

# THE WAY OF THE CROSS IN THE COMPANY OF THE SAINTS

*For the Jubilee for Priests*

Text by Fr. Antonio Maria Sicari OCD

## INITIAL PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we, your priests, the servants you have chosen to continue to build and guide your Church, are accompanying you today on the Way of the Cross.

You desired to utilise our persons to manifest your Person to the community of believers. Every day you involve us in the mystery of your Passion and your Resurrection. Every day you endow us with your Word and your Mercy to sow them in the world. Every day our heart and our soul resound with your sweet and severe invitation: "Let whoever wishes to come with me... take his Cross and follow me!".

Starting this Way of the Cross, we hear the warning of the Apostle Thomas: "I am the way!". We know we have to take the same path that you did, a painful way carved into your own body. We also hear the voice of your Apostle Paul who says: "I complete in my flesh what was missing in the passion of Christ...". We understand that what is missing now is our flesh; our existence that already belongs to you, but which has not yet been wholly offered and which retreats above all when it is afraid of suffering.

Every day we offer the your sacrificed Body and the your shed blood, but we are always tempted to retreat when we must be, with you, ground grains of wheat or pressed grapes. Therefore, oh Lord, to truly learn to accompany you on this sorrowful and glorious path we shall ask for help from your holy priests. Let the mysteries of love and the pain of your passion be impressed in us, your ministers, as they have been impressed in their living body and soul.

## I 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.

I have thought and said so many times, I your priest, that you were unjustly condemned. Judas betrayed you out of ingratitude, out of avarice and influenced by the Malign. The priests and the Sanhedrin rejected you, blinded by your unexpected divine splendor. The soldiers whipped and derided you because they were unaware and reduced to brutes. Pilate handed you over to the executioners out of fear and skepticism. And the crowd shouted: "Crucify him!", because they were roused and had forgotten that "you had passed among them doing good works". - Condemned unjustly, condemned innocent!

But now I think, oh Lord, that I have missed the deepest and most overwhelming truth. You were condemned justly, because you truly wanted to take upon yourself the terrible weight of all our sins, taking responsibility for them before God, our Creator and Father. Even more so, for us and in our place, you wanted to "become sin for us", and became, in the sight of the world, "like one before whom we hide our face out of shame". «Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world...»; you take them away so that you can continue to take them upon yourself and expiate them one by one. And every day of our life is for you a Good Friday.

I recall your priest St. Leopold Mandic, closed for years and years in his confessional, overwhelmed by the sins poured upon him by the penitents. Derided by some because he made the all innocent, giving absolution with merciful generosity, and then passed long nights in expiation, trembling with fear for God's judgment. He had, in fact, sent away the most fragile sinners offering himself in their place: "I will make the penitence for you, I will pray...". Full of mercy for all, he accepted having to tremble before God's justice.

## II STATION

*Jesus bears His Cross*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

We have been left almost alone in the world – we, your priests– in saying that suffering can redeem, that the pain can be filled with meaning and become salvific. But we say it timidly, as if we had to seek pardon for this strange and difficult language. How much pain in the world! There is so much daily suffering, and the cross weighs on many people who cannot prevent it. And we should ask them to carry it, embracing it, as You do while the wood digs into your shoulders and is soaked with your blood!

"I salute you, oh Cross, so long desired!", said your disciple Andrew. The Apostle Paul also proclaimed that he was joyfully "crucified with you" and that he wished to know only "the wisdom of the Cross". One of your poets said: "Jesus takes up the Cross, as we take the Eucharist». Here we are, your priests, who daily hold your sacrificed body, presenting it for adoration and offering it as food. You do not ask us to be stronger in bearing, but more joyful in the transubstantiation of our small sufferings into your infinite suffering, and to make this nourishment for the Church.

St. John of the Cross – who composed the most beautiful poems of mystic Love, in a dark and tormented prison – taught: "Let Christ crucified be enough for you. Suffer with Him and abide with Him"; he was so close to you that on his deathbed he was moved in regarding his own sick body, contemplating his sore "devotedly" because they resembled yours. – Grant us, Lord, to adore our little crosses – above all the ones inherent in our Ministry – as fragments of your glorious Cross.

### III STATION

#### *Jesus falls under the Cross for the first time*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

You, oh Lord, "fall for the first time"; you will fall to the ground three times and arise with difficulty before reaching Calvary. I have often pointed out this exhaustion to the faithful, so that they may take it as an example. "Jesus too fell" – I said–, even the Son of God has experienced the weakness that overcomes our scarce strength!" But I said this as if basically one could have expected from you a more indomitable energy. And I forgot that your falls were the last, decisive steps of your Incarnation.

You descended from heaven for us; you descended to a poor cave in Bethlehem, you descended among a crowd of sinners and the sick. You descended... but this would not be enough, without these last steps of obedience which brought you near to the heart of the earth, to your new sepulcher. Falling, you start to come close to the earth with your whole body. You kiss the earth like a missionary coming to a foreign country that becomes his country. You bow down and kiss the earth as we priests did on the day of our Ordination.

I remember the words said by St. John Bosco's mother to her son on the day of his first solemn Celebration (it was the feast of Corpus Domini!): "You are a priest; say the Mass, you are therefore nearer to Jesus Christ. Remember, though that to start saying the Mass means to start to suffer."

We inevitably start to suffer because we must bring the Body and the Word of God to all men, and the way is uneven and often rough. But grant us, oh Lord, to fall only along your path!

### IV STATION

#### *Jesus meets His Mother*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Along the way, Lord, you certainly met your Mother. For over thirty years she had awaited the day announced in which "a sword would pierce her soul". And so she accompanied you to Calvary, and the centurion already held the lance that was to pierce your hearts. According to tradition the Virgin pronounced the prophet's lamentation: "Oh you who pass along the road, stop and see if there is a sorrow like my sorrow ...".

But we have all stopped on the threshold of the mystery, paying attention only to the pain caused by the insults and injuries. We have not contemplated the true and blessed sorrow of your Virgin Mother, silent in the presence of the dialogue you had with your Father, before he abandoned you. Mary undoubtedly recalled the words of the angel: "you will give birth to a Son... he will be great... and his kingdom will be without end...". This had been promised to her, and instead the Father "gave away His Son for love of the world": "He did not spare her!". She was again asked to consent, to repeat thy will be done, to abandon her Son to death and to receive in

exchange the disciple...

But how could she fail to consent, if she had been the first to be called upon to contemplate "the price of redemption"; not only our redemption as sinning children, but all the more so; her redemption as the Immaculate One, redeemed in advance by the her Son's sacrifice.

Mary accompanied Jesus to the hill where she was to understand, in a mysterious illumination, that she first of all was "daughter of her Son". At the foot of the Cross, realizing that she had always be immersed in a sea of grace, she became for us the Mother of Mercy. - At this station we learn from her only, the Most Holy One.

### V STATION

#### *Jesus is helped by Simon*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

A man, a chance passer-by returning from the country, was obliged to carry your Cross, to give you a little relief. We know nothing about him, but we do know that his children, Alexander and Rufus, became Christians. It is moving to think that perhaps it was the unexpected and merciful intervention of the Father, on that path of passion, that caused them to be born in Christ.

I think back on so many forgotten meditation asking Christians to carry "a little Cross", together with Jesus. In truth, You were exhausted, oh Lord, and it would have been natural for you to proceed with fatigue behind Simon who relieved you of the cross. Nevertheless, the evangelist notes that "upon him they laid the Cross, to bear it after Jesus, and there followed a great crowd of people". By carrying your Cross, Simon of Cyrene learned to follow you, and together with you, became a guide for the people.

We priests must not bear only our daily cross, but we must carry yours in order to be able to ask our people of follow us. The Holy Curate of Ars tried many times to escape from his parish, not because he didn't want to suffer, but for the disturbing thought of being unworthy to represent you, of being too miserable to be your merciful image. And he was always jealously brought back – by you and the people – to that confessional where crowds of pilgrims awaited him. Then he humbly asked forgiveness, saying: "I have been childish!", and resumed bearing the Cross with you, consoling himself by saying: "If not, what would happen to so many poor sinners?"

### VI STATION

#### *Veronica wipes the face of Jesus*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

This is the only episode invented by popular devotion, to give each and every one a place in the Way of the Cross; the place of love and tenderness assigned to the Spouse. Between Veronica and Jesus – as between us and the Crucified – there is a veil, a veil for drying the tormented face of her

Spouse to give back its proper shape and beauty. The Veronica represents and describes the female and spouse-like destiny of all humanity; the intimate nature of the Church born out of the side of Christ and irrevocably united to Him; the vocation and the mission for which every Christian soul in this world is chosen.

Veronica is the woman of the Song of Songs, whose passion of love has become compassion, a true suffering beside the Beloved. Veronica is the one who cherishes within her the image of the Beloved, so that she always knows where to find it. Veronica represents our Christian communities when they search for the face of the Beloved among the crowd, discovering it in the most humiliated faces and pause to clean them with infinite gentleness.

Your holy priests are also like Veronica every time they are moved by meeting your disfigured face, and the honour it with inexhaustible charity and with genial diligence.

St. Camillo de Lellis was often seen kneeling beside the bed of the ill, overcome by the certainty of being before "his beloved Lord Jesus Christ», and at times was so confused that he started to tell them his sins, convinced that he was confessing directly to the Crucified One. His biographer adds: "when he took them in his arms to change their sheets, he did it with so much affection and diligence that he seemed to be handling the very person of Jesus». But it was this "look" and this "tenderness" that allowed for the total renewal of health care in his time.

## VII STATION

### *Jesus falls for the second time*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Halfway along, Jesus, you fall again, as if the road opened up and fell on you from both sides. And this is an even more humiliating fall, because the Cross is on the shoulders of Simon. You though you could resist...

But you fall because you carry the infinite weight of human misery, and this is load unseen by the eyes. You fall because you are a Creator who has become a creature, and the creatures have roped you like a prey. You fall because your place is that of the slave flogged until he is bleeding and left to sigh uselessly in a corner. You fall because you have become similar to a beast of burden, falling to the ground, with the load crushing it.

And while you fall, grant us not to be distracted from contemplating your poor prostrate body; help us not to look away from your injured face among the stones. Lord, may we gladly accept falling, but beside you, every time you want to make us rise again renewed.

For many years your priest St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo lived the priesthood pursuing a rich path of luxury and honours, until you made him "fall" before the bloody bed of a poor woman giving birth, to whom assistance had been refused... He just had time to give the last sacrament to

the mother and Baptism to the girl child, before seeing them die. But he got up again full of grace. He had become – as he liked to say – "the workman of Divine Providence».

## VIII STATION

### *The mothers cry for Jesus*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

The mothers cry for the Son of Mary, humiliated and led to death, even if HE is still like green wood. But it is Jesus who instead is sorry for them; he would prefer the mothers to cry for themselves, for having given birth to and nursed children who – without Him – would be destined to burn like dry wood, in the fire of a world without salvation. Jesus knows the sorrow of the mothers of all times; those inconsolable before the cruelty of a Herod (a Herod with a thousand faces) who drags the children from their arms, and those who accuse themselves of not having managed or wanted to protect them.

Jesus also knows the weeping of children from generation to generation, children to whom their very mother has refused their womb; children rejected by their father; children deprived of a home, of care, of food, of playing; children sold for pleasure and for profit. He also knows the silent sorrow of disappointed relationships; parents who have not been able to become fathers and mothers, and young people who have not been able to become children.

You know these sufferings well, Lord, because you are the Son and because they affect – more than any other suffering – the mystery of your person. Grant that we priests may learn to see only your children around us.

Give us the look of the your St. Vincent de Paul when he also entrusted the nuns, already so overloaded with work, with the Work for foundling children, explaining with enthusiasm: «You shall be like Our Lady, because you will be mothers and virgin. Do you see what the Lord has done for you? For eternity He has established this time to inspire in you the desire of to take care of these little ones who He considers to his own; for eternity he has chosen you, my daughters, to serve them. What an honour for you, to serve the children of God!"

## IX STATION

### *Jesus falls for the third time*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

This is the third time you fall, Lord, and according to traditional iconography, they force you to get up again by beating you, as if you needed a little more suffering to give you the strength to suffer again.

But you know the hidden truth. – Before being raised between earth and heaven, before being able to return "to the right hand of the Father", you

must, for a last time, manifest your complete devotion to our earth and the dust of which we are made. You fall because you want to be able to embrace us all, taking us from below in your arms while we fall. You fall for the third time, just as three times you were tempted by Satan to avoid your true "incarnation". You fall three times, just as the first of your apostles fell three times when he denied you. You fall three times, because the third time is always the definite one, and if you get up again it is because the Father is "strongest of all" and will also enable you to rise again "after three days» from your mortal fall.

Lord, let us understand that certain falls are only a presage of resurrection. And so your blessed servant Daniele Comboni – who had dreamed of embracing the whole of Africa in his mission – was, at the end of his life, overwhelmed by calumny and saw the destruction of his work approaching. He died at the age of 50, exhausted by a vigils and apostolic works, but faithful to that which he had initially promised to his beloved Africans: "The happiest of my days will be the one when I can give my life for you."

## X STATION

### *Jesus is stripped of his garments*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

While the soldiers divided your garments and cast lots for your seamless tunic, your naked body shone with humiliation and glory. The stop at this tenth station, oh Lord, has always been the most difficult for me, and it has also been difficult to explain to the faithful and help them to contemplate you. Not for your painful and trembling nakedness, but for the mysteries I intuit and which require a mystical sensitivity, that of the innumerable male and female Saints who have adored you as their "crucified spouse".

If I think about this, Jesus, in all the Way of the Cross there is a hidden nuptial drama. On the one hand there is the lost humanity which rejects you as Spouse and betrays you, and on the other there is your humanity, that accepts the rejection and the betrayal and converts them into a marriage communion. This is how it was in the last encounter with Judas whom you truly embraced and kissed. This is how it was when they dressed you in purple and crowned you, as the Spouse is crowned at the time of marriage. This is how it was when they "presented" you before crowd of guests: "Here is the man», here is the Elect, the Beloved! So it is now as the servants help you to undress, and you offer yourself to the Bride in joyful and innocent nakedness (that of the new Adam, who has no reason for shame). So it will be soon, when you lie on the bed of the Cross, for a true marriage with Our Lady Poverty.

This is how your holy deacon Francis of Assisi like to contemplate you, telling the world about this sublime wedding, so that he himself wanted to renew this in the Church, loving poverty as "his dearest woman".

## XI STATION

### *Jesus is nailed to the Cross*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

In the prayer that Jesus said on the Cross, in the psalm starting "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" there were also these words: "They have pierced my hands and my feet / I can count all my bones". But then the prayer continued: "I shall announce your Name to my brethren / I shall praise you in the assembly". The Cross was therefore the pulpit that the Father assigned to you, oh Jesus, to reveal us His name, and to praise it together with us your poor crucifiers.

Forgive me, if now I think about the ministry with which you have entrusted me and the proclamation you ask me every day to repeat "to my brethren". My obedience is certainly owed, but I have thought too little about your absolute obedience, your having been inevitably "nailed" to the Cross.

An old medieval text offered the monks "your" advice: "just as someone crucified cannot move his limbs as he wishes, or turn around, but must stay there where they nailed him, you must adhere to your cross and renounce yourself, without being able to turn your will to your fantasies or the pleasure of the moment, but apply it wholly where my will has nailed you". Also grant to us, your Ministers, to remain joyfully crucified – in poor and naked obedience– to the ministry with which you have entrusted us.

In this way, the Blessed Padre Pio of Pietralcina remained daily nailed to your cross for over fifty years, bearing your same wounds in his body. The stigmata show the world the miracle of the Christian priesthood, making visible the "dear price" of blood hidden in every eucharistic sacrifice, in every sacramental absolution, in every intercession of grace and in every conflict with the Malign; the price also hidden in the humble and constant subjection to your Church.

## XII STATION

### *Jesus dies on the Cross*

V. We adore You, O Christ...

After forgiving the obtuse evil of men, after hearing from a repentant thief the first sweet prayer ("Jesus, remember me!"), after shouting "I am thirsty!" – almost a last testament for us, Jesus dies. Lord, the medieval mystics said that one should meditate on your death on the cross "insatiabiliter", never tiring of entering into the depths of your "too great love". The disciple John, the only one of the Twelve to see you die, watched you at the moment of your death and preserved a precious testimony for us: "Jesus, after bowing His head, gave up His spirit".

For every dying person the last breath comes out of his lips, and then his head bows down on his breast. You, instead, first bowed your head and then "gave up the spirit". Thus your last breath descended on the small Church already gathered at the foot of the Cross. Your last dying breath was like the

breath of the Creator upon the first man; it was like the Spirit sent to the Virgin at the time your Incarnation, and already announced that breath of new life that you would bestow on the disciples on Easter evening and on Pentecost.

I again see your martyr St. Maximilian Kolbe stopping exhausted before the pile of bodies he was forced to drag on a cart to the cremation ovens of Auschwitz. Before going away, he murmurs under his breath: «Et Verbum caro factum est... Holy Mary, pray for us». Even at the execution place in a concentration camp, that last sigh of a martyr – a breath of faith in you and of charity for the other victims – was the anticipation of "victory through faith and love".

### **XIII STATION**

#### ***Jesus is laid on His Mother's breast***

V. We adore You, O Christ...

Before the last steps leading you to the sepulchre, oh Jesus, you rest for a moment in peace, in the arms of Mary, like a son tired after an overly long day. It was also the "day" that the Father had assigned to you – a good day's work – and now He is ready to take you back with Him. Like Mary, also the Heavenly Father holds you to His breast and already murmurs: "My Son you are yourself; today I have generated you!" The Virgin Mother silently holds Your dead body in her arms, in faith, hope and charity.

In her we see the image and the model of the Church, which in joy and suffering, continuously generates the children of God and awaits their resurrection. Oh Lord, may we your ministers have "mercy"; mercy for your eternal sacrifice which we must daily renew holding you in our hands; mercy for those whom we must generate as your children, accompanying them on the passion and preparing them for the life of resurrection.

The Blessed Fr. Titus Brandsma, in the Dachau concentration camp, gave his poor crown of the Rosary to the nurse hated and scorned by all the prisoners because she injected them with phenic acid. "I don't know how to pray!" replied the woman with irritation. He answered gently: "You don't have to say the whole Hail Mary, only 'Pray for us sinners'". And she never again forgot the face of the elderly priest to whom she had brought death. She said afterwards: "He took pity on me!" She had killed him, but He had generated her in grace.

### **XIV STATION**

#### ***Jesus is laid in the sepulchre***

V. We adore You, O Christ...

In Mary, the Church has welcomed you forever in her arms and awaits the miracle. In the dark tomb, your body lies watched by the Trinity and in the pure silence the dialogue of Resurrection takes place. The heart of the Father was pierced by your prayer, when you asked "with a loud shout and tears to be freed from death", and the Father, who "Always grants your

wish" cannot allow "His Saint to see corruption". Thus, in the night of the sepulchre, as He already did in the darkness of the cave in Bethlehem, the father again generates you in the power of the Holy Spirit Father; "light of light, true God of true God". Neither the great sealing stone nor the guards place to watch the tomb could prevent the transubstantiation of the your body into the resurrected body.

Since then, all your faithful have accepted, in Baptism, that they are "buried with you", in order to arise with you. Help us, Lord, not to fear the sepulchres of this earth, and help us to do down there in the certitude of falling into the hands of your Father.

Thus the Blessed Fr. Damian de Veuster descended into the lepers' colony of Molokai – then considered "the cemetery and hell of the living" – and from the first sermon embraced all those unhappy people saying simply: "We lepers". And to the first sick person who said, "Be careful, Father, you might get my disease" he replied: I am my own, if the sickness takes my body away God will give me another one".

Oh Lord, may be stay before your sepulchre in adoring expectation, like Mary of Bethany, the woman who gave you in advance "the scented oil for the burial" and whom you chose as the first witness of your Resurrection.

### **FORMULA OF COMMITMENT**

#### ***at the end of the Way of the Cross***

Lord Jesus,

We have accompanied you on the difficult "way of the Cross" with faith, love and hope. We have understood how much it cost you to offer yourself to us as the Way for us to return to the Father; how much it cost you to fall into the abyss to come between us and hell, to embrace us in our perdition and give us your very Life.

In your Supreme Priesthood we have also contemplated our priestly ministry. In your holy Sacrifice we have contemplated the sacrifice you ask us to offer with out hands and with our life; the total Eucharist that we must and want to present to your Father. In your obedience unto death on the Cross, we have also contemplated the obedience we promised to you and your Church. In the passion of the your absolute Love, we have also contemplated the cast offering of our entire self – body and soul – because we are destined to transmit your love.

May this repeated contemplation become humble, daily action, faithful and indomitable service. In this Way of the Cross we have been accompanied by the vivid memory of the Holy Virgin of the Sorrows, also the Mother of our priesthood – and we have been helped by the generous example of Saintly Priests. Through their intercession, Lord, grant us to know how to "give our life" for our flock, like the good shepherd who never flees but always guards and protects his sheep.

Give us your Holy Spirit who makes us holy, and renew in us the happy awareness of being "children" of the your Heavenly Father, children in you, the Son, sent to the world "to gather together all the lost children of God». Amen.