

## Remembering his Love

MEDITATION ON THE PASSION



**F**or St Paul of the Cross, daily meditation on the Passion was ‘the shortest and safest way to union with God’. In his letters of spiritual direction he encourages people to meditate on the Passion and teaches them simple ways of doing so:

In the solitude of your room, take the crucifix in your arms and, with great faith and love, kiss his sacred Wounds and tell him of the benefits he has done you. If you are bothered with scruples or temptations, tell him about them, as a daughter would to a good father. Ask him to teach you how to pray well, to love him and to serve him. Ask him to preach you a sermon, and listen with reverence to the words of eternal life that he will speak to your heart. Listen to what the thorns say, the nails, the wounds, the divine blood (II, 456-7).

Here Paul is teaching us how to speak directly to Christ when we pray, entrusting our cares and worries to him, bringing to him what we need, and allowing the message of his suffering love to touch our hearts. In a letter where he explains how to meditate on the different moments in the story of Christ’s suffering, which he calls the mysteries of Christ’s Passion, he reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit who is the great teacher of prayer, and then goes on to give an example of how a person might meditate on the Passion:

I will give you two reflections on mental prayer, for the Holy Spirit will teach you the rest. When you have made your preparation, at the start of your prayer picture yourself as present to the mystery that is your meditation as follows. If you are meditating on Jesus in agony in the garden, place yourself there



Jesus is taken down from the Cross. *Place your children also beneath the mantle of Mary of Sorrows and pray Mary Most Holy to soften them and bathe them with her tears* – St Paul of the Cross to Francesca Zelli, 15 April 1742

in that garden, all alone with him. Look at him with compassion but with a lively faith and with love, and take account of those drops of Precious Blood and ask: ‘Jesus, my dearest, for whom are you suffering?’ Listen as he replies to your heart: ‘Daughter, I am suffering for you, for your sins, because I love you.’

Then throw yourself at his feet as did the holy penitent Magdalene, stay there a while, kissing his feet in spirit, and ask him to teach you holy love. Oh, what affections of love will come to you! Allow yourself to be taught by Jesus; say to him: ‘Master and my Divine Spouse, teach me how to love and serve you...’ and ask for the graces of the holy virtues. Use these rules in meditating on other mysteries, and during the day keep the mystery you meditated on in the oratory of your heart, and see the blessed Jesus in that mystery, etc (III, 148–9).

In this letter, we see how St Paul of the Cross speaks first of preparation, which in his time would often have consisted of certain prayers such as acts of faith, adoration, humility, contrition, whose aim was to shape the attitudes and dispositions of the person who wished to pray. In his letters, Paul of the Cross also speaks of the awareness of the presence of God and of our own need of the grace of the Holy Spirit as being a way of preparing for meditation. Here we acknowledge that God is with us, that we are in his presence, and that it is only with his help and the guidance of his Spirit that we can pray as we wish: ‘for when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a

way that could never be put into words’ (Romans 8:26). He then tells us to place ourselves in the scene and to look at Jesus with compassion, faith and love. At this point we ask ourselves the questions ‘Who is suffering?’ and ‘What is he suffering?’ From this experience of remembering the sufferings of Jesus and being present to them, we move to a time of reflection where we ask ourselves what this means. In the letter quoted above, Paul expresses this through a question addressed to Christ: ‘Jesus, my dearest, for whom are you suffering?’ In this way, reflection flows into receptivity where we listen to the voice of the Lord, opening our heart to the suffering Christ and allowing him to speak to our heart. From this comes our response where we express our love for Christ who has suffered his Passion out of love for us. These four moments of prayer (remembering, reflection, receptivity and response) are the heart of Passion meditation. They are not stages to be worked through in a methodical or mechanical way, but rather they are the direction in which our prayer naturally moves when it takes place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul counsels us to be faithful to our Passion meditation and to take the time to savour the richness of the experience:

Never leave off meditating on the holy Passion of Jesus Christ and recalling the Sorrows of Mary Most Holy. In meditation do not be in a hurry to pass from one point to another, but stop where you find more devotion and recollection, and do this with a calm and peaceful spirit (II, 562).

For Paul of the Cross, a ‘calm and peaceful spirit’ is the necessary attitude for practising interior prayer. Any stress or forcing of our thoughts or feelings is to be avoided. Instead, we are to be attentive to our inner state, living in the moment, without rushing things or seeking to achieve any prayer targets we may have set for ourselves:

Speak to your God in spirit about the subject you had chosen for your meditation.... This should be done very sweetly in pure faith and without spiritual strain or seeking images. If during this time you feel

your heart filled with peace, compassion, or other sentiments, according as God wills, pause there, all recollected in God, like a bee upon a flower, and suck the honey of holy love in devout silence (1, 63).

The object of Passion meditation is to deepen our relationship with God. It is not a technique for self-awareness; it is a gentle way of drawing close to Christ who reveals the Father's love. When it becomes part of our daily life, it can bring us to live with a continual awareness that we are loved by God, an awareness which will transform our life. Paul teaches us to make what he calls a bouquet of Christ's sufferings, carrying with us throughout the day the awareness of the love Jesus shows in his Passion:

I recommend to you the Presence of God. But do not wear out your head; do it with a spirit of gentleness, sweetly reviving your faith. Live passionately for the love of Jesus. Let your delights be the Wounds of Jesus. Be his companion in the garden and make a bouquet of his feelings, agony, afflictions, pains, sighs, tears. Oh, the tears of Jesus! Make a bouquet of them to carry always on the bosom of your soul to perfume it with love and sorrow (1, 109).

Meditation on the Passion, for St Paul of the Cross, opens us to inner stillness and the conviction that we are loved in a unique and personal way. That is why he speaks of the Passion as the gateway to union with God, the door which leads to life.

### **A Simple Way to Meditate on the Passion**

The easiest way to meditate on the Passion is simply to take a scene from the Passion of Christ and reflect on it. There are various ways of beginning this kind of prayer. We can choose a passage from one of the Gospel accounts of the Passion as our starting point or one of the Stations of the Cross or the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. Meditation can also be prepared for by means of a book about the life of Christ, such as Pope Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, or a book of Passion meditations.

It is important not to rush into this from whatever

*Jesus consoles the women. I ask the merciful God to console you in the midst of so much pain. Do not cease to place everything in the Wounds of Jesus and these pains will become sweet – St Paul of the Cross to Francesca Zelli, 15 April 1742*

other activities we have been engaged in; we need to give ourselves time to slow down and become still inside. Two things that are necessary for prayer are time and place. I need to find a time when I will not be disturbed by other things needing my attention, a time when I won't be interrupted, a time also when I am alert and attentive rather than tired and sleepy. I also need to choose my place of prayer. It should be a quiet place, perhaps a church or my own sacred space at home. Outer silence helps me to attain inner silence, at least in the beginning. However, I should not opt out of prayer because the time and place are not perfect; even in a distracted or noisy place, even when I am tired or stressed, I can still open my heart to God's love.

Before beginning meditation, it is good to spend some time becoming aware that we are in the loving presence of God, asking him to bless and sanctify the place in which we will pray and then asking him to come into our hearts with his peace and his mercy. If I am aware of any faults or sins that have distanced me from him, I can acknowledge them and ask his forgiveness before I begin my meditation.

The next thing to do is to pray for the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit who is the great teacher



of prayer (I, 345). St Paul tells us that when we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit 'comes to help us in our weakness' (Romans 8: 26) and Jesus himself says that the Holy Spirit 'will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you' (Jn 14: 26). In calling on the Holy Spirit, we can use the words of St Paul of the Cross: 'O Holy Spirit, Love of the Father and the Son, inflame me entirely with your love' (I, 191).

The simple method of meditation taught by the early Passionists is to imagine yourself present at some scene of Christ's Passion and enter into the scene by trying to picture what is happening. Then become aware of the sufferings of Jesus in the scene. Ask yourself: Who is he who suffers? What is he suffering? How does he suffer? Why does he suffer this? For whom is he suffering? Talk to Jesus Crucified. Open your heart to him. Tell him of your love for him, your sorrow, your compassion, your desire to be with him. Allow him to touch your heart, to heal you, to make his home in your heart.

Stay until the time you have set aside for meditation is finished. There will be times when you want to run away from the silence, but be faithful. Remain there with him, even if it seems that there is nothing happening. When your time of prayer is ended, spend a few moments in thanksgiving. Thank Jesus for the grace of being in his presence. Ask him what he wants you to do for him. Respond with love to his invitation to follow him.

As you leave your place of prayer, bring with you something that has touched you during your prayer, some awareness of his love and mercy, his patience and forgiveness, and carry this with you throughout the day. Ask Jesus to be with you as you face the challenges of your daily life.

St Paul of the Cross invites us to meditate each day on the Passion of Christ, which he calls 'the miracle of miracles of God's love' (II, 275). If we make meditation on the Passion a part of our daily life, we will grow in the likeness of Jesus so that we can say: 'I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2: 20).

Extracts from *Remembering His Love – Passionist Spirituality in Daily Life* by Paul Francis Spencer CP, published by Ovada Books in 2015 and now available.

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## MY LOVE IS HERE

Victor Hoagland CP

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**O**n Good Friday we take a symbol, the cross, a powerful sign of death, which first struck fear into the hearts of Jesus' disciples, but then as they recalled the Lord's journey from the garden to Calvary, as they saw the empty tomb, as they were taught by the Risen Jesus himself, they began to see that God can conquer even death itself.

On this day, we read the memories of John, the Lord's disciple, who followed him from the Sea of Galilee, to Jerusalem, its temple and its feasts, to Calvary where he stood with the women and watched the Lord die. Like the others, he recoiled before it all, but then saw signs of victory even in the garden, in the judgment hall, before Pilate, and finally in the cross itself (John 18–19).

On this darkest of days, Christ's victory is proclaimed in John's gospel. 'Go into my opened side, Opened by the spear, Go in and there abide, For my love is here' (St Paul of the Cross, Letter 251). We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. By your cross you have redeemed the world.



### Remembering his Love Passionist Spirituality in Daily Life

Paul Francis Spencer CP

This little book is about the spirituality of St Paul of the Cross, whose mission was to guide people to the interior desert, the place of encounter with God which is within the heart of each one of us. Paul's desire was to touch the hearts of those to whom he ministered and to make spaces for God in people's lives. He invites us to remember the love of God which flows from the Cross of Jesus and to let that love shape our daily life.

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