

VIA MATRIS

The Way of Our Sorrowful Mother

_____ Father Romanus Cessario, O.P. _____

Modeled on the Via Crucis, the pious exercise of the Via Matris Dolorosae, or simply the Via Matris, developed and was subsequently approved by the Apostolic See. This pious exercise already existed in embryonic form since the 16th century, while its present form dates from the 19th century. Its fundamental intuition is a reflection on the life of Our Lady from the prophecy of Simeon (cf. Lk 2:34-35) to the death and burial of her Son, in terms of a journey in faith and sorrow: this journey is articulated in seven "stations" corresponding to the "seven dolors" of the Mother of Our Savior. (From the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, The Via Matris, 136.)



▪ OPENING PRAYER ▪

Lord Jesus Christ, come to my aid! Your life, Passion, and Death destroy sin and bring new life to the world. According to the Father's will, your Mother Mary would participate maximally in the mysteries that bring about the world's salvation. Though she is conceived immaculately, Mary did not refuse to embrace the sorrows that you endured for my sake. Grant me, Blessed Lord, the particular graces that I need to meditate fruitfully on the Seven Sorrows of Our Lady. Unite me with her participation in the divine plan for redemption. I ask this in your name, Christ the Lord. Amen.

▪ FIRST STATION ▪

The Prophecy of Simeon at the Presentation

Leader: *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of mercy.*

R/ *To you do we cry, mourning and weeping in
this valley of tears!*

Simeon tells Mary that her life will serve a *redemptive* Incarnation. He stands at the juncture of the Old and New Testaments. We witness a reversal of expectations. The Messiah arrives as a helpless Infant. Among the prophets of Israel, Simeon alone lived to encounter this long-awaited Messiah. The privilege accorded the prophet Simeon foretells the Christian life. Each day, the Christian is given the chance to repeat after Simeon: *My eyes have seen your salvation* (Lk 2:30). The Church places on our lips the Canticle of Simeon. We should pray it at night, before we retire. But to Mary, Simeon announces something sobering: *And you yourself a sword will pierce* (Lk 2:35). This unexpected prophecy prepares the Blessed Virgin Mary to sustain the sufferings that will form part of her universal mediation. She who brought forth the Savior of the world without the pains of childbirth is not thereby prevented from experiencing other sorrows of this life. Her *Fiat*, her prayer of submission to the divine plan, commits Mary to cooperating with her Son as he wins the world's salvation. The sorrows of Mary are meant to provide a source of encouragement for Christian believers. What the Mother of God experiences in faith becomes both a model and a support for us. We know that the price of our salvation includes her sorrows and those of her Son. We cannot expect to appropriate the graces of a redemptive Incarnation without sustaining the sufferings that God allows to befall us.

Hail Mary....

Leader: *Virgin Most Sorrowful,*

R/ Pray for us.

▪ **SECOND STATION** ▪
The Flight into Egypt

Leader: *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of mercy.*

*R/ To you do we cry, mourning and weeping in
this valley of tears!*

Separation causes suffering. Shortly after the birth of her divine Son, Mary is obliged to leave her homeland, her family, and her friends. *Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt* (Mt 2:13). This command spoken by an angel to Saint Joseph follows upon a gross injustice committed by a political ruler. Herod *ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem* (Mt 2:16). He foolishly imagined that a ruler of a land could destroy the Ruler of the universe. The flight into Egypt demonstrates that no one can thwart the accomplishment of God's holy will. No human power is able to trump the merciful and loving plan of divine providence. At the same time, Mary is left to experience the sorrow of the refugee, the distress of the displaced person,

the incertitude of the homeless wanderer. These sorrows still afflict many persons in our world. Mary bore her burdens with a spirit of serenity. She knew that the divine plan never fails. She knew that God would preserve her Son. So she travels with Saint Joseph back to the land whence God delivered the People of Israel. Mary's second sorrow reveals that God enacts a definite exodus, not for the chosen people only but for every human being. In Egypt, Mary proclaims what was foretold by the visit of the Magi. She demonstrates that her divine maternity is meant for peoples of every land and nation. The Fair Daughter of Sion is also the loving Mother of Mankind.

Hail Mary....

Leader: *Virgin Most Sorrowful,*

R/ Pray for us.

▪ THIRD STATION ▪

The Search for Jesus Lost in Jerusalem

Leader: *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of mercy.*

*R/ To you do we cry, mourning and weeping in
this valley of tears!*

We interpret each sorrow that Mary experiences within the context of her loving submission to God's will: *May it be done to me according to your word* (Lk 1:38). Jesus is twelve years old. Mary and Saint Joseph travel with him to Jerusalem. In the Temple of the Old Law, Christ is found proclaiming the truth about his heavenly Father. He reveals himself to be "begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father." When the Child Jesus remains in Jerusalem, without his parents' knowledge, to continue discussions with the teachers of the Jewish law, he displays his embrace of the work the Father has given him. Mary discovers another dimension to her unique role as Mother of the Redeemer. Her Son's true home remains with the Father. Still, the Gospel makes it clear: *He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them* (Lk 2:51). The Holy Family exhibits a truth that all must embrace. Obedience forms the fundamental disposition for discipleship. Because Jesus knew his identity as Son, he was able to proclaim the truth about God: *all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers* (Lk 2:47). Christians must be taught about their new identity, their new being, and their new mission in the world. Adopted sons or daughters know by faith who they are. Once we

receive the truth about ourselves with gratitude, loving submission to the divine plan follows. Obedience comes to us as a Marian grace!

Hail Mary....

Leader: *Virgin Most Sorrowful,*

R/ Pray for us.

▪FOURTH STATION▪

Mary Meets Jesus on the Way to Calvary

Leader: *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of mercy.*

*R/ To you do we cry, mourning and weeping in
this valley of tears!*

As Mary's sorrows intensify, she continues to demonstrate what it means to be a woman of faith. What is adumbrated in the prophecy of Simeon, what is experienced initially in her sojourn in a foreign land and by her search for a lost child, achieves a new dimension when she meets her Son on the way to Calvary. The divine plan that allows the innocent man of Nazareth to die the death of a criminal finds exquisite expression in the encounter of Mary with her Son. Mary's sorrow at seeing a bloodied Jesus expresses the sorrow of the Elect. All those who find their salvation in the fulfillment of the divine plan identify with the Mother of God: *May it be done to me according to your word* (Lk 1:38). Serenity can coexist with sorrow. The Mother of God remains serene in the same way that countless saints have remained composed when faced with the sorrows of dying. The martyrs imitate Mary's faith-based serenity with particular effectiveness. Even as they face torturous deaths, the martyrs proclaim that the divine love compensates for every sorrow sustained here below. God is worth a life. Mary, Queen of Martyrs, prepares the Christian people for a realistic acceptance of what Christian living entails. She is the first to realize what Saint Paul says: *For you have been purchased at a price* (1 Cor 6:20). We can measure our appreciation of Mary's sorrow by the frequency with which we receive the Sacrament of Penance.

Hail Mary....

Leader: *Virgin Most Sorrowful,*

R/ Pray for us.

▪FIFTH STATION▪

Jesus Dies on the Cross

Leader: *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of mercy.*

R/ *To you do we cry, mourning and weeping in
this valley of tears!*

The Christian religion venerates a Redeemer who dies. It is Christ's divine status that makes his death revelatory of the divine plan: *God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him* (1 Jn 4:9). We discover the reason for Christ's death on the cross not in the historical circumstances of its accomplishment but in the sinful actions that, since the original sin, have marked the human race. On Calvary, Mary especially represents the New Eve. From his cross, Christ announces that Mary has become the new mother of the living: *Woman, behold, your son* (Jn 19:26). In the person of Saint John, Mary recognizes that she receives each of us. While standing at the foot of the cross, Mary, the Lady of Compassion, exhibits the full dimensions of her maternal mediation, which began at the Annunciation. She teaches believers that profound joy can coexist even with exquisite sorrow. Portrayals of Mary in a swoon appear late in the history of Christian art. The earliest representations of the crucifixion show Mary sorrowful but composed. She assents in faith to the working-out of the divine plan. She accepts the sorrow that any mother would undergo upon seeing her son die, especially on a shameful cross. At the same time, Mary experiences the joy of embracing all those who have been bought back by the shedding of her Son's blood. Some of this precious blood inescapably must have fallen upon her very person.

Hail Mary....

Leader: *Virgin Most Sorrowful,*

R/ *Pray for us.*

▪SIXTH STATION▪

Mary Receives the Dead Body of Jesus

Leader: *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of mercy.*

R/ *To you do we cry, mourning and weeping in
this valley of tears!*

It is finished (Jn 19:30). Jesus completes his redemptive work. Mary, according to the tradition, holds on her lap the lifeless body of her Son. The pietà! She remains the sorrowful Mother, though she never succumbs to being a sad Mother. There is a difference between experiencing sorrow and being

sad. Sadness arises when one is overcome by evil. While caressing Jesus' dead body, Mary contemplates the supreme goodness that the Incarnation reveals. At the same time, she ponders the plain fact that God *did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all* (Rom 8:32). Mary touches the pierced side of her Son, the fountain of sacramental life. Her sorrowing affords Mary time to meditate on the benefits that we receive from Christ's death: *In all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us* (Rom 8:37). Mary comprehends the divine plan better than any other member of the Church. For this reason, she is able to participate fully in her Son's redemptive work. She merits the unique title Co-Redemptrix. Though she is conceived without original sin and so escapes the burden of making up for sin, Mary is the first to experience vicariously in the dead body of her Son the price paid for our sins. The Sacrament of Penance and the practice of penitence allow Catholics to enter deeply into the mystery of conversion that Christ's death on the cross makes possible. Without his divine power, nothing in us would change.

Hail Mary....

Leader: *Virgin Most Sorrowful,*

R/ Pray for us.

▪SEVENTH STATION▪

Jesus Is Placed in the Tomb

Leader: *Hail Holy Queen, Mother of mercy.*

R/ To you do we cry, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears!

They took the body of Jesus and bound it with burial cloths along with the spices, according to the Jewish burial custom (Jn 19:40). Mary brings her Son's lifeless body to its burial place. The devout friends of Jesus carry his body to the tomb. Mary is supported by holy women, while Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea ensure that the Lord receives the burial accorded to observant Jews. Among these disciples, however, only Mary preserves the hope that the garden tomb is not a final place of rest. Christ's entombment sanctifies the burial places of all Christians. During Tenebrae on Holy Saturday, candles are progressively extinguished to signal the darkness that Christ's death occasions in the world. At the end of the service, it is customary to keep one candle lit and to place it out of sight. This candle represents the Blessed Virgin Mary. Throughout her life, Holy Mary embraces the redemptive work of her Son. She discovers her sufferings in prophecy, in Christ's infancy and childhood, and, especially, during the moments of his Passion. The Church asks us to ponder the sorrows of Mary so that, among

other objectives, we will learn how to accept the sufferings that daily befall us. Mary helps us to sustain those sufferings that are meant to form part of our rising to new life. At the tomb of Christ, Mary's sorrowing turns into rejoicing. The tradition holds that the first person to whom the Risen One appeared was his joyful Mother.

Hail Mary....

Leader: *Virgin Most Sorrowful,*

R/ Pray for us.

▪ CLOSING PRAYER ▪

Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Compassion, I turn to you with filial confidence. You shared fully in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose death brought life to the world. Help me now to understand the truth about the divine compassion. Teach me to accept the sufferings that come into my life as you accepted obediently your own deep sorrows. Loving Mother of the Redeemer, you consecrated yourself by submitting to the divine plan. Obtain for me the grace to make my own submission to the same wise providence, now and at the hour of my death. Amen.

(Father Romanus Cessario, O.P., serves as senior editor for MAGNIFICAT and holds a research fellowship at Ave Maria University.)

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