

Fr. Matta El-Meskeen

The Passion of Jesus Christ in our Life



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The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius

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"The Passion of Jesus Christ in our Life"

Father Matta El-Meskeen

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The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius

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PASSION WEEK & A NEW VISION OF SUFFERING

Passion Week or Paschal Week

Pascha is the word for Passover, derived from the rite of the Paschal Lamb, by whose blood the destroying angel passed over by the houses and harmed them not. Passover Week is not merely a week of fruitless suffering, but on the contrary of Passover suffering, Paschal suffering—the power, light and glare of which we derive from the blood of the Lamb slaughtered on the cross. Therefore, we are to undergo together a Passion Week. However, to pass-over with the power of the blood of Jesus means that we pass over—by suffering—from one life to another, from one faith to another.

It must needs be an immortal Passion Week, that which we celebrate this year, whereby we may attain a more vigorous life. We shall frequently hear how the Lord revealed to His disciples the secret plan of love, which He had deliberately decided to implement upon Himself as a vent for a silent and suppressed love.

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the Gentiles to be killed.” The disciples were sorry to hear this, and some of them denounced such a plan. They could not perceive its greatness. But how about you, Brethren, who have beheld the greatness of salvation and love which is the outcome of such a blessed plan; the plan of ascending to Jerusalem where the Son of man

were to be arrested, insulted and then killed? Who is it that hears of this divine mystery—the mystery of absolute surrender to the Father—and does not wish to fulfill it, tracking the Lord on the way to Golgotha?

For if at the outset it is but suffering and woe, at the Resurrection it is joy, vigor and Ascension into heaven. Who would then shrink from passing over the Week of Paschal suffering with the Savior? Who would ever recede, deeming it too much a price for such a great salvation? It is a 100% successful scheme; let us then carry it out together in love and faith, every one according to his ability.

Let us walk together along the way to Calvary, fulfilling the Passion Week of the Passover. Let us promise (each within his heart) to tread that path. For each one there exists his own journey, his own suffering and his own love. Yet let us all pass-over and none drop out on the way; like a single row whose lintels have been smeared with the blood of the same Lamb. It is a holy unction by Spirit and power. The Passover is what we have been longing for throughout our lives; a Passover from the eyes of the destroying angel; a Passover from the darkness and folly of sin, from sitting by the fleshpots of lust, from the bondage and humiliation of Pharaoh, into light, into salvation, into emancipation by the blood of Christ.

How glorious a Paschal Week it is—that in which we attain such a Passover. Henceforth let us turn it into suffering for the sake of love, deliberate as it is, in which we soak our bread and wet our pillows with tears, giving no slumber to our eyelids, till we pass-over the valley of the shadow of death, so that Christ in His Resurrection may shine upon us. He has set his face toward Jerusalem, completely resolved to carry out the plan. He exposed His face to ignominy, and His back to whips. He never hesitated in proceeding further on, even unto slaughter.

He has thus opened for us the gate and laid down the plan; as for us, there remains nothing but to follow.

* * *

A New Vision of Suffering

After Christ had proved His supreme authority over death at the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and after Mary's anointing Him with precious ointment, which He considered as an act of real enshrouding—i.e., the unction of the body in preparation for death—Christ marched forward to the cross in order to fulfill the Gospel, and to actualize all His precepts and works by facing suffering and voluntary death.

However, let us not overlook here how the Lord began His seven wonders, and how He concluded them (according to the Gospel of John); for they are most strongly linked together.

We know that first among the signs which Jesus did took place in the house of those who loved Him, and amid people who were apt to believe in Him. This took place in the wedding of Cana of Galilee, where he changed water into good wine, in answer to a request by Virgin Mary, His mother.

Finally, we are also in the house of beloved people: Lazarus, Mary and Martha, who were most firm among those who believed in Him. Upon the pleading of Mary, the sister of Lazarus, He restores life back to him. It is here that He manifested His glory, as is recorded in the Gospel. In the first miracle His only objection to the Virgin's pleading, was that His hour had not yet come. But now, after three years or more, the hour has come, leaving no room for any objection whatsoever against performing miracles. It is here also that the Gospel records for us that He revealed His glory. And this is always the case; for Christ finds in none other than those who believe in Him the most appropriate chances to perform His signs and manifest His glory.

Right after changing water into wine, Jesus began teaching on the spot; how to change man himself by a new birth from above, from heaven. of water and the Spirit, initiating him into a new eternal

life. This Nicodemus could hardly grasp. Similarly, in raising Lazarus from the dead, He performed a conspicuous sign of His ability to raise the dead, or in other words to effect total conversion. It is here that the difficulty reached its climax to rejectors as well. So much was their unbelief that they conspired at the moment to kill both Lazarus and Jesus.

Thus did the pangs of death start quite early before the cross; yet what a paradox! For the Passion of the Lord began at once, when He openly revealed His real identity. He entered Jerusalem as the King of Israel, and Owner of the Temple, or, according to the prophecies, He who "will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3:1); further on the prophecies add, "But who can endure the day of his coming?" (Mal. 3:2).

Indeed the chief priests and all teachers of the Law, together with the guardians of holy things and of teaching, could not bear such a spectacle! Not that He entered Jerusalem and the Temple in such glory, but, quite to the contrary, that He came meekly and humbly on an ass—disappointing as this is to their expectations.

It is by absolute rejection, humiliation and extreme hatred that His Passion began; for He came meekly and humbly, which was incompatible with the dreams of Israel. Thus has Christ entered from the narrow way. In Him was the prophecy fulfilled, "One abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers" (Is. 49:7).

Thus begins the way of the cross, right now, for those who cling to truth. It is here that this ever-hateful paradox to the authorities appears; viz. the intolerance of hearing the truth from a weakling's mouth.

Henceforth, the Coptic Church has most wisely set forth Sunday as the beginning of Passion Week, when on that particular day the honor and welcome paid to Jesus reached their zenith, when the Church cries out "Hosana (save us) in the Highest, King of Israel. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." However, in the meantime, the Church starts chanting its Psalms in their plaintive tunes, and sings

the Gospel in a most pathetic melody that writhes one's heart, while the traces of the Oblation is still there on the altar.

Quite amazing! Yet this is the concept of Christ, nay, of the Gospel as the Church is aware of it; a paradox beyond Reason, wherein extreme despondency and grief merge together with utmost joy and hope! For the Church is aware that rejecting Christ by the chief priests, inflicting harm upon Him, insulting Him, crushing Him on the cross, these very things created ineffable and exalted joy for eternal salvation.

ACCEPTABLE SUFFERING:

Perhaps the deepest thing fathomed by the Christian in conceiving the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ is that the Cross, to Christ, was a voluntary and acceptable act: "Shall I not drink the cup that my Father has given me?" Even more so, for Suffering and Crucifixion were not merely voluntary or acceptable, but had become an aim and end in themselves which Christ came to fulfill: "For this purpose I have come to this hour."

This induces us as Christians to interpret suffering simultaneously thus: that the Christian, who truly believes in the Cross, should not abuse his freedom so as to shun it; for the Christian who has fathomed the depth and mysteries of the Cross conceives suffering as part and parcel of his faith—or even a portion of his own which he cherishes and is happy to fulfill, and a goal for which he strikes out fearlessly!

In ecclesiastical tradition, it is stated that when Nero pronounced the sentence of death against Peter by crucifixion, when he declared his faith in the crucified God, Peter was sorely afraid. He dodged the guards and fled. The Lord then appeared to him in a vision and asked him, "Where are you going Peter? Would you like me to go and be crucified for you once again?" Peter then was extremely ashamed. He then suffered bitterly; how could he do such a shameful deed and betray the Cross of his Master? He then returned on the spot and surrendered himself to his executioners.

Hence, tradition here adds to our faith an element of extreme importance: that he who evades his cup and portion of suffering, is but depriving himself of his portion in the Suffering of Christ. It is as if he needs Christ to be crucified for him anew!

THE LOVING HAND PRESENTING THE CUP OF SUFFERING:

The eyes of Christ never failed to recognize the hand presenting Him with the cup of suffering. For Christ never paid attention to the evil hands bearing the hammer and the nail. Nor did He mind the gruff and spiteful faces of the chief priests shouting: "Crucify him, crucify him". Even less so did He regard Pilate as a ruler who could pronounce the sentence of death by crucifixion. Likewise, His ears paid no attention to the insults and words of gloat proceeding from the mouths of malicious and revengeful Pharisees, Keepers of the Law and of Sabbaths. His eyes were only fixed upon the hand of the Father, which is the sole bearer of hammer and nail. His ears attentively listened to the voice of none but the Father, while He pronounced the sentence of scourging and crucifixion. Christ has most clearly stated to Pilate, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (Jn. 19:11).

Pilate thought it is within his authority to release the Lord, and not to crucify Him. But it was here that Christ checked him; for this is nothing but sheer delusion. Jesus regulated for him the course of the whole cause, as to accusation, defence and jury. For Pilate actually articulated what Heaven dictated him! Regardless of the fraudulent Synodic verdict, or of the corrupt Roman Law. In fact, the sentence of Suffering and Death on the cross had been firstly and lastly mixed in the cup with love by the Father, who loved Him before the foundation of the world. This cup was even for the sake of God's love to the world! It thus was not bitter as it seemed to be; nor was it mixed with the hatred of the spiteful or the intrigue of hypocrites—as far as outward form is concerned. Rather, it was a select portion that the hand of the Father Himself presented, bearing within it the essence of Love, Resurrection and Life.

However, in order to relish such a lofty model, we need but go back to minor ones with their beautiful little crosses. A model of such would be Joseph, the blessed young man who bore no grudge against his brothers who threw him in a well, and then sold him for silver, to be taken far away, lonely in exile, to Egypt. As for him, he lifted his heart and eyes up to God, deeming it to be his portion that came directly from the hand of God. For Joseph did not see his "brother's" treacherous rough hand which suspended him with ropes into the abyss of the well. Nor did he feel any repulsion toward his brothers while they were being paid the price of his blood for which they sold him to the Ishmaelites. For in all this he saw nothing but the invisible hand, the hand of God Himself, which weaved all these incidents together. At the end we hear him comforting his brothers, when their ignominious deed was revealed, saying, "So it was not you who sent me here, but God. You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good."

Christ came to elevate such a minor experience and such individual models to a general course, a divine law, a great redemptive Cross, a covenant between God and man. He has sealed it with His blood and has given His Holy Spirit as a guarantee. This covenant consists in the presence of the most compassionate Hand in the whole world—the hand of God—behind each and every stroke dealt to our earthly tabernacle. It is here that His hand is stretched out to play its role of pure love! For the pierced hand of Christ, on which our name was inscribed beforehand, has guaranteed our salvation, making out of our daily suffering and pains (which seem to be at random), of the persecution of our oppressors, and of the ingratitude of those who deal with us every day, a most exquisite cross bearing for us the seed of Life Eternal, with the sweet savor of Christ, in the likeness of His Cross in glory!

FORGIVE THEM:

Christ accepted the cup handed to Him by the Father, fraught as it was with disgrace, scandal, ignominy and suffering even unto death. It is as if this is love, absolute love, void of any doubt or grumbling, or even reproof or groaning. No stronger evidence could be given for such acceptance than Christ's words, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." These words Jesus uttered in the last hour when pain reached its climax, and scandal its utmost—death being at hand.

For if the eyes of Christ were not fixed upon the hand of the Father bearing the cup of Suffering and Death, Christ could not have overlooked the bitterness surrounding Him, nor the foolish hostility, nor the spite and gloat, nor the extreme oppression, nor all the folly with which the devil prompted the hierarchy, the elders of the people and the treacherous disciple.

Henceforth, when Christ commanded us to ask in our daily prayers for forgiveness to those who have sinned against us, this commandment stemmed not from vacuum; nor was it like the orders of the Law, unable as they are to redeem or grant salvation. Rather, Christ's commandment here appears against the striking background of the cross, based as it is on obedience to the love of God; a cross which He commanded us to carry in His wake, and in imitation of Him.

For he who is determined to carry the cross of Christ should first of all not fall under the illusion of those rough hands which crucify his hopes and feelings. Nor should he be bewildered at the ill will of those laying in wait for him, or at the intrigues of the spiteful. He has but to fix his eyes upon the loving and compassionate hand which has laid the yoke of the cross upon his shoulder, with all the details which accompanied the Crucifixion of Christ, as a portion assigned and specified with extreme accurateness, and in accordance with the dispensation of the Divine love which measures everything by the scale of the glory of Christ. This means that however heavy our cross might be, and however far the enemy (in compliance with evildoers)

might go on in pressing hard the burden laid upon our feeble shoulders in whatever foolish manner, yet the Divine hand in its turn also measures our due portion in the corresponding weight of glory, in the Cross of Christ. This takes place in such a manner that if the veil on our eyes, woven by the enemy against us in such moments, were to be lifted up—even for an instant—together with the feebleness of the soul, boredom and afflicted nerves, we would at once realize that the light weight of this cross, together with our slight momentary affliction have in reality created, by the demonstration of the Spirit, an eternal weight of glory, placed before us in heaven, and could be seen by the spirit in the very depths of the heart; a matter which actually facilitates for us a whole-hearted forgiveness toward others; yea, and to proceed even further than that, to the point of prayer and love for all those who have sinned against us, and inflicted harm upon us, however great such harm or injury, even unto death!

Life Eternal, with all its resplendent glories, is latent in the mystery of the sweet little cross that the Lord has laid upon our shoulder!

AN INEVITABLE HOSTILITY; AS FOR THE SPITE OF THOSE WHO CRUCIFIED CHRIST, IT HAS NOT YET ENDED:

No sooner had the outstanding power of Christ appeared, His miracles manifested, and His conspicuously resplendent deeds and words spread all over, than the Chief Priests, Scribes and Pharisees, and all those who use religion for earning their livelihood, started first of all to arouse suspicion, then to attack, then to lay in wait hunting for words and deeds. Finally there was no alternative for hidden conspiracy, and plotting matters in utmost haste, to do away with that Alien, lest their prestige be lost and their trade grow listless—as expressed by the High Priest himself.

What must needs be apparent before our eyes, as to the direct cause of their stance against Christ, i.e., resistance, then crucifixion, insofar as the world dealt with Him, could be summed up in one phrase: *The dazzling success of Christ*—His success in elevating the spirits of the

people and their understanding of the Law; in infusing joy among people in general, and in particular among the sinners, the discarded, the humiliated, the rejected, the crushed, the sick suffering from hopeless diseases and those possessed by diabolic powers.

Once again, the success of Christ, His love, His compassion and His gentleness were the reason for all His Suffering and Crucifixion—this being as far as the world is concerned. But as to God the Father, the case is utterly to the contrary. For in the Cross the counsel of the Father, together with the consent of the Son in full obedience and contentment, had been resolved to rescue the world, so that he who believes in Christ and in His Passion may not perish. The Cross is the new ark which carries of all standards; it fares across the deluge of the world and the impending horrors of death up to this moment, till it safely conveys its passengers to Heaven Haven—the world of everlasting peace.

As a matter of fact, the same kind of hostility displayed by the powers of darkness and by their prince toward Christ the Savior, together with the spite of those who crucified Him, be they priests or elders, urged as they were by personal motives of profit, along with their blind fanaticism that forges the letter, all this is still the case up to now. Such malice, folly and blind fanaticism, still finds a target in anyone bent on witnessing and tracking Christ in his own life.

SUFFERING IS OUR PATH TO GLORY*

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the crucified, for they shall be transfigured.
Blessed are those who are totally crushed, for they shall rule.
Blessed are the hungry, for they shall be filled.

FOR there all their sufferings will be forgotten and their tears will be wiped away and in their place a light will point to the horrors they underwent and the mystery of the glory that was the result. The greatness of human fortitude will be revealed along with the power of the merciful acts of God, for suffering will be seen to be almost ludicrously light in comparison with the glory that results from it. And man will see that suffering was a sacred trap prepared by God to catch man and bring him to glory. For the bearing of suffering is more powerful than worship.

One of the saints says that he saw in vision a group of the martyrs more dazzling in glory than the angels who appeared with them. Around the necks of those who had been beheaded he saw garlands of red flowers in the place where the sword had struck, and these shone and sparkled more brilliantly than any other light in the vision.

(*) From a message written by Fr. Matta-el-Meskeen in reply to a question. Originally published in Arabic in 1968 in the Lebanese magazine "Al-Nour."

For Christ, the mystery of the cross is the mystery of His glory. The overwhelming suffering the Lord underwent and His psychological torment at the injustice and crookedness of His trial, the desertion of His disciples, the treachery of Judas, and the knowledge that the high priests had agreed with one of His disciples to put a value of just thirty pieces of silver on His life, all this was a path by which He could leave the world of passing trivialities and enter into the glory of the Father. And man in every time and place must tread the same path. The cross with its enormous suffering can yet not be compared with the glory it brought forth. The cross did not come by chance into the life of the Lord; He was born for it. "For this purpose I have come to this hour" (Jn. 12:27). Man is born for suffering, and suffering was born for man. But at the same time the cross was not an irrevocable imposition on the Lord; we feel this from His words, and are sure of it in view of His holiness and divinity. He made it irrevocable for Himself—"The cup that the Father has given me, shall I not drink it?" (Jn. 18:11)—in order to share with us the inevitability of suffering. God manifested Himself in the Person of Christ His Son as One compelled to suffer, so as to make suffering under compulsion equal to suffering by choice, so that no man in existence should be deprived of the mercy of God, and so that the cross should be extended to include all who suffer unjustly.

Pain is in itself a great stumbling block to the human mind, which cannot accept pain as a means of acquiring any good thing. The mind believes that pain can be removed by knowledge, and so man strives in the field of medicine, for example, to abolish pain and bring relief to humanity. Indeed, if we consider carefully all aspects of the education process from the alphabet to the building of a rocket, we find that education is basically an attempt to avoid pain and weariness and need.

Therefore pain is a very difficult subject for the mind and is impossible to accept, because to accept pain is to cancel out the mind and all mental activity. So the cross is indeed foolishness and a

stumbling block to the Greeks—as St. Paul the Apostle says (1Cor. 1:22)—that is, a stumbling block to philosophy, which strives to reach God through free Platonic meditation, which knows nothing of sacrifice, believing that pain leads to death. The attempt to attain God by this form of intellectual audacity entered into Christian thought through pagan mysticism and contaminated it. Thus Origen speaks of the possibility of union with God through meditation, making God static and the human mind dynamic; that is he ties God to a fixed point and has the mind moving towards Him. This is a pagan venture resulting from the lack of man's sense of the fatherhood of God, the descent of Christ, the favour of the Holy Spirit and His entry into the heart of man. The truth lies in quite the opposite direction, for it is man who is always in the static position and God who moves towards him (Thy Kingdom come). The supreme movement of man is simply that he be alert to the movement of God and ready for His coming: "My heart is ready, O God; my heart is ready" (Ps. 57:7).

If we realize that the cross is the greatest manifestation of the movement of God so far as visible events are concerned, for in it God was transfigured for man (more than on Mount Tabor), and that the cross is suffering in its greatest, most oppressive and unjust form, then we must also sense that the cross is, so to speak, the beast of burden upon which God Almighty rode to descend from His dwelling place, where He had been veiled from all eternity, and come to us and take us by the hand. The cross is the supreme power of the dynamism of God, which brought Him down to us and clearly revealed Him. That is to say that suffering, from a physical point of view, is a negative and confined deadlock, but in its spiritual essence is incomparable movement!

Man remains at a spiritual standstill and unable to proceed in his return to God with Christ until he takes up his cross. Suffering brings man into the mystery of the cross, the mystery of the divine movement,

so that he no longer stands still like one dead, but is drawn to Christ, guided and led on from suffering to suffering until he attains the Father, borne on his cross, following in the way of Christ.

It is impossible for man to move towards God by mental effort, for the mind, no matter how far it progresses in meditation, can only discover God and His light and love. This brings the mind happiness, but then it falls away. True movement towards God is in Christ, for He is the Son of God who comes to us on the cross, and on the cross we follow Him back to the Father.

He says, "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). He says so not because He would tyrannically override our will, nor because we are unable to attain knowledge, for He taught us all we need to know. It is because He alone, as the Son, has within Him the power to move towards God the Father. Christ carries in Him the power of two movements, the movement of God the Father towards us, and our movement towards the Father:

The first is natural and essential having its being in the mystery of His love for His creation. The second is acquired through the cross¹—that is through the sacrificial suffering that was prepared to bear lifeless mankind and raise him up.

And Christ has filled us with the mystery of these two powers: the power of love and the power of the cross, that is suffering. By our receiving these two powers Christ works in us mystically so that we

(1) Christ alone has the power to move towards the Father, because He is the only-begotten Son of God who is of one essence with the Father. He is ever in the bosom of the Father and turned towards the Father. (The Greek word *πρός* which is used in the first verse of the Gospel of John and is usually translated "with", "the Word was with God," also means "towards," that is "the Word was towards God").

This power was natural in Christ before the incarnation and the cross, but in order to bear mankind, being dead, and bring him to the Father, He had, after taking flesh and becoming a man, to undergo sacrificial suffering, so that He might take us up into the presence of the Father. Thus Christ acquired for us through the cross a power for our good, that is the power to bring sinful humanity towards the Father. "For it was fitting that He, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering" (Heb. 2:10).

might move through Him and with Him until we attain the Father, and then there takes place through these two powers and in Him, the greatest mystery, which is the mystery of union with God.

To conclude, I commit you to the providence of God's great loving care, that makes use of all ages and times and events, and of everything that befalls man or that man attains, to perfect His plan of salvation for all mankind.

Be strong.



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