

ON JESUS CRUCIFIED AND FORSAKEN

Toufic Makhoul

IN DECEMBER 1944, Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, and her first companions were in Italy, the movement was in its infancy, and the Second World War raged on, with its incalculable toll of human suffering, destruction, toil and pain. At a certain point, they asked themselves when in his life Jesus Christ had suffered the most, and ‘a priest said to us that Jesus’ greatest suffering was in the moment he cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”’¹ From that moment on, they decided to choose Jesus crucified and forsaken as the ideal of their lives.

But who and what is Jesus crucified and forsaken, and what does it mean to choose him as our ideal, for everyday people who struggle to make sense of and cope with all of the suffering in the world: the disasters—natural or artificial—struggles, famines and injustices? What can this concept do for us?

Who and What Is Jesus Forsaken?

On the cross Jesus felt himself abandoned by his Father, whom he loved so much and about whom he had said: ‘The Father and I are one’ (John 10:30). Just before he died, Jesus cried: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27:46) How do we make sense of this contradiction?

Writing about Jesus crucified and forsaken is essentially writing a love story between the Son of God and humanity, about the Word of God who incarnated himself, became a fellow human being, took upon himself all of our sins and iniquities, and then ended up, through his abandonment, death and resurrection, by giving his life for all of us,

¹ Chiara Lubich, *The Cry* (New York: New City, 2001), 38. (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.)

past, present and future. It is a never-ending love story, a divine love which calls for our human love in return.

The Church teaches us that within his cry of abandonment, the abandonment of the Son of God by his Father, are contained all of the sufferings of humanity, present, past and future. Pasquale Foresi, a co-founder of Focolare, writes:

There is one moment in the passion in which all the profound meaning of the suffering of Jesus becomes apparent. It is precisely when he cries: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' This is sorrow which gives a particular bitterness to all the sufferings of Jesus on the cross.

St Augustine comments: 'Christ speaks thus, because Christ is in the members of Christ'. On the cross Jesus 'was our voice, because together with him our old self was crucified'.

St Thomas Aquinas remarks that Jesus in that cry spoke 'in the person of sinners who sometimes are forsaken because of their sins'.

For St John of the Cross this cry of abandonment is the supreme moment of the passion, the revelation of the meeting between humanity, united to Jesus, and God. The great mystic explains: 'As for His spirit, it is certain that in His last moments Jesus suffered also the annihilation of the soul, the Father leaving Him without any consolation or comfort, in the deepest aridity of the soul's interior region; so much so that on the cross He bursts into that grief-stricken cry: my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? This was the greatest pain He sensibly experienced in His mortal life. So it was at that very moment He completed the greatest of all His works He ever did in his life, greater than all the miracles and sensational prodigies He performed on earth or in heaven: the work through which He reconciled and united man to God by means of grace.'²

Through his redemptive suffering, Jesus took upon himself everything that separates man from God—all of the evil, suffering and destruction—once and for all. Consequently, in whatever suffering, lack or deprivation, injustice or betrayal we face, we encounter again and again the countenance of Jesus crucified and forsaken, Jesus who is continuously coming towards us and inviting us to recognise him, embrace and love him as our best companion and friend.

² Pasquale Foresi, *Theology of Social Man* (New York and London: New City, 1967), 84–86.

I know all of this is easily written and said, but it reminds me of something that is not at all easy, an evil that has touched me personally: the incalculable human suffering and destruction that took place during the civil war in Lebanon, where I lived until I was thirty years old. So many people were kidnapped, died, lost relatives, friends, houses, limbs, had to flee their burning homes. And the same question came back to haunt us all: why, why, why is all of this happening? If God were really compassionate, if God were love, how could God allow this to happen without



intervening? How can God allow the recurrent famines in Africa; torture and dictatorship in Central and South America and in Africa; all that has happened in the ex-USSR; the Vietnam War and the Boat People—the list is endless. How do we make sense of the deaths of young children with leukaemia, of the sexual abuse of children? How do we understand the present economic crisis that has ruined so many?

Jesus crucified and forsaken is all of this. Jesus has taken upon himself all of the sufferings of humanity, and is present in every difficulty and pain we experience, and in each suffering person we meet in our everyday lives.

What to Do?

What is to be done? Should we stop at a morbid, ineffectual resignation, shrugging our shoulders and saying to ourselves that nothing or very little can be done to alleviate the sufferings of humanity? Or should we rather take advantage of the opportunity that Jesus has chosen to come and meet us with a countenance of forsakenness and suffering, asking us: ‘do you recognise me, do you love me, are you willing to let me into your life, embrace me, and then walk along together with me?’

***A love
story between
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one of us***

Here again, we really can make our lives into a love story between Jesus and each one of us. What do we do when Jesus comes to meet us in suffering, whether our own or another's? We can do our best to accept him, however he chooses to present himself to us: to embrace him without reasoning with pain or rationalising it. Once this initial, important step is made, we must take the next one straight away: to stop focusing only on ourselves, and start loving the next person we meet; to cry with the one who is crying and laugh with the one who is laughing, emptying ourselves to make ourselves one with the other person; or simply to try to do what we perceive to be God's will in the next moment, which could be caring for someone, preparing a meal, writing a letter, driving a car, listening to someone, finishing a task we have started, and so on.

What are the results of embracing Jesus crucified and forsaken in this fashion and then getting on with our lives out of love for him? While physical suffering (illness, pain) might not necessarily disappear, spiritual pain is very much alleviated and often disappears altogether, when we stop focusing on ourselves and start loving the people around us. 'We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death.' (1 John 3:14)

Seeing life from this perspective, if the suffering we meet in our daily life has already been borne by Jesus Christ on the cross, and if we are ready and willing (as much as our human nature allows and enables us) to embrace and accept him under whatever countenance he presents himself, we could end up by having a preferential love for whatever reminds us of Jesus crucified and forsaken in our everyday life. We could prefer to go towards the needy and weak—physically and spiritually—towards anyone who needs and asks for help, comfort and assistance, because in that particular person or group, it is Jesus crucified and forsaken who is presenting himself to us, telling us: 'This is me. Do you recognise me, are you willing to embrace me, love me, help me, and give up your life for me?'

Jesus crucified and forsaken presents himself also in the difficulties we encounter in everyday life, and in the disappointed person, the betrayed, the lonely, the fearful, the unsure, the dismayed, the heart-broken. Are we able to recognise him, call him by name, and then embrace him and love him? To quote Chiara Lubich:

Jesus said: 'To those who love me, I shall manifest myself' (cf. John 14:21). Jesus crucified and forsaken reveals himself in the

concreteness and universality of every face bearing the mark of pain. He presents himself to be loved and embraced in the sufferings of humankind, in every possible situation, even perhaps in the denial of God within large strata of modern society. Sufferings no more cause alarm but become a motive and an invitation to love more intensely, to embrace with prayer and witness each of these faces of Jesus forsaken, in order to make the presence of God felt with love.³

However, accepting and embracing Jesus crucified and forsaken in our lives is not an exercise that just aims at making us feel good about ourselves, at mastering our reactions and behaving like stoics. Love for Jesus forsaken is meant to enable us to reach unity with him, and to work towards unity among men and women, the unity that Jesus prayed for: 'That they may all be one' (John 17:21). Jesus forsaken, and our preferential love for him, are not to be understood only as being the key to our unity with God. Such an interpretation could lead us to live with a self-sufficient and individualistic attitude. Jesus forsaken is the way to unity with our neighbours—whatever their origin, race, colour, nationality, etc. He shows us the way to love them, the way to love one another.

In an earlier article, I wrote about the process of inculturation, as understood through the thought and life of Chiara Lubich.⁴ As my friends and I try to live this concept and put it in practice, we are led, little by little, to understand and experience the fact that no one has gone as far as Jesus forsaken in making himself one with the people he encountered. He made himself one to the extent of giving his life for all of humankind. In other words, as Lubich put it:

We cannot enter the hearts of other persons to comprehend them, to understand them, to share their suffering, if our spirit is rich with a worry, a judgment, a thought ... with anything at all. 'Making ourselves one' demands spirits that are poor, persons who are poor in spirit. Only with people like this is unity possible.⁵

We believe that loving and embracing Jesus forsaken within the all-too-frequent difficulties we experience in human relationships is

³ Chiara Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken* (New York: New City, 1997), 15.

⁴ Toufic Makhoul, 'Making Ourselves One in the Thought and Spirituality of Chiara Lubich', *The Way*, 50/1 (January 2011), 85–94.

⁵ Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, 94.



Christ on the Cross, by Zurbarán

the way to unity with our neighbour. The process of recognising Jesus forsaken in the difficulty, embracing him, and then going ahead and putting in the effort needed to build or rebuild a broken relationship, whenever and each time it has been shattered: this is our response of love to Jesus' love for us—to Jesus who loved us first, when he incarnated himself, lived among us and gave his life for us. Otherwise why would anyone make the effort to rebuild and maintain a relationship at all, be it marital, friendly, brotherly or sisterly?

Consequently, we can see Jesus forsaken as the way to union with God, to unity among men and women, and to a better world. However, in order for our work towards

a better and fairer world not to be an impossible dream, we need to go one more step, like Chiara Lubich, who,

...needed to make an additional discovery in order for unity not be a utopia. This was Jesus crucified and forsaken, who is the author and model of this unity between God and people, and between people.⁶

Christianity in its Essence

However, does all this still make sense and carry some meaning in rich, spiritually exhausted Western societies? We believe it does, more so because the spiritually empty lives that most of us live remind us of Jesus

⁶ Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, 13.

forsaken, who, on the cross, felt himself empty, void, abandoned by heaven and earth. Presenting Jesus under his forsakenness is presenting Christianity in its essence, poor and devoid of material means and riches, without all of the pomp that comes along with cathedrals, works of art and vestments.

Choosing to love and embrace Jesus forsaken in our daily lives takes away our excuse for wanting to avoid difficulties, especially those related to our witness as disciples of Jesus Christ. I have heard many Christians who claim that they love the Church and Jesus Christ very much, but would avoid taking a public stand in favour of the poor, the needy and the afflicted against social injustice, exploitation and so on. Why so? Because these people just do not want to get into trouble. Let us, for a moment, imagine what would have happened if Jesus had chosen to play it safe and avoid trouble during his life on earth

Trying to recognise and embrace Jesus forsaken in the difficult circumstances of our lives is akin to trying to find God in all things, in every single difficulty, suffering and pain in our lives. As Karl Rahner put it so well:

Finding God in all things and experiencing the transparency of things towards God is accomplished only by the person who meets this God at the point where He descended into utter darkness and abandonment: on the cross of Jesus Christ!⁷

We want to love and embrace Jesus forsaken, in order to contribute to a more united world. As Chiara Lubich says:

To love Jesus forsaken in the problems and difficulties of the world, where we discover his face in our own life and in the lives of others, is to contribute to a more united world. To extend his love to all by taking on the burden of their suffering is to establish them in the truth and love of God. To open our hearts to all is to share with them a love that is stronger than death, that offers to all the revelation of a God who is love.⁸

Love Conquers Peacefully

A friend of mine, a family physician, had this experience.

I work as a physician in a government-funded health care centre. In this environment, despite the fact that everyone professes values such as equity,

⁷ Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 271–272.

⁸ Lubich, *Unity and Jesus Forsaken*, 17.

justice, respect etc., there are often conflicts between management and employees.

Early in September 2010 a social worker, who had been a member of our multi-disciplinary team for ten years, was dismissed in what most staff considered to be a disrespectful and unfair way. We met with management and faced a wall of secrecy as to why this colleague had been dismissed.

I saw the dismissed social worker immediately afterwards to comfort her—she called me from a public phone right after being fired. I informed my colleagues of what had happened, and tried to work out with them what could be done to make sure she was treated more fairly.

This is one of a number of similar incidents I have encountered during my work in this clinic over fourteen years. I believe in a united world. I have found at work that if I, like Jesus, keep on loving while facing my apparent adversity in any conflict, I can find special graces and pain is transformed into growth. Unity appears as the fruit of love in painful, stressful situations.

I remembered that, years ago, in a similar case, there had been much dissension among our team members about who would get involved, and about how a particular person would get involved in a particular action. One physician, in particular, had formally dissociated himself from the group out of fear of the repercussions for himself of any action for more justice in our workplace.

However, over the years, the effort at striving for justice, sustained by truly loving behaviour, had transformed our group. Each conflict—even among ourselves—that was resolved with love brought us closer to one another over time. This time I found that our group had become united, much more than I had realised. The doctor who had formally dissociated himself in the past got actively involved in helping us. He wrote a jewel of a letter to the management on our behalf, sharing it and reviewing it with the group.

We have become one 'body', an entity that expresses itself collectively for the betterment of our working environment. New staff members are also welcomed in this body, because love keeps us from closing in on ourselves. This mentality is spreading by osmosis to others, confirming to me that love conquers peacefully.

The latest conflict with the management did not result in our colleague being taken back into her job, but we have been able to provide her with caring support. Our relationship with management is slowly healing, with efforts on both sides to understand one another better and to prevent similar situations from arising in the future.

I realise again how much every hardship embraced with love has made us grow as a group and as individuals up until now. We are far from being perfect, but the way we care for one another makes us stronger and more positive in adversity. We are certainly not actively looking for new trials. But I know that when they occur, I can be sure that something good, if not great, can come out of them. The more I experience the fruits of loving and embracing Jesus forsaken in me and around me, the less I am afraid of life's trials; the more I believe in God's immense love for me.

A Way Forward

Loving and embracing Jesus crucified and forsaken in our daily lives is not a sad story, on the contrary. Let us conclude with a few words of Chiara Lubich:

... suffering has a mysterious task: it can become a way to happiness, to that true and enduring happiness which alone can fill our hearts. It is the same happiness that God enjoys and that we humans, destined to what is absolute, can share already in this life.

Precisely through his suffering, Jesus has given joy to every person: joy here on earth and unending joy in the next life. In the same way, by accepting and offering to him our daily worries and concerns, we obtain happiness for ourselves and for others.⁹

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⁹ Chiara Lubich, *Only at Night We See the Stars* (New York: New City, 2002), 81–82.