

PRAYING THE PASSION

By DONAL O'SULLIVAN

THEY were on the way going up to Jerusalem; and still Jesus led them on, while they were bewildered and followed him with faint hearts'.¹ The disciples of Christ in any century can be as confused as Peter and the rest, and as fainthearted, when it comes to following Christ on the road to the Passion. But the Church's remedy for our confused cowardices can be no other than Christ's 'Once more he brought the twelve apostles to his side and began to tell them what was to befall him: Now we are going up to Jerusalem; and there the Son of Man will be given up into the hands of the chief priests and scribes, who will condemn him to death; and these will give him up into the hands of the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit upon him, and scourge him, and will kill him: but on the third day he will rise again'.² *Ecce ascendimus Jerosolymam* is Mother Church's Quinquagesima theme as she 'prepares and disposes' her children for Lent; and to soothe their fears of the way she also reads for them on the same Sunday St. Paul's marvellous hymn to charity. The Passion, she knows, needs to be faced: it was the conscious embracing of it in love that made of it for Christ a blessed passion. It is through entering into the passion in loving fellowship – *Christo confixus sum cruci*³ – that the Christian is fortified in his own passion. 'Passion of Christ strengthen me'. 'Jesus, living in Mary, come and live in me in the communion of thy mystery'.

But if such strength and fellowship are to come to us from the Passion of Christ it needs to be prayerfully pondered. The Masses of Holy Week open with the request *patientiae ipsius habere documenta*, to 'possess the lesson of his Passion'. And Mother Church's grown-up children – her saints – give universal testimony to the unique value of such meditation. 'The simple remembrance and devout meditation of the Passion of Jesus Christ is much more profitable to a man than to fast a whole year with bread and water and to discipline himself every day even to the shedding of his blood'.⁴ But what is profitable

¹ Mk 10, 32.

² Mk 10, 33.

³ 'With Christ I hang upon the cross'. Gal 2, 20.

⁴ Rosetum Spir. XXII. I.

is not necessarily easy. To 'make' the Stations of the Cross in four or five minutes, or to listen on Good Friday to a passion sermon is no great burden on anyone. But to enter deeply and prayerfully – and normally, therefore, at some length – into the sufferings of Christ is for many so beset with difficulties that they abandon the effort and remain on the surface of this profound mystery. One must be very slow indeed to pronounce on the success or failure of another's prayer. It is matter enough to judge one's own; and anyhow the failure of man may be success before God. But certain fairly objective prayer-norms can be laid down; and it is for each one of us, with goodwill, direction and the aid of the Holy Spirit, gradually to find their application in our own circumstances.

To say that the Passion is a 'mystery' may seem superfluous. But without some appreciation of what we mean by that rather worn word, our whole approach to the Passion is threatened with shallowness, and sentimentality will always be breaking in. The Passion is not merely a mystery in the sense that it is beyond our finite grasp even when revealed to us by God, but also in the sense that although it was an action carried out once-for-all in a time we measure as the year 30 A. D. and in a place we call Jerusalem, and was the passing-over through death to life of a definite individual, Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee; yet it is also the passing-over of one who, as the second Adam, recapitulated, summed up in himself, the whole of mankind. Of the Passion and Resurrection it is as true to say that they are never over as that they are an historical happening long past. Never again will it be the ninth hour on Golgotha. But it is always the ninth hour for the body of Christ, which is his Church, that is for all those who by faith and baptism are 'incorporated' in him. No less than I am of the first Adam am I a member of the second Adam, who 'to the fight and to the rescue came'. In the first, mysteriously, I fell; mysteriously I am risen in the second. Dead, buried and risen 'in' Christ through the initiation sign or sacrament of Baptism and 'moulded into the pattern of his death',¹ I have, as reason develops and the problems and pain of life become realities, consciously to actuate the marvellous potentialities received in those brief moments of 'Christ-ening'. 'We are limbs of his body; flesh and bone we belong to him',² 'I make up in my body what is wanting to the passion of Christ for his body which is the Church'.³ Day after day, the mystery of Redemption,

¹ Phil 3, 10.

² Eph 5, 30.

³ Col 1, 24.

the passion-resurrection process, is ever present on this planet through the Mass and the Sacraments. The Body is given for us, the Blood is shed for us. We take and we eat and we drink. The Mass in St. Thomas's brief summation, is 'the sacrament of the passion'. The Eucharist is for Catholics no *nuda commemoratio*, no empty memorial service. It is a *memoriale*, in the 'above-nature' sense of a memory that contains the thing remembered. Calvary is no 'green hill far away': it is the altar in my parish church, in my community chapel. When the negro-spiritual asks: 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?', my Catholic answer is, 'I am'.

There surely is the basis of all meditation on the Passion; and we may hope that it is present, at least implicitly, in the passion prayers of all sincere Christians. And it is a heartening mark of present-day spirituality that this doctrine is being made more and more explicit. The encyclicals *Corpus Christi Mysticum* and *Mediator Dei* do not supplant the expositions of the Council of Trent; they continue and develop them in a world made extraordinarily self-conscious through its probings into outer space and through the shrinking of space and time. The atom-threatened city dweller of to-day, to whom television brings 'home' the passion of Hiroshima is being given by the Holy Spirit not, of course, a new theology of salvation, but a new slant on it, a fresh vision of it that would have been beyond the burgher or the peasant of the Thirty Years War. Before immersing ourselves in the details of Christ's historical passion, it is the need and fact of salvation, of world-salvation, that calls for prayerful meditating. This is in no way to suggest that the sufferings of the 'dense and driven passion' are for one moment to be excluded from a Christian's meditation. Indeed it is with a sense of shock that we hear St. Ignatius, so fearful of exaggeration in word, telling his 'exercitant' to 'set to work with much energy and strive to grieve and be sad and lament'¹ and to ask for 'sorrow with Christ sorrowing, heart-breaking with Christ heart-broken, tears and inward pain for that so great pain which Christ suffered for me'.² But we must also recall that in this passion 'week' of the Spiritual Exercises, the director must pay more than ordinary attention to 'the age, disposition and temperament'³ of the individual exercitant. In meditating – or preaching – on the Passion, there is a real danger of being hypnotised by suffering as such and of expending spirit in a waste of emotional sympathy for an unfortunate.

¹ Exx 195.

² Exx 103.

³ Exx 205.

'Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children'.¹ It is scarcely a matter of chance that St. Ignatius says that we are 'to consider how the Divinity hides itself, that is to say how it could destroy its enemies and does not do so; and how it leaves the most sacred Humanity to suffer so cruelly'.² By those words the saint is trying not merely to increase our sympathy for Christ – he is doing that too of course for the immediate purpose of the exercise – but he is also reminding us that when, with St. Paul, he preaches 'Christ crucified' he is preaching 'Christ the power of God, Christ the wisdom of God'.³ The exercitant who arrives at the contemplation of 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' has already been thoroughly schooled to think of 'his Creator and Lord', of 'His Divine Majesty'. of the 'praise and reverence' due to him; and in the 'second week' he has 'seen' the 'Eternal King' and has more than glimpsed the 'wisdom of God in a mystery, a wisdom which is hidden, which God ordained before the world, unto our glory'.⁴ And his narrow cell-view has been extended to the cosmic vision of 'the three Divine Persons beholding all the surface and circuit of the whole terrestrial globe'.⁵ On a soul so prepared the passion contemplations of the Exercises make an awesome impact. On the other hand, if the soul is not prepared, they can be productive of violent, even of vicious, emotions. Here we would suggest is the cause of much failure in prayer. We often approach the Passion reluctantly because of our understandable shrinking from such gruesome suffering; yet – fathering our error on a misunderstood maxim of some saint – we whip up our feelings to a morbid pitch of excitement which, when it passes, leaves us spiritually limp and emptied. That is not the kind of passion prayer that will 'strengthen me'. And even where one is prepared by a solid religious training or by some specialised course such as the Exercises, it is essential to remember that peace and admiration and love are of the essence of 'contemplation' as St. Ignatius understands it. If the 'heart-breaking with Christ heart-broken' that we are praying for disturbs our fundamental deep christian peace of soul, then it is not of the good spirit.

The main prayer-scheme of St. Ignatius in the passion week, as indeed in most of the Exercises, is simple. From an active being-present to the mysteries of Christ, the exercitant is led by frequent repetitions to a form of prayer that has a distinct passive quality, and which may well 'prepare and dispose' the soul for the special

¹ Lk 23, 28.² Exx 196.³ 1 Cor 1, 23–4.⁴ 1 Cor 2, 7.⁵ Exx 102.

gift of contemplation in the more widely-accepted meaning of that troublesome word. Troublesome, because St. Ignatius calls his first mainly active prayer-form 'contemplation'. But it is no esoteric process and should be of great aid in our praying about the passion outside of times of retreat. St. Ignatius would ask: *Are you there while they crucify my Lord?* And this whole method of prayer, so in keeping with the 'mystery-theology' of today, supposes that we are. Except in outlining the 'true history' of the part of the passion he wishes us to contemplate, St. Ignatius always uses the present tense: 'To see the persons . . . what they are doing . . . to listen to what they are saying . . . to consider what Christ Our Lord suffers'. We are wrong in regarding this as a mere effort of the imagination, though of course the imagination can and does help. Neither on the other hand need one necessarily fall back on the controversial mystery-theory of Dom Casel.¹ The wonderful consoling fact is that through the infused knowledge which Christ possessed because of the hypostatic union, he had an intimate vital existential knowledge of each of the members of his mystical body. History was present to him; I was present to him; I am present to him.

An appreciation of this is a tremendous aid to prayer. We are all time's fools and, as such, incapable of rendering reality to a scene that was enacted 'long ago'. Ignatian contemplation can be helped a little by pictorial or theatrical representations. It is more likely, however, that such aids will over-stimulate the imagination which, as 'fool of the house', should humbly serve the understanding. Imagination can lead us to the outer rind of the mystery, to the scene; it can help us to form a composition, seeing the place; it is powerless to penetrate to the kernal of the mystery which is of all times. Anyhow, much of 'sacred' imagery is in reality so profane that it is – if consciously used – a positive hindrance to contemplation. The medieval painters can aid us still; but the Renaissance painters – with a handful of exceptions – painted Christ as they painted Apollo or Hermes. Their superb technical expertise – unaccompanied for the most part by any genuine religious feeling – was expended on

¹ Dom Odo Casel, a German Benedictine (1886–1948), taught that the essence of Christianity consists in the physical union of Christ with his Church. This union is realised in the liturgy, which embraces the presence of Christ and the whole economy of his redemption (incarnation, passion, resurrection, second coming), 're-presented' in the members of the mystical Body. This mysterious re-presentation surpasses all natural presence; it is a supernatural, spiritual, sacramental presence; so that Christ in his historical passion is present to the members of his Church, and they are present to him, in a new and mysterious kind of 'when' and 'where'.

the mere outer scene. And their descendants – devoid even of their painterly talent – are legion. It is only in our own day that Georges Rouault, Evie Hone, Manessier and a small handful of others have again led us to the mystery of the Passion.

St. Ignatius gives us six points for our contemplations: seeing the persons, listening to them, watching what they are doing, considering what Christ is suffering, how the Divinity hides itself and, finally, that it is all for me and what I ought to do and to suffer for him.¹ It would be artificial to work our way mechanically from point one to point six; we should rather use one or another as they attract us. In fact, if our prayer is at all natural, the different facets will interweave one with the other and ‘heart-breaking with Christ heart-broken’, we will quite simply take our stand among those present in faith and love at the crucifixion. Genuine love and faith are potent safeguards against empty emotionalism. We can add to them the frequent reminder of St. Ignatius that we ‘should gain some spiritual profit’ and ask ourselves ‘what we ought to do and to suffer for him’. In fact, all the saint is doing is, from his own prayer-experience, to put in the simplest of words the question that any sincere christian is bound to ask himself as he watches the passion. And anyone who has genuinely used his ‘points’ will know that, for all their seeming attention to method, they have a minimum of artificiality. Nor am I to base my ‘colloquies’ with Our Lord on any fictional condition of soul. I should pray as I am here and now: ‘according as I find myself tempted or consoled, and according as I desire to have one virtue or another . . . finally asking for what I most earnestly desire with regard to any particular matter’.²

Underlying all these directions of St. Ignatius about ‘preludes’ and ‘points’ and ‘colloquies’ – and we are trying to pierce behind what so easily becomes spiritual jargon – lie the two soul-shaking facts of the passion for everyman. Christ, the Son of God, my Creator and Lord, redeemed *me* from my sins and I ought in return to love and serve him and unite my sufferings with his as penance and reparation for my own sins and for those of the world. Here again my imagination will try to play me false; but the wonderful consoling truth is that the love of God is indivisible and the entire passion of Christ is for each single being of the human race and is in no whit lessened for each because it is at the disposal of all. We must learn ‘to recognise the love God has in our regard, to recognise

¹ Exx 194–7.

² Exx 199.

it, and to make it our belief. God is love . . . Yes, we must love God: he gave us his love first'.¹ The Passion will not bear its full fruit in my life until, with God's grace answering my prayer, I really come to believe that Christ 'loved me and gave himself for me'.²

We have already said that this type of more or less active contemplation should lead, according to the mind of St. Ignatius, to a form of prayer which is more passive in character and which, to use a favourite phrase of his, 'prepares and disposes' the soul for mystical prayer. Each day he asks the exercitant to contemplate two mysteries of the passion, then to repeat the contemplations twice and, finally, to make an 'Application of the Senses'.³ And it is normally here that the fruits which have been begged for so earnestly will be obtained; for 'It is not abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the *inward sense and taste of things*'.⁴ The saint hopes that the man who has thoroughly soaked his understanding and imagination in the sufferings of the Son of God will ultimately – with God's grace – 'smell and taste, with the senses of smell and taste, the infinite fragrance and sweetness of the Godhead, of the soul and its virtues, and of all else, according to the person one is contemplating'.⁵ His experience told him, and the experience of so many who have 'made' the Exercises confirm it, that in such circumstances the soul, conditioned to act after the manner of the senses, *intuitively* 'sees' and 'smells' and 'tastes' spiritual truths. Just indeed as in everyday life we say of a man that he 'sees' the truth of a statement or that he has a good 'taste' in music or painting, so in the life of the spirit we may hope to find 'palatable' and 'fragrant' the poverty, suffering and humiliation of Christ which before were 'distasteful' and 'malodorous'. It is after some such manner that the passion will produce its fruit in us, so that the things that were gain for us, the same we will count loss; and that we will come to know 'what it means to share his sufferings, moulded into the pattern of his death, in the hope of achieving resurrection from the dead'.⁶

In conclusion let us face a practical difficulty. Has this method of using the passion as material for prayer any possibility of application in our day-to-day lives? Or is it something that is feasible only for those who, in the sheltered conditions of religious life, can set aside thirty days for systematic meditation? To those questions there is no

¹ Jn 4, 16, 19.

² Gal 2, 20.

³ Exx 294.

⁴ Exx 3 (Italics mine).

⁵ Exx 124.

⁶ Cf. Phil 3, 7–8, 10.

facile answer. The 'little ones' whose suffering Rouault has so terribly and feelingly depicted in his passion masterpiece *Miserere* may 'inwardly feel and taste' the passion of Christ with far more reality than the privileged followers of Benedict or Dominic or Ignatius. The grace of God is his free gift and the Spirit blows where it wills. All we can say is that this machine age so abounds with distractions that contemplation of anything – much less of the passion – seems to be impossible. Cities, driven to distraction by distractions, now try to create zones of silence. Without some such effort on our part to create in our individual lives zones and times of silence and recollection, it is hard to see how we can pray the passion at any depth.

Perhaps St. Ignatius's 'Additions' or brief notes for better contemplating the passion may help a little towards this. Presupposing a morning prayer, he advises that the soul be prepared for it by sowing the matter in the mind the night before and preventing the intrusion of all distracting thoughts from the first moment of waking.¹ Nor, in general, should joyful thoughts be admitted; but 'I should incite myself to grief, pain and heart-rending, bringing frequently to my mind the labours, fatigues and pains of Christ Our Lord'.² And exterior penances should be used with guidance 'in order to seek and find some grace or gift which a person wishes and desires, as for instance if he desires to have inward sorrow for his sins, or to weep much over them or over the pains and griefs that Christ Our Lord endured in his passion'.³ Taken according to the strict letter, these hints may seem beyond us. Adapted however to the exigencies of modern life in general and of our own circumstances in particular, they will richly repay the effort that they demand. St. Ignatius indicates that 'intelligent and cultured' men of busy lives might attempt even the whole Exercises if they could set aside an hour and a half a day.⁴ That may seem an impossible ideal; but perhaps an honest examination of conscience with regard to the use of time might make it more possible of achievement. Lent offers the opportunity. To tackle with sincerity, for instance, our frightening waste of time on what is trivial in reading, cinema, radio and television will provide what is at once a quite real external penance, a psychological preparation of the mind for the contemplation of things worth while and a generous measure of time in which to do it. There are few better ways of 'redeeming the time' than by using it to ponder prayerfully the Redeemer's passion.

¹ Exx 206a.

² Ibid.

³ Exx 87.

⁴ Exx 19.