

The Emotional Wounds of Christ

English translation of a transcript of a sermon delivered in Arabic by

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On the Eve of Good Friday, 1981 at St Mina Church, Fleming, Alexandria, Egypt

Why should we contemplate Christ's Passion?

Encouraging the believers to persist in fighting sin and in “*enduring the race that is set before us*”, St Paul the Apostle asks us to contemplate the Passion of Christ “*the author and finisher of our faith ... For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.*” In a gentle reproach of our weakness, he goes on adding that we “*have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin*” [Hebrews 12:1-4].

Tonight is a holy night that the Church has consecrated to contemplate, reflect and indeed share in the sufferings and passion of The Lord even if very little, even if for a single night.

Christ talks to us tonight, just as He talked to Simon Peter on that night at Gethsemane—for Simon and all the other disciples had sleepy eyes and heavy hearts from sadness and “*fell asleep*”, only to be awakened by Christ who wanted to share His Passion with them, asking “*Simon, couldn't you just stay up with me for one hour?*”

Tonight is a night we stay up to share and reflect on the passion of Christ, even if for a single hour.

Suffering is the key to Christianity, for Christ is perfected in his suffering.

It is through His sufferings and passion that Christ is perfect: “*Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.*” [Luke 13:32] He said this prophesizing with regards to the passion He was about to endure in Jerusalem. St Paul emphasizes this by characterizing Christ's passion as the fullness of Christ, noting that “*it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell ... having made peace through the blood of His cross*” [Colossians 1:19-20].

My beloved in Christ: suffering is the key to Christianity. Without believing in the suffering and passion of Christ, there is no way we would know Christ, nor would it be possible to understand Christianity. Today, Christians in general, and the Copts of Egypt in particular, are constantly asked: Why all this gore? Why all this pain? Why did Christ have to suffer?

Sadly, these questions are not only posed by non Christians, but unfortunately, they have become the subject of their ridicule. This is why we as Christians must be prepared and ready to answer these questions – and in the process reveal the secret of our faith and hope.

The Jewish crowds walked with Christ up to the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, for the Gospel says: “*Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!*” [Matthew 21:9] But, these waves of crowds quickly dissipated when they saw His passion unfold.

When presented with His suffering and passion, the Jewish people (as with many unbelievers today) were not able to accept Christ. They accepted Him as a healer who performs miracles, and who feeds crowds of thousands with five loaves of bread. But, whenever He spoke of His upcoming passion, they rejected Him.

St Paul explains that “*Christ crucified is to the Jews a stumbling block*” [1 Corinthians 1:23-24]. One can expect that reaction from the Jewish people who wanted “*a sign*” of glory and power that identifies their long-awaited Messiah “*the Son of David ... who comes in the name of the Lord!*” To them, the cross was not a sign but rather a stumbling block.

To intellectuals and philosophers, exemplified at the time of Jesus by the Greeks and in our world today by atheists, the cross makes absolutely no sense, and those who take pride in Christ’s passion are fools, as St Paul exclaims “*Christ crucified is to the Greeks foolishness.*”

To all those who want to accept Christ only as a great teacher and prophet, like Muslims and others, the crucifix does not make any sense; they just want to forget about it, perhaps by just pretending it “really never happened” and that the whole passion was a figment of their imagination – a fantasy “made up by his disciples and followers.”

My beloved, this is exactly why many people walk with Jesus up to the beginning of His Passion, up to the gates of Jerusalem, and just leave him there.

My beloved, a Jesus who is stripped of His Passion – even if honored and revered by the world and by non Christians – is not our Christ. For we join St Paul in proclaiming that “*Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*” It is in the crucifix that the power of Christ was revealed, for in His weakness, He has revealed what is greater than strength. Indeed, as He explains to St Paul: “*My strength is made perfect in weakness.*” [Corinthians-2 12:9] And, it is in the crucifix that the wisdom of God that was veiled for thousands of years was revealed in Christ Jesus.

Without the passion of Christ, there would be no salvation for humanity. Our Christian faith as professed by the early fathers and carried to us on a “*cloud of witnesses*”, and as recited in the core of our creed by children and elders alike, states that “*Christ was crucified for us during the reign of Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. He arose from the dead on the third day, according to the Scriptures.*”

Christ is the “incarnate” Son of God, the “suffering” Son of God, and the “crucified” Son of God. In truth, He became man and suffered to death on the cross. This is not a matter of “imagination” or “illusions” as many who want to honor Christ want us to believe! Those who find it incomprehensible that Christ would face such suffering and death have not tasted nor have they experienced the depths of His love to humanity. If they did, they would embrace the cross and believe in the crucified to the end of time!

St Athanasius, the author of our creed, explains this very clearly in his treatise “*On the Incarnation of the Word*”. St Athanasius explains that humans, who are God’s creation, fell to the devil. He then asks if it is conceivable for God to accept to see His creation perish. Could God simply turn His back and leave mankind – which He created after His own image – to be defeated by the devil? This is not conceivable! This is why St Athanasius insists that it was necessary for God to intervene to save His fallen creation, for it was inconceivable for God to accept to see sin prevail. Would a father stay still seeing his son or daughter fall sick and risk

dying from a disease? Wouldn't he intervene and do everything in his capacity to seek a cure? As Christ Jesus explains *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give to those who ask Him!"* [Luke 11:13]. If we, with all our weaknesses and shortcomings, do not hesitate to sacrifice our life for our children, how dare we question God's willingness or capacity to save His children whom He created in His image?

As Christians, we must walk with Christ through the gates of Jerusalem and all the way to the feet of the cross. Like John the Evangelist, we must sit with Christ at the table, resting our heads on His bosom, and we must stand next to His cross to witness His ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. For it is John's faithfulness to Christ that got him to be the first to witness Christ's resurrection – John being the first to enter the empty tomb on Easter Sunday! Indeed, if we are to witness Christ's glory in the resurrection, we must first witness His suffering and passion.

The importance of walking with Christ through His Passion, suffering, and death

Why is it important for us to reflect in Christ's suffering? It is because contemplating in Christ's suffering helps us deal with the pain and suffering we experience in our own lives. As St Paul emphasizes, we should remember His pain so that we would not give up when we are faced with our own suffering and temptations. This is why we must walk with Christ and get a taste of His suffering, even if our experience is extremely diluted.

My beloved, St Paul warns that all those who want to follow Jesus will be prosecuted. But even then, our suffering and our prosecution are yet to reach the level that our fathers had to endure, as St Paul said for we *"have not yet resisted to bloodshed"* [Hebrews 12:1-4].

We should not shy away from our cross, for as St John Chrysostom says: *"I cry for those who shy away from the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"*.

The two types of sufferings of Christ: His Bodily and Emotional Wounds

Prophet Isaiah – often described as the fifth evangelist due to his almost complete prophecies of the birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ – describes the suffering Christ as *"a man of sorrows"* who was *"acquainted with grief"* and who *"was wounded for our transgressions"* [Isaiah 53:3-5]. Here, Isaiah differentiates between the two sources of Christ's sorrow: His physical sufferings inflicted by the wounds to His body, as well as the sufferings and grief that He had to withstand emotionally.

Christ was full in his humanity. As such He experienced both bodily pain and emotional pain.

When we contemplate Christ's passion, we often focus on His bodily wounds – the smiting of His holy body, the bruises on His shoulders from carrying the cross, the crown of thorns on His holy head, the piercing of His holy hands, feet, and chest, *etc.* These are the wounds captured by artists in paintings and emphasized by artists in movies. These are the wounds reflected in the shroud of Turin and the ones that Thomas wanted to check!

Every time I contemplate Christ's passion, I recall my pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1965. During Holy Week, and as we were walking with scores of pilgrims down the narrow alleys of Jerusalem, following the various stations of the cross, we came across a church that stands where The Lord was smitten. Until this day, and from the days of the Romans, still etched on the grounds there are marks from the horseshoes of the horses used by the Roman guards, as well as

markings from various games they played on the grounds around the Church, and in one spot, a sign in Roman read *“on this spot, the Roman guards cast a lot on Christ’s robe”*. Inside that church, in a dark corner I came across a statue made out of white marble of Christ lying on the ground after being smitten. The injuries on Christ’s body were marked with red coloring on the white marble – a beautiful, very expressive statue that is left in a dark corner, away from where the crowds typically congregate. This prompted me to ask my guide: “why don’t you display this statue more prominently in the middle of the church?” He answered: *“Well, let me tell you... This statue was originally in the middle of the church. But when thousands of pilgrims walk through the church during Holy Week, hundreds of them would fall down in tears just from looking at the statue.”* He added, *“We had no choice but to remove it from the middle of everything”*. My beloved, if this is our reaction to an artist’s rendition on a piece of marble of the pain of suffering of Jesus Christ, how would our reaction be if we witnessed it for real! Indeed, it is as if we were reading a Gospel etched in the stones.

But, what about the invisible wounds that Christ had to sustain? What about Christ’s grief and His emotional pain and suffering? My beloved, one cannot truly appreciate Christ’s passion without contemplating His emotional grief and sorrow.

Tonight we reflect on Christ’s emotional grief and sorrow.

As the Gospel tells us, as soon as Christ set His sight on the cross at Gethsemane, He increasingly felt sorrowful, saying *“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death”* [Matthew 26:38]. So what is the nature of that sorrow that inflicted Christ’s soul? We can see at least five such types of sorrows – each of which would pain the whole world, and all of which were bourn by Christ without *“opening His mouth”* as prophesized by Isaiah who exclaims: *“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His Mouth”* [Isaiah 53:7].

Feeling hated

The first emotional wound that afflicted Christ’s soul and indeed His heart is His feeling of being hated by those whom He loved. Indeed, in speaking to His disciples on the eve of His Passion, He said: *“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you”* [John 15:18]. He also warns them that *“you will be hated by all for My name’s sake”* [Luke 21:17]. Speaking to the Jews he asks: *“Why do you seek to kill Me?”* [John 7:19].

It is very difficult for a loving heart to find the reflection of its love to be hate. To understand this we should ask who are these people who hate Jesus back then (the Jews) as well as today (the World)? Well, John the Evangelist gives us the answers: *“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him”* [John 1:11]. And why did He come in the first place? It is because *“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* [John 3:16].

Christ loved His own people (the Jews) as well as His whole creation (the whole world). He loved them not for anything they did – for they were a people with a lot not to like! Indeed, John the Evangelist condemns them saying *“the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil”* [John 3:19]. Jesus Himself spoke of their evil ways for they *“pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith”*, for they *“strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”*, and for they *“cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of*

extortion and self-indulgence” [Matthew 23:23-25]. Later in that passage, Christ asks: *“Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”* [Matthew 23:33] Interestingly, it is Jesus Himself who provides them with the only way to escape condemnation – Himself!

But despite their evil works, Christ still loved them. Indeed, it is because of human sin that Christ came in the first place: *“For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance”* [Matthew 9:13].

Christ loved them for no reason, and they hated Him for no reason! How painful could this contradiction be?

So, what is Christ’s answer to this grief, to this unexplainable mistreatment? As He enters Jerusalem, the city that will kill Him, knowing quite well the utter destruction that was going to hit it 40 years later, He cried, saying: *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”* [Matthew 23:37]. Not only that, but after His resurrection, He instructed His disciples that *“repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”* [Luke 24:47].

Often times, we Christians find ourselves going through a similar experience. Often times, a Christian finds himself or herself spreading goodness to all, but in return for this act of love, he or she is faced with acts of utter hate. This was an experience of Christ. My beloved, blessed are you if you go through a similar experience because you have shared in Christ’s passion, as you have partaken from one type of pain He had to endure. And, as He forgave those who crucified Him, you too should follow his example.

My beloved, these days being a witness for the name of Christ subjects us to deadly hate. This is not new. Indeed, the Gospel tells us of the reaction of the world to Lazarus – a silent witness for the work of Christ, who brought Lazarus back to life after having being buried for three days. Lazarus’ mere existence irritated the enemies of Christianity to the point that they wanted to kill not only Jesus, but Lazarus as well as the Gospel says: *But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus.”* [John 12:10-11].

My beloved, don’t be afraid if Christ’s enemies conspire to kill you as they have conspired to kill Lazarus. We should not be afraid because, as the Gospel tells us, it was not Lazarus who died, but Christ. They conspired to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. But, it was Christ’s death that ended the conspiracy against Lazarus. Similarly, in any conspiracy against us we should know that Christ has already endured it for us – His passion is our salvation.

Feeling oppressed

The second emotional wound is oppression – the feeling of being treated unfairly. Isaiah sums up Christ’s passion in one sentence: *“He was oppressed”* [Isaiah 53:7].

Twice He was wronged by the Jewish court at the Sanhedrim. He had to face false witnesses. All along, the Jewish high priests planned to kill Jesus, yet they anointed themselves as Judges!?! He had to contend with a government that is unfair in that it is unable to control the mobs, the rioters

and the bullies who shouted “*crucify Him*” – a powerful government that chose not to exert its power, but instead to let an innocent man be indicted! Oppression!

Even those who committed this oppression admitted it. Judas after delivering Him to the Jews comes back the next day saying, “*I have sinned by betraying innocent blood*” [Matthew 27:4]. Pontius Pilate admits that “*I find no fault in this Man*” [Luke 23:4] and “*while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, Have nothing to do with that just Man*” [Matthew 27:19]. The guards at the cross acknowledged that “*Truly this was the Son of God!*” [Matthew 27:54], which is the very accusation made by the scribes, the Pharisees, and the High Priests that “*He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God*” [John 19:7].

So, what did Isaiah say was Christ’s answer to this blatant oppression?? “*He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth*” [Isaiah 53:7].

What was the answer of the heavens to this oppression? “*The sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two*” [Luke 23:45] “*and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised*” [Matthew 27:51-52]. O beloved, since the living were not able to be just, it was the will of God that the dead would be witnesses of His innocence!

Christ’s answer?? “*He opened not His mouth*” [Isaiah 53:7].

My beloved, in many instances a Christian is forced to get a taste of oppression. Oppressed? My beloved, if we are oppressed, our conduct should follow that of Christ, for “*He opened not His mouth.*” Would that be weakness? Would that be cowardliness? No my beloved! On this St Peter emphasizes that while Christ was wrongly accused, He surrendered His fate to the rule of a fair judge. To whom did Christ surrender His fate? To Pontius Pilate? No! Pontius Pilate was not a fair judge, for he declared that he found “*no fault in this Man*” [Luke 23:4], yet he delivered Jesus to the Jewish mobs to be crucified. On this St Peter says that in the flesh, when He was judged as a human, Christ surrendered His fate to God the Father, who is truly the fair judge. When rulers of our world commit injustices towards us, we know that God is just. This is why the Church finds plenty of consolation in the words of Isaiah the prophet: “*No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment, you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me, says the Lord.*” [Isaiah 54:17].

My beloved, the verdict of “innocent” will come from God!

Feeling ashamed

The third emotional wound that Christ had to endure is the feeling of shame and ridicule. Isaiah the Prophet describes it aptly saying: “*He is despised and rejected by men.*” Notice that even His own followers contributed to these feelings of shame and ridicule, for as Isaiah adds “*And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him*” [Isaiah 53:3].

Tonight the Gospels document this shame and ridicule very clearly, with servants covering His face, beating Him, and asking Him to identify the one who hit Him! St Mark with his sharp attention to details notes that it was not until after Christ was mocked that He was crucified. He details that mocking by noting that “*they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of*

thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him. And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him" [Mark 15:17-20].

They spat on Him?! They spat on the face that is more beautiful than the face of any human?! Indeed as Isaiah prophesized, “[He] gave [His] back to the smiters, and [His] cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: [He] hid not [His] face from shame and spitting.” [Isaiah 50:6]. They spat on the One whose spit created new eyes for the man born blind! What an injustice!

The Gospel adds that when Jesus was sent to Herod, “*Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him*” [Luke 23:11]. We also know that while on the cross, “*those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!*” [Mark 15:29-30]. What disgrace? What mockery? And what was Jesus’ answer to all this? Not a word. To Herod, we read that “*He answered him nothing*” [Luke 23:9]. Pilate asks Him, “*Do You not hear how many things they testify against You? But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly.*” [Matthew 27:13-14].

Throughout His Holy Passion, Christ did not defend Himself in the face of all of the false accusations leveled against Him – with only one exception. When one of the officers who stood by slapped Jesus with the palm of his hand to force Him to properly answer the accusations leveled by the high priest, Jesus answered him, “*If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?*” [John 18:23]. My beloved, Christ said this, not in self defense, but indeed to win the soul of this officer who did not know what he was doing – perhaps these calm words would make this officer think about his actions, and come back to his senses. Even in His deepest pain, Christ could not stop thinking about saving yet one more lost sheep.

St Paul went through this experience of being mocked and ridiculed. While he was preaching to the crowds in Rome, he was called drunk and ridiculed as hallucinating. Similarly, we as Christians are often subjected to ridicule. These days, unfortunately, this ridicule comes through the television from tongues that do not understand Christ. The only thing we can do is ask the Lord to forgive them too, for they know not what they are saying. But, just as Christ answered the officer so that this ignorant officer may, perhaps, think again, I want to take this opportunity and answer a mocking commentary, broadcast on national television two weeks ago in case anybody cares to hear and think about our answer. In that commentary, an infamous sheikh ridiculed baptism saying “Christians immerse a baby in water and believe that this way, the baby is christened. Does believing in Christ come from the water or from the heart?” We must know the answer to this question, and the answer does not come from me, but from St John Chrysostom some 1,500 years ago, long before that infamous sheikh was born! What did St John Chrysostom say? He said that the Christian sacraments confer the invisible acts of God’s grace on humans using visible means. The water in which the baby is immersed and the bread and wine which are offered on the altar for the forgiveness of our sins are all visible means via which God gives us His invisible gift of salvation. St John Chrysostom explains that when Christ gave us the sacrament of the Eucharist, He asked us to share in eating the bread and wine, which are visible things we can eat and taste, as a way of partaking of the offering of His Body and Blood on the cross. God is offering us the invisible gift of His salvation through the visible act of communing from the same chalice.

Similarly, the faith and the new life that we get from Baptism are administered through immersion in water – something we can see, feel, and experience. St John Chrysostom asks us to consider who is at the receiving end of these spiritual, invisible gifts? Are they spiritual, invisible beings like the angels and archangels? No. These gifts are given to us humans who are still in the flesh and blood. Unlike angels, we interact with our world and with each other through our senses – touching the baptismal water, seeing the breaking of the bread, tasting the wine from the chalice, smelling the burning incense, hearing and joining in the hymns of praise... It is because of our weaknesses in this life that God is graceful enough to give us His gifts through material forms we can see and feel in the flesh. This is the reason. Indeed, there will come the day when we take off this material body and enjoy the invisible spiritual gifts in heavens without any need for materialistic means. There will come the day when – as it was revealed to John the Evangelist – we will join the great feast with The Lamb, without the need for bread and wine, for as heavenly beings, we will be in the bosom of Christ.

My beloved, the only thing we can do to those who ridicule our faith in Christ is to repeat the words of St Athanasius: *“What exactly deserves to be ridiculed in the acts of Christ on the cross?”*

Feeling betrayed

The fourth emotional wound that Christ suffered is that of the betrayal of His beloved. The betrayal of the one that ate from His bread, the one that He entrusted with the money box.

The prophet Zachariah likens the grief from betrayal by beloved ones to the pain from the nails. Hundreds of years before the crucifix, he said: *“What are these wounds in Your hands?...Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends”* [Zechariah 13:6].

Judah is one of the twelve disciples that Christ loved to the end. Perhaps He even expressed more love to Judah than to other disciples. Jesus entrusted Judah with the money box. To the end, Christ was reaching out to Judah, giving him yet one more chance for repentance. We know this from the Gospel of John, in which we read: *“When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.’ Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke. Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom He spoke. Then, leaning back on Jesus’ breast, he said to Him, ‘Lord, who is it?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.’ And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon.”* [John 13:21-26]. Jesus had Judah sitting right next to Him at the table. Christ broke the bread and gave it to him in his mouth, knowing quite well that the thirty pieces of silver were in his pocket! And to add insult to the injury of betrayal, Judah had the guts to ask *“Rabbi, is it I?”* [Matthew 26:25].

Jesus even washed Judah’s feet! We read the account from St John that after supper *“He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.”* [John 13:5]. St John Chrysostom, the “Golden Mouth,” explains that Christ must have washed Judah’s feet first among the disciples. Why? Because any other disciple other than Judah would have objected to Christ’s washing of their feet just as Simon Peter did, saying *“You shall never wash my feet!”* [John 13:8]. Peter was not the first one to get washed, for the Gospel said *“Then He came to Simon Peter”* [John 13:6]. Reflecting on this, St John Chrysostom asserts that it must have been the case that Christ washed Judah’s feet first and then

He came to Peter, and after the rest of the disciples heard the explanation that Christ gave to Peter for why it was necessary to wash their feet, for *“If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me”* [John 13:8]. Hearing this, the rest of the disciples did not object further.

Not only did Judah have the guts to let the one he betrayed wash his feet and give him the bread in his mouth, but in Gethsemane, as accounted by the evangelists he calls him *“Rabbi”* (i.e., teacher) and kisses him. To this day, this is the *“kiss of betrayal”*, the *“kiss of death.”* How painful of a betrayal!

St Paul experienced the pain of beloved ones forsaking him, as he says: *“for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia.”* [2 Timothy 4:10].

My beloved, do you sometimes feel forsaken by those you love? If you do, you are partaking from Christ’s suffering; you are a partner in His Passion.

Feeling lonely

The last emotional wound we will reflect on is the pain of loneliness. In His hour of suffering, in His passion, Christ was alone, for even the remaining faithful disciples and apostles could not stay awake, and later on, they all ran away as St Mark admits: *“Then they all forsook Him and fled”* [Mark 14:50]. Loneliness at times of tribulations and distress hurts. We read in the Gospel that *“He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed”* asking Peter and the two sons of Zebedee to *“stay with Me and watch with Me”* for *“My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death”*, and later on reproaching them when they couldn’t saying *“What, could you not watch with Me one hour?”* [Matthew 26:37-40].

Even Peter from afar denied knowing Christ. Cursing and swearing, Peter said *“I do not know the Man!”* [Matthew 26:74]. Notice that Christ knew that He will be alone and indeed was distressed and sorrowful because He knew that they will all leave Him alone – *“I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me”* [Luke 22:34]. How painful it must have been for Christ to listen to Peter’s denial, for the Gospel tells us that after Peter swore that he does not know Jesus, *“the Lord turned and looked at Peter”* [Luke 22:61]. Simon Peter, the “rock” on which the church is to be built denied Him and left Him alone.

This is why Isaiah the prophet speaking for Jesus says: *“I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me.”* [Isaiah 63:3].

What does Christ do to those who left Him alone? He assures them and strengthens their beliefs, saying *“All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: ‘I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.”* [Mark 14:27]. The Good Shepherd prays for them. Speaking to Peter, He assures him that *“I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren”* [Luke 22:32].

What does Christ do to those who left Him alone? He comes back and gives them company when they are lost and feel lonely. Even in the midst of His tribulations, the Lord, the Good Shepherd took the time and *“turned and looked at Peter”* – a look that may indeed have saved Peter... On Easter day, He finds two of His apostles that fled from Gethsemane, He walks with

them, strengthen their faith and brings them the joy of His resurrection. He later on visits His disciples and brings them peace and joy, and before too long, He sends them His Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to comfort them!

We all often leave Him, but He does not. Why? St Paul gives us the answer: because He cannot deny Himself; *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”* [Timothy-2 2:13].

St Paul experienced the pain of being alone in tribulations. In his letter to Timothy he writes: *“At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me... But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me... And I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.”* [Timothy-2 4:16 -17].

My beloved, if in one day or in a difficult moment you experience the loss of loved ones and feel lonely, don't be afraid, for God will remain faithful. St Paul experienced this difficult test. In his later years, as he got old, St Paul who was surrounded with the multitude of faithful believers throughout his evangelical travels all over Asia and Europe experienced the pain of being lonely. We see this in the picture he paints in his letter to Timothy, when he says: *“Only Luke is with me.”* [Timothy-2 4:11] Later he adds, *“Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me”*. [Timothy-2 4:17].

My beloved, do not be afraid if one day, as a true witness for Christ, you feel that you are out there in the field, alone. Do not be afraid because God will remain faithful for *“He cannot deny Himself.”* As He Himself said: *“Do not fear therefore... for whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.”* [Matthew 10:31-33]. Indeed, as proclaimed in the revelation to John, *“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”* [Revelation 3:5].

My beloved, if you feel lonely, just join David in proclaiming that *“even if my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take care of me.”* [Psalms 27:10].

Sharing in Christ's Passion is a unique gift

Yes, my beloved, these emotional wounds are the ones that we are likely to experience. These are wounds that we should cherish because they allow us to share in Christ's passion. While Churches of Christian minorities may look to the Christian world as small or insignificant, these Churches were given the unique gift of sharing in Christ's emotional wounds of feeling hated, oppressed, ashamed, betrayed, and lonely. These wounds are gifts that make our Church a true witness for Christ. If our Church appears to the rest of the world to be weakened by prosecution, remember that He said *“My strength is made perfect in weakness.”* [Corinthians-2 12:9]. Indeed, all we need is the grace of God, because in our apparent weakness, the strength of Christ is completed. Indeed, contradicting the wisdom of the world and its philosophy, in the eyes of God, our suffering church is strong for it is the arm of God that supported and will continue to support it through the ages.

May Christ our Savior, who was crucified in weakness, but conquered death with the full strength of His resurrection, lead us to the cross in His victory parade. May we always be faithful to the end so that we may be enthroned with Him when we see Him face to face.

May Christ be glorified in His Church now and forever and ever. Amen.