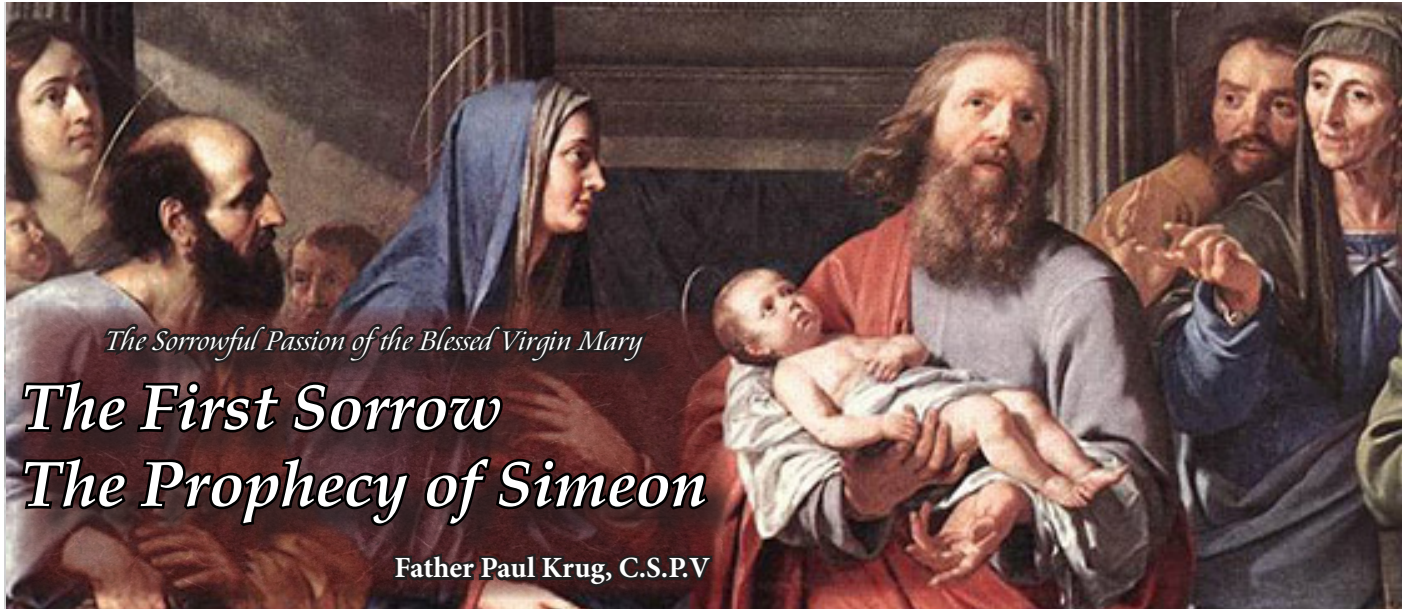




Dolorosa

QUINQUAGESIMA WEEK

MARCH 2017



“And after the days of her purification were accomplished, they carried Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.”

In the Law of Moses, there were two precepts that concerned the birth of a firstborn son. The first precept, which applied also to subsequent sons, was that the mother was deemed unclean according to the Law. She was thus forced to remain hidden indoors for forty days. After forty days, the mother was obliged to present herself in the temple to obtain the legal purification, which was procured through prayer and sacrifice. In his commentary on Saint Luke, the great Scripture scholar Cornelius a Lapide explains that the mother, if she were rich, would offer to God a lamb as a sacrifice for her own purification and a young turtledove or pigeon as a sin-offering. But, if the mother were poor, she would be obliged only to offer a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons (104). Now, the second precept, which pertained only to a firstborn son, was that the child would be taken to the temple and offered to God. Thus, Saint Luke writes in his Gospel, “And after the days of her purification were accomplished, they carried Him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Lk. 2:22).

Now, the Blessed Virgin Mary was in no way required to present herself in the temple for a legal purification. She was the purest of all mothers, for she was the Mother of God. Indeed, her purity was never tarnished in even the slightest degree by anything whatsoever. She was immaculate. Yet, in her humility and in her docility to the will of God, she submitted to this law out of obedience to the command of God. So, it was early on February second, the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph set out for Jerusalem. “Each carried an offering,” writes Father Lasance in *Our Lady Book*. “The Mother carried her Divine Son; Saint Joseph, a pair of turtle doves” (97). At length, the walls of the great city appeared on the horizon. The pinnacle of the temple, which gleamed in the morning sun, soon came into view. Father Lasance, in the same place, beautifully describes the entrance of the Holy Family into Jerusalem in these words:

Timidly, gently, surrounded by choirs of invisible angels the holy Mother, side by side with her protecting spouse, Saint Joseph, entered the city of Jerusalem and passed near Herod’s palace. They passed up the steps on the southern side of the temple and went in by the door “for the first-born” to the inner court before the gates of the “Tabernacle of Manifestation,” where the purification was usually administered.



On entering the inner court of the temple, Our Lady went and stood near the eastern entrance, which was the place of purification. A priest of the temple, then, performed the sacred rite of purification over her, rendering her once again clean according to the Law. But, there was yet one more precept to be fulfilled on that February day. The Mother of God had to offer her Son to Almighty God. This, however, would not be done in the same way other mothers offered their first-

borns. For other mothers, this was nothing more than a legal ceremony. It was a joyous occasion. But for the Mother of God, it was not so. It was neither an occasion of joy nor a mere ceremonial offering required by the Law. The Blessed Virgin's offering of her Divine Son was really and truly an offering of His life, even as it was an offering of her own life. "God willed that on this day," explains Saint Alphonsus in *The Glories of Mary* "[that the Blessed Virgin] make a solemn sacrifice of herself, by offering her Son to [God] in the temple, thus sacrificing His precious life to Divine justice" (359). It was a true sacrifice. And painful as it was, it was a sacrifice that she was willing to make because it was the will of God. Our Lady, thus, handed the infant Jesus to the priest. And, the priest, not knowing the significance of what he was about to do, took the Infant in his hands and raised Him up towards heaven, completing the twofold offering of Mother and Son.

Now, while all this was transpiring, a venerable, holy man was watching from a distance. The man's name was Simeon. The Holy Ghost revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he saw with his own eyes the Messiah, the Redeemer of mankind. Simeon spent many years, waiting and praying for the Messiah. Although he

"And thy own soul a sword shall pierce"

had seen countless newborns offered to God in his day, still, the very moment he saw Our Lady and the Infant in her arms, he knew by divine inspiration that the day had finally come. He was going to hold in his feeble hands Him, Who holds the world in the palm of His hand. So, humbly and reverently, he approached the Holy Family and asked Our Lady if he might hold her Son. Without hesitation, Mary handed Him to Simeon. Words cannot describe the feeling of joy and overwhelming emotion that

shot through Simeon's soul as he looked into the tiny face of his Creator and pressed Him to his heart. Simeon, then, expressed his joy and gratitude to God in the following canticle, which has been immortalized in the liturgy of the Church: "Now Thou dost dismiss Thy servant, O Lord, according to Thy word, in peace: Because my eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared before the faces of all peoples. A light to the revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Lk. 2:29-32).

The countenance of the holy prophet did not, however, remain joyful. His face grew serious and his complexion grave as he turned to Mary herself. Then, inspired by the Holy Ghost, he uttered that most sorrowful of prophecies. "Behold," he said looking at the Infant Jesus, "this Child is set for the fall and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted." And lifting his eyes to the Mother, he added: "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed" (Lk. 2:34-35).

"As often as I looked at my Son, as often as I wrapped Him in His swaddling clothes, as often as I saw His hands and feet, so often was my soul absorbed in fresh grief."

Our Lady herself revealed to Saint Matilda that, on this announcement of Simeon, "all her joy was changed to sorrow." All the joy, all the happiness, that surrounded the birth of her Divine Son was at that very instant turned into a deluge of grief. Saint Alphonsus relates in *The Glories of Mary* that "although the Blessed Mother already knew that the life of her Son would be sacrificed for the salvation of the world, [at Simeon's words] she learned more distinctly and in greater detail the sufferings and cruel death that awaited her poor Son" (421). In other words, though Our Lady knew what torments her Jesus would endure, nevertheless, on hearing the words of Simeon, all the minute circumstances of the sufferings, which were to torment Our Lord in His Passion, were revealed to her. She saw Him, as it were, contradicted and persecuted by men of every class. She heard the bloodthirsty cry of the mob at the court of Pilate: "Away with Him! Away with Him! Crucify Him!" She saw Him mocked, scourged, and spit upon. She saw Him cloaked in the purple of His own blood, carrying the cross with a crown of piercing thorns on His sacred head. She saw Him pinned to the cross between two thieves, struggling just to breathe. And, she saw Him at that most solemn moment—she saw Him bow His head and exhale His final breath. She experienced the sight of these things in her very soul. Then, as she glanced at the precious face of her infant Jesus as He rested in the

arms of Simeon, what grief must have welled up in her soul? It was, indeed, sorrow so great that it felt as though a sword were plunged into her Immaculate Heart. Although she was perfectly and peacefully resigned to God's will that her Son should suffer these and the countless other brutalities inflicted upon Him, what anguish must she have felt at this moment? Our Lady later revealed to Saint Bridget that while on earth, there was not an hour in which this grief did not pierce her soul. "As often as I looked at my Son," she said to Saint Bridget, "as often as I wrapped Him in His swaddling clothes, as often as I saw His hands and feet, so often was my soul absorbed in fresh grief. [Whenever I thought of my Son,] my eyes were filled with tears, and my heart was tortured with grief; for I thought how He would be crucified." Our Lady later revealed that even after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, whether she ate or worked, the remembrance of His Passion was fixed in her mind and impressed in her Heart. Thus, she spent her whole life in continual sorrow, for her soul was always occupied with sadness and suffering.

Rightly, then, is Mary called the Queen of Martyrs, for her martyrdom was longer and greater than that of all the martyrs united. The Blessed Virgin Mary, as Saint Bernard so eloquently puts it in one of his sermons, "was a martyr, not by the sword of the executioner, but by bitter sorrow of heart" (*The Glories of Mary* 405). This is so because though her body was not wounded by the hand of the executioner, her Immaculate Heart was transfixed by a sword of grief at the Passion of her Son. "This grief," says Saint Alphonsus, "was sufficient to have caused her death, not once, but a thousand times" (Ibid. 405). Truly, then, did she suffer in her soul all that her Divine Son endured in His body. Indeed, as Saint Alphonsus relates, "Every torture inflicted upon the body of the Son, [was] a wound in the heart of the Mother" (Ibid. 445). The Blessed Virgin Mary was, then, a martyr. She was a martyr of the heart, for she suffered in her Heart more than all the torments that the martyrs endured in their bodies down through the centuries. Thus, Our Lady, without dying, earned the palm of martyrdom beneath the cross.



Like the Mother of Sorrows, each one of us is called to be a martyr. No, not all are called to be martyrs in the perfect sense of the term, that is, by the shedding of blood for Christ; but, all are called to be spiritual martyrs. All are called to endure, like our heavenly Mother, an unbloody martyrdom, a martyrdom of the heart.

The word "martyr" comes from the Greek *martus* or *marturas*. It means "witness."

Thus, martyrdom is not the mere undergoing of physical torture and death; rather it is the undergoing of such suffering primarily as a witness to the truth. In the Catholic sense, this means witnessing the truth of the Faith by enduring death for the confession of the Faith or for some Christian virtue. In the history of the Church, there are numerous instances of such martyrdom, for example, Saint Stephen, who was stoned to death for the faith; Saint Peter, who was crucified upside down; Saint Paul, who was beheaded; Saint Philomena, who was tortured and put to death because she refused to compromise the virtue of purity. However, for those souls who do

not attain the glorious privilege and grace of dying for Christ at the hands of a persecutor, there is an alternative. They can still be martyrs. They can be spiritual martyrs. Spiritual martyrdom applies primarily to those who do not undergo actual martyrdom of blood. Yet, they can be witnesses to Christ by the goodness of their lives and the practice of virtue. They suffer for Christ by their patient bearing of the sorrows and trials of this life and by the struggle against sin and vice, the struggle against temptation and the devil. In his dissertation "Spiritual Martyrdom in Saint Gregory the Great," Father Alfred

"Let no one say, 'I cannot be a martyr because there is now no persecution' for trials are never lacking."

C. Rush, C.S.S.R. quotes a number of saints who have spoken on the sublimity of spiritual martyrdom. Among them, Father Rush quotes Saint Jerome, who writes that "Not only the shedding of blood is regarded as a confession, [that is, a martyrdom], but the service of a dedicated soul is also a martyrdom and a daily one." Following on this, he cites Saint Augustine, who declares, "Let no one say, 'I cannot be a martyr because

there is now no persecution' for trials are never lacking." To these, Father Rush then adds the words of Saint Caesarius of Arles: "Let no one say that the struggles of the martyrs cannot be a reality in our days; for the period of peace has

its own martyrs. For to curb anger," he explains, "to flee temptation, to preserve justice, to hate avarice, to humble pride, and to suffer sadness and difficulty with patience is, to a great part, a martyrdom" (*Theological Studies*, vol. 23, 4: 575-576. 1962).

So many Christians, so many Catholics will say: "I am ready to die for Christ. I would willingly lay down my life for the Faith." Indeed, everybody, relatively speaking, wants to lay down his life for Christ. Everybody wants to die for the Faith. Everybody wants to be a martyr—that is until it's time to do what martyrs do. What do martyrs do? They give up their lives. They renounce self-will and their own way. They do things that are repugnant to human nature. Martyrs suffer. How can there be so many, then, who are theoretically willing to suffer death nobly for their Faith, but when it comes to suffering on a smaller scale, they withdraw their offering? It is, no doubt, because their love for Christ is imperfect. Bloody martyrdom, according to Pope Saint Gregory the Great, calls for heroic love, and it is this same love that is also necessary to endure spiritual martyrdom. It is a love that is generous, disinterested, patient; a love that, as Saint Paul says, "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (I Cor. 13:7).

*Everybody wants to be a martyr . . .
until it's time to do what martyrs do.*

The times in which we live are not so different from the times of the martyrs. There may be no violent persecutions unto blood—at least, not yet. But, we do live in a world in which God is, for the most part, ridiculed, despised, and hated. The one, true Catholic faith has been abandoned by countless millions. Morality has been trodden under foot and is regarded as nonsense. Thus, our day can, in a certain sense, be likened to the days of the martyrs. For, many of the things we see today that concern God, the Faith, and morality, were witnessed by the martyrs over nineteen hundred years ago. Today, as in yesterday, then, the Church is in dire need of martyrs—spiritual martyrs. She desperately needs devout and courageous Catholic men and women who are ready to endure sufferings for her. And, this is all the more true in light of the words of Tertullian. Tertullian was a Church writer who lived in the late second century. At one time, he was an adamant defender of the faith, but something went wrong. He yielded to pride and bitter zeal and gave way to anger, and in the end, he apostatized from the Faith. But, before his spiritual demise, he wrote a powerful work called *The Apology*, and in that work, he summed up the important part the martyrs played in



—Rembrandt. *The Stoning of Saint Stephen*. 1625. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Lyon.

the growth of the Church. This he did in one short, but meaningful sentence. "The blood of martyrs," he wrote, "is the seed of the Church." What Tertullian meant is that by the sacrifice of their lives and their heroic example of selflessness, the early martyrs merited innumerable graces for the propagation of the faith; the spread of the one, true Church; and for the conversion of sinners. Perhaps, the greatest example of this is the martyrdom of Saint Stephen. Saint Stephen was stoned to death for remaining true to the faith and bearing witness to it. As he knelt in the pool of his own blood, beseeching Our Divine Savior to forgive his persecutors, he was unknowingly winning a very special grace for one of them. The blood of Saint Stephen was truly a seed of grace. It was a seed of grace for a young man named Saul, who stood by inciting the Jews who were stoning Stephen. This is so because about thirty years after the death of Saint Stephen, this same Saul who took the name Paul, died for the same faith as Stephen. What Tertullian said of physical martyrdom, is no less true of spiritual martyrdom. The "blood" of spiritual martyrs, that is, the patient suffering of the sorrows, pains, and difficulties of this life, is the seed of the conversion of sinners, for these sufferings win the graces sinners so desperately need today.

As we strive each day to comfort and console Our Sorrowful Mother, the Queen of Martyrs, let us also resolve to imitate her. Let us imitate her example of self-sacrifice by offering ourselves as spiritual martyrs for the conversion of sinners. Unite your sufferings and sorrows with hers. Refrain from complaining when you do not get your way or when sadness and trial come upon you. Strive to speak and act charitably towards those with whom you do not naturally get along or towards those who have insulted or offended you. Be faithful to prayer in time of temptation. Be generous in bearing all for Christ. For, if we are faithful striving to do these things—if we are faithful to the practice of virtue—we will grow to

a greater and more perfect love of Christ. We can, then, go forward with an indomitable confidence that we shall win the palm of spiritual martyrdom. Ever mindful of the words of Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Invicti Athletae*:

There is always a bit of martyrdom in [the practice of] virtue if we really want to strive day by day for a greater perfection of Christian life. For not only by the shedding of blood is the witness of our faith given to God, but also by courageous and constant resistance to the lure of evil and by the complete and generous dedication of all that we are and have to Him who is our Creator and Redeemer and who will one day be our neverending joy in heaven (*The Pope Speaks* IV 219).



○ God, at whose Passion,
according to the prophecy
of Simeon, a sword of sorrow pierced
the most sweet soul of the glorious
virgin and mother Mary; grant in Thy
mercy that we, who call to mind with
veneration her soul pierced with sorrow,
through the glorious merits and prayers
of all the saints faithfully standing by
Thy cross, may obtain the blessed fruit
of Thy Passion.

*(Collect for the Feast of the Seven Sorrows
of the Blessed Virgin Mary)*

