



Dolorosa

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

MARCH 2017



Three weeks ago, I was traveling to Blackfoot, Idaho for the weekend Mass circuit. After a two-hour delay in Albany for a “weight-balancing issue” and, consequently, a missed connection in Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, I was finally able to obtain a seat on a flight that departed O’Hare at 6:45 p.m. This flight was going to Salt Lake City, Utah, where I could connect to reach Idaho. So, at 9:20 p.m. Mountain Standard Time, I landed in Salt Lake City and deplaned.

While I was viewing the video board to find out from which gate the Idaho flight was departing, I was approached by a middle-aged man. “A Catholic priest!” he said. “Father, my name is John. I’m a member of the Knights of Columbus, and I know a dedicated Catholic priest when I see one. The dedicated ones wear the suit.” I introduced myself and explained that I was part of the Congregation of Saint Pius V, that all the priests of the Congregation wear the suit, and that we offer the traditional Latin Mass.

After some small talk, John then facetiously said, “You know, Father, I never thought I would see a Catholic priest in the land of Mormon.” Now, the reason he said this is because Salt Lake City is, so to speak, the Vatican of the Church of Mormon, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) as they style themselves. The Mormon Church was founded by Joseph Smith in 1830 in New York. According to the interfaith website *Patheos*:

Smith claimed to have been called by God to restore the church that Christ had established on the earth, but which had been lost after the deaths of the original apostles. Smith said that heavenly messengers, including John the Baptist, visited him and conferred upon him the divine authority to perform valid Christian baptisms. Later, Smith introduced the practice of plural marriage as part of his desire to reintroduce all biblical practices into the modern world After Smith’s murder in 1844, leadership of the church passed to Brigham Young, a dynamic organizer and frontiersman who led the church to the relative isolation and security of the American West. The church abandoned polygamy in 1890, and gradually found a place within traditional American culture. (“Mormonism”; 6 March 2017, patheos.com)

I’m not going to delve into the numerous and bizarre beliefs of the Mormons. Suffice it to say that they have a very distorted notion of the Blessed Trinity and salvation. Moreover, they believe, as it was once explained to me by a practicing Mormon, that after death everyone becomes a god and is rewarded with his own planet to rule. These are but a few of the tenets of the Church of Mormon. You can see now why John

jokingly commented on seeing a priest in their territory—our beliefs are exceedingly different.

After laughing his comment off, John then said: “Father, may I ask you a serious question?”

“Surely,” I said.

“Father,” John asked, “how do you lead a Catholic life in this world? There is so much filth, sin, and temptation out there. How is it possible?”

I encouraged John to persevere in keeping the Commandments, in avoiding the occasions of sin, and in practicing virtue. I then told him to be faithful to daily prayer, especially to the rosary, and to pray to the Holy Family each day to help him and his family persevere. I explained that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph know what it is like to live in a pagan and sinful land and that they would have stood out in Egypt as I stood out in Mormon territory.

Among Scripture scholars and theologians, it is commonly held that the Holy Family lived in Egypt for seven years. This they were forced to do on account of the edict of King Herod, who sought to kill the divine Infant. After the departure of the Magi on January sixth, the Christ Child was taken to Jerusalem and presented

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in the temple. This took place on February second. Afterward, according to the Scripture scholar Cornelius a Lapide writing in *The Great Commentary*, the Holy Family returned to Nazareth, and it was about this time that Herod’s imperial decree went out (1:71). The decree to execute all male children who were two years old or younger was devised by King Herod after the Magi failed to return to inform him where the newborn King was to be found. Herod felt threatened. He feared that this new King would dethrone him one day. Thus he decided he would rid himself of the threat by means of a massacre. He ordered his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and to all the surrounding towns and villages and kill innocent children. This they did. The soldiers marched through the streets of Bethlehem and the surrounding area, and they invaded the homes to enforce the edict of Herod. Thousands of innocent children were ruthlessly murdered. In fact, Cornelius a Lapide tells us that it is commonly held that fourteen thousand infants were put to death (82). Newborns were snatched from the arms of their mothers and were cruelly slain by the sword. The sorrow of the grief-stricken mothers, as you can imagine, was unbearable.

If this event were not recorded in the Gospel, it would seem too horrible to believe.

While Herod was yet devising his wicked scheme, God the Father sent an angel to Saint Joseph to warn him of the impending danger. Saint Matthew records this in his Gospel:

... Behold an angel of the Lord appeared in sleep to Joseph, saying, “Arise, and take the Child and His mother, and fly into Egypt: and be there until I shall tell thee. For it will come to pass that Herod will seek the Child to destroy Him.” (Mt. 2:13)

Without a moment’s hesitation, Saint Joseph woke the Blessed Virgin and related to her the command of the angel. Hearing this sorrowful news, the Mother knew that already the prophecy of Simeon concerning her Son was being verified. Her heart was overwhelmed with grief as she pondered the manhunt that was soon to begin for her Son. After packing the few belongings they possessed and some meager provisions for their journey, Saint Joseph and Our Lady, divine Infant in arm, set out for Egypt in the darkness of night. “Anyone may imagine,” writes Saint Alphonsus in *The Glories of Mary*, “what Mary must have suffered on this journey. To Egypt the distance was great. Most authors agree that it was three hundred miles; so that it was a journey of upwards of thirty days” (427-428). The roads were rough and untraveled. Since it was winter, the weather was cold, damp, and, at times, snowy. Writing of these adverse conditions, Saint Alphonsus says:

... what a touching sight must it have been to have beheld that tender Virgin, with her newborn Babe in her arms, wandering through the world What can they have eaten but a piece of hard bread, either brought by Saint Joseph or begged as an alms? Where can they have slept on such a road (especially on the two hundred miles of desert, where there were neither houses nor inns), unless on the sand or under a tree in a wood, exposed to

—Gaetano Gandolfi, *Joseph’s Dream*, 1790. Private collection.



the air and the dangers of robbers and wild beasts, with which Egypt abounded? (428)

Despite these traveling conditions, the Holy Family, nevertheless, persevered in their journey in obedience to the command of the angel.

A rather interesting tradition has been handed down concerning the journey of the Holy Family to Egypt. Saint Anselm relates that as Jesus, Mary, and Joseph made their way to the pagan land, they were forced to pass through a dense forest. The forest, unbeknownst to the Holy Family, was inhabited by thieves. Among the thieves was a murderer called Dismas. Hidden from view and awaiting an unsuspecting victim, Dismas and his bandits saw the approach of a man and a young woman carrying a Child. The three travelers had very little baggage, and they appeared to be of a lower class. Dismas judged that this unprotected caravan would not offer any resistance, so he advanced towards them to rob them. As he drew near the Holy Family, his eyes happened to fall upon the divine Infant resting in Mary's arms. Dismas stopped. He was struck to the heart at seeing the heavenly beauty and majesty of the Baby's countenance. So touched was this thief that rather than harm the Holy Family, he protected them and even led them through the forest, preserving them from the attacks of other thieves. Before parting ways with the Holy Family, Dismas offered them everything he had. The Blessed Virgin Mary, according to the tradition,

then assured the thief that he would be rewarded for this action before his death. Dismas went on in his habits of crime, but he always remembered the promise of Our Lady—a promise that was fulfilled as he hung upon his own cross beside Our Divine Savior (Prof. Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira; "St. Dismas"; *Tradition in Action*; 6 March 2017, TraditioninAction.org).

At length, the Holy Family reached Egypt. They settled, as Saint Alphonsus explains in *The Glories of Mary*, either in a city called Heliopolis or one called Maturaia (428). Their home was poor. Their food was meager. Their life was one of poverty. "Mary lived there," Saint Alphonsus relates, "in the midst of such poverty that at times she had not even a bit of bread to give her Son, when urged by hunger, He asked for it" (429). How this must have broken her heart! How it must have grieved her to stand there and tell her famished little Boy that there was no food. How she must have embraced Him, held Him tightly, and reassured Him that food would come—that everything would be alright. In addition to the poverty of their life in Egypt, Mary and Joseph had no relatives or friends there, and to make matters worse, they were despised by the pagan Egyptians. They were outcasts. The Egyptians worshiped cats, dogs, crocodiles, calves, rams, goats, the sun, the moon, the stars, and whatever else they decided to deify. They were steeped in impurity and immorality of all sorts. The inhabitants of Egypt were

—Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*. 1563. Courtauld Gallery, London.



thus full-fledged pagan idolaters, who wanted nothing to do with Jews. It was to these living conditions that the Son of God, the Blessed Virgin, and Saint Joseph subjected themselves not for one, not for two, but for seven long years.

The trials and sorrows that Our Lady faced during this exile in Egypt are not so different from the many trials and sorrows we face in our own time. As Herod sought to rid himself of Christ, so do the Herods of today. That is, the corrupt leaders of religions and nations, as well as other wicked men in high places, seek to rid the world today of Christ altogether. They are bent on destroying the Church, they are set on abolishing morality, they are determined to extinguish the light of Faith. So-called “laws” have been enacted, which like the imperial edict of King Herod, permit the slaughter of innocent children. The massacre of unborn children today, however, makes the massacre at Bethlehem two thousand years ago seem as nothing. Herod may have slaughtered fourteen thousand, but today, in the United States alone, over one million unborn children are put to death each year. Furthermore, as impurity and immorality, sin and vice were rampant among the pagan Egyptians, so too are these things widespread in our world today.

The Holy Family endured living in a sinful and heathen land to encourage us in our own time. They bore with the difficulties of living in a land where the true God was not known and where morality was non-existent to instruct us—to answer the question like my friend John’s: “How do you lead a Catholic life in this world? There is so much filth, sin, and temptation out there. How is it possible?” To what repulsive sights and sounds the Holy

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Family must have been exposed during their time in Egypt. Yet, they remained steadfast. This is something that people do not usually realize when they consider the Flight into Egypt, but it was, nevertheless, a very real—a very anguishing—part of Our Lady’s sorrow.

Much of our world today has, in a certain sense, reverted to the paganism of early times. People may not worship cats, dogs, and crocodiles, but they do worship, so to speak, technology, money, and all that this world has to offer. They are obsessed with these and the pleasure they give, and they make them, so to speak, their gods. Like Our Lady, then, we are living exiled in a pagan world,

and often, we must contend with the spirit of the world. There will be times when we will be looked down on and ridiculed by others, as Our Lady certainly was, for not following the sinful ways of the world. We will have to combat the temptation that is all around us. We will have to work and suffer in this valley of tears. Following the



—Rembrandt. *Landscape with the Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. 1647. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

example set for us by the Mother of God, then, we must live in this world, but we must not be of it. In other words, we must be resolute in fleeing the occasions of sin, that is, any person, place or thing that can lead us into sin. We must use the material things with which God has blessed us and enjoy the pleasures of this life as befits Catholics. God does not want us to live like hermits in the desert, that is, not possessing anything. God wants us to have joy in this life. He wants us to partake in good, wholesome entertainment and recreation; He wants us to use the things of this world; but, He does not want us to become engrossed in these. In other words, He does not want us to become so absorbed in the things and pleasures of the world that we begin to neglect our daily prayers and the practice of our Faith. He wants us to keep our priorities straight.

The Blessed Virgin Mary knows in a very real way what we have to deal with in this life. She knows what it is like to live in a world rife with sin and vice. And, she is not unmindful of us, her children, who have to live in such a world. When it is difficult, then, when you are tempted to discouragement at the state of the world, or when you are just worn out with the struggle, go to Our Lady and ask her to help you. Mingle your suffering, your sorrow, your toil with hers. Whether it’s temptation, ridicule, human respect, or just the sheer difficulties of day-to-day life in this world, go to Mary. Go to her—for never was it known that anyone who fled to her protection, implored her help, or sought her intercession was left unaided.