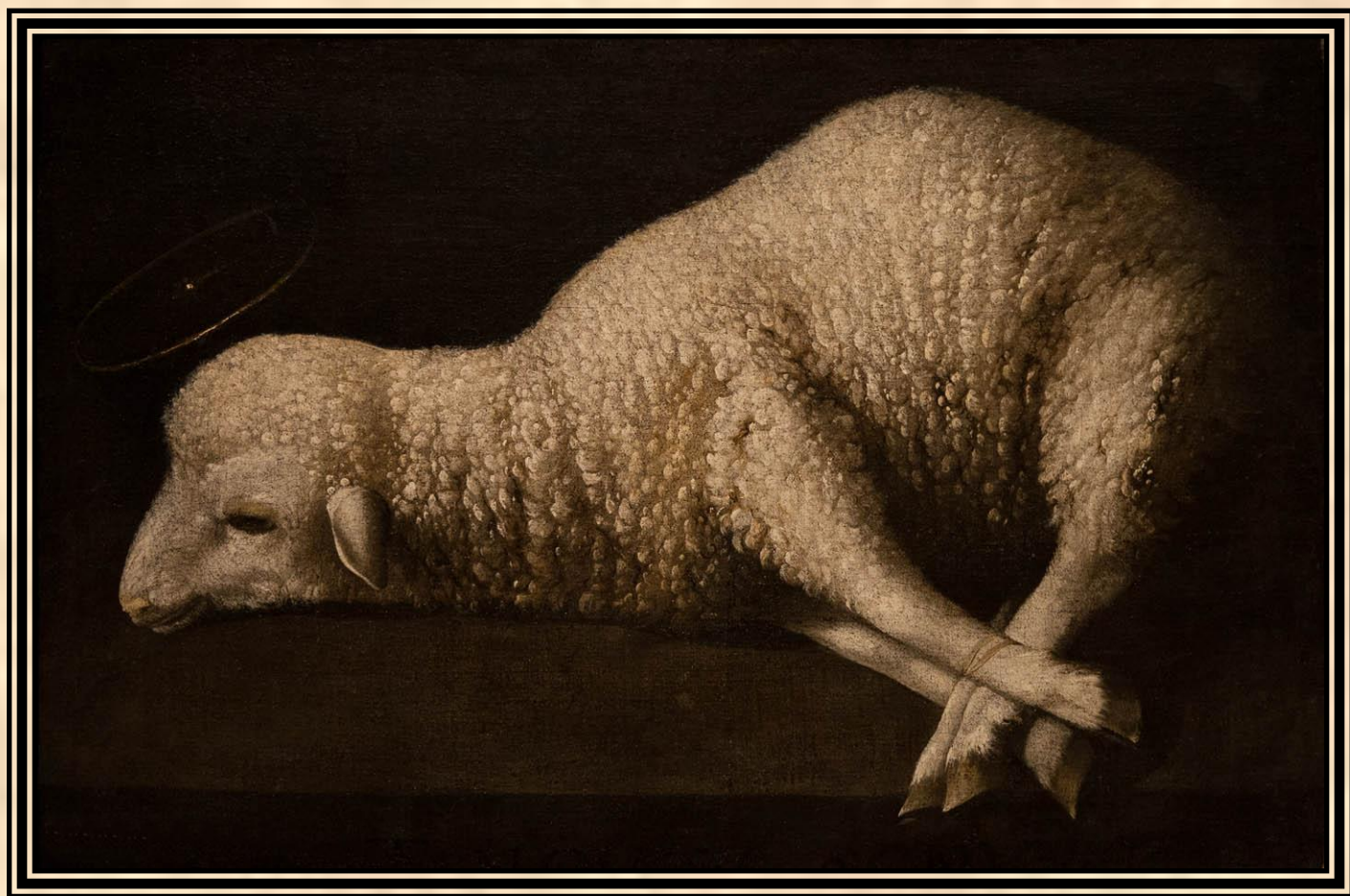


They Crucified Him



They Crucified Him

By

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They Crucified Him

Our three title words are Saint Luke's terse summary of the events of Our Lord's Sacred Passion. Who "**they**" were, what "**crucified**" implied, and what manner of Man they outraged in crucifying "**Him**."

These ideas are capable of wide expansion, they have formed the subject matter of innumerable meditations, and they are most aptly illustrated in the fourteen scenes known familiarly to us as "the stations."

Catholics, thank God, nourish their love of Our Lord and deepen their hatred of sin by frequently "making" those stations so I hope to be helpful to them in these pages by developing one single idea for contemplation at each of the fourteen stations as we follow Christ and Mary through the events taking place on the way to Calvary.

I

Jesus is Condemned to Death

(Independence of Our Opinions)

We find ourselves at the outset, in a quiet corner of Pilate's hall, looking on the Prisoner Who is standing before His judge.

In the street below a brutal mob is howling, and the cry, quivering from excess of hatred, sends up its echo, "Away with Him! He is guilty of death! Crucify Him!" Presently the Governor arises from his seat, dips his hands in a basin of water, and holds them dripping over the edge of the balcony. "No," he declares, "this Man is not guilty of death. He is innocent and I wash my hands to show you I am not responsible for His condemnation. But, though He is innocent, I sentence Him to be crucified."

We might draw many a helpful consideration from this first station, but it will probably be most useful to concentrate on one at a time. So as we watch Pilate and the infuriated Jews we see very clearly indeed how foolish is that man, like Pilate, who allows himself to be swayed unduly by desire for his fellowman's praise and approval. Pilate's inconsistency is equaled only by his cruelty. In one breath, he affirms Christ's innocence, and in the next, he condemns Him! As for the

multitudes, it is barely five days since they gathered around during His triumphant journey into Jerusalem, once more shouting themselves hoarse, but in jubilation that time as they acclaimed this same Man their King. Look at them now and see how swiftly the popularist aura has changed. These are the people whose sick He cured and whose dead He raised to life again. These same people followed Him into the desert and He miraculously fed them. They brought their children to Him to bless. Yet today they lift up those same little ones high in their arms and teach them to yell curses at Him as at a hypocrite and a criminal?

Whatever their charge, even if it were a just one, the Truth cannot but force itself upon us that he who leans much on mere human friendship and permits his conduct to be guided by the fickle opinions of men is building upon shifting sands. Of course, there is nothing more removed from our minds than censure of the beautiful and lasting friendships that abound. However, unless friendship and affection be the overflow of the love of Christ in the soul, it will soon degenerate into mere expediency. A friend of this sort smiles upon you and is lavish with attentions as long as he has anything to gain from you, or thinks he has. If you seek him out when sorrow presses upon you and he will not be at home, or he will be plainly bored and uninterested, and when next you meet him in the street he will look the other way or cross to the other side. Jesus, enduring this fickleness of men, would have me learn there is one abiding friendship, and only one that stands unshaken in the midst of men's insincerity--the friendship existing between God and the soul and the friendship that loves others for His sake.

Human respect is another form of subservience to men's opinions. Men drink freely and use loose language or intersperse their conversation with foul oaths--and why? They are ashamed to silence indecent talk, they smile or laugh at a tale that nauseates--and why? They fawn on those who have power, and compromise their consciences to win approval. They make careful study of the art of timeserving--and why? Look back ten or fifteen years and see how utterly unimportant it is now what men thought of you or said about you then, when you were ridiculed or laughed at, or on the other hand, when you were lauded to the skies. Whether they praise or blame, whether they regard you as a wise man or a fool, you are what God sees you to be. Just that, no more and no less. What fools we are to be so easily swayed, and to lose opportunities to grow in God's love or to combat His enemies because we fear what others will think or say about us! "To me," writes Saint Paul, "it is a very small thing to be judged by you. . . . He that judgeth me is the Lord."

In this first station, Jesus teaches me to ignore, as being unworthy of a moment's consideration, what men think of me and to seek to win for my words and actions the approval of Him Whose judgment of me, because His judgment is unerring, is the only one worth having.

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Jesus is Made to Bear His Cross

(Lord, am I guilty of death?)

Therefore, He is accounted guilty of death and, accordingly in the second station, Jesus proceeds to carry His cross.

This time we draw very close to Him and, as the excited crowds continue to yell that He is guilty of death, we may well ask to which of the two of us do those accusing fingers point. They cannot justly indicate our Savior, for even the corrupt Pilate has pronounced Him innocent. Nevertheless, it is indeed true that every man who commits mortal sin is guilty of death. Before that fatal day and hour, his soul was pulsating with the very life of God Himself, for to be in the state of grace is to participate in the divine nature. However, as the sinner consummates his foul deed his hands are red with the blood of murder. He has stifled, strangled, and slain the life of his own soul. He is branded in God's sight as a murderer, like another Cain. Like Cain, often he is not satisfied with destroying the life of his own soul but needs to inject the virus into the souls of others. "Woe to the scandal-giver," says Our Lord. Woe to him or to her who teaches others how to sin, who tempts them to wickedness, who laughs airily at their just scruples. Such a one is indeed guilty of death. The lying mob surrounding Our Lord gives place to the souls ruined and slain by such a scandal-giver and these proclaim in all truth, as they look upon him and point him out, "He has incurred sentence of death, for he is a murderer. He has murdered our souls!"

Fearful responsibility! Perhaps to set a young man on the road to moral collapse! Perhaps to blight a fair young life by evil example or to stir up in another the flames of passion that may take years to extinguish and control again, if indeed the task is ever accomplished at all! "Father," said an old woman, "I'm eighty-two, and will you tell everyone you can what I'm going to say to you? I was a sinner and the

memory of my sins haunts me night and day. I sit in this bed at two and three in the morning and ask myself how will I answer to God for the souls I have led into the ways of sin. If only young people would learn from me what misery there is in sin!”

We are still standing side by side, Jesus and I. He willingly takes the cross though He is innocence itself. Must I not corroborate the accusation hurled against me, that it is I who am guilty of death? If so, what could be more just or fitting than that I relieve the innocent Man of His load, and accept the cross willingly for my own portion of His death?

III

Jesus Falls the First Time

(Hell, and the sinner's first serious fall)

Tradition says Our blessed Lord fell several times on the road. In this station, we make reverent commemoration of the first of these falls. On the streets, it is greeted with shrieks of fiendish delight. Our divine Lord is prodded with a lance and rudely kicked as He lies on the ground. While we are waiting for this poor exhausted Man to force Himself to rise again, we let our minds go back to our own first serious fall, back to the day of the sinner's first mortal sin.

All sin is a species of idolatry, a falling down before impurity, drunkenness, injustice, or hatred, and willfully paying to them the homage due to God alone. Thus, sin is the free choice of a soul. If the soul passes out of this world in that state, God just confirms it in the choice it has freely made. Thus, the soul condemns itself to eternity in hell, for so great an evil is mortal sin that only in hell can it find a fitting environment. If, to make an impossible supposition, such a soul were admitted to heaven and into the sight of the infinitely holy God, it would endure an even more fearful hell. Seeing its own filth compared to His ineffable purity, the soul would endeavor to crawl away out of the light, even as our first parents, after their sin, hid themselves from the eyes of God. What enormity must be sin considering the only place fit for the unrepentant sinner is in everlasting fire. That unrepentant sinner will dwell in the midst of the screams of despair wrung from those who have not a single atom of hope, who have lost the power to love, whose hearts are continually torn by the thought that this is all their own fault?

The skeptic may sneer at the idea of hell and a hereafter, but the clear teaching of Christ stands against him. "Fear not them who can destroy the body and after that have no more that they can do, but fear Him rather Who can destroy both body and soul into hell."

"Yea, I say to you, fear ye Him." "If thy hand or thy foot scandalize thee, cut it off and cast it from thee. It is better for thee to go into life maimed or lame, than, having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire." If something so dear as a limb or an eye were to be a source of sin, we should not hesitate to take these drastic steps. Why? Does Our Lord speak so vigorously just to strike terror into us? Undoubtedly, that is part of His purpose. However, one also thinks that these weighty warnings about hell are dictated by His love. He sees, on the one hand, the soul He loves intensely and purchases at such a price and, on the other hand, He looks into the place of torments lying open there before His eyes. What wonder that His Sacred Heart throbs with anxiety to save, and that even divine eloquence finds difficulty in expressing the horror of the reality?

The sinner's first fall into mortal sin! His first prostration in adoration before an idol! His first deliberate preference in serious matter of passion and selfish gratification to God! Whatever would have happened if there were no forgiveness! What if God had taken him at his word! Recall the circumstances--the day it was, the person or persons who were there, the place the crime was perpetrated--of that first fall. Does it not make one's blood almost freeze to think that if death had come then, the sinner is lost now in hell?

IV

Jesus Meets His Afflicted Mother

(The fiat of Jesus and Mary)

Christ does not accept for Himself the same mercy he extends to sinners. When He is down under the weight of our sins--not of His own--He is kicked and cursed and jeered at until at last, more dead than alive, He drags Himself again to His feet. As He forces open His eyes, weighed down as they are with blood and spittle, to see where next to place His foot, He finds Himself looking straight into the eyes of Mary His Mother. We have reached the fourth station, the meeting of Jesus and Mary on

the way to Calvary. When was their last meeting? Probably it was the evening before, when Jesus came in from the house of Magdalene and Martha at Bethania, two miles out, and left His Mother behind. What a night has passed since! “Jesus,” writes Saint Ignatius, “spent the whole of that night in bonds.” He was flung into jail after the soldiers had finished their savage sport with Him. The stigma of the jail! He is locked up and wearily sits down on the hard floor of that narrow guardroom with hands tied in front of Him, looking forward to the morrow that is to bring Him the Passion. That was the night for Jesus. For Mary? One thinks of the dreadful suspense she felt all that night, as she waited for His return to the house at Bethania. He had gone into the city for the Paschal supper and His Mother knows enemies are there, thirsting like wolves for His blood. Why is He not returning tonight? Every footstep she hears outside makes her mother’s heart beat more rapidly in hopeful expectation, only to sink more deeply when the footstep passes by the door and Mary realizes it is not He after all. Morning comes and with the first grey streaks of dawn, she is on the road to Jerusalem. Magdalene, once the sinner, now the inseparable companion of Mary Immaculate, is by her side. Well-intentioned townsfolk meet her on the way and, without tact or thought, they blurt out the news that cuts into her soul. He has been taken and the report is on everyone’s lips that He will surely be crucified. “There are tears which, at their fountains, freeze,” writes the poet, and Mary’s were of that kind. She is paralyzed by an excess of agony as she continues to walk towards Jerusalem, dazed and leaning on Magdalene’s arm.

Their last meeting--when He embraced her there at the door, when He was leaving Bethania, when she stood looking after Him, as a mother would, until He was quite out of sight. Now, here is the next meeting in this fourth station. Such a terrifying contrast! When sin wreaks vengeance on the sinless Christ, this is the result. When He undertakes to prove His love for the sinner, this is how He does it. The Father did not spare His own well-beloved Son and Jesus will not spare the Mother He cherishes. His anguish at the sight of the grief He was causing her was probably one of the most poignant pains of the entire Passion. It is comparatively easy to bear suffering oneself, but it is agonizing to make another suffer, especially one who is loved intensely. Mary too must share in the work of redeeming souls and she too must be given this opportunity of offering for men’s salvation Him to Whom she clung with a consuming love.

Their hearts were inundated with sorrow at this meeting but neither of them would have things otherwise. Jesus offered Himself and Mary offered Jesus, each with a

generosity devoid of any vestige of desire to withhold the offering, wholly or in part. For Jesus and Mary loved our souls, our souls that are now accompanying them to Calvary. Although to give thus cost them unutterable anguish, their love of us rose higher still and both spoke their fiat. “Fiat voluntas tua,” said Jesus to the Father. “Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum,” echoed Mary. It was hard to say, but they both said it. It was harder still to mean, but they did mean it, and gave overwhelming proof of their sincerity when out of love for us, Jesus offered Himself and Mary offered Jesus, on the way to Calvary.

V

Simon Helps Jesus Carry the Cross

(The apostolate—a responsibility and an honor.)

Jesus could quite well have carried the cross the whole way Himself, had He not freely renounced supernatural help. However, He needs help because He wills to need it. So Simon of Cyrene is forced to share His burden. God condescends to want the assistance of His creature. Just as last night, when Jesus lay prostrate in agony, He deigned to receive comfort from the angel—who after all was a mere creature--so now on the road to Calvary He is willing that another creature should be privileged to give Him the help required to finish the journey.

The truth that God makes our salvation depend, to some extent, on our co-operation is, in the words of Pius XII, “a subject of inexhaustible meditation.” Let us realize this and the realization must shake our souls to their very foundations. It is actually left to me to decide whether a certain number of souls will bless God throughout eternity in heaven or blaspheme His holy name for endless ages in hell. How many are thus dependent upon me? That is God’s secret, but it is beyond question that, if I make myself the instrument He expects me to be, He will use me to save others and if, through my neglect and selfishness, I fail Him, these souls will not receive the grace that otherwise would have come to them.

As our Holy Father is careful to point out, this weighty responsibility for the souls of others rests, not only on priests and religious, but also, in due measure, on all members of the Church. The issues involved leave us baffled and speechless in our effort to express their gigantic importance. If I fail to answer an urgent letter I can,

perhaps, make good the omission by sending a letter or leaving a message. However, my failure to render myself fit for use as an instrument in God's hand for men's salvation--this is fraught with irreparable losses of daily and perhaps hourly opportunities affecting the eternal welfare of the souls for whose sake He is going to Calvary. "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel!" cried Saint Paul. Small wonder!

If I seize upon these opportunities, having made myself, as nearly as I can, what Jesus means me to be, and He pours into my soul the healing graces of salvation and sanctification. Let these opportunities pass me by, let me resist His invitations and offers, and it is more than possible that souls will be excluded from heaven forever as a result. Yes, assuredly, it is "a subject of inexhaustible meditation."

My cooperation is much more than a responsibility and a duty. It is also an honor. You know how jealously men guard positions and tasks that will result in their gaining great praise or that will swell their bank account. Often to oust another, they will stoop to methods that cry to heaven for vengeance. If a man wins much money, his instinctive reaction is to hug the prize to his own heart. If he is manager of a big firm, shareholder in a lucrative policy, or if he has climbed to the head of his profession, you will frequently find when he is getting old he wants to pass on these honorable posts to his own friends or relatives, and tries to exclude others.

Jesus Christ is very different. We are inestimably privileged to help Jesus Christ in the work of saving souls. To those who engage in it, this work brings rewards and merits immeasurably above the highest pinnacle of worldly power or worldly prestige. Although it is the most divine of all divine works, still so pressing is it in its demand to be undertaken that anyone can help, anyone may have the honor, anyone and everyone is capable of learning how to do it.

Anyone and everyone. Before we pass on to the next station let us recall two anecdotes that have a bearing on our considerations here.

From the heart. A Legionary of Mary went one Sunday with a companion to mind the children of a poor woman and, by so doing, give the woman an opportunity of going out to Mass. However, the woman declared she could not go because she had no shoes. Whereupon this excellent apostolic Legionary took the shoes off her own feet, put them on the woman, and promptly packed her away to Mass!

For the long term. A certain artist used to spend long months perfecting the details of his pictures. Others would turn out six or seven pictures for a single one of his. A friend remonstrated. “Well,” said the artist, “this is how I see it. The others are painting for time and money only. As for me--I am painting an eternity. I want to turn out works of art that will endure.”

When men have long forgotten the victories won by generals and mighty statesmen, when hard-earned and closely-guarded money has long ago slipped like water through men’s fingers, when edifices and cities that are monuments to men’s pride have been reduced to a heap of ruins, when this world itself has crashed in--even then that zealous Legionary’s act will still be living and remembered and rewarded by God.

Jesus deigns to want my cooperation--as He wanted Simon’s cooperation. His wanting is my responsibility and His wanting is my privilege. *Aeternitatem pingo!* We must paint for eternity.

VI

Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus *(Veronica and how to sanctify pleasure)*

No one tries to deny that in the Sacred Passion we are faced with lessons that our human nature, loving ease as it does, finds exceedingly hard to learn and put in practice. For this reason, there is a grain of comfort in seeing our divine Master and Model avail of the relief, brief though it was, brought to Him by the action of Veronica. Veronica’s heart overflowed with sympathy for the poor Sufferer, so she pushed her way through the crowd and offered to wipe that disfigured and bleeding face with a towel. Far from repelling her by insisting He preferred to suffer, Jesus, in this case, accepts what she is eager to give and, as a sign of gratitude, leaves behind the image of His own countenance on her towel. The scene forms the subject matter of the sixth station.

Other parts of Our Lord’s life come from other examples when again He chose or accepted what was naturally pleasant. Thus, He went to the marriage feast with His Mother and we may reasonably assume He partook of the simple pleasures provided. He was weary one summer evening and He sat down by the well on the

roadside to rest. One day, quite exhausted, He stepped into a boat with His disciples, provided Himself with a pillow, placed it under His head, and soon was fast asleep.

Sometimes on life's journey, a faithful soul can please Him best by accepting relief, a pleasure, or a relaxation in this same spirit of gratitude. "When the fire is lit," writes the gentle Saint Francis de Sales, "we see that obedience would have us warm ourselves, provided it be not done with too much eagerness." The proviso is important. In a painful illness, it may be more pleasing to Him to take with gratitude the remedy or relief offered rather than bear the pain with a bad grace. It is quite possible that when depression weighs down upon us, the right course is to shake it off by curtailing our penitential acts and our prayer and allowing ourselves more time for lawful recreation. For example, someone calls and you are delighted to see them, but they call just when you had arranged to go out and make a holy hour. Naturally, you would prefer to speak to your friend. It is likely enough that you will please God best in the circumstances by deferring your prayer and entertaining your friend. For it is not so much the accepting or rejecting of pleasant things that makes or mars the holiness of a soul, as the intention that directs the choice. Our Lord "did not please Himself," if He accepted what was easier and more pleasant. He accepted what was easier and more pleasant because He saw that it was His Father's Will. It would be unthinkable, for instance, that, as He staggers along on this terrible journey, He should meet the offer of Veronica with harshness and remind her that He had come to suffer and not to seek relief. That would have cut into her heart. It would have wounded charity, and Jesus was incapable of inflicting such a wound.

You will always find that, whenever He takes the easier course, He is actuated by a high motive. It is not merely because that course is easy and not merely because He is led by natural impulse. Charity is at stake or He sees a chance to instruct others, or He wills to draw souls to Him by accommodating Himself to their ways. There is nothing wrong in eating with publicans and sinners or in resting when one is tired. It is not forbidden to enjoy oneself and there is no sin in seeking relief when you are lying awake all night convulsed with pain. You are not bound to fast if the Church grants a dispensation. However, the all-important point for the soul that would follow Him loyally is the motive. There was no difficulty about this in His case, for He always did whatever was pleasing to His Father. With us, the case is quite different. Always ready to take the line of least resistance, we can arrange everything to suit ourselves and then proceed to persuade ourselves that we want nothing except God's Will--having first taken good care to have our own!

Therefore, where there is question for us of accepting what pleases us naturally, there is need of great sincerity in probing and purifying our motive. Still, Our Lord's action in this sixth station makes it quite clear--many a faithful soul will remain most faithful, not by always thwarting itself, but at times by accepting--with the gratitude we see Him show here--the pleasant things of life, "giving thanks to God in all things."

VII

Jesus Falls the Second Time

(The falls in-between)

It is likely that Our Savior fell several times for He was more dead than alive as He stumbled along the cobbled streets. In this case, there would have been a first fall and a last fall, and three or four--perhaps even more--in between. The fall we commemorate in the seventh station then, may be regarded as being representative of that uncertain number occurring between the first and the last.

As the sinner contemplates it in this light, he can scarcely avoid recalling his own falls into sin between the sad day he first grievously offended God and his last mortal sin. How many such falls were there? Impossible, it may be, to reckon. He remembers good confessions made and firm resolutions taken but, after a while, these were forgotten and world, flesh, and devil returned to the attack and captured the citadel of his soul again. He recalls fervent missions or retreats. He thinks of the earnestness with which he assured the Lord "never more will I offend Thee." He thinks of the hymns he sang and meant, expressive of his sorrow but, somehow, that contrition did not last. When the atmosphere changed and the old sinful associations came back, he forgot all about his promises to God and all his good intentions.

The falls in-between! Suppose a child had the insolence to strike his mother a deliberate blow across the face. Soon, realizing the wickedness of the act he falls on his knees and begs pardon. His mother easily forgives and tries to forget because she loves him. But lo, the next day, perhaps even that very night, the same offence is repeated. It is followed by another apology. It occurs yet a third and fourth time. Then,, at every opportunity, that child raises his hand and strikes his mother. What would you think of the genuineness of his act of sorrow? Possibly indeed, he is

sincere, but taking the whole proceeding at its face value, you would be inclined at least to doubt if that boy meant what he said when he assured his mother of his grief for his often-repeated sin.

Treat a human friend like this and chances are you sever the friendship forever. Treat even a loving mother in this hardhearted way and even she will ultimately grow tired of forgiving. We must remember, though, so immeasurably does divine love exceed even the strongest and purest human love that it is prepared to go on forgiving even seventy times seven times.

If, through God's mercy and grace, a man or woman has stayed free from all mortal sin or at least has done so for a long time, there is still much matter for thought and prayer in connection with this seventh station. Looking back over those years, such a person will see innumerable infidelities and venial sins and an apparent inability to eradicate them. After so many years trying to serve God, there is still the bad temper that makes one impossible to live with. There is the slanderous tongue. There is the seeming lack of all love of prayer. There is petty jealousy. There is laziness. There is the shirking spirit that leads a man always to seek the easiest for himself and let the difficult and disagreeable go to his neighbor. There is love of ostentation and worldly ways and pride and censoriousness. All going on for years.

During these years, that man or woman perhaps has been almost a daily communicant. Often, such people provide others an opportunity to criticize religion harshly. Others will argue with conviction, illogically of course, that, if such religious people can speak so harshly, treat others with such injustice, or fly into tempers that are a source of constant trial to others--if religious people are like this, what is the good of going to sacraments and Mass and saying prayers? Looking at Jesus lying under the cross in this second fall. We see a good reason to strike our breast for the innumerable falls sustained on the road of life, even though they were not mortal sins.

These lesser faults have a consoling aspect too. Saint Francis of Assisi, when he saw how pride had brought one of his brethren to ruin, lay down on the ground saying, "Only here is a man safe!" Remembering our lesser faults and our inability to grapple with them can be used by increasing the virtue that lies at the foundation of all true holiness--genuine humility. A merciful Lord permits them so He can warn us that, if we are weak in the face of comparatively small temptations, we cannot be proud of ourselves just because we do not fall into mortal sin.

“Our Lord,” writes Saint Francis de Sales, “treats us in just the same way as a good father or mother, who lets the child walk quite alone when it is in a soft meadow where the grass is thick, or upon a mossy bank, but on bad and dangerous roads carries the little one carefully in his arms. We have often seen souls courageously bear great assaults without being overcome by their enemies, who have afterwards been vanquished in very trifling encounters. And why is this except that Our Lord, seeing they would not be hurt much in falling, has let them walk alone, which He did not do when they were among the precipices of grave temptations whence He delivered them with His almighty hand?”

VIII

Jesus Speaks to the Daughters of Jerusalem

(The safety of the hard way)

In the sixth station, we saw Our Lord accept the comfort offered to Him by Veronica and we might have noticed the same when He allowed Simon to relieve Him of the weight of the cross. We know of the few isolated instances wherein He accepts, but there are very many wherein He refuses to avail of the consolation offered. Indeed, the whole Passion is a seeking out of what is hard and repellent to human nature. In the eighth station, we find the holy women weeping tears of compassion for Him in His truly heart-rending condition. In this case, He does not take what is offered to Him. Instead, He directs them to weep over their own sins.

Why does He refuse consolation and why should this be His more ordinary mode of procedure? There could have been no danger of His seeking this consolation. If He was to accept the sympathy offered, as He did when He met Veronica or when He ate with sinners, it is beyond question that He would have pleased the Father and that His choice would have been determined by that motive only.

However, He has come to give us an example and He knows all our inherent weaknesses. Thus, He knows we are biased in favor of what pleases us naturally and that there is need to suspect ourselves if we yield easily and frequently to our tastes and fancies, even if we tell ourselves that our motive is pure. “The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away.” Generally, the hard way is the safer way, if the soul is to advance in holiness. It is true, the hard way also has

its dangers of pride, imprudence, or lack of perseverance, but one must remember the easier way is also beset with subtleties and snares. Therefore, the question is, which road has fewer perils? The example of Our Lord and the saints unmistakably indicates it is usually the hard one. In individual cases, there may be room for doubt whether to take what is pleasant or hard, but the general principle stands firm.

“Let each one reflect,” writes Saint Ignatius--and the words have been cited as being an epitome of his whole teaching--“that he will make progress in all spiritual things in just the same proportion as he divests himself of self-love and self-will and self-satisfaction.” “Without mortification, and I say it boldly,” Saint John of the Cross tells us, “we shall make no progress towards perfection, or in the knowledge of God and of ourselves, notwithstanding all our efforts, any more than the seed will grow which is thrown away on uncultivated ground.” In many subsequent pages he goes on to lament bitterly over those souls who come to the service of God, advance a certain distance, do not ordinarily fall into serious sin, but yet, because they lean on creature comforts, inordinately lose the immense graces God would pour into them if they were only more generous in the practice of detachment. “Even one unruly desire, though not a mortal sin, sullies and deforms the soul, and indisposes it for the perfect union with God, until it be cast away.”

These are hard sayings, but they mark the way traced by Jesus and Mary on the road to Calvary. It is also the unanimous teaching of the saints, who accept these hard sayings literally and aim consistently at living them. They confirm that once they seriously undertook the task of self-abnegation, tolerating in themselves no deliberate fault and ruthlessly suppressing the movements of self-love, they can recall how a generous God flooded them with light and grace, and poured into them a torrent of joyousness that compared to no earthly satisfaction.

Saint John of the Cross was nine months in a dark prison cell, during which time he was flogged every day, nearly starved, insulted, and taunted. Afterwards he assured a Carmelite nun that so great was the joy he experienced in his soul during that long period of imprisonment, that, for a moment of it a hundred years' such privation would be a small price to pay. Is it any wonder that he waxed eloquent on the disastrous loss sustained by many tolerably good souls because they cling inordinately to merely human consolations like those that Jesus rejects here?

IX

Jesus Falls the Third Time

("Never again"--the sinner's last fall)

In the ninth station, Our Lord's last fall is brought before us for our reverent consideration. His last fall--and mine? What a comfort it would be to the sinner if, kneeling here, he could assure himself that never again would he offend God, at least mortally. That, no matter how black the past, he was certain now at least he had begun in earnest, and the fall into mortal sin he endured, an hour ago, or a week ago, or a month or a year ago--that that was his last fall. This day, and this journey with Jesus and Mary, made today in this church, are going to mark a definite break with occasions that, in the past, have enticed the sinner back into the ways of sin!

The sinner's last fall! Why not? Everyone who ever tasted sin knows it is poison--a poison not without it a sweetness for the time being--that no sooner drunk, it leaves in the sinner's heart a feeling of disgust and self-contempt. In spite of the frequency of one's experience, in spite of the fact that we ought to realize the price that will certainly be exacted afterwards in shame and anguish, nonetheless the serpent has continued to deceive us, time and time again. He did this with our first parents in paradise. He has done it successfully for thousands of years. He has done it with millions of Adam's sons and daughters who have lived since.

What about you, who are now following Christ and Mary to Calvary? He has deceived you too? Perhaps, but, please God you have had your last fall. You experience great encouragement as you recall the tremendous love in the hearts of Jesus and Mary for the poor soul who fell and now fears the force of the bad habits developed! Their love is not mere sentiment. It is beyond question--a cure is possible. Many who stumble and fall badly finally arise and go straight. Many repentant sinners, having had their last fall, even arise to climb great heights to sanctity. Why? Because the love of Jesus and Mary for them translated itself into action. Immense graces were poured into those sorrowful hearts and new vigor and new life resulted. Listen to the grand prayer of the penitent Saint Augustine and make it your own.

"Take my heart, O Lord, for I cannot give it to Thee. Keep my heart, O Lord, for I cannot keep it for Thee. Send me any cross, O Lord, that may keep me subject to

Thy cross, and save me in spite of myself!” “If only I could be sure that the past was all right and I would not fall again, I might take courage and do. But there have been so many false starts, when I thought all was now at last firmly set for the rest of the journey, that I have lost hope!”

How often cries like these are wrung from the poor sinner’s heart! We can only guess the consolation given to Christ when, despite fierce temptation to abandon the struggle and make a truce with the enemy, the sinner arises once more to his feet; once more takes hold of the cross; resolves to wage unceasing war on that sinful inclination; (and, following in Christ’s footsteps) refuses to be beaten; and stoutly affirms to himself the truth that was definitely his last fall?

It is not only those who have preserved their innocence who give much glory to God, but also those who are broken-hearted with sorrow and resolve to turn away from sin and its occasions. Mary Immaculate followed Jesus to Calvary. But, Mary Magdalene, the woman who once was a sinner also followed Him to Calvary. Mary Magdalene, who, hearing one day of this wonderful Jesus of Nazareth, met Him, knew Him, loved Him, and, from that hour, counted the date of her last fall.

“The soul,” writes Saint Teresa, “should firmly resolve never to submit to defeat, for if the devil sees the soul is staunchly determined to lose life and comfort and all that he can offer rather than return to sin, he will the sooner leave it alone.”

X

Jesus is Stripped of His Garments

(The completeness of the giving of Christ)

The stripping of Our Lord is symbolical of the completeness of His giving. “He emptied Himself,” writes Saint Paul, “taking the form of a servant.” The prophet, speaking in His name asks, “What is there that I ought to do more to My vineyard that I have not done to it?” When we want to express our readiness to go to any lengths to help a person, we say we are prepared “to take the coat off our back.” We shall better understand that Jesus left nothing undone if we recall He was Our Divine Lord and God.

He was God, first, but in this Sacred Passion who could possibly recognize Him as such? All the way through, the Divinity hides Itself. At any given moment, He might have exercised His divine power to end the tortures His enemies were inflicting upon Him. We know how eagerly we welcome relief in pain--an aspirin when we have a bad headache or a refreshing drink to assuage our thirst on a burning hot day. What love is implied in the sentence of the apostle that Our Lord “delivered Himself up!” He handed Himself over to them to torture Him and He kept His divine power steadily in check when He might have used it to paralyze the hand that smote Him or that drove the nails into His sacred body. “He was coffered because it was His own will.” He began to suffer when He willed to suffer and He continued willing to suffer all that we are contemplating as we follow Him through these stations. He need not have begun to suffer and His enemies continued to make Him suffer only because He refused to stop them.

Jesus was God. He was man too. How can we make even the barest summary of the completeness of His giving as man? The strength of His body was reduced to absolute prostration. The beauty of His body-- He had been “beautiful above the sons of men”--is so marred that the prophet describes Him as “a worm and no man,” and a “leper.” He is a man Who, from His crown of thorns to the soles of His feet, is one mass of wounds and blood. As man, He possessed a human soul, all the powers of which were placed unreservedly at the disposal of those He loved. His mind was continually occupied thinking out ways and means to help them. His will bent all its energies in one direction--to labor for them, to pray for them, to heal them, to die for them. Over and above all this, on the evening before, He gave them Himself in the Blessed Eucharist and soon, from the cross, He will give them His Mother.

It is most literally true that He had nothing left. “What is there that I ought to do more to My vineyard that I have not done to it?” He is an omnipotent Lover Who has been lavish within all His power to do. He seems to challenge us to consider carefully if there is anything still left. Thus, He does it for our sakes. In this tenth station, He lets them take the coat off His back to indicate that omnipotence and infinite love together now ensure the completeness of the measure of the giving of Christ. A heart that is throbbing with infinite love has given superabundantly. If the sinner does not understand now that Our Lord is ready to forgive and to restore him, what more can omnipotence and infinite love do to convince him?

XI

Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

(The soul's Crucifixion and exaltation)

The following extract is from Songs in the Night by a Poor Clare, Colletine. It serves to introduce the eleventh station in which Jesus is nailed to the cross and raised up upon it.

“What each soul is interiorly, face to face with God, unknown to anyone, is of vital consequence to all the human race, and every act of love towards God, every act of faith and adoration, every mute uplifting of the heart, raises the whole church, yea, the whole world, nearer to God. From each soul in union with God and at rest in the divine embrace, radiates a spiritual vitality and strength and joy that reaches from end to end of the universe, a source of grace to those least worthy of it and knowing nothing of how and whence it came.”

Thus, the more a soul grows in holiness the more grace it draws down upon other souls. What is holiness? Is it necessarily saying long prayers or performing frightening penances? No. Such things we find in some of the saints because by these means they make contact with Christ, the source of holiness, and ease their own cravings to atone to Him for sin. “What each soul is interiorly” is really, what matters most. Each soul will come “face to face with God” and will be filled with God’s very own life and energy. This sharing in His life is called “sanctifying grace.” The more fully the soul participates in this divine life the more it grows in holiness and the more widely diffused will be its “spiritual vitality and strength” to save and sanctify other souls.

Before the soul can be filled in this marvelous way with God’s own life, it must first be emptied of sin and sinful attachments. In this eleventh station, Jesus shows how this is to be done. Here, He is crucified and the soul that would grow in sanctity must also be crucified. “They that are Christ’s have crucified their flesh with the vices and concupiscences.” Why? Is it that God delights in seeing His servants and friends suffer? Not at all. The gift of His grace can be communicated to a soul only in the measure in which the soul is capable of receiving it and, as long as sin and deliberate sinful desires reign, the streams of the divine life are held in check.

If you want to sow flowers in your garden, you must first uproot the weeds. If you want to pour gold into a vessel already full of mud, you must first make space by removing the mud. The life of sin is transmitted to us as a sad heritage from Adam and that is why suffering--“crucifixion”--is necessary. The “space” so to say, in our souls that should be occupied with the life of God is filled with sin and selfishness. Therefore, before the divine life can be established and consolidated, the other must be put to death. Every act of self-conquest, every effort to push back the confines of the life of selfishness leaves more “room” for the divine life to expand. Therefore, in a pregnant phrase put on our lips at Mass, we pray that we may become “capaces sanctae novitatis.” (Final prayer in Mass for Tuesday in Holy Week.) May we deepen the capacity of our souls to contain more and more God’s gift of grace!

That is a thought we may profitably ponder and examine, as we kneel and watch Him being crucified.

There is more. Our Lord said, “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to Myself.” He is crucified first and we have seen the application to ourselves of this first incident in the eleventh station and, after He is nailed, He is elevated on the cross. As the soul learns to withdraw by penance from what is sinful, that soul is also raised nearer to God. She begins to relish the things of God--especially prayer and works of zeal. The mind is now absorbingly interested in what concerns God and His glory, so absorbed that it is difficult for her to bother about anything else. The news of the day, the ways and means of making money, the pleasures that were formerly such a source of delight and excitement--these things have lost all their charm, for the soul has discovered other interests that are dearly perceived to surpass immeasurably in importance the trivialities upon which many men pour out their time and affections. Through the force of God’s grace, the soul too is “lifted up” into the bracing air of the supernatural.

Just as the trembling little thrush lying in your hand will spring, by the very force of its nature, into the glorious freedom of the open sky the moment you release your hold, so the soul delivered from the bondage of sin, soars swiftly into the light of God. Just as Our Lord promised to draw all to Himself, so too the soul, when freed and exulting in her new-found happiness, must share her treasure with other souls. Perhaps, like the Little Flower, it will be the soul’s vocation to remain near to the source of this divine life and by prayer and sacrifice to open the sluice-gates of grace and in this way bring salvation to men. Perhaps the soul, intoxicated with

divine love, will “leave God for God,” by engaging in the works of the active apostolate. Which it is to be is God’s will to decide, but in either case the object is the same--to be “a source of grace, reaching from end to end of the universe.”

XII

Jesus Dies on the Cross

(Calvary and the Mass)

All through this Way of the Cross, we have been watching how Christ gives. Now the question arises, “Is all the giving to be on His side?” The answer? We have a gift to offer back to God. We have only one gift and it is the exact gift He offers in the twelfth station. The sacrifice He makes here of His life, is ours to offer too, through holy Mass. What an ineffable privilege it would have been to stand or kneel on this hallowed spot while Jesus was hanging on this cross! When we come to Mass we do not come just to say our prayers, make a visit, or go to Holy Communion. We come first, and before all else, to offer Jesus to His eternal Father--that Jesus may plead for us as He pleaded on Calvary, that He may thank the Father in our name for the innumerable gifts lavished upon us, that He may adore the Father and supplement our inability to do this fittingly. Jesus belongs to us and we present Him, as the only gift worthwhile, to His eternal Father. We stand in spirit with Mary near the cross and continue the stupendous offering made on Good Friday.

Complaints are made about us that we do not understand the value of the Mass and that, as a result, we come late or not at all. If there is question of getting to a game on Sunday morning, we take very good care to be there in time. However, we often think that ten or fifteen minutes after Mass has begun is good enough for Jesus Christ! Scolding Catholics who act this way does very little. Rather, let them sit back and try to realize what the Mass is. Their trouble is that they have little love for the Mass because they have little understanding of its marvelous significance.

Why is it true that “of all honors that have ever been rendered to God,” to quote Saint Liguori, “whether by the homage of the angels and by the virtues, austerities, martyrdoms, and other holy deeds of men, none could procure so much glory for Him as one single Mass?” Why? Because, in the Mass, Jesus takes our acts and our poor prayers and makes them His own, presenting them on our behalf to the Father.

“He catches them up,” writes Bishop Hedley, “in His own infinitely strong and perfect acts and so carries them to the throne of His Father.”

You consider yourself fortunate if, when seeking a favor from somebody in a high place, you have a friend of his to plead your cause. Jesus pleads in the Mass--the well-beloved Son of God. He presents our prayers and petitions with His own, just as the priest offers, in the same chalice, the wine and with it the tiny drop of water.

Mass continues Calvary. That is why you cannot dissociate the two, and the twelfth station leads you almost imperceptibly into thoughts concerning the Mass. Indeed this station is represented at every Mass for the altar crucifix is placed to keep vividly before our eyes the amazing truth that we need not envy Magdalene or John, or even the Blessed Mother, their privilege of standing by His Cross. What we should beg for in this station is a deeper faith. If a deeper faith comes, our eyes will be opened to see into the depths of the mystery of the Mass and our hearts will be inflamed to love it. “The active participation of the faithful,” writes Pope Pius X, “in the sacred mysteries . . . is the first and indispensable source whence is drawn the true Christian spirit.”

XIII

Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross

(Suffering--the acid test of love)

A few years ago a nine and a half year old boy was dying. His mother, broken-hearted, was kneeling by the bedside. “When you go up to heaven, son,” she said, “you’ll ask Our Lord to send something to mother, won’t you? What will it be? There was a short pause and then the child, gasping for breath and holding mother’s hand, managed to murmur, “When I go up to heaven, I’ll ask Our Lord to send you much suffering and pain!” Of course, the mother was dumbfounded, but the little lad continued, “Yes, mother. I noticed that Jesus kept a lot of it for Himself, and gave a lot to His own Mother whom He loved. It must have a great value then. If He could not find anything better for His Mother could I ask Him anything better for you?”

Often, when the cross presses heavily upon our shoulders, we are inclined to ask querulously what have we done against God to deserve to be punished so. Such a question dies away on our lips if we kneel on Calvary in the thirteenth station.

Nicodemus and Joseph are taking the nails from His hands and feet, for Jesus is dead. Reverently, they lower the sacred Body and Mary stands in mute agony to receive It into her arms. Between them, they bear this Treasure over to the “stone of unction”--a table of hard stone, convenient for embalming. Some horsemen, tradition says, pass by while the friends of our Lord are washing His wounds and embalming His Body. Horrified at the sight of His mangled condition, they stop to ask what He has done to deserve this. The only explanation is that He has done all things well, but He submitted to this unparalleled butchery because He loved.

As Mary sits watching, holding His sacred head between her hands, pressing the wounds to her heart--now His hands, now His lips--ask her, and she will answer the same. She loved, and her love too must be subjected to love’s most searching test--suffering for the sake of the one loved. She must share in our salvation; she must be given this opportunity to show her love for us and for the Father’s glory. Therefore, she too is permitted to suffer to a degree impossible for us to fathom or guess.

You can ask any chance acquaintance to perform a service that costs little or nothing--to open a door or drop a letter in the mail. But, if your request is going to make demands on that person’s spirit of self-sacrifice--if it implies he must hand you a large sum of money, or he must deny himself a holiday or a free day, or he must endure hunger or thirst--if your request is going to include any of these things you would not ask a mere acquaintance. You will go to a true friend, confident that he will do what you want, even at such a cost to himself. Your confidence is built on your knowledge that sacrifice is the test of love.

We prove our love for Christ by prayer, by works of zeal, by organizing sodalities and similar associations, but there is a proof more sure than all these or any of these. It is especially when He turns to us and asks us to suffer That He shows He can depend on us to give the proof “*par excellence*.”

XIV

Jesus is Placed in the Sepulcher (*Calvary, the prelude to our resurrection*)

What a desolate little party they were, who followed His dead body to the tomb! You would say, as you walk after them in the last of the stations, that you could

imagine no more ignominious failure than this. Are you correct? Even as they are walking to the place of burial, He is beginning to enter the hour of His triumph. For, no sooner had He expired on Calvary than His soul went to Limbo and we can dimly imagine the ecstasy of joy with which the souls imprisoned there heard the gladsome news of their fast-approaching delivery. The faithful prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament are there. The heroic mother of the Machabees who sacrificed her seven sons rather than violate God's Law, Judith and Esther--types of Mary His Mother, Saint Elizabeth, Saint Zachary, their son the Baptist, Saint Joseph His foster-father--all these names come readily to mind as we enter with the triumphant Christ into that prison house.

The place is flooded with light, for Jesus is the true light, and we hear the heartening message, "Come ye blessed of My Father, possess the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." The triumphant message continues when, on Sunday morning, His sacred soul returns to Calvary to be reunited with His glorified body. Such a contrast now--no more suffering or disfigurement--but the face of Our Lord radiant with joy as He hastens, first to His Mother and then to one friend after another to speak to them of the kingdom of God and to assure them that He is risen indeed. "Where, O death, is thy victory? Where, O death, is thy sting?"

Without the hope of our own resurrection, life would be a sort of blind alley. Nevertheless, we know, if we suffer with Him, we shall certainly rise with Him. Even in this vale of tears, we can begin to share in the joys of that resurrection. It is a resurrection above our sins and passions, it is a resurrection above our worldliness and our petty jealousies, above our cramped and narrow selves, a resurrection befitting men destined to share, even here, in the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

We are told He was risen "truly"--no mere appearances but in absolute reality. After considering so many things walking with Him to Calvary, surely that must be the first trait in our resurrection also--no mere external conversion, but, what He values most, a conversion of heart, a turning of the heart away from sin, to be inflamed by His love. His resurrection was lasting for "Jesus Christ being risen from the dead, dieth now no more." He wants from us too, a clean breakaway, a definite and entire severing of the manacles that have held us captive--like the breakaway we envisioned when thinking about our last fall. After His resurrection, He appeared openly, letting everyone know of the wonderful change. Let us not be afraid to imitate Him. Many are timid about giving the impression that they love Him enthusiastically. Yet,

whatever they have been in the past, they are now determined to channel all their energies in one direction--to make Him known and loved.

He truly rose; He rose never again to die; and He let the world know of His resurrection. Therefore, the little procession to the tomb is not so desolate after all, for Calvary is not the end. It is only the beginning.

One of Michelangelo's greatest works is the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The surface measures some ten thousand square feet. It is covered with over eight hundred figures, some twelve-feet long, others eighteen, all most carefully and conscientiously finished. Every detail of each picture stands out with marvelous truth to nature--the hairs of heads and beards, fingernails, the creases in the garments. It is a masterpiece, an everlasting monument to the genius who produced it!

However, what a price it cost Michelangelo! Day after day he worked, lying flat on his back, with the paint dropping down onto his face. In the course of time his eyes grew so accustomed to looking upwards that, long after he had finished his beautiful ceiling, he had to hold a letter above his head to read it. You can produce a masterpiece only by being willing to pay the price.

We have seen the price paid by Our Savior as we accompanied Him and His Mother from station to station along the Way of the Cross. Our Savior's masterpiece is the human soul pulsating with His own very life. He accumulated treasures of grace on Calvary and He longs for the soul to draw near and be filled. If we could see into a soul radiant with sanctifying grace we would drop down on our knees in adoration, thinking ourselves to be in presence of God Himself.

How do you think Michelangelo would feel if, when coming one morning to continue his glorious work, he found that during the night his pictures had been destroyed, that someone jealous of his genius had smeared paint all over his ceiling, effacing those lovely images entirely? It takes little to utterly undo the grand work that cost Our Lord such a price. Suppose that during the night the great artist conceived a new idea, the next day he proceeded to put it into execution, and after a month or two he has the satisfaction of seeing it in all its perfection, how his heart is gladdened by his success! Again, his joy and satisfaction are negligible compared with the joy the soul gives to Christ and Mary by endeavoring faithfully to correspond with their inspirations.

Admittedly this is hard to understand, for it is all to the soul's interest, here and hereafter, to cooperate thus with the workings of grace within her. So concerned is Jesus about the soul's sanctification that you would be inclined to believe that to Him some advantage must accrue from its fidelity and advancement. Nothing of the kind. All the benefit is to the soul itself. Why then does Christ "bother" about the soul? Why does he just allow it to go its own way? Why pay such a price for its redemption? Only one answer is possible, and we have seen it already. Love is the only explanation. "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

On page one, we promised to try to develop a single idea at each of the fourteen stations. It may help us when making the stations to have those ideas in a form that is easy to remember. Therefore, here is a list of the ideas with the corresponding station number:

- i Independence of our opinions.
- ii Lord, am I "guilty of death?"
- iii Hell, and the sinner's first serious fall.
- iv The fiat of Jesus and Mary.
- v The apostolate--a responsibility and an honor.
- vi Veronica and how to sanctify pleasure.
- vii The falls "in-between."
- viii The safety of the hard way.
- ix "Never again"--the sinner's last fall.
- x The completeness of the giving of Christ.
- xi The soul's Crucifixion and exaltation.
- xii Calvary and the Mass.
- xiii Suffering, the acid test of love.
- xiv Calvary, the prelude to our resurrection.

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