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"I give my life to take it up again": The Christian Meaning of Sacrifice (I)

The reason Christians are willing to go against their desires, fast, and make sacrifices for others; the reason they are able to bear suffering with joy, without making too much of it, is that they do not want to leave the Lord alone with the weight of the world's evil and suffering.

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These men are disturbing our city (...). They are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice (Acts 16:20). Paul and Silas' preaching was interrupted by a growing commotion that led first to a public uproar, followed by flogging and imprisonment. This is just one of many episodes in the Acts of the Apostles that illustrates the hostility the preaching of the Gospel provoked from the very beginning. The apostles and the first Christians were repeatedly imprisoned, humiliated, and assaulted. But what stands out the most is the serenity of their response. In this scene, while Paul and Silas' bodies, bruised from the flogging, are locked in a dungeon, still numb, and their minds still reeling from the public humiliation, *around midnight, they were praying*

and singing hymns to God, while the prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:25). Their reaction is similar to that of the apostles in Jerusalem, after an entirely arbitrary flogging: They went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin rejoicing, because they had been considered worthy to suffer disgrace for the Name (Acts 5:41).

The history of Christianity is full of men and women, young and old, who endured suffering with a spiritually profound joy that is, from a human perspective, quite baffling. This attitude would be astonishing at any time, but especially in societies that never knew Christianity or that have lost sight of it. Our contemporaries sometimes express the same amazement we see in a 2nd-century letter to Diognetus: “They [Christians] display an admirable and confessedly striking way of life.” One of the many aspects of the first Christians’ lives that stood

in contrast to the surrounding culture was their approach to pleasure and pain, their reaction to suffering, and their willingness to make sacrifices: “They are put to death, and restored to life. [...] They are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers; and when they are punished with death, they rejoice as if being given life.”^[1] — The way they found life in suffering defied all comprehension. Like the cross of Christ, this way of seeing and living seemed like madness: *a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called — both Jews and Greeks — Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God* (1 Cor 1:23-24).

Challenge and opportunity

The air we breathe in many parts of the world today is thick with hedonism, perhaps even more than it was in the great cities of the Roman Empire. Good is often reduced to what brings pleasure, and evil to what gives pain. Today, too, there are people who adopt a stoic attitude, struggling for greater self-control and resilience in adversity, but their underlying perspective is still centred on pleasure and pain, with little thought for what lies beyond. This outlook arises from a variety of factors: in much of the world, opportunities to live comfortably have multiplied, pleasure and entertainment are always at our fingertips, and pain relief is more effective than ever. These are mostly positive developments, without a doubt, and yet, like any change in the way we experience the world, they affect the way Christian life develops. In this context, the willingness to suffer for Christ or the belief that joy

has its “roots in the shape of the Cross”^[2] may seem shocking or, at the very least, difficult to understand. All of this presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge is that those who want to live close to God in the world are exposed to the same messages as their peers. The prevailing current could lead them, for example, to reinterpret or soften Jesus’ message. At its core, this is the temptation of a kind-hearted Christianity, without the cross. Yet Jesus’ words remain: *If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me; for whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the Gospel will save it (Mk 8:34-35); Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (Jn 12:24)*. Indeed, “a Christianity without a cross is a worldly Christianity, and shows itself

to be sterile.”^[3] — The path to living in Christ and sharing that life with others is through the cross. As with so many other aspects of our faith, here too we encounter a paradox: “to live we must die.”^[4] —

But a hedonistic environment also brings opportunities. Christians’ striking behaviour in such surroundings opens the door to conversations about the reason for their hope (cf. 1 *Pt* 3:15). This is how evangelization advanced in the first centuries: it is as if the contrast with the darkness made the light of Christ shine brighter. Today, when any Christian lives with a spirit of sacrifice, calmly embracing the cross, it is inevitably a challenge to their contemporaries. Their way of experiencing suffering — without drama, without burdening others — is attractive, like Jesus’ patience and gentleness (cf. *Mt* 11:28-30). Sooner or later, it raises questions that lead

to conversations about faith: how is it that Christians endure suffering with such serenity? Why don't they rebel against it? Where does their joy come from? How can they renounce some of the good things in life, if they enjoy them like anyone else? What does all this have to do with the Christian God? What difference does their sacrifice make to the world?

The only answer: Christ

All these questions, which sometimes arise in Christians' hearts too, ultimately have "only one genuine answer, a definitive answer: Christ on the cross."^[5] The reason Christians are willing to go against their desires, fast, and make sacrifices for others; the reason they are able to bear suffering with joy, without making too much of it, is that they know that, in a mysterious but real way, Jesus' passion continues to unfold throughout history. "In the life of the

Church, in her trials and tribulations, Christ continues, in the stark phrase of Pascal, to be in agony until the end of the world.”^[6] —

Jesus “is suffering in his members, in all of humanity spread throughout the earth, whose head and firstborn and redeemer he is.”^[7] — When Christians understand this deeply, it is only natural that they do not want to leave the Lord alone with the weight of the world’s evil and suffering. Their willingness to suffer, then, does not stem from a puritanical moralism that views pleasure with suspicion; nor is it merely an ascetic choice or a stoic approach. It is, in the truest sense, *compassion* (from the Latin *com-passio*, “suffer with”): a perception of the suffering that pierces Jesus’ heart and a desire to accompany Him, to align our hearts with his. As Saint Paul says, *I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am*

filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the Church (Col 1:24).

This is the same desire which Saint Ignatius of Antioch expressed around the year 110, on his way to martyrdom: “Give me the privilege of imitating the passion of my God. If you have him in your heart, you will understand what I wish, and feel as I do.” This saint turned the world’s view of life and death upside down: “Do not hinder me from living; do not wish for my death. Do not grant the world one who wishes to belong to God, nor tempt them with material things.”^[8] Once again, it is the same spirit that led Saint Paul to consider *everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and live in Him (Phil 3:8-9).* If being with Jesus requires

suffering and letting go of good things, we will do so; not because these things are rubbish in themselves, but because to prefer them over Jesus would be like sifting through pearls in a sewer.

Drops of blood

Sacrifice — whether chosen when the Lord asks, or accepted when He allows it, but always loved — is lived in a truly Christian way from the heart of Christ, that is, by *having the same mindset as Him* (Phil 2:5). If we want to “feel with Him,” to enter into that *compassion*, then contemplating the Lord’s passion can be a great help. What does Jesus feel before his cross? Among the many insights that such reflection can offer, we can observe that Christ’s heart naturally recoils at the prospect of pain, yet He freely accepts it as an act of love, with the hope of the resurrection. Jesus gives Himself, confident that

nothing He will suffer will be wasted, that none of his efforts will be in vain; that the cross will be transformed into the tree of life.

Faced with the approaching passion, Jesus sweated blood, a physiological reaction that occurs very rarely, in situations of extreme stress or anguish. Jesus' human heart, in that moment, reveals its perfect sensitivity; He perceives suffering and evil for what they truly are: something repulsive. While this may seem obvious, it is worth remembering that Jesus did not choose suffering and the cross for their own sake; He accepted them voluntarily as the "price of our redemption."^[9] In the struggle of his prayer, Jesus asks his Father: *If it is possible, let this cup pass from me* (Mt 26:39), showing us that it is right to seek to avoid suffering. *Yet not as I will, but as you will*, He adds; because in the light of God's love, it is not only

good to accept the cross but even to embrace it.

If our Lord felt anguish on the eve of his passion (cf. *Mt* 26:37-38), it should not surprise us that our hearts feel something similar when faced with pain or sacrifice. Naturally, this resistance is not only external; sometimes we can feel the scandal of the cross within ourselves. Sin is an open wound in the world and in our nature, a wound so real that it generates a genuine resistance, not only to pain but even to goodness, to love, and to the Kingdom of God.^[10] Liberation from sin does not occur without a painful struggle: in this world, in our lives, goodness does not triumph effortlessly. That is why the love of God, the pure love that can heal wounded love, is mysteriously united to suffering. Saint Teresa of Calcutta understood this well: “Love demands sacrifice. But if we love until it hurts, God will give us his

peace and joy... Suffering in itself is nothing; but suffering shared with Christ's passion is a wonderful gift."^[11] —

In Gethsemane, Jesus felt in his flesh that human resistance to the saving will of the Father. However, although He naturally recoiled from it, Jesus did not suffer the cross against his will; He accepted it voluntarily: *No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (Jn 10:18)*.

The passion and cross were the result of the free rejection of Christ by the authorities of his time, reflecting the human heart's resistance to God's love, a resistance still visible in the recurring martyrdoms throughout the history of the Church, even to this day. Yet Jesus transforms this free decision of his contemporaries into an act of love: *This is my body, given for you (Lk 22:19)*. Jesus knows that this act of self-giving is necessary for love to

become possible again in the world: He must love us to the very end (cf. *Jn* 13:1); He must embrace all our hatred, our indifference, our misery... That embrace began a “loving transformation”^[12] that demands of us a response, a “yes” to the cross. Only in this way can our personal story and the world’s enter into the resurrection with Him.

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^[1] *Epistle to Diognetus*, nos. 5-6.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 28; *Christ is Passing By*, no. 43.

^[3] Pope Francis, Homily, 14-IX-2021.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 187.

^[5] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 168.

^[6] Benedict XVI, Homily, 18-IX-2010. Cf. Pascal, *Pensées*, 553, ed.

Brunschvicg. St. Augustine preached the same thing several centuries before: “Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, the members of his body, have to bear” (Sermon on the Ascension of the Lord, “No one has ever ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven,” on vatican.va).

^[7] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 168.

^[8] St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, chapter 6.

^[9] St. Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 20*, 11,8. Cf. 1 Pt 1:18-19; 1 Co 6:20; Is 53:5.

^[10] Cf. Rm 5:12-17; 8:1-13.

^[11] St. Teresa of Calcutta, qtd. Brian Kolodiejchuk (ed.) *Come Be My Light*, Rider, New York, 2006, pg. 146.

^[12] “‘Greater than your heart’:
Contrition and Reconciliation,” on
opusdei.org.

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