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The Week
of the Passion

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The Week of the Passion*

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Holy week is with us once again. The full moon in the sky these nights is the age-old herald of Easter. Through the forty days of Lent the Church has set her face towards Jerusalem, the place of the blessed Passion, and now during the next few days, she unfolds, prayerfully and reverently, the great mystery of our Redemption. Christ spoke of this time, these days when His mission was fulfilled, as His Hour. "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father save me from this hour. But for this purpose have I come unto this hour" (John 12:27). These words bring us very near to the heart of Christ. They have the ring of His personal and characteristic accent. If we are to accompany Christ to Calvary it is not enough to see or imagine to ourselves the external events merely, we must know the mind and heart of Him who suffered and see the external events from out that mind and heart. Let these words then echo in our minds, let them be a refrain to bind together our thoughts as we walk with Christ to His Crucifixion. "Father, save me from this hour. Yet it is for this hour I have lived."

Spy Wednesday is the day of the betrayal, the day of Judas. All the people who mattered in Jerusalem, the people in high places, looked with contempt on this carpenter's son from a village in the wilds of Galilee, the back of God-speed. They, who beyond all doubt were the representatives of the Most High God, would sift the pretensions of this country preacher. They would put Him in His place. They had decided that He must be got rid of. But easier said than done. There were the people to consider. Many of the people believed in Him and He had a chosen band of twelve around him who would make things even more difficult. They all loved Him and would all die for Him – or so it seemed. But in the midst of these Galileans there was one man from Judea who looked on it all with a cold eye, watching and waiting. By this time he saw the way the wind was blowing. No, this village prophet would never sit on the throne of David. It only remained for a good business man to make what he could out of it and go his way. While Jesus talked

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of love, Judas thought of money. “And from thenceforth he sought opportunity to betray Him” (Matt. 26:16).

We, Irish, have reason to know better than many, from the history of our own country, what the words traitor and informer mean.

There are names of men in our history which we remember but don't much mention. High and holy causes have always had much to fear from traitors – men with an eye to the main chance. When Judas heard of the arrangements for the paschal supper he saw his chance and took it. His price was a ten-pound note. “If my enemy had reviled me, I would indeed have borne with it. But thou a man of one mind with me, my guide and my familiar, who didst eat sweet meats with me ... Lord save me from this hour.”

Holy Thursday, the eve of the Crucifixion, the day of the Last Supper and the Blessed Eucharist, the day too of that wonderful last discourse, chapters 13-17 of Saint John's Gospel: “I have longed and longed to eat this Pasch with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). In the most wonderful words that were ever uttered Christ sets forth His new commandment of love, His mandate (and so we speak of Maundy Thursday, the day of the Mandate). “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Not just any love but the love by which “I have loved you.” Here is a man going forth that same night, as He very well knew, to suffer the most terrible torments, and His only thought is to comfort his “little flock.” “Let not your heart be troubled ... In My Father's house there are many mansions ...

I will not leave you orphans ... I will come to you.” Notice the tenderness of His words, the same tenderness that compared His care of us to that of the hen that gathers her chickens under her wings ... He had just left us the greatest pledge of His Love that He could give – Himself. “This is My Body ... This is My Blood ... Do this in remembrance of me.” Across the centuries the Church, reproducing in the Sacrifice of the Mass the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, has offered the faithful the Bread of Eternal Life and upon every priest as he pronounces the words of consecration there comes something of that dignity and majesty that was Christ's as He sat in the upper Room that night in the shadow of the Cross.

“Do this in remembrance of Me.” It was a command, and a command, as we see it now, that was to be obeyed with an extraordinary diligence. Century after century men made this action their business, in land after land, until it measured the earth. “Father, I want you to say a Mass ...” and what that priest will do today is no different from what Patrick did at Saul in 432, or from what Christ did in the upper Room when He said: “Do this.” For the crowning of kings or for a country wedding it is all the same.

Man has nothing better that he can do – secretly at a Mass – rock or in a concentration camp, gloriously at a congress or a canonization, in sadness for him who died yesterday ... Day by day, Sunday by Sunday, in every parish in Christendom the priests have done just this and flags have worn thin under the feet of men and women approaching unendingly the Table of the Lord. That is how the command of Christ has been obeyed. “Do this in commemoration of Me.”

In the Upper Room that night Christ foresaw that scrupulous obedience and was comforted. No word of complaint escaped Him about what He had to face beyond the simple statement that the death He was going to would show the greatness of His love for them. Of one thing only did He complain – and He comes back to it several times – the betrayal of Judas. It would seem that this was the greatest pain of all. We must not think of Judas as a hateful character. Jesus loved Him as one of His most intimate friends to whom He had opened the secrets of His heart. He was a well beloved son who could greet his Lord with the kiss of love. This is the sword that searches the heart of love to the final twist. “Judas, do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:48). “Father save me from this hour.”

When the Supper was over Jesus and the eleven pushed back their chairs and went out into the moonlit night. They left the city by the Golden Gate, crossed the Kedron valley and the little stream that ran through it and ascended to a grove of olive trees where an olive-press stood that gave the place its name, Gethsemane. Here Jesus went aside from His disciples. His Hour had come. “My Soul is sorrowful even unto death ...” His sweat became as drops of blood ... It was the beginning of the mental anguish in the garden when He collapsed flat on the ground and prayed that this thing might not be, flat on the ground with His lips in the dry dust, breaking into that awful sweat and the sweat turning to blood. “Father, save me from this hour ... But not as I will but as thou wilt.”

Our understanding is pretty helpless here before the mystery of God’s love and God’s justice, in which the Son of God takes on Himself our sins, being somehow “made sin” that the power of sin and Satan might be broken for ever. There is however, a certain external situation which expresses the interior mystery, and this situation we can in some measure understand. Jesus is alone; the apostles are asleep. The traitor is on his way with a band of soldiers.

Somewhere in the city that looms darkly beyond the little valley the Mother of Jesus is waiting. “Behold the hour is at hand ... behold he is at hand that will betray me.” Again and again He

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returns to the betrayal. The others have stood by Him so far, yet we feel that His Heart is now being hurt by them too. They could not watch one hour with Him. They are loyal and He loves them for it but their love lacks the refinement and the generosity of the love with which He has loved them. "Amen I say to you, you shall all be scandalized in me this night ... and they all, leaving him, fled ... Peter cursed and swore that he knew not the man." "Father save me from this hour."

After the arrest in the Garden of Olives events follow each other more quickly. This is the hour of the powers of darkness, the hour of the hypocritical Pharisee, and the coarse soldier, the hour of pride and brutality and two-timing. It is the world of disorder and nightmare in which the Lamb of God is sacrificed. It is that sacrifice alone which gives sense and unity to the events. There is the mocktrial, the model of every travesty of justice from Oliver Plunket to Josef Mindzenty. Annas, Caiphas, Pilate, Herod, Pilate-in and out through Jerusalem with a terrible weariness. They mocked Him, they spat on Him, they set Him at naught, they scourged Him and they crowned Him with thorns. "Crucify Him, Crucify Him ... His blood be upon us and upon our children ..." "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldst not." "Not this man, but Barabbas."

"And bearing His own Cross, He went forth to that place which is called Calvary where they crucified Him ... and His Mother stood by the Cross of Jesus." Mary is in Jerusalem for the Pasch just as long ago she came up each year with Joseph and the boy Jesus. She is a pious daughter of Abraham, full of respect for the Law and for its ministers, the learned men of the Temple. It is these men that have put her son to death as a blasphemer. The whole world has turned against Him. His apostles have fled away; only John has crept up to the foot of the Cross. Here is a forlorn little group, one man and a few women, gathered about a man dying in disgrace, cast out from the sacred city which towers above the land broken by the invincible power of Rome. Here Mary is alone as she was at the Annunciation. Against all this mighty frame of the world she can only oppose the faith that is in her. But it is above all her love that shines forth to illumine the whole world. That which is our own catches at the heart in a special way, if it is only the familiar landscape of one's own country. You will notice how a mother's face changes when she sees her own child in a crowd of children. Jesus is Mary's own, and through Mary He is our own to each of us. At the very deepest point of that tragedy and mystery of suffering, breaking through that nightmare of horror and cruelty there are the words in which a new family is gathered

tenderly about the cross. “Mother behold thy son ... Son behold thy Mother.” Here is intimacy and sweetness, and the bright world of childhood. “Suffer the little children to come unto me for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.” And here, near the cross, we are all children, born again of water and the Holy Ghost, renewed through the Blood of Christ, mothered by the Virgin Mary, risen with Christ from the dead.

Living Holiness.

On a crisp Sunday in January
They went to pray at the shrine of Mary,
Two women, one linking the other to pass
Safely through city traffic to morning Mass.

I noticed the tasteful overcoats and hats
Of those two women discreet as diplomats.
Their faces were a smooth, quiet sea of peace,
Their eyes steady with divine certainties.

I thought of the most desirable state
Which all wish to have or contemplate.
These holy women could tell me the secret
That calmness, justice, and God in them had met.

Further on, they wanted to receive the Son,
Placing love, duty, ecstatic joy in One.
I see ever since their countenance of light
Which I hope will never depart from my sight.

— Eamon Flanagan, *Church at the Heart of the World*, Maynooth:
St. Paul’s, 2017, p.27.