could have legions of angels to defend Him, allowed them to take and bind Him without any resistance. Let us remember that, when He was taken prisoner and condemned, He did not hesitate to say to the Roman governor, "Thou shouldst not have any power against Me, unless it were given thee from above" (*Jn* 19,11). Jesus is the victim. He goes willingly to be sacrificed; He immolates Himself lovingly, with sovereign liberty. We touch here the summit of love, the summit of liberty, for we speak of the love and the liberty of God.

COLLOQUY

"O sweet Jesus, I understand what You must be feeling! O good Jesus, meek and loving! You suffered martyrdom by the many wounds caused by the scourging and the nails.

You were crowned with thorns. How many, O good Jesus, were they who struck You! Your Father struck You, since He did not spare You, but made You a victim for all of us. You struck Yourself when You offered Your soul to death, that soul which cannot be taken from You against Your will. The disciple who betrayed You with a kiss struck You too. The Jews struck You with their hands and feet, and the Gentiles struck You with whips and pierced You with nails. Oh! how many people, how many humiliations, how many executioners!

"And how many gave You over! The heavenly Father gave You for us, and You gave Yourself, as St. Paul joyfully says : 'He loved me and delivered Himself up for me.'

"What a marvelous exchange! The Master delivers Himself for a slave, God for man, the Creator for the creature, the innocent One for the sinner. You put Yourself into the hands of the traitor, the faithless disciple. The traitor handed You over to the Jews. The wicked Jews delivered You to the Gentiles to be mocked, scourged, spit upon, and crucified. You had said these things; You had foretold them, and they came to pass. Then, when all was accomplished, You were crucified and numbered among the wicked. But it was not enough that You were wounded. To the pain of Your wounds, they added other ignominies and, to slake Your burning thirst, they gave You wine mixed with myrrh and gall.

"I weep for You, my King, my Lord, and Master, my Father and Brother, my beloved Jesus" (St. Bonaventure).

*THE GIFT OF LOVE***HOLY THURSDAY**

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, grant that I may fathom the immensity of that love which led You to give us the Eucharist.

MEDITATION

i. "Having loved His own...He loved them unto the end" (*Jn* 13,1-15), and in those last intimate hours spent in their midst, He wished to give them the greatest proof of His love. Those were hours of sweet intimacy, but also of most painful anguish. Judas had already set the price of the infamous sale; Peter was about to deny his Master; all of them within a short time would abandon Him. The institution of the Eucharist appeared then as the answer of Jesus to the treachery of men, as the greatest gift of His infinite love in return for the blackest ingratitude. The merciful God would pursue His rebellious creatures, not with threats, but with the most delicate devices of His immense charity. Jesus had already done and suffered so much for sinful man, but now, at the moment when human malice is about to sound the lowest depths of the abyss, He exhausts the resources of His love, and offers Himself to man, not only as the Redeemer, who will die for him on the Cross, but also as the food which will nourish him. He will feed man with His own Flesh and Blood; moreover, death might claim Him in a few hours, but the Eucharist will perpetuate His real, living presence until the end of time. "O You who are mad about Your creature!" exclaimed St. Catherine of Siena, "true God and true Man, You have left Yourself wholly to us, as food, so that we will not fall through weariness during our pilgrimage in this life, but will be fortified by You, celestial Nourishment!"

Today's Mass is, in a very special way, the commemoration and the renewal of the Last Supper, in which we are all invited to participate. Let us enter the Church and gather close around the altar as if going into the Cenacle

to gather around Jesus. Here we find, as did the Apostles at Jerusalem, the Master living in our midst, and He Himself, through the person of His minister, will renew once again the great miracle which changes bread and wine into His Body and Blood; He will say to us, "Take and eat...take and drink."

It was Jesus Himself who made the arrangements for the Last Supper, choosing "a large room" (*Lk 22,12*), and bidding the Apostles to prepare it suitably. Our hearts, dilated and made spacious by love, must also be a "large" cenacle, where Jesus may come and worthily celebrate His Pasch.

2. During the Last Supper and coincident with His gift of the Sacrament of love, Jesus also left us His testament of love—the living, concrete testament of His admirable example of humility and charity in the washing of the Apostles' feet, and His oral testament in the proclamation of His "new commandment." The Gospel of today's Mass (*Jn 13,1-15*) shows us Jesus, as the Master, washing the Apostles' feet; it ends with His words : "I have given you an example, that as I have done, you also may do." It is an urgent invitation to that fraternal charity which should be the fruit of union with Jesus, the fruit of our Eucharistic Communion. He mentioned it in precise words at the Last Supper : "A new commandment I give unto you : 'that you love one another' as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (*ibid. 13,34*).

If we cannot imitate the love of Jesus by giving our body as food to our brethren, we can imitate Him at least by giving them loving assistance, not only in agreeable circumstances, but also in difficult and disagreeable ones. By washing His disciples' feet, the Master shows us how far we should humble ourselves to render a service to our neighbor, even were he most lowly and abject. The Master, who, by unceasing proofs of His love, advances to meet ungrateful men and even those who have betrayed Him, teaches us that our charity is far from His unless we repay evil with good, forgive everything, and are even willing to repay with kindness those who have done us harm. The Master, who gave His life for the salvation of His own, tells us that our love is incomplete if we cannot sacrifice ourselves generously for others. His "new commandment," which

makes the love of Jesus Himself the measure of our fraternal love, opens up unlimited horizons for the exercise of charity, for it means charity without limits. If there is a limit, it is that of giving, like the Master, one's life for others, for "greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*ibid.* 15,13).

Jesus revealed to us the perfection of fraternal charity on the same evening that He instituted the Eucharist, as if to indicate that such perfection should be both the fruit of the Sacrament of the Eucharist and our response to this great gift.

COLLOQUY

"O Lord, Lord, how small and narrow is the house of my soul for You to enter! Enlarge it Yourself. It is in ruins; repair it. I know and admit that there are things in it that are offensive in Your sight. But who will cleanse it? Or to whom but You shall I cry, purify me, Lord, from my hidden sins?" (St. Augustine).

"O good Jesus, to sustain our weakness and to stir up our love, You have chosen to remain always in our midst, although You well foresaw the way that men would treat You and the shame and outrages from which You would have to suffer. O eternal Father, how could You permit Your Son to live with us, to endure fresh insults every day? O my God! What great love in that Son! and also, what great love in that Father!

"But how, eternal Father, couldst Thou consent to this? How canst Thou see Thy Son every day in such wicked hands?... How canst Thy mercy, day by day, and every day, see Him affronted? And how many affronts are being offered today to this most Holy Sacrament! How often must Thou see Him in the hands of His enemies!

"O eternal Father! Surely all these scourgings and insults and grieved tortures will not be forgotten.... Could it be that He failed to do something to please Thee? No, He fulfilled everything.... Has He not already more than sufficiently paid for the sin of Adam?

"O Holy Father who art in Heaven, if Thy divine Son has left nothing undone that He could do for us in granting sinners so great a favor as that of the Blessed

Sacrament, do not permit Him to be so ill-treated. Since Thy holy Son has given us this excellent way in which we can offer Him up frequently as a sacrifice, let us make use of this precious gift so that it may stay the advance of such terrible evil and irreverence as in many places is paid to this most holy Sacrament" (cf. T.J. Way, 33-3-35).

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*THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS**GOOD FRIDAY*

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, permit me to penetrate with You into the depths of the mystery of the Cross.

MEDITATION

1. Good Friday is the day which invites us more than any other to "enter into the thicket of the trials and pains... of the Son of God" (J.C. *SC**, 35,9), and not only with the abstract consideration of the mind, but also with the practical disposition of the will to accept suffering voluntarily, in order to unite and assimilate ourselves to the Crucified. By suffering with Him, we shall understand His sufferings better and have a better comprehension of His love for us, for "the purest suffering brings with it the most intimate and the purest understanding" (*ibid.*, 36,12); and "no one feels more deeply in his heart the Passion of Christ than one who has suffered something similar" (*Imit. II*, 12,4). With these dispositions let us accompany our Lord during His last day on earth.

The atrocious martyrdom, which within a few hours will torture His body, has not yet begun, and yet the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Olives marks one of the most sorrowful moments of His Passion, one which best reveals the bitter sufferings of His soul. His most sacred soul finds itself immersed in inexpressible anguish; it is extreme abandonment and desolation, without the slightest consola-

* Asterisk indicates first redaction of the *Spiritual Canticle*.

tion, either from God or from man. The Savior feels the weight of the enormous burden of all the sins of mankind; He, the Innocent One, sees Himself covered with the most execrable crimes, and made, as it were, the enemy of God and the target of the infinite justice which will punish all our wickedness in Him. Of course, as God, Jesus never ceased, even in the most painful moments of His Passion, to be united to His Father; but as man, He felt Himself rejected by Him, "struck by God and afflicted" (*Is* 53,4). This explains the utter anguish of His spirit, much more sorrowful than the dreadful physical sufferings which await Him; explains the cruel agony which made Him sweat blood; explains His complaint, "My soul is sorrowful even unto death" (*Mt* 26,38). Whereas before He had so ardently desired His Passion, now that His humanity finds itself facing the hard reality of the fact, deprived of the sensible help of the divinity, which seems not only to withdraw, but even more, to be angry with Him, Jesus groans: "My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me!" But this anguished cry of human nature is immediately lost in that of the perfect conformity of Christ's will to the Father's: "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (*ibid.* 26,39).

2. The Agony in the Garden is followed by the treacherous kiss of Judas, the arrest, the night passed in the interrogations by the high priests and insults from the soldiers who strike Jesus, spit in His face and blindfold Him, while in the outer court, Peter is denying Him. At dawn they commence anew the questionings and accusations; the going back and forth from one tribunal to another begins—from Caiphas to Pilate, from Pilate to Herod, and back again to Pilate—followed by the horrible scourging and the crowning with thorns. Finally, clothed as a mock king, the Son of God is presented to the mob which cries out: "Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas"; for Jesus, the Savior, the crowd can only shout: "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" (*Lk* 23,18-21). Loaded down with the wood for His torture, Jesus is led away to Calvary where He is crucified between two thieves. These terrible physical and mental sufferings reach their climax when the Savior, in agony on the Cross, utters the cry: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (*Mt* 27,46).

Here again we are in the presence of the inner struggle which tortures the soul of Christ, and now accompanies, with rapid crescendo, the intense increase of His physical sufferings. Jesus had said to His Apostles at the Last Supper, in speaking of His approaching Passion : "Behold, the hour cometh... [when] you shall be scattered... and shall leave Me alone; yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me" (*Jn* 16,32). Union with the Father is everything to Jesus; it is His life and His strength, His comfort and His joy. If men desert Him, the Father is always with Him, and that is sufficient for Him. This fact gives us a better understanding of the intensity of His sufferings when, in the course of His Passion, the Father withdraws from Him. Yet, even in His agony and death on the Cross, Jesus is always God, and therefore always indissolubly united to the Father. However, He has taken upon Himself the heavy burden of our sins, which stand like a moral barrier between Him and the Father. Although personally united to the Word, His humanity is, by a miracle, deprived of all divine comfort and support, and feels instead the weight of all the malediction due to sin : "Christ," says St. Paul, "has redeemed us from the curse... being made a curse for us" (*Gal* 3,13). Here we touch the most profound depths of the Passion of Jesus, the most atrocious bitterness which He embraced for our salvation. Yet, even in the midst of such cruel torments, the last words of Jesus are an expression of total abandonment : "Father, into Thy Hands I commend My spirit" (*Lk* 23,46). Thus Jesus, who willed to taste to the dregs all that is bitter for man in suffering and dying, teaches us to overcome the anxieties and anguish caused in us by sorrow and death, by acts of complete submission to the will of God and trustful abandonment into His hands.

COLLOQUY

"O Christ, Son of God, as I contemplate the great sufferings You endured for us on the Cross, I hear You saying to my soul : 'It is not in jest that I have loved you!' These words open my eyes, and I see clearly all that Your love has made You do for me. I see that You suffered during Your life and death, O Man-God, suffered because of that

profound, ineffable love. No, O Lord, it was not in jest that You loved me, but Your love is perfect and real. In myself, I see the opposite, for my love is lukewarm and untrue, and this grieves me very much.

"O Master, You did not love me in jest; I, a sinner, on the contrary, have never loved You except imperfectly. I have never wanted to hear about the sufferings You endured on the Cross, and thus I have served You carelessly and unfaithfully.

"Your love, O my God, arouses in me an ardent desire to avoid anything that might offend You, to embrace the grief and contempt that You bore, to keep continually in mind Your Passion and death, in which our true salvation and our life are found.

"O Lord, Master, and eternal Physician, You freely offer us Your Blood as the cure for our souls, and although You paid for it with Your Passion and death on the Cross, it costs me nothing, save only the willingness to receive it. When I ask for it, You give it to me immediately and heal all my infirmities. My God, since You agreed to free me and to heal me on the one condition that I show You, with tears of sorrow, my faults and weaknesses; since, O Lord, my soul is sick, I bring to You all my sins and misfortunes. There is no sin, no weakness of soul or mind for which You do not have an adequate remedy, purchased by Your death.

"All my salvation and joy are in You, O Crucified Christ, and in whatever state I happen to be, I shall never take my eyes away from Your Cross" (St. Angela of Foligno).

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THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS

HOLY SATURDAY

PRESENCE OF GOD - O Jesus, crucified for love of me, show me the victory won by Your death.

MEDITATION

i. As soon as Jesus expired, "the veil of the Temple was torn in two...the earth quaked, the rocks were rent. And the graves were opened; and many bodies...arose," so that those who were present were seized with a great fear and said: "Indeed this was the Son of God" (*Mt 27,51-54*). Jesus willed to die in complete ignominy, accepting to the very end the mocking and ironic challenges of the soldiers, "If Thou be Christ, save Thyself" (*Lk 23,39*); but scarcely had He drawn His last breath, when His divinity revealed itself in such a powerful manner that it impressed even those who, up to that moment, had been jeering at Him. Christ's death began to show itself for what it really was, that is, not a defeat but a victory: the greatest victory that the world would ever witness, the victory over sin, the victory over death, which was the consequence of sin, the victory, which restored to man the life of grace.

In offering us the Cross for adoration yesterday, the Church sang: "Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world," and after the mournful alternations of the *Improperia*, or tender reproaches, she intones a hymn of praise in honor of the Cross: "Sing, my tongue, the noble triumph whose trophy is the Cross, and the victory won by the immolation of the Redeemer of the world!" Thus consideration of the Lord's sufferings and compassion for them alternate with the hymn of victory. The supreme paradox of death and life, of death and victory reach a unity in Jesus, in such a way that the first is the cause of the second. St. John of the Cross, describing the agony of Jesus on the Cross, affirms: "He wrought herein the greatest work that He had ever wrought, whether in miracles

or in mighty works, during the whole of His life, either upon earth or in Heaven, which was the reconciliation and union of mankind, through grace, with God. And this, as I say, was at the moment and the time when this Lord was most completely annihilated in everything. Annihilated, that is to say, with respect to human reputation; since, when men saw Him die, they mocked Him rather than esteemed Him; and also with respect to nature, since His nature was annihilated when He died; and further with respect to the spiritual consolation and protection of the Father, since at that time He forsook Him...." And he concludes : " Let the truly spiritual man understand the mystery of the gate and of the way of Christ, and so become united with God, and let him know that, the more completely he is annihilated for God's sake, according to these two parts, the sensual and the spiritual, the more completely he is united to God and the greater is the work which he accomplishes" (*AS II*, 7,11).

2. "In peace in the selfsame I will sleep, and I will rest." These opening words of Matins of Holy Saturday refer to the peace of the tomb, where, after so many torments, the sacred Body of Jesus rests. Indeed, this day is meant to be one of recollection in silence and prayer beside the sepulcher of the Lord.

After the death of Jesus, frightened by the earthquake and the darkness, all had left Calvary except the little group of faithful ones : Our Lady and St. John, who were never away from the Cross, and Mary Magdalen and the other pious women who " had followed Jesus from Galilee ministering unto Him" (*Mt 27,55*). Although Our Lord had died, they could not tear themselves away from Him, their adored Master, the object of all their love and hope. It was their love that kept them near the lifeless Body. This is a sign of real fidelity, to persevere even in the darkest and most painful moments, when all seems lost, and when a friend, instead of triumphing, is reduced to defeat and profound humiliation. It is easy to be faithful to God when everything goes smoothly, when His cause triumphs; but to be equally faithful in the hour of darkness, when, for a time, He permits evil to get the upper hand, when everything that is good and holy seems to be swept away and irrevocably lost—this is hard, but it is the most authentic proof of real love.

Two disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, took charge of the burial. The sacred Body was taken down from the Cross, wrapped in a sheet with spices, and laid "in a new tomb" which Joseph "had hewed out in a rock [for himself]" (*Mt* 27,60). Together with Mary, who must certainly have been present at the scene and received the lacerated Body of her divine Son into her arms, let us also draw near to the sacred remains; let us gaze on these wounds, on these bruises, on this Blood, all of which speak so eloquently of Jesus' love for us. It is true that these wounds are no longer painful, but glorious; and tomorrow, at the Easter dawn, we shall celebrate the great victory which they have won. However, though glorified, they remain and will remain forever the indelible marks of the exceedingly great charity with which Christ loves us.

May this Saturday, a day of transition between the agony of Friday and the glory of the Resurrection, be a day of prayer and recollection near the lifeless body of Jesus; let us open wide our heart and purify it in His Blood, so that renewed in love and purity, it can vie with the "new sepulcher" in offering the beloved Master a place of peace and rest.

COLLOQUY

"Hail, O Cross, our only hope! You increase grace in the souls of the just and remit the faults of sinners. O glorious resplendent tree, decked in royal purple, on your arms hangs the price of our Redemption, in you is our victory, our ransom!" (cf. *RB*).

"O Christ, I glance again at Your bloodstained face, and I raise my tear-filled eyes to see Your wounds and bruises. I lift my contrite, afflicted heart, to consider all the tribulations You have endured in order to seek me and to save me.

"O good Jesus, how generously have You given us, on the Cross, all You had! To Your executioners, Your loving prayer; to the thief, Paradise; to Your Mother, a son, and to the son, a Mother; to the dead, You gave back life, and You placed Your soul in Your Father's hands; You showed Your power to the entire world, and shed, through Your wide and numerous wounds, not a few drops, but all

Your Blood, to redeem a slave!... O meek Lord and Savior of the world, how can we thank You worthily?

"O good Jesus, You bow Your crowned Head, pierced by many thorns, inviting me to the kiss of peace. 'See,' You say to me, 'how disfigured, torn, and annihilated I am! Do you know why? To lift you up, O wandering sheep, to put you on My shoulder, and bring you to the heavenly pasture in Paradise. Now return My Love. Behold Me in My Passion. Love Me. I gave Myself to you; give yourself to Me.' O Lord, I am grief-stricken at the sight of Your wounds; I want You to rule over me, just as You are, in Your Passion. I want to set You as a seal upon my heart, as a seal on my arm, to make me conformable to You and Your martyrdom in all I think and do.

"O good and gentle Jesus! You who gave Yourself to us as a ransom for our redemption, grant that we, unworthy though we be, may correspond with Your grace, entirely, perfectly, and in all things" (St. Bonaventure).