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THE  
Tragedy of Calvary

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# THE TRAGEDY OF CALVARY

By MSGR. HENRY BOLO

## I

### ON THE CROSS

AT last the cortege, swelled by an evergrowing crowd, reached the summit of Calvary. With melancholy significance the fainting Saviour might have murmured the words of the Psalmist: "It is here that I shall find a little rest" (Ps. cxxxi. 14). The three crosses were thrown on the ground and preparations were begun for the final torture.

It was customary to allow to the condemned a certain quantity of drugged wine to deaden their sufferings. Some of this wine was offered to Jesus, but "when He had tasted He would not drink" (Matt. xxvii. 34). It was not fitting that the Prince of martyrs should lose one of the pangs which awaited Him. Moreover, the Mosaic law forbade the sacrificing priest to touch any wine (Lev. x. 9); and Christ was "the true priest, entering with His own blood into the Holies" (Heb. ix. 11, 12). It was fitting that the sacrifice should be accomplished, even to Jewish eyes, with all the characteristics ordained by law.

Long before the prophet had written: "They have pierced My hands and My feet" (Ps. xxi. 17), and the executioners proceeded to fulfill his words. The cross of Aleppo pine was lying on the ground ready to receive its unhappy and divine bride. In order to facilitate their movements the Roman soldiers drove the crowd from off the level ground that formed the summit of Calvary; Providence thus allowed the circle of immediate spectators to be more extended, and the holy women to find themselves in the first rank with John. Jesus was thrown upon His cross. The long sharp nails, four-sided and with a round head, lay ready. To render the attachment as firm as possible each nail was



driven in obliquely from close up to the wrist, at the base of the hand, at the lower extremity of the furrow which is formed when one brings the thumb and little finger together. Several blows of the hammer, a jet of blood, and it was done. Tradition says that the holes already pierced in the wood of the cross were separated by a space wider than the span of Christ's arms, and that therefore it was found necessary to strain the second arm into position, dislocating the chest. There seems ground for the legend when one remembers that the cross had very probably been made for Barab-bas, a powerful brigand. Agonizing pain and laceration of the pectoral muscles were the immediate consequence of this treatment. And for three hours Jesus remained suspended thus, with gaping wounds and chest distended by unspeakable torture.

Jesus had willingly, sweetly, surrendered His Hands and Feet. Was it not the crowning of all the gifts He had bestowed during His Life? Was it possible for Him, after all the generous acts of His career, to shrink from giving the supreme proof of His love for us? The soldiers, who had rarely done so hard a day's work, must have been touched by the patient resignation of the condemned man. He was so different from the others. His heroism was at the same time so superhuman and yet so calm. And too, more than once during their grim task they must have encountered an irresistible glance from the pale, bleeding face.

#### Redemption at Hand

Meantime the earth was drinking in the dew of the Saviour's blood (Ps. lxiv. 10). The cross still lay upon the ground, and the Crucified turned His gaze towards the sky (Ps. xxvi. 8), towards Him who plucks the feet of the innocent out of the snare (Ps. xxvi. 15), Who hears the groaning of those in fetters (Ps. ci. 21). The Father had revealed Himself in the creation, by life; the Son was about to

reveal Himself, in the redemption, by death. The moment was at hand when Jesus, "exalted on a rock" (Ps. lx. 3), would "draw all things unto Himself" (John xxii. 32), and already He had the right to commend the world to the mercifulness of His Father (Ps. xvi. 7).

When at last the cross was reared up on the summit of Calvary a profound tremor must have passed through the soul of humanity. All Nature rejoices at the rising of the sun. The long looked for sun of the universe, the Cross, appeared at last, in response to the longing cry of saints and prophets: "Upon the dark mountains lift ye up a banner, exalt the voice, lift up the hand" (Is. xii. 2); the banner around which would rally hearts constrained by love (John xii. 32); the voice that would reach all the scattered sheep of the flock (John x. 3, 16); the hand which opens wide to let all blessing flow forth with His Blood (Ps. cxliv. 16).

Doubtless a hoarse shout from the crowd greeted the uprearing of the cross, and as the soldiers let it fall heavily into the hole prepared for it, Jesus horribly shaken by the sudden shock, prayed for them saying: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke xxiii. 34).

And the Father in heaven gave ear to His prayer. "Whilst rejecting His Son," says Bossuet, "He opened His arms to us." "God indeed in Christ reconciled the world to Himself" (1 Cor. v. 19). The Romans knew none of the prophecies familiar to the Jews; they were simply executing a condemned man, and had never conceived the idea of crucifying a God. St. Paul bears witness to this: "If they had known it they would never have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. ii. 8). This is why the prayer of Christ has redounded in splendid benediction to the elect nation. The Church of the future which must, to the great shame of the Jews, be called the Roman Church, began in a mysterious manner around Calvary the function which she would be destined to fulfill in the world. The Romans it was

who offered up the victim and elevated it in the sight of the multitude. They had already severed themselves from the deicides at the moment when Pilate asked indignantly: "Am I a Jew?" (John xviii. 35). While the members of the Synagogue, thirsting for blood, pursued the prisoner with insult and blasphemy, they out of pity had constrained the Cyrenian to share the burden of His Cross. These future guardians of the unity of the Church would refuse to tear the tunic of Jesus. These depositaries of the faith would be the first to write and to uphold the principal dogma of the new faith—the royalty of the Nazarene. They would smite their breast at the moment when the sacrifice should be consummated, saying: "Truly that was the Son of God." Lastly, with the same spear which would open up to the Gospel all the highways of the universe, they would open the sacred heart of the Master, from whence flows streams of benediction and of supernatural life. Since all humanity is guilty of the death of the Redeemer, since all have steeped their hands in His blood, and since therefore the future Church could not be represented but by culprits, does it not seem as though the Romans as early as the time of Calvary were, though unconsciously, inaugurating, substantiating their immortal destiny?

The cross had been fixed in such a position that the back of Jesus was turned upon Jerusalem, while his face was *to the west*, toward the Eternal City. This detail, so suggestive of the rejection of the Jews, and the calling of the Gentiles, had been foretold: "I will show them the back and not the face, in the day of their destruction" (Jer. xviii. 17). "His eyes behold the nations" (Ps. lxxv. 7).

#### Forgive Them

By His supplication: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," Jesus taught once again the great law of mercy tempering justice; from henceforth the re-

sponsibility of all actions would have its root in the conscience. The immoral morality of "whited sepulchres" would be no longer a religious law, and the severity of the punishment would be determined by the degree of intelligence and knowledge brought to bear by the sinner upon the practice of evil. The cry: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," will resound to the judgment hall of God, for it is the cry of Him "whose words shall not pass" (Matt. xxiv. 35), and we cannot doubt that the vast multitude of human souls, sinful but ignorant, will owe their salvation to it.

And, further, it is a splendid and sublime confirmation of that law of forgiveness of injuries which forms one of the most essential elements of the spirit of the gospels.

The Jews themselves even were not excluded from the effects of this prayer. The conversion of the multitude which followed upon the first sermon of St. Peter has been attributed, as indeed all other Jewish conversions, to the sweet petition of Jesus. It has been used by all the martyrs on behalf of their murderers. The first martyr of all, St. Stephen, when crushed beneath a shower of Jewish stones, prayed: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." And with the words scarcely past his lips he breathed out his life with the charity by which it had lived (Acts vii. 59). And since then each time that Christians kneels at the foot of the Cross and repeat the words: "Father, forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," they know that this honey and this milk of forgiveness dropped from the lips (Cant. iv. 2) of the Master at the very moment when His murderers were steeping Him in unimaginable anguish, and they also are filled with power to forgive.

### King of the Jews

Pilate had given orders for the accustomed title to be written, indicating the name and crime of the condemned, and fastened to the head of the Cross (John xix. 19). In

these terms, pregnant with contempt and irony for the children of Israel, it was couched: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." In order that it might be intelligible to the multitudes thronging Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover, they translated it into Hebrew, Greek and Latin (John xix. 20).

By this act Pilate sought to humiliate the Jews before the whole world, but God (as Bossuet says) through it proclaimed the royalty of His Son before the sacerdotal race, which was the race of Israel; before the nation of intelligent and learned people, which was the Greek nation; before a people strong in arms and reigning by authority, which was the Roman people. Thus was accomplished the prophecy: "I will give thee all nations for thine inheritance" (Ps. ii. 8).

The priests saw in the superscription only an insult aimed at their nation, and they protested against it, saying: "Write not, the King of the Jews; but that He said: I am the King of the Jews." Pilate crushed them with a word: "What I have written, I have written" (John xix. 21, 22). The inscription was as unalterable as though God Himself had dictated it.

Had not the new Sovereign whose reign was thus inaugurated said by the mouth of His prophet: "I am appointed king over Sion and over holy mountains by Him that dwelleth in heaven and derides His enemies" (Ps. ii. 6).

The inscription concealed a mystic meaning. The Nazarenes were poor, ignorant, despised, timid. To invest Jesus with royalty in His character of Nazarene, was to recall by one touch the whole system of the kingdom of the gospel, as it had been taught by the Crucified.



## II

### AROUND THE CROSS

THE work of crucifixion finished, the soldiers directed their attention to the dividing of the meagre spoil assigned them by custom. They took the poor, mean garments of the condemned man and divided them into four lots (John xix. 23), His cloak and girdle, His turban and shoes. There remained His tunic, woven without a seam. There remained also an unfulfilled prophecy which said: "Upon My vesture they cast lots" (Ps. xxi. 19). And because of this prophecy the soldiers said among themselves: "Let us not cut it, but let us cast lots for it whose it shall be" (John xix. 24).

The poverty of Christ would not have been complete, if, though stripped, He had retained possession of the garments lying at the foot of the cross. It is bitter for the dying to see, at the moment of parting everything, a gleam of cupidity in the eyes which forget to weep, and which lose sense of the anguish of the departing in the anticipation of rushing upon the spoil. It was not fitting that this sorrow should be spared the King of Sorrows.

The early Christians related that this tunic was woven by the hands of the Virgin Mary herself. Everything belonging to the gentle Virgin, everything which is under her protection, remains intact; the virtue and strength of those vowed to her worship no less than the garment of flesh which she gave to the Son of God, and of which it is said: "Not a bone of Him shall be broken," no less than the linen tunic which was not torn.

Each one having secured his portion, the soldiers, having nothing further to do, sat down at the foot of the cross to protect the condemned Christ against whom the Jewish mob continued to hurl their fury.

And the storm of imprecations and blasphemies, of gibes and insults, raged around the Word whose bleeding flesh hung in grievous plight.

Whilst with eyes dimmed by the sorrow and by blood, with dislocated limbs and open wounds, the Saviour embodied the very spirit of the prophetic words: "O all ye that pass by the way attend, and see if there be any sorrow like to My sorrow; for the Lord hath made a vintage of Me, as He spake, in the day of His fierce anger" (Lam. i. 12); those who passed and repassed before His cross blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying: "Vah, Thou that destroyest the temple of God, and in three days dost rebuild it, save Thyself; if Thou be the Son of God come down from the cross" (Matt. xxvii. 39, 40).

The Wise Man had prohibited "Mocking one who is in bitterness of spirit" (Eccles. vii. 12), but when Jesus was overwhelmed with grief, "all the witnesses of His torments mocked Him, overwhelming Him with invective, and wagging their heads" (Ps. xxi. 8). The chief priests, the scribes, and elders, more bitter against Him than were the people, strove to add to the dishonor of His miserable death by recalling the incidents of His life: "He saved others. Himself He cannot save." Mockingly they took up the title inscribed by Pilate: "If He be the King of Israel (Matt. xxvii. 42), the elect of God (Luke xxiii. 35), let Him come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe" (Mark xv. 32). They cast in His teeth His declaration of royalty made to Caiphas, and which had cost Him His life: "He trusted in God; let Him now deliver Him if He wants Him; for He said, I am the Son of God" (Matt. xvii. 23). Even the soldiers also mocked Him, coming to Him, and the very soldiers who were refreshing themselves with sour wine, offered it ironically to Him, saying: "King of the Jews, save Thyself" (Luke xxiii. 36, 37).

## Prophecies Fulfilled

And the scribes, knowing the Scriptures, did not see the amazing miracle which was being wrought before their very eyes, brought about, though all unconsciously, by themselves. The most explicit prophecies were being fulfilled by them in an astonishing manner; "Let us oppress the poor just man . . . let us lie in wait for Him. . . . He calleth Himself the Son of God . . . let us then see if His words be true. . . . If He be the true Son of God, He will defend Him, and will deliver Him from the hands of His enemies. . . . These things they thought and were deceived; for their own malice blinded them (Wisd. ii. 10-21). All they that saw me laughed me to scorn; they have spoken with the lips; He hoped in the Lord, let Him deliver Him, let Him save Him (Ps. xxi. 8, 9). All that pass the way have robbed Him; those who came near Him were ashamed of Him (Ps. lxxxviii. 42). What are these wounds in the midst of Thy hands? These are the wounds wherewith I was wounded in the house of My friends (Zach. xiii. 6)."

It was not the first time that the scribes and priests demanded a miracle of the Messiah, but they had already received their answer from Jesus. "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh a sign and a sign shall not be given it but the sign of the prophet Jonas. For as Jonas was in the whale's belly three days and three nights, so shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. And the men of Ninive who repented at the preaching of Jonas shall rise in judgment with this race and shall condemn it" (Matt. xxii. 40, 41).

Hanging on the cross, Jesus must have recalled the prophecies written concerning Himself: "My inheritance is become to Me as a lion in the wood; it hath cried out against Me (Jer. xii. 8) . . . Many say to my soul. There is no salvation for Him in His God (Ps. iii. 3) . . . I am become a reproach to them; they saw me and shaked their

heads (Ps. cviii. 23) . . . My tears have been my meat day and night whilst it is said to Me daily where is thy God? (Ps. xli. 4). Lord, when wilt thou look upon Me? Rescue thou My soul from their malice? (Ps. xxxiv. 17). They have opened their mouths against Me, as a lion ravening and roaring (Ps. xxi. 14). They scoffed at Me with scorn, they gnashed upon Me with their teeth (Ps. xxxiv. 16); the troubles of My heart are multiplied (Ps. cxvii. 10)."

"Why O Lord are they multiplied that afflict Me? Many are they who rise up against Me (Ps. iii. 1). They surround Me like bees, they envelop me like flames, which crackle among thorns (Ps. cxvii. 12) . . . Deliver Me; for thou art He that hast drawn Me out of the womb; My hope from the breasts of My mother. Thou art My God, depart not from Me (Ps. xxi. 10, 11)."

### III

#### THE THIEVES

As foretold by Isaiah (Is. liii. 12), the Cross of Jesus had been reared up in company with two others on which criminals were nailed. They, having been spared the scourging and fatigues which had fallen to the lot of the Saviour, employed their remaining strength in adding insults to those already heaped upon Him (Matt. xxvii. 44); sometimes bitterly reproaching Him for the promises He had made to the common people, and to which His ignominious death seemed to give the lie: "Honest thou then in the Lord, that a great multitude still asketh; What is this One who will show us the benefits we have waited for?" (Ps. iv. 6); sometimes mingling their curses with the tumult arising from the crowd. The whole of the suffering humanity which curses God instead of uniting itself with Him through the sufferings of the God-Man, was represented by these two thieves, hideous to look upon, bleeding, mouthing blasphemy, inaccessible even to the irresistible brotherhood which springs from a common misfortune, a common death.

But it was fitting that the saving grace of redemption should not tarry, and that the power of the redeeming blood should be manifested on the very day on which it began to flow. Therefore, Jesus, whose head dropped upon His shoulder, let a glance full of mercy fall on one of the wretched malefactors; and a sudden rush of pity, repentance, and grace filled the heart of the thief, and silenced his curses. But the other continued to blaspheme and to repeat the mockery of the multitudes: "If thou be the Christ, save Thyself and us" (Luke xxiii. 39).

The repentant thief indignantly replied: "Dost not even thou fear God, since thou endurest the same torture as His Son?" Thus the repentant thief made an act of faith; he

believed. He had not experienced the convincing power of the miracles, and would not witness the stupendous prodigy of the Resurrection; the divine beauty of the Master under suffering was sufficient to excite his adoration of that which thousands more favored than he would continue to deny and blaspheme. Well might the Master have repeated His famous saying: "I have not found so great faith in Israel" (Matt. viii. 10); and the spectacle thus presented to the "Gainsaying" people (Rom. x. 21) was an awful confirmation of His words spoken on a former occasion: "Woe to thee, Corazain, woe to thee Bethsaida, for if in Tyre and Sidon had been wrought the miracles that have been wrought in you, they would long ago have done penance in sackcloth and ashes" (Matt. xi. 21).

Truly, the good thief did penance; he confessed his sins while charitably exhorting his comrade to examine himself: "We are condemned justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done no evil" (Luke xxiii. 41). All the fragrance and strength of contrition are contained in these few words; the humiliating avowal, the resignation which accepts punishment without murmuring, above all, the upward gaze at "This man who hath done no evil," but who has willed to suffer more than all sinners that all sinners may be saved.

"Which man is he who loveth most?" the Saviour had one day asked a Pharisee, who had replied: "He to whom most is forgiven." And Jesus, returning this admirable speech, had added while indicating the Magdalen: "Many sins are forgiven her, because she loved much" (Luke vii. 42, 47). And the Redeemer, while dying, emphasized once more the sublime law of mercy.

#### Paradise Gained

The believing thief, in full assurance of faith, and despite his humiliating condition as a guilty man (Ps. cxv. 10), had dared to speak: "Lord, remember me when Thou

shalt come into Thy kingdom." And, Jesus, the butt of so much brutality and outrage, Whom no one had sought to defend, of Whom, no one had asked anything, gave to the miserable wretch, transformed by faith and penitence, all that He had to give, all that which He would give to no other. "Verily, I say unto thee" He replied, "this day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise" (Luke xxiii. 43).

"This robber stole Paradise," cries St. Chrysostom in an access of holy jealousy. No one before him ever received such a promise; not Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob, or Moses, or the prophets, or the apostles; the thief pressed in before all these. But his faith also surpassed theirs. He saw Jesus tormented, and adored Him as if He were in glory. He saw Him nailed to a cross, and petitioned Him as if He were enthroned. He saw Him condemned, and asked a favor of Him as of a king. . . . O admirable thief, thou sawest a crucified man and thou proclaimedst a God."

True it is that the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and that one can take possession as by force, of eternal happiness (Matt. xi. 12).

True it is also that we should not trust to our last hour for our conversion, since of these two thieves one died unsaved though he had Christ Himself before his eyes.

## IV

### THE MOTHER OF SORROWS

It must have been at the moment of granting to the penitent thief the unspeakable privilege of entering with Him into Paradise that the gaze of Jesus rested on His Mother. The Blessed Virgin had no need to feel envious of the thief, for Paradise had been hers since the Annunciation. Nevertheless she would have many years still to wait before rejoining her child in glory; therefore Jesus cast on her a look of filial tenderness to assure her that she filled always the first place in His heart.

With wet passionate eyes she stood watching the Son of her womb panting on the cross. Near her stood her sister, Mary Cleophas, the Magdalen, and the beloved disciple. She did not speak; supreme grief, like supreme joy, is silent. We need no Evangelist to tell us that there, no less than at Bethlehem, she "pondered in her heart" (Luke ii. 19) every act, every word, connected with the terrible event.

As she watched Him the mournful words of the prophet floated through her mind: "Before His days be full He shall perish; and His Hands shall wither away. He shall be blasted as a vine when its grapes are in the first flower and as an olive tree that casteth its flower" (Job xv. 32, 33). Liars rise up before His face, fury has assembled against Him and menaced Him; they have ground their teeth against Him; His enemies have beheld Him with terrible eyes; they have opened their jaws against Him, they have outraged Him and struck Him in the face; they have glutted themselves with His anguish, God has given them over to the ungodly" (Job xvi. 9-12). "Thirst burns Him. His strength faints from hunger, famine invades His ribs, premature decay devours the beauty of His skin and consumes His arms" (Job. xviii. 9-13) . . . "Here, His flesh being consumed, His bones cleave to His skin, His lips and His cheeks are glued



to His teeth" (Job xviii. 20); "His flesh falls away in shreds, and His bones are laid bare" (Job xxxii. 21). "Ah, why do you glut yourselves thus with the poor flesh (Is. xl. 6) which He assumed but for love of you?"

### A Contrast

The poor Mother recalled the happy careless days at Bethlehem; the delicate, tender infancy, the first cries, the childish lispings, which have given place to bloodshed and wounds and the death rattle. In thought she hears again the angel recounting the prophecies of Isaias concerning the Emmanuel. Alas! the same prophet who had compared the frail newborn babe to a flower of the field (Is. xl. 6) had also said: "From the sole of the feet unto the top of the head there is no place that has been spared from blows; all is bruises and pallor, all is swollen beneath the blows, there are no swathing bands (as at Bethlehem) to envelop Him, no liniments and no oil to mollify His wounds" (Is. i. 6). And the grief-wrung heart of the Virgin, deep and bitter as the ocean, slowly retraced in the bleeding wounds of the Crucified the picture drawn by the prophet: "Who could have believed my reports?" In her *Magnificat* she had sung: "He hath showed might in His arm" (Luke i. 51). Isaias replies to her:

"To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" Who could divine the work which He was about to accomplish in His Son, Who "would spring up as shrub, whose root is in dry ground; He has no sightliness or beauty; we have seen Him; His appearance is intolerable, and we have wept for His being alive.

"Despised and the most abject of men, the man of sorrows, and acquainted with failings; His face was hid under a veil of dust and blood; He was despised and we esteemed Him no more highly.

"Surely He hath Himself borne our weariness, and car-

ried our sorrows, and we have esteemed Him as it were a leper, stricken of God and humiliated.

"But if He was wounded, it was because of our iniquities; crushed, it was because of our crimes; the price of our pardon was upon Him and by His livid hue we have been healed.

"All we have wandered like lost sheep, each one has gone his own way; and God hath laid on Him the iniquities of us all.

"He will be offered because it was His own will, and He will not open His mouth; He will be led as a sheep to the slaughter; as a lamb in the hands of the shearer, He will be silent and will not open His mouth.

"He will disappear in the anguish of a lawsuit. Who will recount the crime of His race? for He has been violently cut off from the land of the living. I have struck because of the wickedness of my people.

"There will be the ungodly even to His sepulchre, and a rich man for His death (Joseph of Arimathea).

"It pleased the Lord that He should be crushed in His weakness.

"He has been numbered with the scoundrels, He has borne the sins of many and He has prayed for His persecutors" (Is. liii. 1, 12).

The Virgin wept, and tears streamed from her eyes . . . and she stretched forth her hands trembling with grief, and none was able to comfort her (Thren. ii. 16, 17).

Her mother-heart cried out: "Behold O God, how I am broken; my bowels which have given thee this Son are torn, my heart is overthrown within me, I am full of bitterness. While abroad the sword destroyeth my Son, at home in my heart death is not less grievous" (Thren. ii. 20). . . . From out the past the voice of the prophet, himself in tears at a like spectacle, speaks to her: "To whom shall I compare thee, to whom liken thee, O daughter of Jerusalem; to whom shall I compare thee, and how console thee, O daughter of

Zion? For great as the sea is thy sadness; who can staunch the wounds of thy heart?" (Thren. ii. 13).

To "soothe" the heart of the Mother one must be found who could heal the wounds of the Son, all of whose bones she could number (Ps. xxi. 18). The sword which, passing through the heart of Mary struck her Son, must be wrenched from the hands of Justice; and against Justice, God Himself was powerless.

Slowly Mary tasted the full bitterness of grief. Her deathless love, sacred ocean—rose and fell with the tide of her sorrow. Pious hearts love to dwell on the revelations which she is believed to have made afterwards to one of her chosen friends:

"I have seen His dying, tear-drowned eyes, His cheeks pale with the hue of death, his piteous face, with half-open mouth and parched tongue. . . . His sunken cheeks clave to His teeth, and His pinched nostrils added to the sharpened aspect of His face . . . His body was wan and bloodless. His limbs, incredibly thin, seemed part of the wood of the Cross. His hair and beard were matted with blood. In all this rending and pallor of my Son, His heart alone resisted, because it was of perfect construction and very strong" (*Revelations of St. Bridget*, i. 10; iv. 70).

And Jesus, Who had just spoken to the penitent thief the most merciful of all His utterances, let His gaze fall on her whom He loved more than all the world beside, and who was experiencing almost infinite anguish in exchange for her incomparable innocence. He recalled the smiles and caresses of Bethlehem, the terrors of the flight into Egypt, the toils of Nazareth, the anxieties, the fatigues, the loneliness she had undergone during the last three years; He thought of her present grief, the future days of mourning and solitude during twenty more long years, and in the midst of His own torments He yearned to comfort the Mother to whom the splendid promises had been made and who up to now had received nothing but indescribable sufferings. "O Virgin,

whom I have brought into my house, I wish to make thee a joyful mother of children" (Ps. cxii. 9).

"Thou art about to lose the only Son of thy virginity and of thy spotless love. I will give thee in exchange the beautiful and glorious generation of the chaste (Wisd. iv. 1), of whom thou shalt be the mother."

### Children of Mary

All virtue, all moral beauty, all honor, will seek thy shade and flourish under thy care . . . thou shalt be the Mother of divine grace, of purity, the Mother beloved of all, admired of all . . . and if thou wouldst at this moment foresee how pure, loving, free from all corruption, will be those who from henceforth will call themselves thy children, look on him who stands by thy side, the eldest of that family; the leader of that phalanx; look on him whom I have loved" (John xx. 2) . . . "Woman behold thy son" (John xix. 26).

And when He had uttered these words: "Woman, behold thy son" Jesus meditated on the heart-breaking solitude in which His mother would be left. He knew her heart; knew all that she had suffered during the three years of His public life when she never saw Him but from a distance, and was forced to efface herself silently in the crowds that separated her from Him. He thought of the twenty years she would still live, with heroic soul, but with vacant eyes, weaned of the vision of the Child to whom she had given birth.

### Son, Behold Thy Mother

Musing on all this He turned towards John. His look seemed to say, "O thou who hast heard the beating of My heart (John xxi. 20), and who knowest the secrets of My soul; thou whose hands are pure and whose gaze profound; I choose thee, and confide to thy charge this treasure, this pearl of great price, this holy soul. Thou wilt soothe her

grief, conjure up memories of a sweet past, shield her old age. Thou wilt fill My place when the end of her exile is come. Thou wilt close the dear eyes which have shed so many tears over Me, thou wilt render up to the angels, whom I will send, her virgin flesh, the holy tabernacles of her body, from which I issued forth a pure and bleeding host." And while the eyes of the dying Man were saying this, His lips were murmuring, "Son, behold thy mother" (John xix. 26).

There is no Christian who has not heard these words. And since that moment in which the friend of Jesus became, in the name of friendship, the adoptive son of the Mother of God; since that moment in which the Son, unable to forget His mother, begged His friend to love her and surround her with devotion and honor; there is no friend of Jesus who is not drawn by a like friendship to make himself the child and the servant of Mary.

## V

### THE LAST AGONY

HAVING thus parted with the last treasure remaining to Him, Jesus remained in very truth the orphan who could say to God, the Father of all the forsaken: "Thou seest, for Thou considerest labor and sorrow, how that I am stripped bare (Ps. x. 14). O Thou refugee of the poor (Ps. ix. 10), who healest the broken of heart, and bindest up their miseries" (Ps. cxlvi. 3); Thou hast said to Me: "Thou art My son, I have begotten Thee (Ps. ii. 7); Thou hast been My strength from My Mother's womb. Thou art My protector and My glory (Ps. iii. 4). Look upon Me, and have mercy on Me, and save the son of thine handmaid" (Ps. lxxxvi. 16).

Alas, the Saviour, abandoned by His disciples, bereft of His Mother, lifted His failing eyes in vain to heaven (Is. xxxviii. 14; Ps. lxxviii. 4). It was written that the great high priest, the high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech (Heb. vi. 20) should offer His sacrifice "without father, without mother, without genealogy" (Heb. vii. 3); and as the hour of oblation approached He found Himself derelict, alone, forsaken by heaven and earth.

Whilst the darkness deepened on Calvary, and filled the whole earth (Matt. xxvii. 45), a mysterious, horrible night wrapped the soul of the Redeemer in icy folds. As the gathering clouds veiled the light of the sun, so the cloud spoken of by the prophet (Lam. iii. 44) hid from the straining eyes of the Victim the Face of God.

That loved and gentle Face, the contemplation of which had strengthened and comforted the God-Man in the midst of all the trials and all the struggles of His life, was shrouded in a mystery, the secret of which theology has never yet been able to unravel. In vain the Saviour called: "O Lord hear My voice. Have pity, Hear Me. My heart saith to

Thee: I seek Thee, I seek Thy face, O Lord; turn it not thus away from Thy servant (Ps. xxvi. 7-9). Reject Me not, neither cast Me away from Thy face (Ps. i. 13). Thou seest My humiliation, My confusion, and My shame (Ps. lxxviii. 20). Must I say in the excess of My soul: He hath cast Me far away from His sight? (Ps. xxx. 23). Look again on My soul, deliver it (Ps. lxxviii. 10), turn not away Thy head from Thy child, for I am in misery (Ps. lxxviii. 18). Have pity on Me, O Lord, have pity on Me; My soul trusteth only in Thee; under the shadow of Thy wings will I wait until all this iniquity be passed (Ps. lvi. 2)."

Although the hypostatic union was not severed in Jesus—any more than the presence of God essential to the preservation of life is withdrawn from the damned—the Victim was nevertheless passing through a state similar to that unspeakable pain of loss which constitutes their most painful expiation.

### A Divine Sacrifice

"It was essential," says Bossuet, "that everything should be divine in this sacrifice; a satisfaction worthy of God was demanded and a God to offer it; a vengeance worthy of God and wrought by a God. To be nailed to a shameful cross; to have the Hands and Feet pierced and to hang supported only by these Wounds; to have all the limbs bruised by a violent shock; to feel both Heart and Tongue dried up through loss of blood; inconceivable anguish of mind and body, and to receive no refreshment save a draught of gall and vinegar; to see amid these unspeakable sufferings unnumbered multitudes mocking Him, nodding their heads, and ridiculing His pitiable condition; to have a thief crucified on either side, one of whom, desperate and furious to the last, died uttering a thousand blasphemies, is about the most terrible aspect of the crucifixion of Jesus that our feeble imagination can devise. Truly it is an awful picture,

and may well fill us with horror; but the cruelty of this torture, and all those other torments which we have considered in detail, are but as a dream compared with the anguish and oppression, and agony which rent the soul of Jesus under the chastising hand of God. Press it well home to your souls, Christians, that all the bodily sufferings were but preparatory to the consummating of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; and this final stroke must be struck at Him on the Cross and by a higher than human power" (First Sermon on the Passion).

It was while thus, "Bruised in infirmity" (Is. liii. 10), that Jesus began to repeat the Psalm, so bitter and yet so resigned, of which the phrases are full of tears and the fragments seem to bleed: "Eli, Eli, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. xxi.)..

Voices which the dying Man no longer heard sneered at Him from the foot of the Cross: "This man calleth Elias." It was necessary that insult should pursue the unhappy sufferer even unto the pangs of death (Matt. xxvii. 47).

Then, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled and that His resignation and obedience might be manifested to the end, He added: "I thirst" (John xix. 38). Despite the mocking chorus which arose: "Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to deliver Him," one of the soldiers ran and took a sponge and filled it with water, mixed with vinegar, with which the executioners quenched their own thirst, and fastened it to the end of a reed and held it to the mouth of the dying Man.

Jesus pressed the sponge to His parched and dying lips.

Then He said: "It is finished" (John xix. 30).

"The dust is finished, the wretch is consumed" had been written by the prophet (Is. xvi. 4), and "justice is satisfied by expiation."

But suddenly life seemed to revive, and with a loud voice Jesus cried: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit" (Luke xxiii. 46; Ps. xxx. 6).



Then His grief-stricken and bleeding Head drooped forwards.

He signalled to Death, and gave him permission to take possession of Him and He expired (Luke xxxii. 46).

### Conclusion

During the more than two thousand years that have elapsed since the Crucifixion many sorrows have fallen upon the human race and upon the Church. What ruin and carnage, what wholesale destruction of towns, what cutting off of generations and blotting out of peoples, and as a consequence what tears and mourning. Nevertheless, there remains not one of these sorrows from which time has not taken the sting.

One wound alone always bleeds. One only sorrow survives and never will be soothed; the sorrow caused by the murder of the Only Son of the human race, the First-Born of Christians, the one innocent being in this world, Jesus Christ. Over this sorrow one will always weep. Grief will lift trusting eyes to Him to learn resignation. Virtue will seek to learn from Him the secret of His strength. Love will draw near and sound the Wounds in His Hands and Feet and Heart to discover the hidden source of unbounded generosity and divine enthusiasm. The sin-stricken conscience will seek in His dying gaze the beam of mercy which convicts, converts, and absolves. But from all these eyes turned towards "Him whom they have pierced" gush out, to all eternity, unquenchable streams of tears; for this Cross of Jesus bears the double imprint of a sorrow and a crime for which faith, repentance, and love will not be comforted.

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