



Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem ©
* Knights of Malta *

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Chancellor's Update

Calvary Revisited

During the season of Lent Catholics perform various acts of penance, mortification and piety as they seek to review and renew their lives. To be fruitful this review of one's life should be done in the spirit of the beatitudes, where one weeps over one's sins. As the process continues, the Lenten season moves on to its high point on Good Friday. At that point the penitent should place himself on Calvary for the most important event in human history.

The background for this event should take one back to the dawn of history, when God created man, who was endowed with a beautiful nature and with preternatural and supernatural gifts. Then one should remember the most tragic event in the history of mankind, namely the disobedience of our first parents, which caused the sin of Adam with its consequent loss of the preternatural and supernatural gifts. What made matters worse was that this was not just a personal loss for Adam. Rather this loss extended to all succeeding generations of Adam. The gates of heaven with the promise of future eternal happiness were closed to all human beings. The chasm was so great that no act or series of acts on the part of humanity could bridge the gap.

However, God in His infinite mercy offered man a second chance, a glimmer of hope. God cursed the serpent, the instigator, but promised man that at some time in the future He would send someone who would bridge the gap. After centuries of prophecy about who this someone would be, the day had finally arrived: Good Friday on Mount Calvary. As the Fathers at the Council of Trent emphasized, "The fact that He suffered death precisely on the wood of the cross must also be attributed to a particular counsel of God, which decreed that life should return by the way whence death had arisen. The serpent who had triumphed over our first parents by the wood (of a tree) was vanquished by Christ on the wood of the cross."

Standing at the foot of the cross, the penitent should remember the words of the Council Fathers as recorded in the Catechism of the Council of Trent. "It was the peculiar privilege of Christ the Lord to have died when He Himself decreed to die, and to have died not so much by external violence as by internal assent. Not only His death, but also its time and place, were ordained by Him. For thus Isaias wrote: *He was offered because it was his own will Isaias liii. 7*). The Lord before His Passion, declared the same of Himself: *I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No man taketh it away from me: but I lay it down of myself and I have power to lay it down: and I have power to take it again (John x.17, 18)*...He therefore offered Himself not involuntarily or by compulsion but of His own free will. Going to meet His enemies He said: *I am he (John xviii. 5)*; and all the punishments which injustice and cruelty inflicted on Him he endured voluntarily.

"When we meditate on the sufferings and all the torments of the Redeemer, nothing is better calculated to stir our souls than the thought that He endured them thus voluntarily. Were anyone to endure all kinds of suffering for our sake, not because he chose them but simply because he could not escape them, we should not consider this a very great favor; but were he to endure death freely, and for our sake only, having had it in his power to avoid it, this indeed would be a benefit so overwhelming as to deprive even the most grateful heart, not only of the power of returning but even of feeling due thanks. We may

hence form an idea of the transcendent and intense love of Jesus Christ towards us, and of His divine and boundless claims to our gratitude."

By this act of love Jesus had bridged the gap and had reopened the gates of heaven to us. For this we must be forever grateful and this should be our thought as we place ourselves near the cross on Calvary. We should also remember that the Church teaches us that the sacrifice of the Mass is the same sacrifice as the sacrifice of the cross because the victim, Christ is the same and the priest, Christ is the same. By saying *This is my body*, the priest at Mass acts in the person of Christ. Thus, every time we attend Mass, we are there at Calvary, the great act of redemption.

Father Walter Cizek, S. J., who spent over two decades in the Soviet Union, provides us with a description that may help to expand our understanding of our participation at Calvary. "Sometimes I think that those who have never been deprived of an opportunity to say or hear Mass do not really appreciate what a treasure the Mass is. I know, in any event what it came to mean to me and the other priests I met in the Soviet Union; I know the sacrifices we made and the risks we ran in order just to have a chance to say or hear Mass... I have seen priests and prisoners deprive their bodies of needed sleep in order to get up before the rising bell for a secret Mass in a quiet barrack, while everyone else clung to those precious extra moments of sleep. In some ways, we led a catacomb existence with our Masses. We would be severely punished if we were discovered saying Mass, and there were always informers. But the Mass to us was always worth the danger and the sacrifice; we treasured it, we looked forward to it, we would do almost anything in order to say or attend a Mass...

"In small groups the prisoners would shuffle into the assigned place, and there the priest would say Mass in his working clothes, unwashed, disheveled, bundled up against the cold. We said Mass in drafty storage shacks, or huddled in mud and slush in the corner of a building site foundation of an underground. The intensity of devotion of both priests and prisoners made up for everything; there were no altars, candles, bells, flowers, music, snow-white linens, stained glass or the warmth that even the simplest parish church could offer. Yet in those primitive conditions, the Mass brought you closer to God than anyone might conceivably imagine. The realization of what was happening on the board, box or stone used in place of an altar penetrated deep into the soul. Distractions caused by the fear of discovery, which accompanied each saying of the Mass under such conditions, took nothing away from the effect that the tiny bit of bread and few drops of consecrated wine produced upon the soul...

"Just the thought of having celebrated Mass here, in this spot, made my journey to the Soviet Union (this Godless country) and the sufferings I endured seem totally worthwhile and necessary. No other inspiration could have deepened my faith more, could have given me spiritual courage in greater abundance, than the privilege of saying Mass for these poorest and most deprived members of Christ the Good Shepherd's flock. I was occasionally overcome with emotion for a moment as I thought of how he had found a way to follow and to feed these lost and straying sheep in this most desolate land...

"Life in the labor camps was Calvary for these men in many ways every day; there was nothing I would not do to offer the sacrifice of Calvary again for them each day in the Mass." (He Leadeth Me) As we consider the meaning of Calvary to ourselves and all mankind we pray for a deeper appreciation of this salvific event in addition we pray for those who are unaware of this great treasure and finally we pray for those who like those in the gulags of the Soviet Union even today offer or participate in the Mass in spite of great personal danger.

So, with deep humility and sincere gratitude, we pray: **We adore Thee, O Christ, and we praise Thee because by Thy holy cross Thou hast redeemed the world!**

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