

Dolorosa

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A STEP BACK IN TIME



THE WOMAN WHO LAUGHED AT GOD

Father Paul Krug, C.S.P.V

—Willem Van Herp. *Abraham And The Three Angels.*

Following their expulsion from the Garden of Paradise, Adam and Eve were made to wander the earth and work hard to make a living. “In the sweat of thy face,” God said, “shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return” (Gen. 3:19).

In the midst of their years of toil, God blessed Adam and Eve with many children. Through the years they told their descendants the story of what had transpired since their creation by God. They described their former happiness in Paradise, the special gifts God had given them, and their loss of these through their disobedience and sin. Adam and Eve expressed to their children the true sorrow they had for having disobeyed God, but they also encouraged them with the great hope God had given mankind. Our first parents thus passed down to their children the promise of a Redeemer who would atone for man’s sins and reopen the gates of heaven.

As their children grew older, Adam and Eve taught them how to worship God. They did this by offering sacrifice to Him. In other words, they adored God by giving back to Him some of His gifts. “These gifts they burned up,” Father George Johnson tells us in his *Bible History*, “so that they could never be given to anyone except to God” (15).

Over time, many of Adam and Eve’s descendants became disobedient, selfish, and wicked. The first murder

was committed when Cain killed his brother Abel out of anger. Cain was jealous that Abel’s sacrifice was more pleasing to God than was his. This jealousy begot in him a blinding anger, and this uncontrolled anger drove him to murder. As the years went on, the good began marrying the wicked, and—as happens in such marriages even today—the good, too, became sinful. They abandoned the service of God and, at length, forgot Him.

The wickedness of men reached such heights that God regretted that He had created man. “And God seeing that the wickedness of men was great on the earth,” we read in the Book of Genesis, “it repented Him that he had made man on the earth. And being touched inwardly with sorrow of heart, He said: I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth. . .” (6:5-7).

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In spite of the evil of the majority of His rational creatures, one man found grace with God. His name was Noe. God spoke with Noe and informed him of His plan to destroy the earth with a flood. “Behold I will bring the waters of a great flood upon the earth,” God said, “to

destroy all flesh. . . . All things that are in the earth shall be consumed” (Gen. 6:17). To save Noe and his family, as well as to preserve the various species of animals, God commanded him to build an ark. After Noe and his wife, his three sons and their wives, and all the animals were safely in the ark, God punished mankind. He flooded the world to the point that the highest mountains were submerged. “And all flesh,” as Moses tells us in Genesis, “was destroyed that moved upon the earth. . .” (7:21).

“For five months,” writes Father Johnson, “the ark floated about on the water” (21). At length, the waters subsided, and God again spoke to Noe. “Go out of the ark, thou and thy wife, thy sons, and the wives of thy sons with thee,” He said. “All living things that are with thee of all flesh . . . bring out with thee, and go ye upon the earth: increase and multiply upon it” (Gen. 8:16). Obedient to God’s command, Noe and his family left the ark. God blessed Noe and his sons for their fidelity and promised with a rainbow never again to flood the earth. “This is the sign of the covenant,” God said, “which I give between me and you, and to every living soul that is with you, for perpetual generations. I will set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be the sign of a covenant between me, and between the earth” (Gen. 9:12-13).



—Zac Kinkade. *Noah's Ark*.

Continuing his narrative, Father Johnson tells us that “after many years the human race grew larger and larger . . .” (23). All spoke the same language, and there was a certain harmony in the world. However, mankind again grew proud and sought, as it were, to be as gods. This time, man plotted to construct a tower that would reach to heaven. “Let us make a city and a tower,” they said to one another, “the top whereof may reach to heaven: and let us make our name famous. . .” (Gen. 11:4). So, they began building. God saw the wickedness of their pride, and He decided to punish them. Father Johnson describes what God did. He writes:

One day while [the men] were working on the tower, they noticed that they could not understand one another very well. Little by little the language spoken

by one family became entirely different from that of another. They could work together no longer, so they ceased to build the city and the tower. (23)

The unfinished city was henceforth called *Babel*—which means *confusion*—because, as we read in Genesis, “there the language of the whole earth was confounded: and from thence the Lord scattered them abroad upon the face of all countries” (11:9). Mankind thus dispersed throughout the known parts of the world.



—Pieter Brueghel the Younger. *The Tower of Babel*.

For many years, God’s promise of a Redeemer was passed down from father to son, from mother to daughter. At length, God decided, so to speak, that it was time to choose one nation in particular to preserve His promise and to be the ancestors of the Redeemer. The man chosen by God to be the father of this nation was called Abraham.

The twelfth chapter of Genesis opens with God speaking to Abraham, whose name was Abram before God changed it. “Go forth out of thy country,” God said to him, “and from thy kindred, and out of thy father’s house, and come into the land which I shall shew thee” (12:1). Continuing, God said, “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and magnify thy name, and thou shalt be blessed. . . and in thee shall all the kindred of the earth be blessed” (2-3). Later, God would add to this promise by assuring Abraham that his descendants would number the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens.

In obedience to the command of Almighty God, Abraham packed, left his home, and headed in the direction of Chanaan—a gorgeous and fertile land. God promised Abraham that He would give this land to his descendants. Chanaan was henceforth known as the Promised Land—the same place where Moses sought to lead the captive Israelites so many years later.

When Abraham left his home, he did not go alone. He brought with him his wife, Sara, and his nephew, Lot. Interestingly, Sara is the first woman named in the Bible



after Eve. Nothing is known of her life before her marriage to Abraham. We do know, however, that Sara possessed an extraordinary beauty. In fact, she was so beautiful that Abraham was afraid for his life on several occasions when he traveled with her into foreign lands. He feared that if it were discovered that he was her husband, he would be put to death so that another could take her as wife. "I know that thou art a beautiful woman," he said to Sara, "and that when the Egyptians shall see thee, they will say: She is his wife: and they will kill me, and keep thee" (Gen. 12:11-12). He therefore pretended to be her brother. Sometime later in the land of Gerara, Abraham and Sara employed this same tactic.

Great as her beauty was, Sara's devotion to her husband was even greater. She truly loved Abraham with all her heart, and she was ready and willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary for the sake of their marriage. Whether it was attending to the household chores or packing up and traveling to Chanaan, Egypt, Hebron, or wherever Abraham went, she was faithful and did not complain. Indeed, Sara was noble as a princess, as her name means in Hebrew. She was noble both in countenance and in conduct.

One thing that troubled her, however, was her inability to beget children. "Behold," she lamented, "the

Lord hath restrained me from bearing. . ." (Gen. 16:2). Little did she know that Almighty God was preparing her to be the mother of the great nation promised to Abraham. In fact, it was a mission that God Himself came to announce to her.

One day, three strangers approached the home of Abraham and Sara. Abraham, who had been resting at the door of the tent, saw the three men and immediately went out to meet them. On approaching them, he bowed low and said, "Lord, if I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away from thy servant" (Gen. 18:3). It was, no doubt, revealed to Abraham that one of the three was God Himself, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, and that the other two were angels. And so, as we read in Genesis, Abraham "adored down to the ground" (18:2). He, then, invited them to stay a while, rest, and dine with him.

The three visitors graciously accepted the invitation. Overjoyed at their acceptance, Abraham rushed into the tent and asked Sara to prepare cakes of the finest flour. He then ran out to his herd, selected his best calf, and gave it to one of his herdsmen to cook. After the meal had been prepared, he set it before his guests and waited upon them while they ate.

Having finished the meal, the Lord then told Abraham that Sara would have a son. "Sara thy wife," He said, "shall have a son" (Gen. 18:10). Sara, who was inside the tent and listening to the conversation, did not know that this was God Who spoke. Hearing that she would have a child, she laughed behind the door of the tent—not a mocking laugh, but a laugh of doubt. Sara was ninety years old and passed the age of child-bearing. She therefore laughed off the Visitor's words as craziness. "Shall I who am an old woman," she incredulously said to herself, "bear a child indeed?" (Gen. 18:13)

Her jovial doubt, however, did not go unnoticed by God. Although she laughed in secret at His words, God knew she doubted what He had said. So, He said to Abraham, "Why did Sara laugh . . . ? Is there any thing hard to God?" (Gen. 18:13-14).

—James Tissot, *Abraham And The Three Angels*, 1896-1902.





—Rembrandt. *Abraham Serving The Three Angels*. 1646.

Hearing these words, Sara feared she had been discovered. Surely, she must have wondered how this Man knew of her incredulity—how He knew she had laughed at His words. She thus hurried out of the tent to defend herself. Moses tells us in Genesis that “Sara denied, saying: I did not laugh: for she was afraid” (18:15). But God “called her on the carpet.” “Nay,” He said to her, “but thou didst laugh” (18:15).

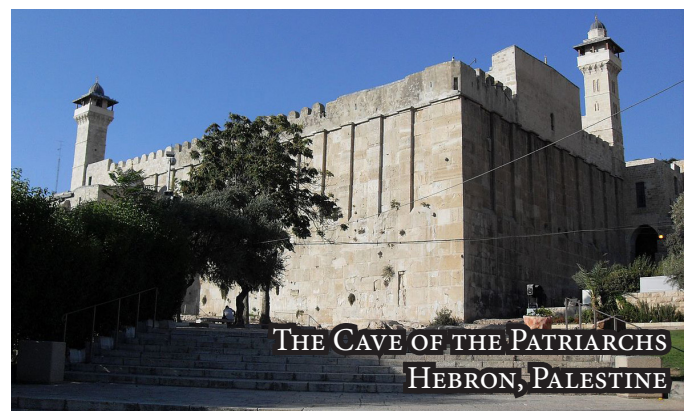
In the end God had, as it were, the last laugh. As He had promised and at the time He foretold, Sara did bear a son. He was named Isaac, which means “laughter.”

“Why did Sara laugh . . . ? Is there any thing hard to God?”

Sara lived to be 127 years old. In fact, she is the only woman in Sacred Scripture whose age is specifically mentioned. Throughout the Old Testament chronologies, the ages of the various male patriarchs are given, but not of the women. It is recorded in Genesis, that upon Sara’s death Abraham wept many tears (23:2). How he must have loved her. Indeed, as Our Lord’s love for his friend Lazarus was measured by the tears He wept after his death, so can we measure Abraham’s love for Sara by his tears.

After the funeral rites were finished, Abraham bought a field in the land of Hebron and buried his wife there in a double cave called *Machpelah*. This cave

marks the burial site for the three patriarchs and three matriarchs: Abraham and Sara, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah. Their remains lay there to this very day hidden in the caves beneath the large rectangular stone structure, which was originally built by King Herod the Great (31-4 B.C.). It is commonly known as the Cave of the Patriarchs.



In his Epistle to the Hebrews, Saint Paul writes this of Sara: “By faith also Sara herself, being barren, received strength to conceive . . . even past the time of age; because she believed that he was faithful who had promised” (11:11). Saint Paul thus posits Sara’s faith in God’s promise as the reason she bore Isaac.

However, this faith or trust in the promise that she would have a son was not her immediate reaction to



God's words. Her first reaction was this: "Which when Sara heard, she laughed behind the door of the tent" (Gen. 18:10). Sara laughed; she doubted. She laughed at the prospect of having a son at such an advanced age. She doubted that such a thing was possible.

When a person doubts the possibility of something, he typically expresses his doubt in some way. Like Sara, he might laugh off the object of his doubt, not derisively but incredulously. Without giving any assent, he might question it repeatedly. He might, like another Saint Thomas the Apostle, demand proof before he believes. However, two of the most common expressions of doubt or disbelief, are worry and anxiety.

"Worry," writes Father Joseph Manton, C.S.S.R., in *Pennies From A Poor Box*, "may not be listed among the Seven Capital Sins, nor included among the thundering 'Thou Shalt not's' of the Ten Commandments, but it is still one of the sharpest arrows in the devil's quiver" (326). It is among the devil's most efficient tools, as Father Manton explains, "[because] once [the devil] can lodge it in a man, the victim thinks of nothing else" (326). How true this is! How easily worry envelops our minds—how quickly anxiety can take over our lives if it is not checked!

Worry and anxiety are so closely related that they are essentially one; they are practically synonymous. Worry is a state of anxiety and uncertainty over actual or potential problems. Anxiety, on the other hand, denotes a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome. Both of these, worry and anxiety, are the result of a lack of confidence in God; they are the manifestation of doubt concerning God's loving and all-permissive Will. This is true because when one gives way to his feelings of worry and anxiety, he is telling God, as it were, "I have doubts that You are doing what is best for me."

Sara laughed the laugh of doubt at these words of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity: "I will return and come to thee at this time, . . . and Sara thy wife shall have a son" (Gen. 18:10). When we yield to worry and feelings of anxiousness, we doubt these words of the same Son of God:

Be not solicitous therefore, saying, What shall we eat: or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed? . . . For your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things. Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God, and his justice, and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matt. 6:31-33)

What Our Divine Savior means is that God knows all of our concerns and everything we need. He loves us and is always looking out for us. We, therefore, need not "be solicitous"—we need not worry—for God will always do what is best for us, even if it does not seem so to our darkened understanding.

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Bear in mind that I am writing about worry and anxiety, not about reasonable thinking, not about prudent planning. We should think things out; we must plan as far as is humanly possible. But worry is useless thinking; it is not productive. In fact, Saint Francis de Sales tells us, in so many words, that the worst thing that can befall a soul, except for sin, is worry or anxiety. This is because anxiety about the past or worry about the present and future is like trying to drive a car in a blizzard or in fog. Like a snowstorm and fog, worry and anxiety diminish our visibility, blind us, and make it very difficult to move forward. In fact, they often overwhelm us to such a point that we devote our time and attention to little else. We even sacrifice our peace of soul in our feeble attempts to alleviate our worries and to solve our problems, as if we had all the answers!

If we have heretofore yielded to fruitless and unavailing worry and anxiety, let us begin today to restrain these enemies of our soul. Let us fight our anxiety about the past, as well as our worries about the present and future.

When it comes to our past, we cannot allow ourselves to become anxious over it. The past is passed, and there is nothing we can do to change it. Some people have a strange idea that if they say some magic words, they can somehow alter history. The magic words are *if only*

and *what if*. “If only I had done this.” “What if I had made this decision instead of that one.” “If only I had left that unsaid.” No matter how many times one says “if only” or “what if,” he will not change anything.

Instead of worrying about past mistakes and choices, let us realize that to make mistakes is human; to err belongs to fallen human nature. Indeed, mistakes can be some of life’s best educators if we learn from them. We must thus let the past train us with its lessons, not strain us with its stress. In other words, learn from it, entrust it to God’s loving and merciful care, and then move forward with confidence. May we, like Saint Paul, “[forget] the things that are behind, and [stretch] forth . . . to those that are before, [and] press towards the mark, to the prize of the supernal vocation of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13).

As we cannot waste our time and energy worrying about the past, neither can we waste them on anxiety about the present and future. Worry about present situations and future circumstances is often due to the fact that we want to rid ourselves of some present or impending evil, whether that evil is real or imagined. The evil might be in the form of an irritable person, a sorrowful occasion, a difficult situation, or it might be a mere figment of our imagination, such as the thought of some disaster that is only a mere possibility.

When these worries come, let us put them in perspective with a few practical considerations. Have you ever seen a house that worry built? Have you ever witnessed one sickness that it cured? Have you ever heard of one bill that it paid? Have you ever met one soul that it saved? No! Because worry does not build houses, cure sicknesses, pay the bills, or save souls. Worry does nothing but drain our energy and harm us spiritually.

Recently, I came across a rather interesting statistic. In his article titled “The Fog of Worry,” Earl Nightingale, the motivational speaker and business strategist, explains that 40% of the things we worry about will never happen. 30% of our worries concern events that cannot be changed by all the worry in the world. 12% are needless worries. 10% are petty worries, many of which do not concern us. Finally, 8% of our worries are legitimate—only 8%! (Earl Nightingale. “The Fog of Worry [Only 8% of Worries are Worth It].” *Nightingale-Conant*. 14 February 2019. www.nightingale.com).

I do not know how Earl Nightingale obtained these percentages. However, they seem accurate, and they give us a common sense understanding of worry: it is worthless and unproductive. 92% of our worries beat us down; the other 8% should be entrusted to our loving Savior and embraced as the crosses that they are.

We will grow worried, at times, and we will feel anxious, but we must refuse to give in to these feelings. The solution to all our worries, anxieties, and concerns is confidence in God and resignation to His holy Will. A



childlike trust that God loves us more than anything else in this world is the answer to all our doubts. This is a fact, for when one is truly convinced of it, he will leave everything in God’s hands, knowing that God will permit only what is for the good of his soul.

If there is a problem or a hardship, yes, we should calmly think it over, prudently look at it from different angles, and come to what decision we can. After that, we must leave it in God’s care. We must tell Him, “My Lord, I entrust this to you. I know You will do what is best for me and for those I love. Please grant me the grace not to worry and to leave it in Your hands.” We must then assure ourselves, “God’s got this—He has it under control.”

“Why did Sara laugh?” God asked Abraham. “Is there any thing hard to God?” The same might be asked of us when we are tempted to worry. “Why did you worry? Is there any thing hard to God?”

“Why did Sara laugh?” God asked Abraham. “Is there any thing hard to God?” The same might be asked of us when we are tempted to worry. “Why did you worry? Is there any thing hard to God?”

Let us go forward, then, as brave soldiers of Christ with these inspiring words of Saint Teresa of Avila in our minds and our hearts: “Let nothing disturb you; let nothing frighten you. All things are passing. God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Nothing is wanting to him who possesses God. God alone suffices.”