

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

by Msgr Romano Guardini

OPENING PRAYER

Lord, Thou hast said: "Whosoever will be my disciple, let him take up his cross daily and follow Me." I desire to tread in Thy footsteps, and in spirit follow Thee along Thy way of sorrows. Grant that all Thou hast suffered for my sake may become living and present before my soul. Open mine eyes, touch my heart that I may see and deeply perceive how great is Thy love for me; that with my whole soul I may turn to Thee, my Redeemer, and forsake the sin which brought Thee such bitter pain.

Of all my sins I repent from my heart, O Lord. I will begin again; with all earnestness will set out to follow Thee. Help me to do this. Help me also to carry my cross with Thee. Thy way of pain is the school of all suffering, of all patience and overcoming. Let me recognize in it my own misery. Teach me to understand its message, what I ought to do--I myself--and to do in this very hour. And then let this insight become strong and fruitful that I may also carry it out into action.

FIRST STATION

JESUS is condemned to death

V. We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You.

R. Because by Your holy Cross You have redeemed the world.

Jesus stands before the judgment seat. Those who accuse Him are liars. The judge is a man without strength of character. The procedure is an insult to all justice. At this tribunal, Our Lord is declared guilty of a grievous crime. The penalty is both shameful and terrible. And Jesus knows how pure His goodwill has always been. How He has loved the common people and consumed Himself for their salvation! The fearful injustice and the wantonness of this sentence must have shaken the heart of Our Lord to its very depths.

How would my sense of justice be revolted if anyone sought to inflict due punishment on me! How vigorously I defend myself against my misfortune when I consider that I have not deserved it--knowing all the time of how much after all I have been guilty! How must this miserable parody of justice wound Our Lord to the quick! But He is silent. He accepts the sentence of His own free will, because the most holy will of the Father lies therein, because our salvation is at stake. But all that now follows is steeped through and through in the stinging bitterness of its being unjust, undeserved.

Lord, Thou didst go before, and hast cleared a way for me. Now teach me to follow after Thee when mine hour comes. If I receive command or blame, dealt in harsh tones, shew me what in this is justified, and teach me, for the sake of that, to forget the injustice. When a duty seems to me unbearable, I

will recognize in it the will of the Father and will obey. When suffering comes and I consider it is not deserved, do Thou teach my heart to submit to the will of the Father, as Thou didst submit. And if open injustice befalls me then shall Thy grace help me, even me, to keep perfect silence, and to leave my justification to the Father.

SECOND STATION

JESUS takes up his Cross

V. We adore You, O Christ...

The judgment is spoken. Jesus has accepted it in silence. Now they bring the cross. The condemned is to carry it Himself to the place of execution. Our Lord takes up the wood of pain. He does not stand there numb, while they load Him with it, but resolutely sets His hand to the task.

There is no vague emotional dreaming about it. All that is now to happen stands out hard and clear in all its terrors before Jesus' soul. He has no illusions. Nor is it the courage of despair which drives Him forward. Our Lord is wholly free, without any fear. It is the Father's commission which He sees in the cross, and our salvation. that He Himself wills with all the strength of His heart. His soul is fully serene and collected. He goes to meet the cross and sets His hand to it resolutely.

Lord, it is one thing in a good hour to say: I am ready for all that God wills and another really to be ready when the cross comes. Then the heart is often slack and fearful, and all good dispositions are forgotten. Help me to stand firm when it comes to the test. Perhaps the cross is upon me, or quite near to me. Come when it may, I will be ready. Make me strong and generous that I may not whine, nor struggle against that which has to be. I will face it bravely and fully, and recognize in it the call of the Father. Give me the firm trust that this suffering is to serve for my good, and strengthen me that I may accept it resolutely. When I have succeeded in this, then much of its bitterness is already overcome.

THIRD STATION

JESUS falls for the first time

V. We adore You, O Christ...

He has gone without sleep all night and has tasted nothing since last evening. From one tribunal to another have they dragged Him. Pain and loss of blood have weakened Him. All the baseness of men has tortured Him. Our Lord is terribly weary. The cross is too heavy for Him: the load is beyond His strength. He carries it with trembling knees for a little way, then He stumbles against a stone, or in the throng someone pushes against Him, and He falls. Men are rough at such moments! Laughter, abuse and blows are rained on Him as He lies there. As soon as Jesus can, He gathers Himself up, painfully raises the cross on to His wounded shoulders, and goes on.

Lord, the cross is too heavy for Thee, and yet Thou bearest it because the Father wills it so, for us. Its load is beyond Thy strength, and yet Thou dost not cast it down. Thou dost fall, and gather Thyself up again, and struggle on. Teach me to understand that every real affliction must, at some time, in some way, come to seem too heavy for our shoulders, because we are created not for suffering but for happiness. Every cross in its turn comes to seem beyond our strength. There is sure to rise the weary cry of anguish: "I can bear no more!"

Lord, by the strength of Thy patience and Thy love help me in such an hour as that, that I may not lose heart. Thou knowest how heavily a cross can press. Thou dost not blame us, when our strength fails, and thou dost help us to get up again. Renew in me patience, pour Thy strength into my soul. Then it lifts itself up again, takes up its load, and goes on.

FOURTH STATION

JESUS meets his Mother

V. We adore You, O Christ...

He may have been waiting at a cross-road, and now she makes her way towards the procession. They say no word, the Mother and her Son. What indeed should they say? They are alone, the one with the other, alone in the world, in spite of the horrid throng that press about them, eye to eye, heart to heart. What love and anguish then goes through their souls, and passes from eye to eye between them, is known to God alone.

Will you ponder for a moment, what her soul was like? Perfectly strong, perfectly tender and deep, nothing but love. And though it might chance that other mothers could find refuge from sorrow in the dullness and shallowness of the human heart - she, the forechosen among all women, the one close to God, had no such refuge. Her heart was pierced to its very depths. - That was a long, swift moment. Then the glance of the Lord speaks: "Mother, it must be. The Father wills it so." "Yes, Child, the Father wills it, and Thou too - so be it."

O Lord, dear Lord, that all this bitterness should be my fault! For me didst Thou part from Thy Mother! Lord, that sacrifice shall not be lost on me. Let it wake to life in me then, when God calls me, and the heart feels itself in bondage by men. Teach me to overcome the fear of man, when this would prevent me from confessing Thee. Teach me to shake off human respect, when this would keep me from my duty. Teach me to be stronger even than the love of man, however great and however pure this may be, the moment I am in danger, for its sake, of becoming unfaithful to Thee. But, Lord, teach me to do all this as Thou hast done: in love. Not brusquely, not inconsiderately, but mercifully and tenderly. And this I know: If I have to hurt love for Thy sake, love rooted in Thee will grow stronger. And what it must lose for Thy sake that, in Thee, it will gain a thousandfold.

FIFTH STATION

Simon of Cyrene is compelled to help JESUS

V. We adore You, O Christ...

The length of one short moment Our Lord is enfolded in His Mother's love: His home. Now He must again go forth. All the more bitterly He feels the brutality about Him: twice as heavy presses upon Him the weight of the cross. He is all alone. Those who love Him are powerless; those who might have helped, will not. When the soldiers of the guard see that His strength is giving out, they seize upon a peasant, Simon by name, who is coming home from the fields; He is to help carry. But Simon is not willing. He is tired, is hungry, wants to go home, to eat and rest. Why indeed should he take all this trouble for that leader of sedition? He resists, they have to force him. Outraged, indignant, he seizes hold of the cross. What sort of help is that going to be? Jesus is utterly alone; utterly, utterly alone in the agony of His distress. Only the Father is with Him.

Lord, to so many hast Thou given help, now all have forsaken Thee. And Thou endurest to the end, for my sake, that Thou mayest be both way and strength to me. I will think of Simon the Cyrene when the time comes for me, too, to stand alone in suffering. How often does one who is afflicted see himself forsaken. Alone, in pain, and no one to help. Alone in his soul's anguish, other people not understanding. And if he goes to them with his distress, then their faces show how troublesome they find him. Looks and words say: "What has that to do with us?"

Lord, in such hours do Thou stand by me. Help me to acquiesce in that being alone and not to lose heart. Yes, and in any case I must not be always running to other people for help, must learn to stand firm, of my own free will alone with Thee. And when some day it is brought clearly home to my mind that fundamentally everyone is alone with his trouble and must deal with it by himself -- that in the last resort no human being can help another -- then let me feel that Thou art by my side. Let me know that Thou art faithful, wilt never forsake me.

SIXTH STATION

Veronica hands her napkin to JESUS

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Our Lord is wholly forsaken. Around Him, is nothing but enmity, cruelty, stupid dullness of heart. He is exhausted through thirst and pain; weary in body and soul to the point of collapse. The cross presses terribly. He has the feeling that He is being stifled, and again and again everything reels before His eyes. Any other would tread that path in desperation and have no thought of aught else. And when Veronica comes and offers her napkin, would have no eye at all for her, would stagger past her blind and stupefied. Jesus is gasping beneath His burden; and yet so alert is His heart and so tender, that He is able to take heed of the woman's poor service, to appreciate it and divinely to thank her for it. He wipes the blood and sweat

from His face, and when He returns the napkin, it bears the likeness of His sacred features.

O Lord, how strong and tender is Thy heart! Thou royal soul, noble beyond all nobility, free above all. Thou alone free, among us, who are the slaves of life and of sorrow! O make me also free! When I am in the midst of suffering, and apt to become blind and indifferent towards those about me, then do Thou keep mine eye clear and my heart free from that self-seeking which especially and so easily takes hold of anyone who is in pain. Help me not to be thinking always of myself. I must not become exacting, must not be a burden to others, must not spoil their pleasure just because I am depressed. Teach me to notice each little service of love; teach me to acknowledge it and be grateful for it.

And I must learn myself to be of use to others, for we most easily conquer our suffering when we look out beyond ourselves. Do Thou teach me to be thoughtful of others and to understand them. Show me how I may win their confidence; how I may say a word of true kindness to them, may comfort them and raise them up and help them.

SEVENTH STATION

JESUS falls the second time beneath the cross

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Simon of Cyrene has not been of much help; in the end he may very likely have taken himself off altogether. Jesus is again alone in the midst of all the pitiless crowd. He has had to part from His Mother; His disciples have fled; the new faithful ones are powerless in the midst of the great multitude. Nobody helps Him in His distress. The cross weighs so heavily; but still more heavily does all the ingratitude about Him oppress His soul. With purest love has He proclaimed to them the Kingdom of God. Perhaps some are there whom once He healed, or fed in the wilderness. And now they rage against Him as though he were their bitterest enemy. It is that which weighs Him down to the ground for the second time. But a great light shines in His soul: Through the very things that they inflict upon Him, He wills to redeem them! For the second time He rises up painfully, and goes on.

Lord, could I but comprehend how great this is: to suffer for others! All Thy pain has a hidden sweetness, because Thou knowest, that from it, blessing and salvation stream forth for us. Can I not be like-minded? Can I not bear for others whatever burdens me? Offer my troubles, my toils, my pains as sacrifice to the Heavenly Father, united to Thy redeeming suffering? For all who are dear to me, husband wife, children, parents, brothers and sisters... For all the misery in the wide world... For every great, pure, holy thing that is in danger. For the many who err and live in sin, and have lost their way.

Could I but deeply comprehend, that so my suffering may turn to blessing upon others! That it has share in the power of the Redeemer's suffering! Draws down God's grace on others and helps when nothing else can help. Then would suffering be in very truth conquered! Then would it be

overcome down to its deepest roots. And instead of repining, I should, in the midst of my misery, have at heart the joy of being God's helper in the work of love and redemption. Lord, I pray Thee with my whole soul, teach me to understand this. Enlarge my soul, and make it generous, that I may grasp this unspeakably great truth. And give me also the love to carry it into action.

EIGHTH STATION

JESUS speaks to the wailing women

V. We adore You, O Christ...

This, too, reveals a marvel of Jesus' liberty of heart. When I think what He is feeling... His head tortured with thorns, His flesh torn with deep wounds, tormented by acrid sweat... How He is well nigh suffocated beneath His burden... About Him nothing but hatred and scorn, and facing Him the fearful end... If I were in such distress and people came to me and made a great lamentation, bewailing my fate with many words and tears - would not a furious impatience seize upon me? But Jesus' soul remains free and collected. And although His whole body quivers with pain, He talks quietly with the women, and exercises His office: that of teaching them and showing them the truth.

To every man times come when heavy suffering weighs on him, and his whole being feels the anguish of its pressure. The nerves no longer obey; only with difficulty does he keep hold on the last vestiges of control. And the difficulty is doubled, if those about him irritate him by unfeeling, unreasonable behaviour.

In any hour when this befalls me, help me, Lord, to keep calm. In the power of Thy patience I will hold myself together; will meet others with kindness, even when they are unreasonable, unfeeling, uncouth. I will go on quietly doing my work; go on fulfilling my vocation, however miserable I feel.

NINTH STATION

JESUS falls the third time beneath the cross

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Soon after the second fall Jesus breaks down for the third time. What can be said in the presence of such torturing anguish? Shall we go over the same words again? All words here are empty. Strive to feel with Him what He feels - how weary He is, even to death, and what it means to fall to the ground under such a load, amid such surroundings, for the third time! He is at the end of His strength. Nevertheless He drags Himself up yet once more, and carries the cross to its goal. That which there awaits Him is not deliverance, but a terrible death.

O Jesus, Thou strong one, Thou art in me, and I in Thee. With Thee I shall not lack the power to hold out in suffering to the very end, even when I think I can bear no more. With Thee I shall not lack the power to perform my duty., let it become never so difficult. Do Thou help me that I do not

lose heart in affliction, that I do not shirk my duty. And if I fall, if my strength fails, then do Thou help me to rise again.

Three times didst Thou sink down, three times rise. Teach me, Lord, to understand, that Thou dost not ask of us never to show weakness, but that Thou dost ask of us., always and always, to rise up again. Teach me to realize that all our earthly life is an ever-new rising up, an ever-fresh beginning again.

TENTH STATION

JESUS is stripped of his garments

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Everything they have taken from Him: His liberty, His friends, His work. Now they take from Him the dignity and honour of His person as well. Naked and uncovered He is given over to shame. Every insolent passer-by can look upon Him and jeer at Him. All those who once revered Him as the great prophet, exalted Him as the Messiah - friends, strangers, all the people - behold Him in his humiliation. Strong is Jesus' soul, deep, inexpressibly noble and delicate; fully sensitive and alert in His sense of honour. With burning flames, as it were, shame closes over Him. But He stands fast in God's will, and holds out to the end.

Lord, remind me of this bitter hour, if the time comes when my honour is assailed; if men mistake my intention, and attribute wrong motives to me; if I am slandered, and my good name attacked, if even those who are nearest and dearest to me, and ought to know my heart, misjudge me. Let me not become impatient; suffer not that I render like for like, that I utter reproaches, pass judgment or even cast suspicion on him who assailed my honour. Help me to remain fair-minded and calm and to trust in Thee.

Such unspeakable shame didst Thou suffer for my sake. By this sacrifice strengthen me in such an hour. God knows the truth about me; thereon will I take my stand. I will bethink me that my honour is in His care, and that He will justify me in His good time.

ELEVENTH STATION

JESUS is nailed to the cross

V. We adore You, O Christ...

What takes place now is so dreadful that one would fain flee away, and not have to look upon it. They nail Him to the cross and then lift it erect.... O my Lord and Saviour! But I have no right to make my escape; I must stay here. It is for me He suffers. On His way hither, Jesus has, at least, been able to walk, to move, to exert Himself. Now all that ceases. Now He can do nothing more, only hang there in silence and endure. The pain in His pierced members, in His head and in all those deep wounds, increases and burns like fire; more and more tormenting grows the thirst, heavier and heavier the anguish and oppression of His heart. And He cannot aid Himself, cannot move, can do nothing, only endure and feel that He is on His way to death.

And the multitude around! In His enemies, devilish hate and scorn! In the rabble, brutality!

O Lord, forgive me, a sinner! Mine is the blame for all Thy distress. And let Thy sufferings not be lost on me. Let its divine strength and patience become alive in me.

To every one the hour comes, when he can do nothing more, cannot shield his honour, cannot allay his pain, cannot find any way out of his misery. Above all it will be thus in his last illness, when he knows that he is on his way to the end, that the physician can effect nothing more. Then each man is, as it were, nailed to the cross and cannot aid himself. Can do but one thing: recollect heart and will in God; hold himself firmly, unfalteringly, to the will of the Father and calmly endure to the end: leave it absolutely to Him whether that to which he is drawing near be a peaceful or a bitter end.

Lord, when that hour comes, then shalt Thou be with me, that I know. The power of Thy cross then shall be in me, and make me strong.

TWELFTH STATION

JESUS dies on the cross

V. We adore You, O Christ...

For three long hours Jesus endures... By the cross stand His Mother and His dearest friend. "Behold thy Son," He says to her. And "Behold thy Mother," to John. It is, as if He were stripping from Himself the enfolding love of these two. He wills to be alone. He has taken our guilt upon Him; alone He wills to appear in our stead before the face of the eternal Justice. No one is to stand by Him. Utterly alone He settles this fearful thing with God. What went on in the soul of Jesus during this time, no man knows... Then He cries: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" No man unveils this mystery - how God's Son can be by God forsaken. This only can we say to ourselves: hitherto His heart has felt God's nearness as comfort and stay. Now that, too, forsakes Him.

He is utterly naked and alone. Forsaken by all, alone He stands without guilt, face to face with the divine justice. No man will ever conceive what that means. One thing only sustains Him: his unswerving faithfulness to the work which the Father sent Him to do: His incomprehensible love for us. And in this love He consumes Himself, till all is accomplished. - "It is consummated."

I adore God's infinite righteousness, before which I stand as a sinner; and I adore Thee, my Redeemer, Who has been surety for me. Lord, Thou hast redeemed me; I thank Thee for it from the depths of my heart. Thou hast shewn me, too, how I can bear my own suffering and how alone I can overcome it: Through love. I can bear it only if I accept it as Thou didst, from the hand of the Father. If I trust in the Father and cling to Him, then I remain strong, even if all else deserts me. I can overcome it only if I turn it into blessing upon others as Thou didst. If I bear it and offer it to the Father for those who are dear to me, for all whom I desire to help. Then it has a

share in the omnipotence of Thy suffering; it calls down the Father's grace, and helps even there where other hope of help is gone. And then I, too, am helped, for I know that what I suffer is not in vain, but brings blessing upon others.

And when the day comes to me when I can do no more service and feel myself to be useless in the world, then, in truth, can I still render the very highest sacrifice of all: Together with Thee calmly and rejoicingly offer the sacrifice of my suffering, of my powerlessness, yes, even of my dying on behalf of others. Lord, so only will be accomplished that which no human wisdom, no worldly power and no worldly wealth can accomplish: So only will suffering and death verily be overcome.

THIRTEENTH STATION

Jesus is taken down from the cross

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Our Lord has suffered to the end. Now He is dead. God's wonderwork, this life in its very flower, full of all power and of all riches, so strong, so delicate, lies in ruins. Humanly speaking, He had His life before Him. What might not Jesus have wrought - what teaching, what great deeds, what help - what divine fullness of life might not have blossomed forth from Him, if He had but passed through the whole course of man's life! Now all is crushed under foot. But that is "the foolishness of the cross." "The grain of wheat must die," in order that highest life be brought forth from it, and they who have trodden it into the ground have become, without meaning it, the sewers of salvation.

Lord, here is the answer to the bitter question: Why suffer? Why have to suffer when everything is calling out for happiness and the joy of doing? Why die? Why have to be gone, when life has not yet been lived? Why have to relinquish what is so dear?

Here, all human wisdom comes to nought. In the cross alone is the answer: "The grain of wheat remains unfruitful, as long as it does not die in the earth." All our suffering, our sacrifices and our dying is heavenly seed. If we are at one with God's will then there is brought forth thence life for life, for us and for others. And so I will believe: will trust and hold fast to God, that so my living and suffering and dying -- mine too -- may bear everlasting fruit.

FOURTEENTH STATION

Jesus is laid in the tomb

V. We adore You, O Christ...

They wrap the body of Our Lord in linen cloths and lay it in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Then they place the heavy slab in the opening and sorrowfully go home. Now all is still.

We breathe again now that the terrible distress is over at last. Deep peace lies about the lonely tomb. It is the peace of fulfilment. He who sleeps

therein has, with divine fidelity, brought to an end all that the Father had laid upon Him to do. Now He rests from His work. And it seems to us that already the approaching glory of Easter plays like summer lightning around the silent spot. - The disciples, as is but natural, do not feel it so. For them all hope is gone. For them the passion and death of Good Friday is the end. But to them, too, He soon appears, radiant in power and light, and they realize, "how the Messiah must suffer all these things and so enter into His glory" and that His death was the price paid for our life.

O Lord, that is the glad message which Thou hast brought to all people, that after every Good Friday comes an Easter. That all suffering is a fount of blessing, and death itself the seed of new life for everyone who holds fast to Thee. That do Thou teach me to understand. Let this conviction rise to life in me, when hours of darkness come. Then I shall learn to know that thus I can not only endure my suffering, but also overcome it. In Thee shall I feel myself equal to the task; shall realize that from every hour of suffering bravely battled through, the soul goes forth the stronger, that from every stretch of darkness travelled through, a ray of Easter light shines forth. And that he who thus lives and suffers with Thee, has, even in the midst of bitterness, share in Thy peace.

Note:

"...This, then, was the origin of the Way of the Cross, as we know it today: one of the truest and purest of popular devotions: uniting picture and thought, outward action and inward disposition, historical truth and creative action of the believing imagination. More than any other devotion it is fitted for approaching Our Lord's suffering in the manner, reverential and at the same time familiar, unconstrained and yet not without its proper form, which is characteristic of the people.

The praying soul never fails to find something new in the Way of the Cross. Now this station speaks the more persuasively, now that. Many a picture remains dumb for a long time. Awakened by some spiritual experience it suddenly begins to speak to the soul. Others with their radiant secret accompany it unaltered through the course of many years. And, more especially, anyone who accustoms himself to take his personal experiences, worrying questions and perplexities with him into the Way of the Cross, often receives undreamt of light and unhopd for consolation.

Two things, above all, this devotion has to say to us. First, it teaches us to feel with our very hearts what Our Lord suffered. We walk with Him and bear the load with Him. Thus it is revealed to us how great is the Redeemer's love and how great our guilt. We learn to repent and to pray for the grace of a deep inward turning to God.

Then secondly: the Way of the Cross is the school where we are taught how to overcome. We see how Our Lord goes through most bitter suffering of soul and body, but also how through His love for God and for us He overcomes. And we learn to bring something similar to pass in regard to our own lot.

In the devotion of the Way of the Cross as set forth in this little book, it is the second point of view which especially predominates. The former is not forgotten; but the Way of the Cross is meant to reveal itself as above all a school of victory over suffering. In this way the author might well hope in these hard times of ours to render service to many a soul, to help the worshipper to recognise in the several stations passages of his own life, and to see his daily troubles in union with those of Our Lord, and, thus gather insight and strength not only to bear his suffering, but also to conquer it..."