

OF THE DOLOURS OF MARY*

St. Alphonsus Liguori

Mary was the Queen of Martyrs, for her martyrdom was longer and greater than that of all the Martyrs.

Who can ever have a heart so hard that it will not melt on hearing the most lamentable event which once occurred in the world? There was a noble and holy Mother Who had an only Son. This Son was the most amiable that can be imagined—innocent, virtuous, beautiful, Who loved His Mother most tenderly; so much so that He had never caused her the least displeasure, but had ever shown her all respect, obedience, and affection: hence this Mother had placed all her affections on earth in this Son. Hear, then, what happened. This Son, through envy, was falsely accused by His enemies; and though the judge knew, and himself confessed, that He was innocent, yet, that he might not offend His enemies, he condemned Him to the ignominious death that they had demanded. This poor Mother had to suffer the grief of seeing that amiable and beloved Son unjustly snatched from her in the flower of His age by a barbarous death; for, by dint of torments and drained of all His blood, He was made to die on an infamous gibbet in a public place of execution, and this before her own eyes.

Devout souls, what say you? Is not this event, and is not this unhappy Mother worthy of compassion. You already understand of whom I speak. This Son, so cruelly executed, was our loving Redeemer Jesus; and this Mother was the Blessed Virgin Mary; Who, for the love she bore us, was willing to see Him sacrificed to Divine Justice by the barbarity of men. This great torment, then, which Mary endured for us—a torment which was more than a thousand deaths deserves both our compassion and our gratitude. If we can make no other return for so much love, at least let us give a few moments this day to consider the greatness of the sufferings by which Mary became the Queen of martyrs; for the sufferings of her great martyrdom exceeded those of all the martyrs; being, in the first place, the longest in point of duration; and, in the second place, the greatest in point of intensity.

First point. As Jesus is called the King of sorrows and the King of martyrs, because He suffered during, His life more than all other martyrs; so also is Mary with reason called the Queen of martyrs, having merited this title by suffering the most cruel martyrdom possible after that of her Son. Hence, with reason, was she called by Richard of Saint Lawrence, “the Martyr of martyrs”; and of her can the words of Isaias with all truth be said, “He will crown thee with a crown of tribulation;” that is to say, that that suffering itself, which exceeded the suffering of all the other martyrs united, was the crown by which she was shown to be the Queen of martyrs. That Mary was a true martyr cannot be doubted, as Denis the Carthusian, Pelbart, Catharinus, and others prove; for it is an undoubted opinion that suffering sufficient to cause death is martyrdom, even though death does not ensue from it. Saint John the Evangelist is revered as a martyr, though he did not die in the caldron of boiling oil, but he came out more vigorous than he went in. Saint Thomas says, “that to have the glory of martyrdom, it is sufficient to exercise obedience in its highest degree, that is to say, to be obedient unto death.” “Mary was a martyr,” says Saint Bernard, “not by the sword of the executioner, but by bitter sorrow of heart.” If her body was not wounded by the hand of the executioner, her blessed heart was transfixed by a sword of grief at the passion of her Son; grief which was sufficient to have caused her death, not once, but a thousand times. From this we shall see that Mary was not only a real martyr, but that her martyrdom surpassed all others; for it was longer than that of all others, and her whole life may be said to have been a prolonged death.

“The passion of Jesus,” as Saint Bernard says, “commenced with His birth”. So also did Mary, in all things like unto her Son, endure her martyrdom throughout her life. Amongst other significations of the name of Mary, as Blessed Albert the Great asserts, is that of “a bitter sea.”⁹ Hence to her is applicable the text of Jeremias : “great as the sea is thy destruction.” For as the sea is all bitter and salt, so also was the life of Mary always full of bitterness at the sight of the passion of the Redeemer, which was ever present to her mind. “There can be no doubt, that, enlightened by the Holy Ghost in a far higher degree than all the prophets, she, far better than they, understood the predictions recorded by them in the sacred Scriptures concerning the Messias.” This is precisely what the angel revealed to St. Bridget; and he also added, ‘that the Blessed Virgin, even before she became His Mother, knowing how much the

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Incarnate Word was to suffer for the salvation of men, and compassionating this innocent Saviour, who was to be so cruelly put to death for crimes not His own, even then began her great martyrdom.”

Her grief was immeasurably increased when she became the Mother of this Saviour; so that at the sad sight of the many torments which were to be endured by her poor Son, she indeed suffered a long martyrdom, a martyrdom which lasted her whole life. This was signified with great exactitude to Saint Bridget in a vision which she had in Rome, in the church of Saint Mary Major, where the Blessed Virgin with Saint Simeon, and an angel bearing a very long sword, reddened with blood, appeared to her, denoting thereby the long, and bitter grief which transpierced the heart of Mary during her whole life. When the above named Rupert supposes Mary thus speaking: ‘Redeemed souls, and my beloved children, do not pity me only for the hour in which I beheld my dear Jesus expiring before my eyes; for the sword of sorrow predicted by Simeon pierced my soul during the whole of my life: when I was giving suck to my Son, when I was warming Him in my arms, I already foresaw the bitter death that awaited Him. Consider, then, what long and bitter sorrows I must have endured.’”

Wherefore Mary might well say, in the words of David, “My life is wasted with grief, and my years in sighs.” “My sorrow is continually before me.” “My whole life was spent in sorrow and in tears; for my sorrow, which was compassion for my beloved Son, never departed from before my eyes, as I always foresaw the sufferings and death which He was one day to endure.” The Divine Mother herself revealed to Saint Bridget, that “even after the death and ascension of her Son, whether she ate, or worked, the remembrance of His passion was ever deeply impressed on her mind, and fresh in her tender heart”. Hence Tauler says, “that the most Blessed Virgin spent her whole life in continual sorrow;” for her heart was always occupied with sadness and with suffering.

Therefore time, which usually mitigates the sorrows of the afflicted, did not relieve Mary; nay, even it increased her sorrow; for, as Jesus, on the one hand, advanced in age, and always appeared more and more beautiful and amiable; so also, on the other hand, the time of His death always drew nearer, and grief always increased in the heart of Mary, at the thought of having to lose Him on earth. So that, in the words addressed by the angel to Saint Bridget: “As the rose grows up amongst thorns, so the Mother of God advanced in years in the midst of sufferings; and as the thorns increase with the growth of the rose, so also did the thorns of her sorrows increase in Mary, the chosen rose of the Lord, as she advanced in age; and so much the more deeply did they pierce her heart. Having now considered the tenth of this sorrow in point of duration, let us pass to the second point-its greatness in point of intensity.

Second point. Ah, Mary was not only Queen of martyrs because her martyrdom was longer than that of all others, but also because it was the greatest of all martyrdoms. Who, however, can measure its greatness? Jeremias seems unable to find any one with whom he can compare this Mother of Sorrows, when he considers her great sufferings at the death of her Son. “To what shall I compare thee or to what shall I liken thee, O daughter of Jerusalem “... for great as the sea is thy destruction: who shall heal thee?” Wherefore Cardinal Hugo, in a commentary on these words, says, “O Blessed Virgin, as the sea in bitterness exceeds all other bitterness, so does thy grief exceed all other grief. Hence Saint Anselm asserts, that “had not God by a special miracle preserved the life of Mary in each moment of her life, her grief was such that it would have caused her death. Saint Bernardine of Siena goes so far as to say, “that the grief of Mary was so great that, were it divided amongst all men, it would suffice to cause their immediate death.

But let us consider the reasons for which Mary’s martyrdom was greater than that of all martyrs. In the first place, we must remember that the martyrs endured their torments, which were the effect of fire and other material agencies, in their bodies; Mary suffered hers in her soul, as Saint Simeon foretold: “And my own soul a sword shall pierce.” As if the holy old man had said: “O most sacred Virgin, the bodies of other martyrs will be torn with iron, but thou wilt be transfixed, and martyred in thy soul by the Passion of thine own Son.” Now, as the soul is more noble than the body, so much greater were Mary’s sufferings than those of all the martyrs, as Jesus Christ Himself said to Saint Catherine of Siena: “Between the sufferings of the soul and those of the body there is no comparisons.” Whence the holy Abbot Arnold of Chartres says, “that whoever had been present on Mount Calvary, to witness the great sacrifice of the Immaculate Lamb, would there have beheld two great altars, the one in the body of Jesus, the other in the heart of Mary; for, on that mount, at the same time that the Son sacrificed His body by death, Mary sacrificed her soul by compassion.”

Moreover, says Saint Antoninus, “while other martyrs suffered by sacrificing their own lives, the Blessed Virgin

suffered by sacrificing her Son's life, a life that she loved far more than her own; so that she not only suffered in her soul all that her Son endured in His body, but moreover the sight of her Son's torments brought more grief to her heart than if she had endured them all in her own person. No one can doubt that Mary suffered in her heart all the outrages which she saw inflicted on her beloved Jesus. Any one can understand that the sufferings of children are also those of their mothers who witness them. Saint Augustine, considering the anguish endured by the mother of the Maccabees in witnessing the tortures of her sons, says, "she, seeing their sufferings, suffered in each one; because she loved them all, she endured in her soul what they endured in their flesh." Thus also did Mary suffer all those torments, scourges, thorns, nails, and the cross, which tortured the innocent flesh of Jesus, all entered at the same time into the heart of this Blessed Virgin, to complete her martyrdom. "He suffered in "the flesh, and she in her heart," writes that Blessed Amadeus. "So much so," says Saint Lawrence Justinian, "that the heart of Mary became, as it were, a mirror of the Passion of the Son, in which might be seen, faithfully reflected, the spitting, the blows and wounds, and all that Jesus suffered." Saint Bonaventure also remarks that "those wounds—which were scattered over the body of our Lord were all united in the single heart of Mary."

Thus was our Blessed Lady, through the compassion of her loving heart for her Son, scourged, crowned with thorns, insulted, and nailed to the cross. Whence the same Saint, considering Mary on Mount Calvary, present at the death of her Son, questions her in these words: "O Lady, tell me where didst thou stand? Was it only at the foot of the cross? Ah, much more than this, thou wast on the cross itself, crucified with thy Son." Richard of Saint Lawrence, on the words of the Redeemer, spoken by Isaias the prophet, "I have trodden the wine-press alone, and of the Gentiles there is not a man with me," says, "It is true, O Lord, that in the work of human redemption Thou didst suffer alone, and that there was not a man who sufficiently pitied Thee; but there was a woman with Thee, and she was Thine own Mother; she suffered in her heart all that Thou didst endure in Thy body."

But all this is saying too little of Mary's sorrows, since, as I have already observed, she suffered more in witnessing the sufferings of her beloved Jesus than if she had herself endured all the outrages and death of her Son. Erasmus, speaking of parents in general, says, that "they are more cruelly tormented by their children's sufferings than by their own." This is not always true, but in Mary it evidently was so; for it is certain that she loved her Son and His life beyond all comparison more than herself or a thousand lives of her own. Therefore Blessed Amadeus rightly affirms, that "the afflicted Mother, at the sorrowful sight of the torments of her beloved Jesus, suffered far more than she would have done had she herself endured His whole Passion." The reason is evident, for, as Saint Bernard says, "the soul is more where it loves than where it lives." Our Lord Himself had already said the same thing: "where our treasure is, there also is our heart." If Mary, then, by love, lived more in her Son than in herself, she must have endured far greater torments in the sufferings and death of her Son than she would have done, had the most cruel death in the world been inflicted upon her.

Here we must reflect on another circumstance which rendered the martyrdom of Mary beyond all comparison greater than the torments of all the martyrs: it is that in the Passion of Jesus she suffered much, and she suffered, moreover, without the least alleviation. The martyrs suffered under the torments inflicted on them by tyrants; but the love of Jesus rendered their pains sweet and agreeable. A Saint Vincent was tortured on a rack, torn with pincers, burnt with red-hot iron plates; but, as Saint Augustine remarks, "it seemed as if it was one who suffered, and another who spoke." The Saint addressed the tyrant with such energy and contempt for his torments, that it seemed as if one Vincent suffered and another spoke; so greatly did God strengthen him with the sweetness of His love in the midst of all she endured. A Saint Boniface had his body torn with iron hooks; sharp-pointed reeds were thrust between his nails and flesh; melted lead was poured into his mouth; and in the midst of all he could not tire saying "I give Thee thanks, O Lord Jesus Christ." A Saint Mark and a Saint Marcellinus were bound to a stake, their feet pierced with nails; and when the tyrant addressed them, saying, "Wretches, see to what a state you are reduced; save yourselves from these torments," they answered: "Of what pains, of what torments dost thou speak? We never enjoyed so luxurious a banquet as in the present moment, in which we joyfully suffer for the love of Jesus Christ." A Saint Lawrence suffered; but when roasting on the gridiron, "the interior flame of love," says Saint Leo, "was more powerful in consoling his soul than the flame without in torturing his body." Hence love tendered him so courageous that he mocked the tyrant, saying, "If thou desirest to feed on my flesh, a part is sufficiently roasted; turn it, and eat." But

how, in the midst of so many torments, in that prolonged death, could the Saint thus rejoice? “Ah!” replies Saint Augustine, “inebriated with the wine of Divine love, he felt neither torments nor death.”

So that the more the holy martyrs loved Jesus, the less did they feel their torments and death; and the sight alone of the sufferings of a crucified God was sufficient to console them. But was our suffering Mother also consoled by love for her Son, and the sight of His torments? Ah, no; for this very Son who suffered was the whole cause of them, and the love she bore Him was her only and most cruel executioner; for Mary’s whole martyrdom consisted in beholding and pitying her innocent and beloved Son, who suffered so much. Hence, the greater was her love for Him, the more bitter and inconsolable was her grief. “Great as the sea is thy destruction; who shall heal thee?” Ah, Queen of Heaven, love hath mitigated the sufferings of other martyrs, and healed their wounds; but who hath ever soothed thy bitter grief? Who hath ever healed the too cruel wounds of thy heart “Who shall heal thee,” since that very Son who could give thee consolation was, by His sufferings, the only cause of thine, and the love which thou didst bear Him was the whole ingredient of thy martyrdom. So that, as other martyrs, as Diez remarks, are all represented with the instruments of their sufferings—a Saint Paul with a sword, a Saint Andrew with a cross, a Saint Lawrence with a gridiron—Mary is represented with her dead Son in her arms; for Jesus Himself, and He alone, was the instrument of her martyrdom, by reason of the love she bore Him. Richard of Saint Victor confirms in a few words all that I have now said: “In other martyrs, the greatness of their love soothed the pains of their martyrdom; but in the Blessed Virgin, the greater was her love, the greater were her sufferings, the more cruel was her martyrdom.”

It is certain that the more we love a thing, the greater is the pain we feel in losing it. We are more afflicted at the loss of a brother than at that of a beast of burden; we are more grieved at the loss of a son than at that of a friend. Now, Cornelius à Lapidè says, “that to understand the greatness of Mary’s grief at the death of her Son, we must understand the greatness of the love she bore Him.” But who can ever measure that love? Blessed Amadeus says that “in the heart of Mary were united two kinds of love for her Jesus—supernatural love, by which she loved Him as her God, and natural love, by which she loved Him as her Son.” So that these two loves became one; but so immense a love, that William of Paris even says that the Blessed Virgin “loved Him as much as it was possible for a pure creature to love Him.” Hence Richard of Saint Victor affirms that “as there was no love like her love, so there was no sorrow like her sorrow.” And if the love of Mary towards her Son was immense, immense also must have been her grief in losing Him by death. “Where there is the greatest love,” says Blessed Albert the Great, “there also is the greatest grief.”

Let us now imagine to ourselves the Divine Mother standing—near her Son expiring on the cross, and justly applying to herself the words of Jeremias, thus addressing us: “O all ye that pass by the way attend, and see if there be any sorrow like to my sorrow.” O you who spend your lives upon earth, and pity me not, stop awhile to look at me, now that I behold this beloved Son dying before my eyes; and then see if, amongst all those who are afflicted and tormented, a sorrow is to be found like unto my sorrow. “No, O most suffering of all mothers,” replies Saint Bonaventure, “no more bitter grief than thine can be found; for no son more dear than thine can be found.” Ah, “there never was a more amiable son in the world than Jesus,” says Richard of Saint Lawrence; “nor has there ever been a mother who more tenderly loved her son than Mary! But since there never has been in the world a love like unto Mary’s love, how can any sorrow be found like unto Mary’s sorrow?”

Therefore Saint Ildephonsus did not hesitate to assert, “to say that Mary’s sorrows were greater than all the torments of the martyrs united, was to say too little.” And Saint Anselm adds, that “the most cruel tortures inflicted on the holy martyrs were trifling, or as nothing in comparison with the martyrdom of Mary.” Saint Basil of Seleucia also writes, “that as the sun exceeds all the other planets in splendour, so did Mary’s sufferings exceed those of all the other martyrs.” A learned author concludes with a beautiful sentiment. He says that so great was the sorrow of this tender Mother in the Passion of Jesus, that she alone compassionated in a degree by any means adequate to its merits the death of a God made man.

But here Saint Bonaventure, addressing this Blessed Virgin, says, “And why, O Lady, didst thou also go to sacrifice thyself on Calvary? Was not a crucified God sufficient to redeem us, that thou, His Mother, wouldst also go to be crucified with Him?” Indeed, the death of Jesus was more than enough to save the world, and an infinity of worlds; but this good Mother, for the love she bore us, wished also to help the cause of our salvation with the merits of her sufferings, which she offered for us on Calvary. Therefore, Blessed Albert the Great says, “that as we are under

great obligations to Jesus for His Passion endured for our love, so also are we under great obligations to Mary, for the martyrdom which she voluntarily suffered for our salvation in the death of her Son." I say voluntarily, since, as Saint Agnes revealed to Saint Bridget, "our compassionate and benign Mother was satisfied rather to endure any torment than that our souls should not be redeemed, and be left in their former state of perdition." And, indeed, we may say that Mary's only relief in the midst of her great sorrow in the Passion of her Son, was to see the lost world redeemed by His death, and men who were His enemies reconciled with God. While grieving she rejoiced," says Simon of Cassia, that a sacrifice was offered for the redemption of all, by which He who was angry was appeased."

So great a love on the part of Mary deserves our gratitude, and that gratitude should be shown by at least meditating upon and pitying her in her sorrow. But she complained to Saint Bridget that very few did so, and that the greater part of the world lived in forgetfulness of them: "I look around at all who are on earth, to see if by chance there are any who pity me, and meditate upon my sorrows; and I find that there are very few. Therefore, my daughter, though I am forgotten by many, at least do thou not forget me; consider my anguish, and imitate, as far as thou canst, my grief." To understand how pleasing it is to the Blessed Virgin that we should remember her dolours, we need only know that, in the year 1239, she appeared to seven devout clients of hers (who were afterwards founders of the religious order of the Servants of Mary), with a black garment in her hand, and desired them, if they wished to please her, often to meditate on her sorrows: for this purpose, and to remind them of her sorrows) she expressed her desire that in future they should wear that mourning dress. Jesus Christ Himself revealed to the Blessed Veronica da Binasco, that He is, as it were, more pleased in seeing His Mother compassionated than Himself; for thus He addressed her: "My daughter, tears shed for My Passion are dear to Me; but as I love My Mother Mary with an immense love, the meditation of the torments which she endured at My death is even more agreeable to Me."

Wherefore the graces promised by Jesus to those who are devoted to the dolours of Mary are very great. Pelbert relates that it was revealed to Saint Elizabeth, that after the assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven, Saint John the Evangelist desired to see her again. The favour was granted him; his dear Mother appeared to him, and with her Jesus Christ also appeared; the Saint then heard Mary ask her Son to grant some special grace to all those who are devoted to her dolours. Jesus promised her four principal ones: First, that those who before death invoke the Divine Mother in the name of her sorrows should obtain true repentance of all their sins. Second, that He would protect all who have this devotion in their tribulations, and that He would protect them especially at the hour of death. Third, that He would impress upon their minds the remembrance of His Passion, and that they should have their reward for it in heaven. Fourth, that He would commit such devout clients to the hands of Mary, with the power to dispose of them in whatever manner she might please, and to obtain for them all the graces she might desire. In proof of this, let us see, in the following example, how greatly devotion to the dolours of Mary aids in obtaining eternal salvation.

EXAMPLE

In the revelations of Saint Bridget we read that there was a rich man, as noble by birth as he was vile and sinful in his habits. He had given himself, by an express compact, as a slave to the devil; and for sixty successive years had served him, leading such a life as may be imagined, and never approaching the sacraments. Now this prince was dying; and Jesus Christ, to show him mercy, commanded Saint Bridget to tell her confessor to go and visit him, and exhort him to confess his sins. The confessor went, and the sick man said that he did not require confession, as he had often approached the sacrament of penance. The priest went a second time; but this poor slave of hell persevered in his obstinate determination not to confess. Jesus again told the Saint to desire the confessor to return. He did so; and on this third occasion told the sick man the revelation made to the Saint, and that he had returned so many times because Our Lord, who wished to show him mercy, had so ordered. On hearing this the dying man was touched, and began to weep: "But how," he exclaimed, "can I be saved; I, who for sixty years have served the devil as his slave, and have my soul burdened with innumerable sins?" "My son," answered the father, encouraging him, "doubt not; if you repent of them, on the part of God I promise you pardon." Then, gaining confidence, he said to the confessor, "Father, I looked upon myself as lost, and already despaired of salvation; but now I feel a sorrow for my sins, which gives me confidence; and since God has not yet abandoned me, I will make my confession." In fact he made his confession four times on that day, with the greatest marks of sorrow, and on the following morning received the holy communion. On

the sixth day, contrite and resigned, he died. After his death, Jesus Christ again spoke to Saint Bridget, and told her that that sinner was saved; that he was then in purgatory, and that he owed his salvation to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin His Mother; for the deceased, although he had led so wicked a life, had nevertheless always preserved devotion to her dolours, and whenever he thought of them, pitied her.

PRAYER

O my afflicted Mother! Queen of martyrs and of sorrows, thou didst so bitterly weep over thy Son, who died for my salvation; but what will thy tears avail me if I am lost? By the merit, then, of thy sorrows, obtain me true contrition for my sins, and a real amendment of life, together with constant and tender compassion for the sufferings of Jesus and thy dolours. And if Jesus and thou, being so innocent, have suffered so much for love of me, obtain that at least I, who am deserving of hell, may suffer something for your love. "O Lady," will I say with St. Bonaventure, "if I have offended thee, in justice wound my heart; if I have served thee, I now ask wounds for my reward. It is shameful to me to see my Lord Jesus wounded, and thee wounded with Him, and myself without a wound." In fine, O my Mother, by the grief thou didst experience in seeing thy Son bow down His head and expire on the cross in the midst of so many torments, I beseech thee to obtain me a good death. Ah, cease not, O advocate of sinners, to assist my afflicted soul in the midst of the combats in which it will have to engage on its great passage from time to eternity. And as it is probable that I may then have lost my speech, and strength to invoke thy name and that of Jesus, who are all my hope, I do so now; I invoke thy Son and thee to succour me in that last moment; and I say, Jesus and Mary, to you I commend my soul. Amen.
