

***Mater Dolorosa, Mother of Sorrows***

‘Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.”’ (Lk 2:34-35)

Our Senatus meeting this month, later than normal, providentially falls on 15th September, Memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows. Indeed, the whole month of September customarily has a devotional dedication to her Seven Sorrows, which pierced her soul in accordance with Simeon’s words. So it is a suitable moment to reflect on all her sorrows, striving to bring to mind and heart some sense, however inadequate, of the unfathomable reality the Sorrowful Mother would have experienced in the burning maternal love of her Immaculate Heart.

The Seven Sorrows or Seven Dolours of Catholic devotion make us aware of the many aspects of Mary’s pains, the seven swords of sorrow: first, the Prophecy of Simeon that a sword would pierce her soul; second, the Flight into Egypt; third, the Loss of the Child Jesus in the Temple; fourth, Mary meeting Jesus on his way to Calvary; fifth, Mary standing at the foot of the Cross; sixth, Jesus being taken down from the Cross and placed in his Mother’s arms; and seventh, the burial of Jesus.

Devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows grew from the eleventh century and would be especially promoted by the Servite Order (Order of the Servants of Mary, established by the Seven Holy Founders in Florence in 1233). Many would be familiar with the ‘Servite Rosary’ long approved by the Church. This is the Rosary or Chaplet of the Seven Sorrows, prayed using a rosary with seven sets of seven beads. Seven septets, each consisting of one *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*, are prayed on the beads while meditating on each of the Seven Sorrows in turn, with the addition of other brief prayers. We also know well the thirteenth-century hymn, the *Stabat Mater*, which can be sung or recited as the Sequence in the Mass of Our Lady of Sorrows and is also often sung at the Stations of the Cross.

On Palm Sunday last year we reflected on the inner meaning of Mary’s presence at Calvary; we repeat here three brief Magisterial passages. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: ‘Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries. This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering.’ (n. 618)

Vatican II declared: ‘The Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross...[There] she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth.’ (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964) 58)

And Pope St Pius X taught that Our Lady was ‘so entirely participating in His Passion, that if it had been possible she would have gladly borne all the torments that her Son bore. And from this community of will and suffering between Christ and Mary she merited to become most worthily the Reparatrix of the lost world and Dispensatrix of all the gifts that Our Saviour purchased for us by His Death and by His Blood.’ (Encyclical Letter *Ad diem illum* (1904) 12)

Going more deeply than into how Mary's sufferings contributed to redemption, we listen to the words of Pope St John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* 'On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering' (1984). The Pope wrote: 'Declaring the power of salvific suffering, the Apostle Paul says: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24).' (1)

'The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world's redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings...to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world...In this dimension – the dimension of love – the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished...The mystery of the Church – that body which completes in itself also Christ's crucified and risen body – indicates...the space or context in which human sufferings complete the sufferings of Christ.' (*Salvifici Doloris* 24)

In Mary, 'the many and intense sufferings were amassed in such an interconnected way that they were not only a proof of her unshakeable faith but also a contribution to the redemption of all...It was on Calvary that Mary's suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view but which was mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world...a special sort of sharing in the redeeming death of her Son...Mary offered a unique contribution to the Gospel of suffering, by embodying in anticipation the expression of Saint Paul which was quoted at the beginning. She truly has a special title to be able to claim that she "completes in her flesh" – as already in her heart – "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions".' (*Salvifici Doloris* 25)

The Office of Readings for today's Memorial includes part of a sermon of St Bernard. He writes, 'Someone may say: "Did she not know in advance that her Son would die?" Without a doubt. "Did she not have sure hope in his immediate resurrection?" Full confidence indeed. "Did she then grieve when he was crucified?" Intensely. Who are you, brother, and what sort of judgement is yours that you marvel at the grief of Mary any more than that the Son of Mary should suffer? Could he die bodily and she not share his death in her heart? Charity it was that moved him to suffer death, charity greater than that of any man before or since: charity too moved Mary, the like of which no mother has ever known.'

As we consider all these things, compassion for our Blessed Mother in her sorrows is aroused and deepened in our hearts. And in our poor effort to imagine what her own motherly compassion for her Son must have been, we find ourselves more deeply taking on at least something of that same compassion. Her thoughts and affections towards him insensibly become our own thoughts and affections. Thus we grow to be more like the Most Holy Mother in her love for her divine Son – a pre-eminent way in which we come 'to Jesus through Mary'.

In the words of the *Stabat Mater*: 'Is there one who would not weep, / whelmed in miseries so deep, / Christ's dear Mother to behold? / Can the human heart refrain / from partaking in her pain, / in that Mother's pain untold? / ... O you Mother, fount of love! / Touch my spirit from above, / make my heart with yours accord: / make me feel as you have felt; / make my soul to glow and melt / with the love of Christ our Lord.'