

THE WAY OF THE CROSS



STATIONS OF THE CROSS use various events in the final hours of Jesus' life as a means of meditation and prayer. By following Jesus on his journey, we begin to understand that in Jesus' sufferings we see our own journey mirrored in his. Life is sometimes dark, painful, and brings endings, but the light of Easter Sunday is meaningless without the darkness of Good Friday. The Stations of the Cross remind us of the darkness as a basis to celebrate the light.

The wood carvings in the following pages may be found on the footpath to the Vallunga valley, nestled deep in the Dolomite mountains in Italy, and are known as the Via Crucis. They were carved by local craftsmen in 2005.

The meditations are taken from Pope Benedict's 'Meditations and Prayers for the Stations of the Cross' at the Roman Colosseum, Good Friday 2005, Pope John Paul II's meditations on Good Friday 2000 and John Peterson's 'A Walk in Jerusalem' (1998) .



JESUS AND PONTIUS PILATE

PILATE FOUND HIMSELF in a difficult situation. He is not utterly evil. He knows that the condemned man is innocent, and he looks for a way to free him. But in the end he lets his own position, his own self interest, prevail over what is right, so he passed the decision over to the mob and agreed to have Jesus crucified.

Yet neither are the people shouting and demanding the death of Jesus utterly evil. At this moment they are caught up in the crowd, shouting because everyone else is shouting. Pope Benedict XVI said:

"Justice is trampled underfoot by weakness, cowardice and fear of the diktat of the ruling mindset. The quiet voice of conscience is drowned out by the cries of the crowd. Evil draws its power from indecision and concern for what other people think."

LET US PRAY ...

Lord, you were condemned to death because fear of what other people may think suppressed the voice of conscience. So too, throughout history, the innocent have always been maltreated, condemned and killed. How many times have we ourselves preferred success to the truth, our reputation to justice? Strengthen the quiet voice of our conscience, your own voice, in our lives. Look at me as you looked at Peter after his denial. Let your gaze penetrate our hearts and indicate the direction our lives must take.



JESUS RECEIVES HIS CROSS

IT WAS ROMAN practice to whip and insult prisoners, before making them carry the crossbeam of the cross to the site of the crucifixion. On the way the crowd would be encouraged to insult the prisoner.

Jesus, having been condemned as an imposter king, is mocked. But it is because Jesus is mocked and wears the crown of suffering that he appears as the true King. His sceptre is justice (cf. Ps 45:7). The price of justice in this world is suffering: Jesus, the true King, does not reign through violence, but through a love which suffers for us and with us. He takes up the Cross, our cross, the burden of being human, the burden of the world. And so he goes before us and points out to us the way which leads to true life.

LET US PRAY ...

For those who mock and torment others and for those who are mocked and tormented;
For all victims of violence and those who commit violence against others;
For ourselves when we mock, insult or hurt others;
When we ourselves are hurt or put down.

Lord, you willingly subjected yourself to mockery and scorn. Help us not to ally ourselves with those who look down on the weak and suffering. Help us to acknowledge your face in the lowly and the outcast.

May we never lose heart when faced with the contempt of this world, which ridicules our obedience to your will.

You carried your own Cross and you ask us to follow you on this path (cf. Mt 10:38).

Help us to take up the Cross, and not to shun it. May we never complain or become discouraged by life's trials.

Help us to follow the path of love and, in submitting to its demands, to find true joy.



JESUS FALLS FOR THE FIRST TIME

MAN HAS FALLEN, and he continues to fall: often he becomes a caricature of himself, no longer the image of God, but a mockery of the Creator.

Jesus' fall beneath the Cross is not just the fall of the man Jesus, exhausted from his scourging. In Jesus' fall beneath the weight of the Cross, the meaning of his whole life is seen; by his voluntary degradation and humiliation, we are lifted up from the depths of our pride.

The nature of our pride is also revealed: it is that arrogance which makes us want to be liberated from God and left alone to ourselves, the arrogance which makes us think that we do not need his eternal love, but can be the masters of our own lives. In this rebellion against truth, in this attempt to be our own god, creator and judge, we fall headlong and plunge into self-destruction. But the humility of Jesus overcomes our pride; by his abasement he lifts us up.

Let us allow him to lift us up. Let us strip away our sense of self-sufficiency, our illusions of independence, and learn from him, the One who humbled himself, to discover our true greatness by bending low before God and before our downtrodden brothers and sisters.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord Jesus, the weight of the cross made you fall to the ground.

The weight of our sin, the weight of our pride, brought you down.

But your fall is not a tragedy, or mere human weakness. Help us to abandon our destructive pride and, by learning from your humility, to rise again.

We pray for ourselves, when we face sickness, physical weakness, tiredness and exhaustion; when we experience failure, that we may know the power of Christ's experience on the Cross.



JESUS MEETS HIS MOTHER

ON JESUS' WAY OF THE CROSS, we also find Mary, his Mother. During his public life she had to step aside, to make place for the birth of Jesus' new family, the family of his disciples. She also had to hear the words: "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?... Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is brother, and sister and mother" (Mt 12:48-50).

Now we see her as the Mother of Jesus, not only physically, but also in her heart. Even before she conceived him bodily, through her obedience she conceived him in her heart.

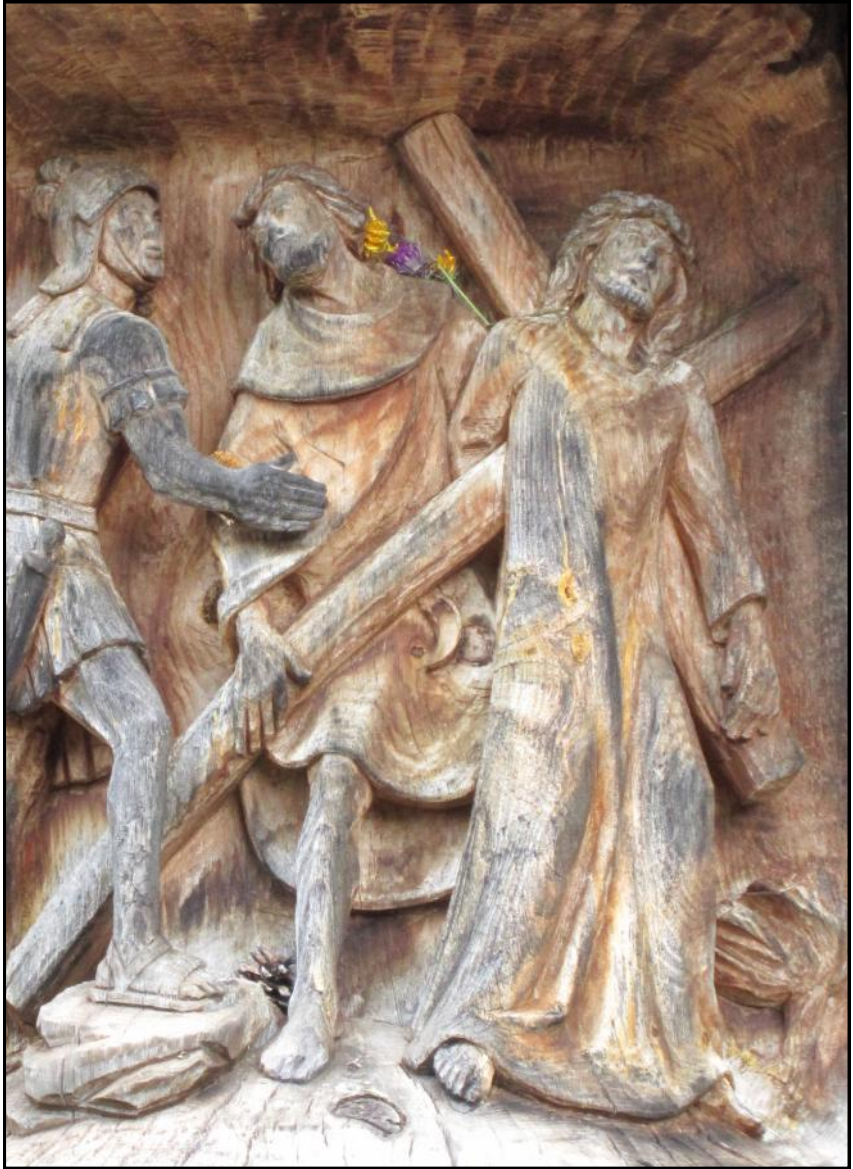
It was said to Mary: "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son. He will be great and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David" (Lk 1:31ff.). And she would hear from the mouth of the elderly Simeon: "A sword will pierce through your own soul" (Lk 2:35). She would then recall the words of the prophets, words like these: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was like a lamb that is led to slaughter" (Is 54:7). Now it all takes place. In her heart she had kept the words of the angel, spoken to her in the beginning: "Do not be afraid, Mary" (Lk 1:30).

The disciples fled, yet she did not flee. She stayed there, with a Mother's courage, a Mother's fidelity, a Mother's goodness and a faith which did not waver in the hour of darkness. Yes, in this moment Jesus knows: he will find faith. In this hour, this is his great consolation.

LET US PRAY ...

Mary, you remained faithful when the disciples fled. Just as you believed the angels' incredible message- that you would become the Mother of the Most High, so too you believed at the hour of the world's darkest night.

Teach us to believe, and grant that our faith may bear fruit in courageous service and be the sign of a love ever ready to share suffering and to offer assistance.



SIMON OF CYRENE HELPS JESUS CARRY THE CROSS

SIMON OF CYRENE is on his way home, returning from work, when he comes upon the sad procession of those condemned. For him, perhaps, it was a common sight. The soldiers force this rugged man from the country to carry the Cross on his own shoulders. He does what he must do, but reluctantly.

Significantly, the Evangelist Mark does not only name him, but also his children, who were evidently known as Christians and as members of that community (cf. Mk 15:21). From this chance encounter, faith was born.

The Cyrenian, walking beside Jesus and sharing the burden of the Cross, came to see that it was a grace to be able to accompany him to his crucifixion and to help him. The mystery of Jesus, silent and suffering, touched his heart.

Whenever we show kindness to the suffering, the persecuted and defenceless, and share in their sufferings, we help to carry that same Cross of Jesus. In this way we obtain salvation, and help contribute to the salvation of the world.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord, you opened the eyes and heart of Simon of Cyrene, and by his share in your Cross you gave him the gift of faith.

Help us to aid our neighbours in need, even when this interferes with our own plans and desires.

Help us to realise that it is a privilege to be able to share the cross of others and, in this way, know that we are walking with you along the way.

Help us to appreciate with joy that, when we share in your suffering and the sufferings of this world, we become servants of salvation and are able to help build up your Body, the Church.



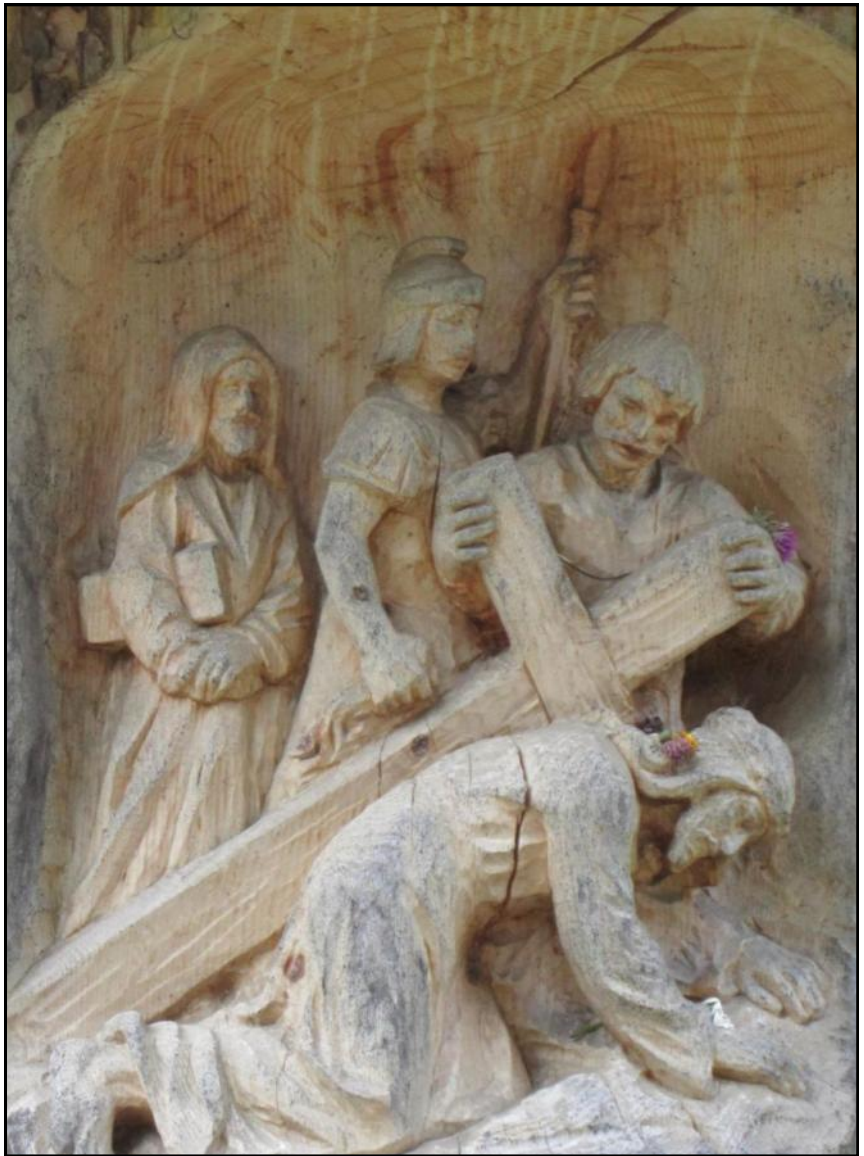
VERONICA WIPES THE FACE OF JESUS

VERONICA REPRESENTS the yearning of all believers to see the face of God. On Jesus' Way of the Cross, though, she at first did nothing more than perform an act of kindness: she held out a facecloth to Jesus. She did not let herself be deterred by the brutality of the soldiers or the fear which gripped the disciples. Amidst turmoil and dismay she shows the courage born of goodness and does not allow her heart to be bewildered. "Blessed are the pure in heart", the Lord had said in his Sermon on the Mount, "for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8).

At first, Veronica saw only a buffeted and pain-filled face. Yet her act of love impressed the true image of Jesus on her heart: on his human face, bloodied and bruised, she saw the face of God and his goodness, which accompanies us even in our deepest sorrows. Only with the heart can we see Jesus. Only love purifies us and gives us the ability to see. Only love enables us to recognise the God who is love itself.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord, grant us restless hearts, hearts which seek your face. Keep us from the blindness of heart which sees only the surface of things. Give us the simplicity and purity which allow us to recognize your presence in the world. When we are not able to accomplish great things, grant us the courage which is born of humility and goodness. Impress your face on our hearts. May we encounter you along the way and show your image to the world.



JESUS FALLS AGAIN

MY GOD, YOU CAN GO no farther. Even walking under the cross, which strong arms make lighter, is too much for you. The cross weighs on your shoulders. Although you do not have to drag it alone, the heavy tree weighs you down, while you have all you can do to keep from collapsing. The stumbling ceases, for your feet refused to serve you; you fall to the ground. You can go no farther. A moment's relaxation may make possible a final exertion of strength and enable you to stand up. Your strength has abandoned you, and powerless, you bow your head to the ground.

Yet no pity rises in the hearts of your executioners. They are not satisfied yet. They see that you have not succumbed. The closer you come to the slaughter, the crueller their treatment becomes.

A few more steps and you have reached your goal. That final expenditure of strength they will require of you. It may kill you; you must die. So close to the end, they no longer fear that you will elude death on the cross. They mock at your lack of strength and laugh at it, as though you were trying to avoid death on the cross. They do not realize that this second fall shows that you are calling on your last reserve of strength in order to reach Calvary and die for us there.

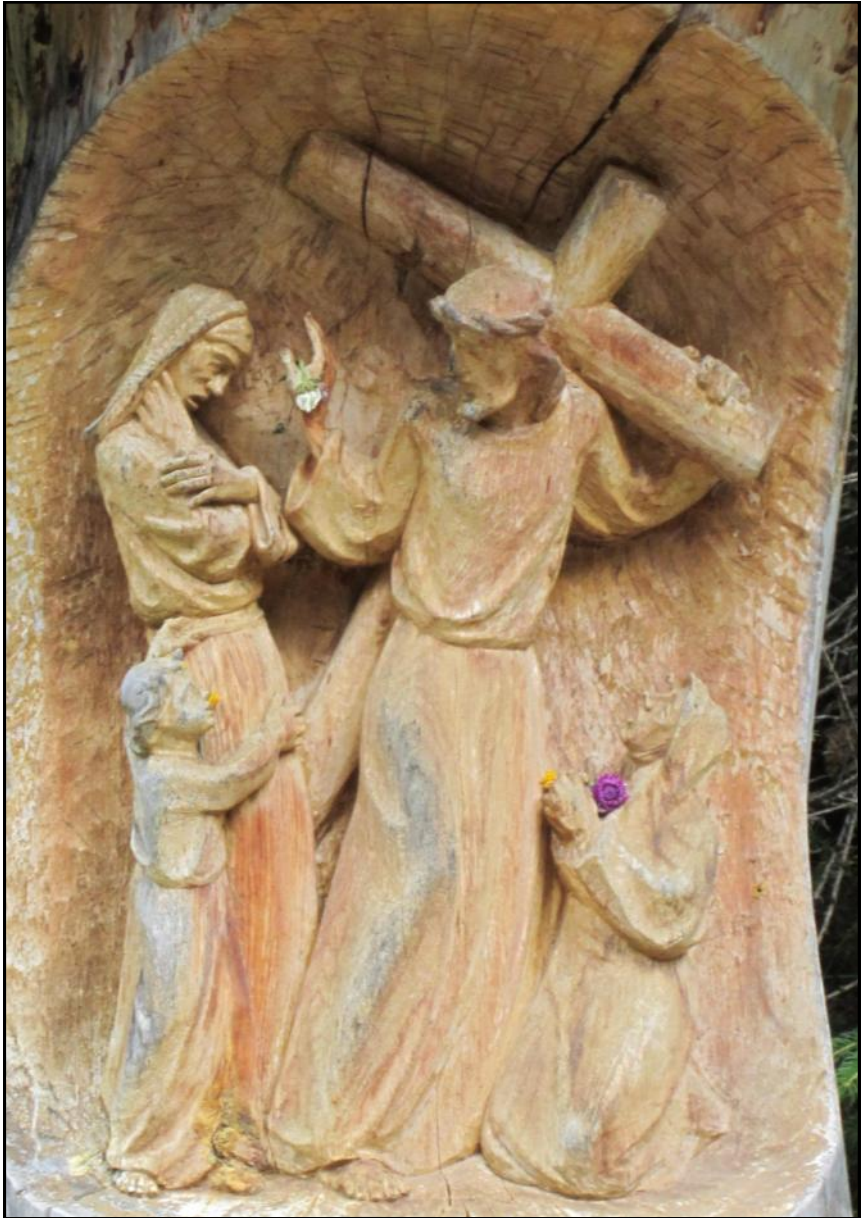
LET US PRAY ...

MY JESUS, even with the help of Simon You fell again. Were You telling me that there may be times in my life that I will fall again and again despite the help of friends and loved ones?

Though it grieves my heart to see You so weak and helpless, it is a comfort to my soul to know that you understand my sufferings from Your own experience. Your love for me made You want to experience every kind of pain just so I could have someone to look to for example and courage.

When I cry out from the depths of my soul, “This suffering is more than I can bear,” do You whisper, “Yes, I understand”? When I am discouraged after many falls, do you say in my innermost being, “Keep going, I know how hard it is to rise”?

There are many people who are sorely tried in body and soul who try and try and fall again and again. Through the humiliation of this fall, give them the courage and perseverance to take up their cross and follow you.



JESUS TALKS TO THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM

THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM know as Jesus reaches the city gate that no pardon will now come for him. He is an innocent victim. So hearing Jesus reproach the women who follow him and weep for him ought to make us reflect. How should we understand his words? Are they not directed at a piety which is purely sentimental? It is no use to lament the sufferings of this world if our life goes on as usual. So Jesus shows us both the seriousness of sin and the seriousness of judgment. Can it be that, despite all our expressions of consternation in the face of evil and innocent suffering, we are all too prepared to trivialize the mystery of evil? Have we accepted only the gentleness and love of God and Jesus, and quietly set aside the word of judgment?

Yet as we contemplate the sufferings of the Son, we see more clearly the seriousness of sin, and how it needs to be fully atoned if it is to be overcome. Before the image of the suffering Lord, evil can no longer be trivialized. To us too, he says: "Do not weep for me, weep for yourselves ... if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" Here is a call to repentance, true repentance and sorrow at the reality of the evil that has been committed. One cannot merely scrape away at the surface of evil; one has to get down to its roots, its causes, and the inner truth of conscience.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord Jesus, we see your words to the women of Jerusalem as a warning to each of us. Those words invite us to conversion, to pass from a sentimental religiosity to a faith grounded in your word. We pray for those who are forced to bear the burden of shame, the suffering of abandonment, the lack of a presence. O God, Father of all kindness, you do not abandon your children in the trials of life. Give us the grace to be able to rest in your love and enjoy forever the consolation of your presence. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.



JESUS FALLS FOR THE THIRD TIME

ONCE MORE CHRIST has fallen to the ground under the weight of the Cross. The crowd watches, wondering whether he will have the strength to rise again.

St Paul writes: “Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a Cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

The third fall seems to express just this: the self-emptying of the Son of God, his humiliation beneath the Cross.

Jesus had said to the disciples that he had come not to be served but to serve. In the Upper Room, bending low to the ground and washing their feet, he sought, as it were, to prepare them for this humiliation of his.

Falling to the ground for the third time on the way of the Cross, he cries out loudly to us once more the mystery of himself. Let us listen to his voice!

This Condemned Man, crushed to the ground beneath the weight of the Cross, now very near the place of punishment, tells us: “I am the way, and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). “He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). Let us not be dismayed by the sight of a condemned man, who falls to the ground exhausted under the cross. Within this outward sign of the death which is approaching the light of life lies hidden.



LET US PRAY ...

Lord Jesus Christ,
through your humiliation beneath the Cross you
revealed to the world the price of its redemption.

Grant to the men and women of the third millennium
the light of faith,
so that, as they recognize in you the Suffering Servant of
God and man,
they may have the courage to follow the same path
which, by way of the Cross and self-emptying, leads to
life without end.

To you, O Jesus, our support when we are weak, be
honour and glory for ever. Amen.



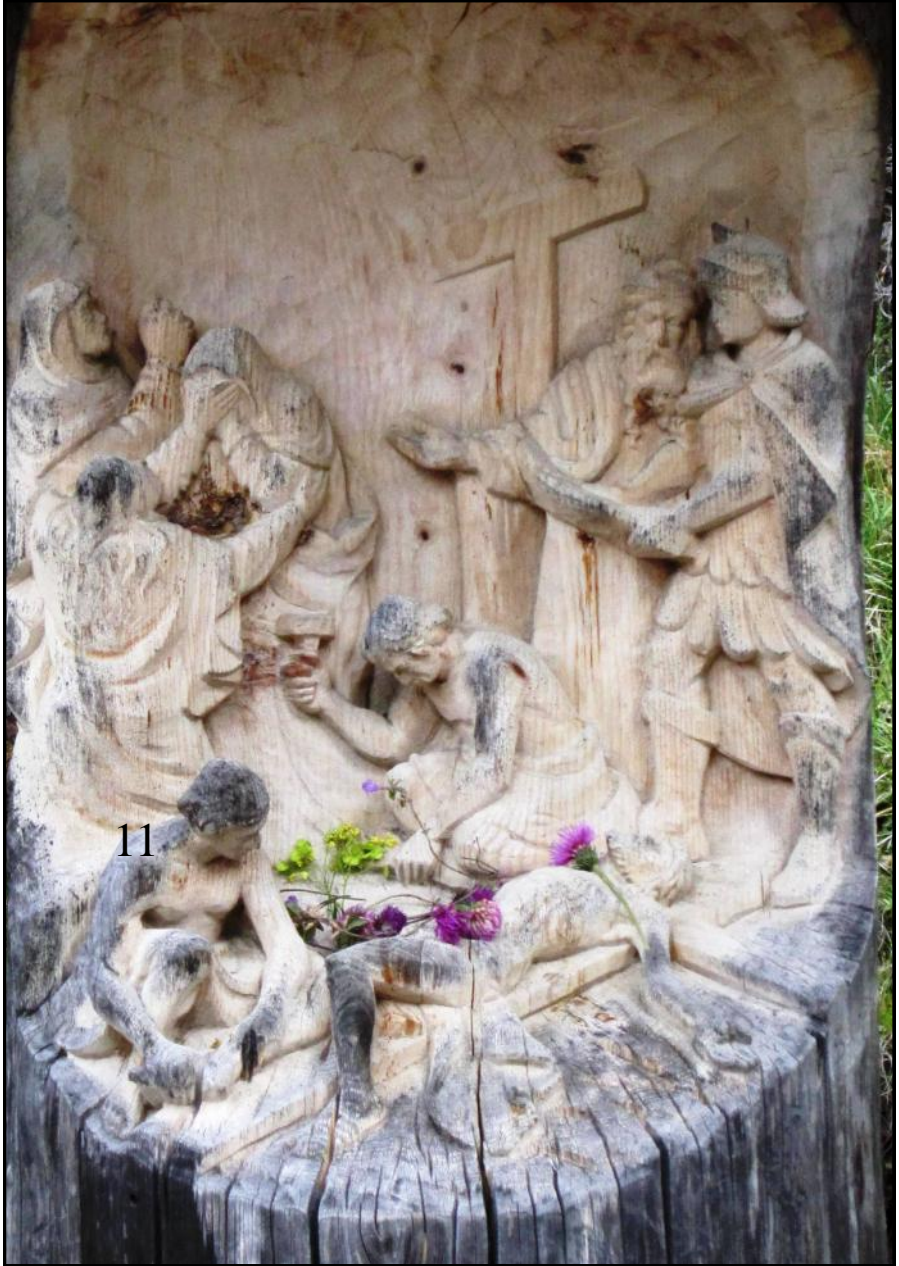
AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

JESUS IS STRIPPED of his garments. Clothing gives a man his social position; it gives him his place in society, it makes him someone. His public stripping means that Jesus is no longer anything at all, he is simply an outcast, despised by all alike. God's splendour has fallen away from humanity, who now stands naked and exposed, unclad and ashamed. Stripped of his garments, he reminds us that we have all lost the "first garment" that is God's splendour.

At the foot of the Cross, the soldiers draw lots to divide his paltry possessions, his clothes. John says that lots were drawn for Jesus' tunic, "woven without seam from top to bottom" (Jn 19:23). We may consider this as a reference to the High Priest's robe, which was "woven from a single thread", without stitching (Fl. Josephus, a III, 161). For he, the Crucified One, is the true High Priest.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord Jesus, you were stripped of your garments, exposed to shame, cast out of society. You took upon yourself the shame of Adam, and you healed it. You also take upon yourself the sufferings and the needs of the poor, the outcasts of our world. And in this very way you fulfil the words of the prophets. This is how you bring meaning into apparent meaninglessness. This is how you make us realise that your Father holds you, us, and the whole world in his hands.



11

JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS

JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS. Jesus does not drink the numbing gall offered to him: he deliberately takes upon himself all the pain of the Crucifixion. His whole body is racked; the words of the Psalm have come to pass: "But I am a worm and no man, scorned by men, rejected by the people" (Ps 22:7). "As one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised... surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Is 53:3f.).

Let us halt before this image of pain, before the suffering Son of God. Let us look upon him at times of presumptuousness and pleasure, in order to learn to respect limits and to see the superficiality of all merely material goods.

Let us look upon him at times of trial and tribulation, and realise that it is then that we are closest to God.

Let us try to see his face in the people we might look down upon. As we stand before the condemned Lord, who did not use his power to come down from the Cross, but endured its suffering to the end, another thought comes to mind. Ignatius of Antioch, a prisoner in chains for his faith in the Lord, praised the Christians of Smyrna for their invincible faith: he says that they were, so to speak, nailed with flesh and blood to the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1). Let us nail ourselves to him, resisting the temptation to stand apart, or to join others in mocking him.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord Jesus Christ, you let yourself be nailed to the Cross, accepting the terrible cruelty of this suffering, the destruction of your body and your dignity. You allowed yourself to be nailed fast; you did not try to escape or to lessen your suffering.

May we never flee from what we are called to do. Help us to remain faithful to you. Help us to unmask the false freedom which would distance us from you. Help us to accept your "binding" freedom, and, "bound" fast to you, to discover true freedom.



12

JESUS DIES

A SIGN STOOD ABOVE the Cross of Jesus, indicating who he was: the King of the Jews, the promised Son of David. Pilate, the unjust judge, became a prophet despite himself. The kingship of Jesus was proclaimed before all the world.

Jesus himself had not accepted the title "Messiah", because it would have suggested a mistaken, human idea of power and deliverance. But now the title can remain publicly displayed above the crucified Christ. He is indeed the king of the world. Now he is truly "lifted up".

In sinking to the depths he rose to the heights. He has offered himself and reveals the true God, the God who is love. Now we know who God is. Now we know what true kingship is.

Jesus prays Psalm 22, which begins with the words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:2). He takes to himself the whole suffering people of Israel, the whole, suffering world and he makes God present in the very place where he seems definitively vanquished and absent.

The Cross of Jesus is a cosmic event. The world is darkened, when the Son of God is given up to death. The earth trembles. And on the Cross, the Church of the Gentiles is born. The Roman centurion understands this, and acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God. From the Cross he triumphs -ever anew.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord Jesus Christ, at the hour of your death the sun was darkened. Ever anew you are being nailed to the Cross. At this present hour of history we are living in God's darkness. Through your great sufferings and the wickedness of humanity, the face of God, your face, seems obscured, unrecognizable. And yet, on the Cross, you have revealed yourself. Precisely by being the one who suffers and loves, you are exalted. From the Cross on high you have triumphed. Help us to recognise your face at this hour of darkness and tribulation. Help us to believe in you and to follow you in our hour of darkness and need. Show yourself once more to the world at this hour. Reveal to us your salvation.



JESUS IS TAKEN DOWN FROM THE CROSS

JESUS IS DEAD. From his heart, pierced by the lance of the Roman soldier, flow blood and water, symbols of both baptism and the Eucharist.

Jesus' legs are not broken, like those of the two men crucified with him. He is thus revealed as the true Paschal lamb, not one of whose bones must be broken (cf. Es 12:46). And now, at the end of his sufferings, it is clear that, for all the dismay which filled people's hearts, for all the power of hatred and cowardice, he was never alone. There are faithful ones who remain with him.

Under the Cross stand Mary, his Mother, the sister of his Mother, Mary, Mary Magdalen and the disciple whom he loved.

A wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, appears on the scene: a rich man is able to pass through the eye of a needle, for God has given him the grace. He buries Jesus in his own empty tomb, in a garden. At Jesus' burial, the cemetery becomes a garden, the garden from which Adam was cast out when he abandoned the fullness of life, his Creator. The garden tomb symbolises that the dominion of death is about to end.

A member of the Sanhedrin also comes along, Nicodemus, to whom Jesus had proclaimed the mystery of rebirth by water and the Spirit. Even in the Sanhedrin, which announced his death, there is a believer, someone who knows and recognises Jesus after his death. In this hour of immense grief, of darkness and despair, the light of hope is mysteriously present. The hidden God continues to be the God of life, ever near.

Even in the night of death, the Lord continues to be our Lord and Saviour. The Church of Jesus Christ, his new family, begins to take shape.

LET US PRAY ...

Lord, you descended into the darkness of death. But your body is placed in good hands and wrapped in a white shroud (Mt 27:59). Faith has not completely died; the sun has not completely set.

How often does it appear that you are asleep?

How easy it is for us to step back and say to ourselves: "God is dead".

In the hour of darkness, help us to know that you are still there.

Do not abandon us when we are tempted to lose heart.

Help us not to leave you alone.

Give us the strength to withstand moments of confusion and a love ready to embrace you in your utter helplessness, like your Mother, who once more holds you to her breast.

Help us, the poor and rich, simple and learned, to look beyond all our fears and prejudices, and to offer you our abilities, our hearts and our time, and so prepare a garden for the Resurrection.



JESUS IS LAID IN THE TOMB

JESUS, DISGRACED AND MISTREATED, is honourably buried in a new tomb. Nicodemus brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight, which gives off a precious scent. In the Son's offering of himself, as when Mary anointed him with oil in Bethany, we see an "excess" which evokes God's generous and superabundant love.

God offers himself unstintingly. If God's measure is superabundance, then we for our part should consider that nothing is too much for God. This is the teaching of Jesus himself, in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:20).

But we should also remember that St Paul told us that God, "through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere. We are the aroma of Christ" (2 Cor 2:14ff.). Our faith needs to be the fragrance which returns us to the path of life.

At the very moment of his burial, Jesus' words are fulfilled: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). Jesus is the grain of wheat which dies. From that lifeless grain of wheat comes forth the great multiplication of bread which will endure until the end of the world. Jesus is the bread of life which can satisfy the hunger of all the world and provide its deepest nourishment..

LET US PRAY ...

Lord Jesus Christ, in your burial you have taken on the death of the grain of wheat. You have become the lifeless grain of wheat which produces abundant fruit for every age and for all eternity. From the tomb shines forth in every generation the promise of the grain of wheat which gives rise to the true manna, the Bread of Life, in which you offer us your very self. The eternal Word, through his Incarnation and death, has become a Word which is close to us: you put yourself into our hands and into our hearts, so that your word can grow within us and bear fruit.

Through the death of the grain of wheat you give us yourself, so that we too can dare to lose our life in order to find it, so that we too can trust the promise of the grain of wheat. Help us grow in love and veneration for your Eucharistic mystery - to make you, the Bread of heaven, the source of our life. Help us to become your "fragrance", and to make known in this world the mysterious traces of your life. Like the grain of wheat which rises from the earth, putting forth its stalk and then its ear, you could not remain enclosed in the tomb: the tomb is empty because he - the Father - "did not abandon you to the nether world, nor let your flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:31; Ps 16:10 LXX). No, you did not see corruption. You have risen, and have made a place for our transfigured flesh in the very heart of God. Help us to rejoice in this hope and bring it joyfully to the world. Help us to become witnesses of your resurrection.

