



# THE COLORS OF THE CROSS

## A RETREAT GUIDE FOR LENT

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## INTRODUCTION

### God's Presence & Retreat Overview

Christians have been celebrating Lent — in some form or other — since the earliest days of the Church.

And this Lenten period of fasting and penance has always been somehow related to the holiest days in the liturgical cycle: The three-day Paschal celebration of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday.

And the center of that celebration is the Cross.

- In carrying the cross, Jesus takes upon himself the sins of the world.
- In obediently and lovingly dying on the cross, Jesus atones for those sins.
- In rising again from the dead, Jesus makes the sign of the cross into the banner of his everlasting victory over evil.

The Cross was absolutely central to Christ's life and mission. And so, it must be absolutely central to the life and mission of us Christians.

Why did God make the Cross so central to his Son's life? Why did God make the Cross so central to our lives? And how can we carry our crosses as courageously and fruitfully as Jesus carried his?

Those are the questions that this Retreat Guide, *The Colors of the Cross*, will invite you to reflect on, to meditate on, and to pray about.



- In the first meditation-starter, we will tackle the first question (Why did God make the Cross so central to our faith?), and we will seek an answer in the first color of the Cross: the earth-brown color of the wood itself.
- In the second meditation-starter, we will tackle the second question (Why did God make the Cross so central to our lives?), and we will seek its answer in the second color of the Cross: the red color of Christ's life-giving blood.
- In the conference, we will look at the third color of the Cross — the simple skin-color of Christ's complete humanity, which will help us get practical and explain the age-old Catholic exercise of uniting our own sufferings to Christ's cross by "offering it up."



## INTRODUCTION

### *Preparing for the Retreat*

Before you dive in, take a few minutes to turn the eyes of your heart to God, to thank him for giving you this time to spend in quiet prayer, and to ask him for the graces you need, especially the grace to penetrate, a little more deeply, the glorious mystery of the saving Cross of Jesus Christ.





## FIRST MEDITATION

### *The Cross Was Central to Christ's Mission*

God, all-powerful and all-wise, could have chosen an infinite number of ways to redeem the fallen human race.

And from all those possibilities, he chose the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Because of this, we know that the Cross was not a mistake.

The events and prophecies of the Old Testament were pointing towards the Cross.

Jesus himself explained that the Cross was the necessary centerpiece of his redeeming mission.

Talking to his Twelve Apostles, he explained that



*The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*

– Luke 9:22

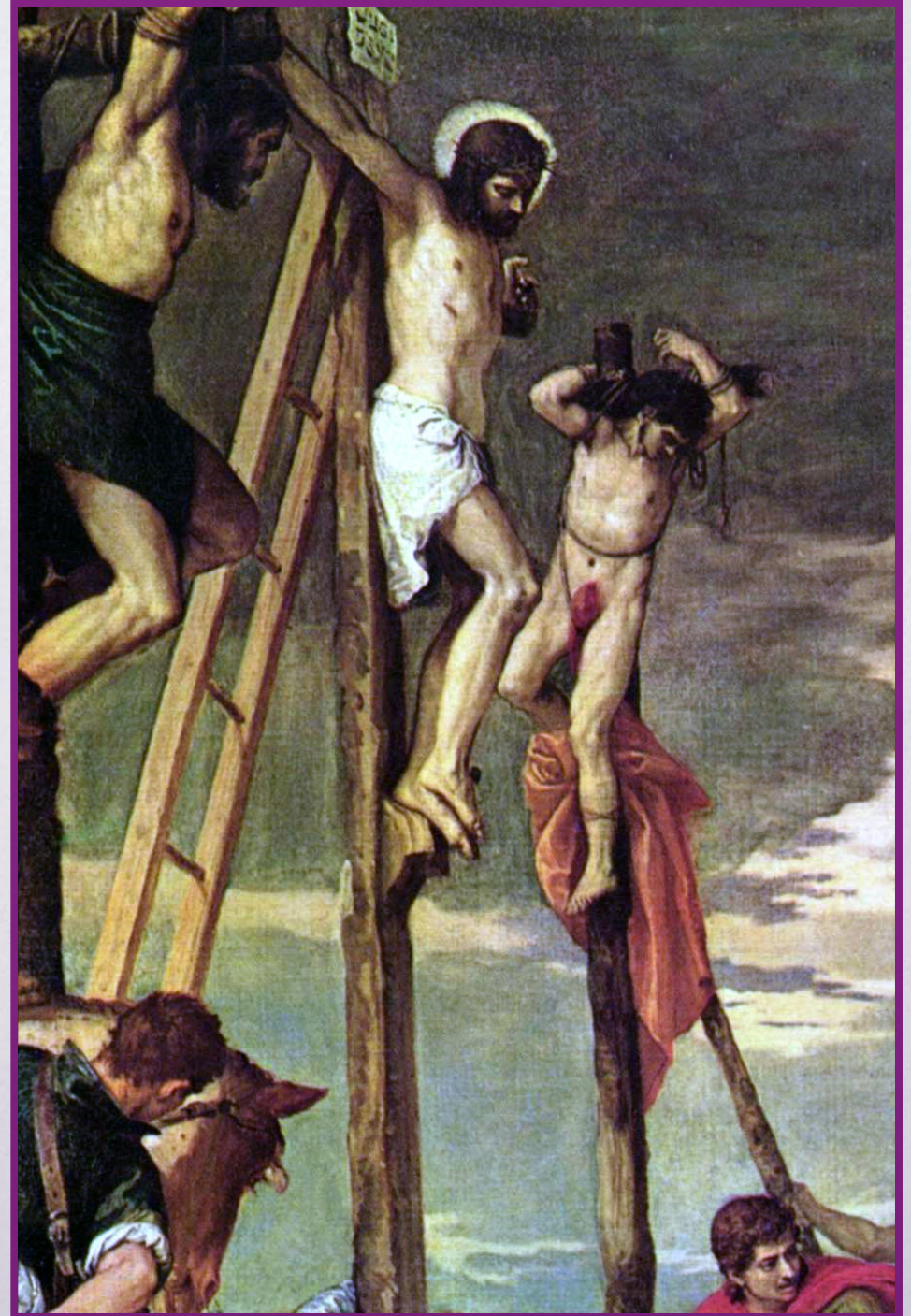
And later, as the fateful day of the crucifixion was drawing near, and Jesus was beginning to feel the pressure, he made the same point again when he said,



*I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.*

– John 12:27

There is simply no doubt about it. The Cross was absolutely central to the Mission of Christ. But why?





## FIRST MEDITATION

### *Untying the Knot of Eden*

The answer to that question is vast, and mysterious, and inexhaustible. But we know for certain at least one of the reasons.

To understand that reason, we need to go back to the beginning.

God's original plan for the human family was spoiled by original sin.

Through original sin, our first parents rebelled against God and separated themselves from his friendship. That brought evil, death, and suffering into the world.

At the root of that sinful and destructive rebellion was an act of arrogance, of diabolical pride, by which Adam and Eve tried to take over the place of God.

Here is how the Catechism describes it:



*In that sin man preferred himself to God and by that very act scorned him. He chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good.*

– CCC 398

After original sin, God had a choice to make, so to speak:

He could abandon the human rebels and let them suffer to the full the consequences of their actions, or he could save and redeem them.

He chose the second option. He sent a Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus, to repair the destruction caused by original sin, reversed the act of diabolical pride by committing an act of heroic humility. Instead of elevating himself, as Adam and Eve had tried to do, he humbled himself.

Here's how St. Paul puts it:



*Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.*

– Philippians 2:5–9

By being obedient to this extreme of absolute humility, Jesus untied the knot of original sin. He rebuilt the bridge of communion between God and the human family, between heaven and earth.





## FIRST MEDITATION

### *The Color of “Humus”*

And that humble sacrifice is why the first color of the Cross is the brown earth-color of the wood.

The word humility comes from the Latin root word, “humus,” which means earth or soil. The same Latin term is at the root of our word for “humanity.”

An act of humility always involves keeping ourselves in our place as created human beings, as earthly.



That’s just the opposite of sin, which follows the example of the builders of the Tower of Babel, who tried to force their way into the divine realm, leaving their earthly origins behind and transforming themselves into gods.

And the color of the earth is brown: the same as the color of the Cross.

The Cross is the stage of the greatest act of humility in human history, which repaired for the monstrous act of pride at the dawn of that history.



## FIRST MEDITATION

### *The Beauty of Humility*

The Cross was central to Christ's mission because he came to atone for all sin, and only absolute humility could do that. And only Jesus, true God and true man, could make an act of absolute humility.

For the rest of us, humility — being earthly, created, close to the “humus” — is a natural state; that's what we are supposed to be; pride and arrogance are the aberrations.

But Jesus was the Divine Word of God become man: he deserved to be revered, and worshipped, and elevated. And yet, for our sake, to redeem us from our sins, to fix what we had broken and could not fix ourselves, he chose to be scorned, rejected, and humiliated, to the extreme.

If Jesus hadn't humbled himself, we would have no hope of recovering the abundant, eternal life that we lost because of original sin, and that we long for in the depths of our hearts.

Humility is the soil from which true happiness springs, just as “humus” is the soil from which all earthly plants grow.

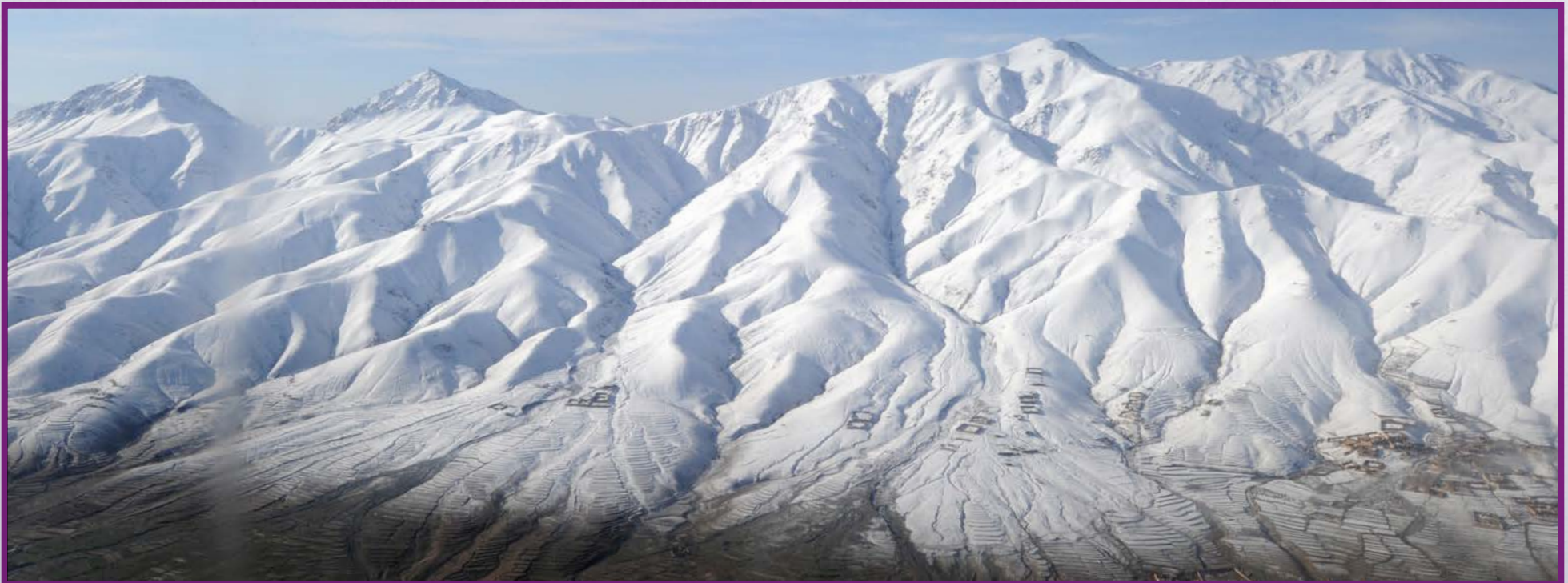
Picture a high mountain, a snow-covered mountain.

Where would you rather live, on the peak of that towering mountain, or in the valley at its foot? The peak is far away, magnificent, impressive — but there is no life there: only snow, rocks, and cold wind. Nothing can grow in those harsh conditions.

The valley is closer, less visible, and less impressive from a distance. But it is teeming with life — the sun melts the snows on the peak, and the waters flow down the mountain and irrigate the valley, giving it glorious life.

Pride is like the peak of that mountain, and humility is like the valley.

Jesus, by humbling himself and accepting death on a cross, melted the pride of our fallen human family, and renewed the flow of grace in our hearts, giving us new life, new hope, new strength.





## FIRST MEDITATION

### Conclusion & Further Reflection

When we look at the crucifix, is this beautiful humility what we see?

When we look at the crucifix, do we let ourselves be amazed by God who goes to such extremes to ransom his rebellious sheep?

When we look at the crucifix, do our hearts fill with gratitude for such a gift?

When we look at the crucifix, are we moved to repent from our self-centeredness and arrogance and to follow Christ's example of loving humility?

Let's take some time now to gaze at our Lord on the cross, to meditate on the first color of the Cross, the brown, earth-color of absolute humility, which opened the door of hope and laid the groundwork for our salvation.

1

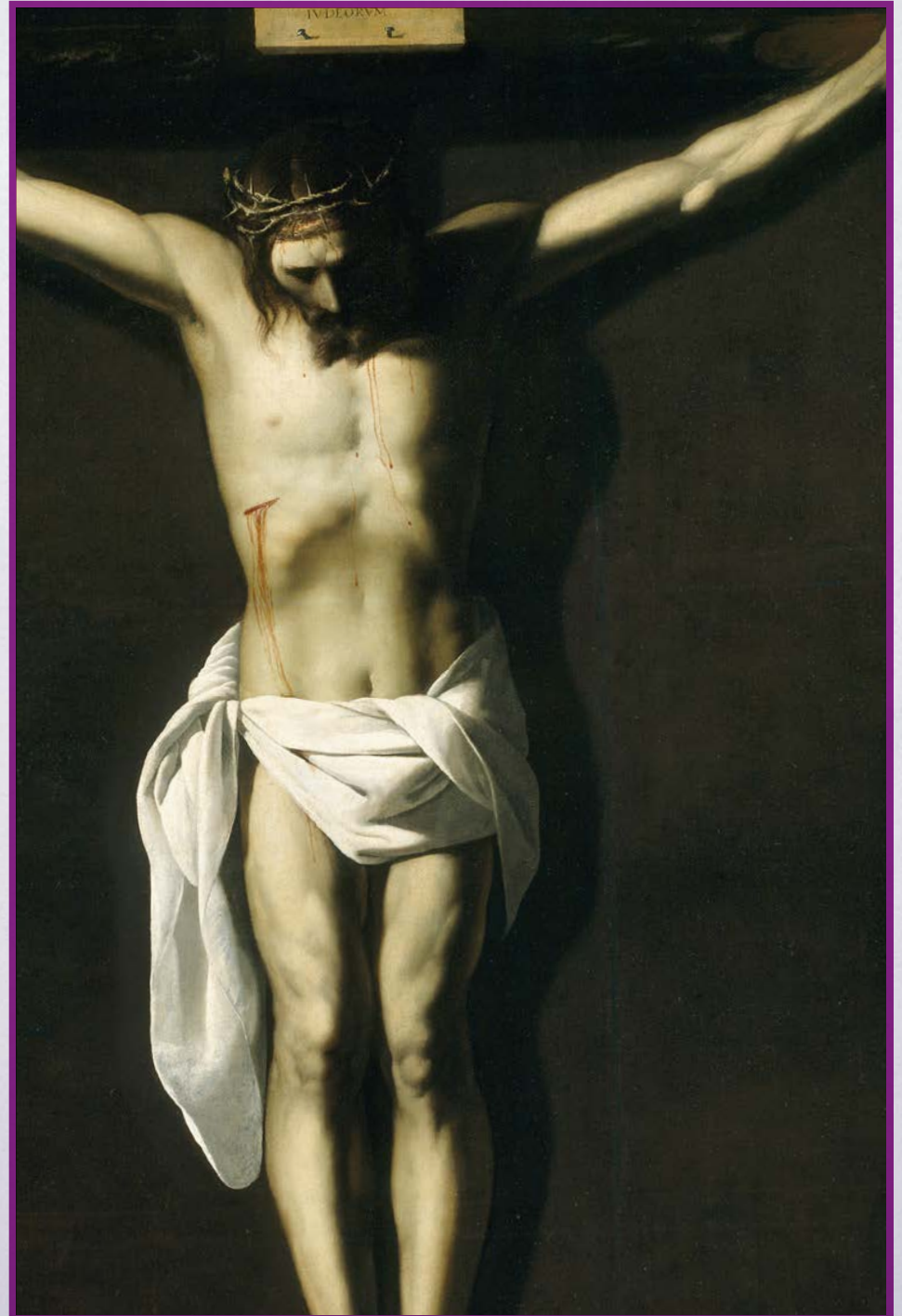
When was the last time I looked at a crucifix and thanked Jesus for what he did for me on that first Good Friday? What do I usually think of when I look at the crucifix?

2

When Jesus was dying on the cross, he was thinking of me — as the Catechism puts it “Christ did not live his life for himself but for us” (CCC 519). What was he thinking? If he could have spoken to me from the Cross, what would he have said? Converse with him as he hangs there, opening your heart to him, and letting him open his heart to you.

3

When I think of the virtue of humility, what comes to mind? What place does this virtue have in my own efforts to grow spiritually? What place would I like it to have?







Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

– Philippians 2:5–9



But he bestows a greater grace; therefore, it says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you of two minds.

– James 4:6–7



Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 18:4



Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves.

– Matthew 11:29



And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for: "God opposes the proud but bestows favor on the humble."

– 1 Peter 5:5



Good and upright is the LORD, therefore he shows sinners the way; He guides the humble in righteousness, and teaches the humble his way.

– Psalm 25:8–9



Thus says the LORD: The heavens are my throne, the earth, my footstool. What house can you build for me? Where is the place of my rest? My hand made all these things when all of them came to be — oracle of the LORD. This is the one whom I approve: the afflicted one, crushed in spirit, who trembles at my word.

– Isaiah 66:1–2



For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

– 1 Corinthians 1:22–25





## SECOND MEDITATION

### *The Cross as the New Tree of Life*

The Cross was central to Christ's mission, because he reversed the pride of sin with his act of absolute humility. And if the Cross was central for him, it also must be central for his followers — for you and me.

Jesus doesn't leave any room for doubt on this score. St. Luke tells us that Jesus, speaking to all of his followers (not just The Twelve), said:



*If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*

— Luke 9:23

Through his own cross, Jesus opened the path of eternal life. Through our crosses, we follow that path.



The Fathers of the Church called the Cross the new “Tree of Life,” taking the place of the old tree of life in the Garden of Eden, which was forfeited by original sin.

It is easy to see that we all have crosses — no one is exempt from difficulties and sufferings in life. But it is not so easy to see how these crosses can increase the life of grace in our souls. How does that work?



## SECOND MEDITATION

### *While We Were Yet Sinners*

The answer is found in the second color of the Cross: red — the red of Christ's blood, poured out on the cross, staining the wood of the cross and revealing to us for all time the real motivation behind Jesus' redeeming self-sacrifice: love.

Red is the color of blood, and blood is the symbol of life itself. And the meaning of life, as God has revealed it to us in Christ, is love: self-giving, self-sacrifice, self-forgetfulness.

As Jesus put it during the Last Supper:



*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

— John 15:13

On the cross, Jesus not only reveals the horror of our sin — the fruits of our rebellious pride — but he also reveals the totality of his love.

Jesus didn't redeem us because we deserved to be redeemed, or because he had to; Jesus redeemed us, gave his life in atonement for our sins, because he loved us.

God wanted to reveal the totality of his love, and so he ordained that Jesus must suffer not just a little bit, but immensely, profusely, to the extreme.

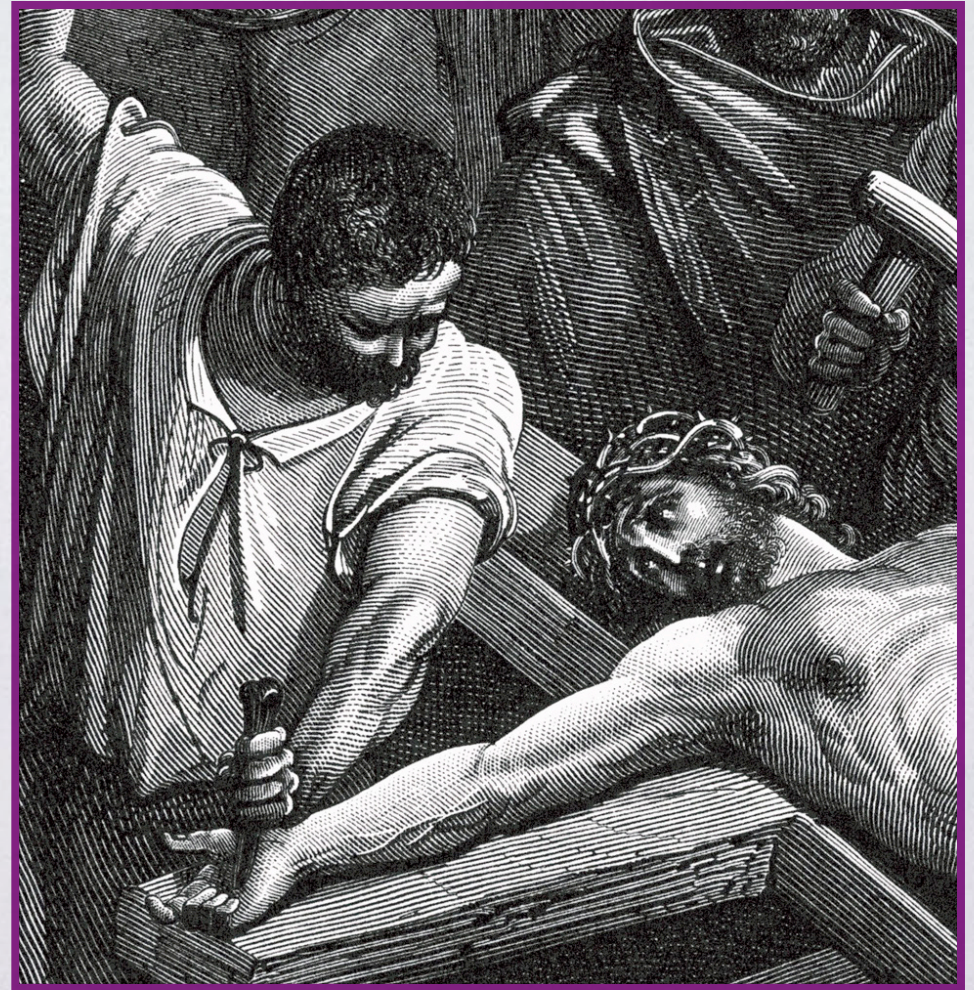
The intensity of Christ's suffering on the cross is a direct reflection of the intensity of God's unconditional love for us — unconditional because he didn't wait until we were worthy of such a gift; he poured it out freely.

This is what completely amazed St. Paul:



*For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly... But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.*

— Romans 5:6,8



And if we are ever tempted to doubt that love of God for us, we have only to go to Mass, or to kneel in front of the Tabernacle — there we find the same gift still being given: Jesus, while we are still here on earth, still full of selfishness and sin, gives himself to us completely in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

There is the second color of the Cross, flickering quietly but surely in the sanctuary lamp, reminding each one of us that God's love for me is full, total, without any conditions.



## SECOND MEDITATION

### *The Secret of Trust*

In the deep red color of Christ's love we find the secret to carrying our crosses. Our fallen nature resists the Cross — we just don't like facing difficulties and sufferings, confusion and rejection and disappointment and betrayal.

These are our crosses and they hurt. Yet, God permits them. Certainly he protects us from many sufferings, but not from all of them. Why?

Because he knows that we will only find the happiness and meaning we yearn for if we continue to grow in friendship with him. And every friendship is built on trust.

So, to grow in our friendship with him requires that we grow in our trust in him. And the moment in which we can most fully exercise our trust is when obeying or accepting his will is hard — when we feel the weight of our crosses.

This is why God permits crosses in our lives; so that we, like Jesus before us, can say to God and really mean it: "Let your will, and not mine, be done" (cf. Matthew 26:39).

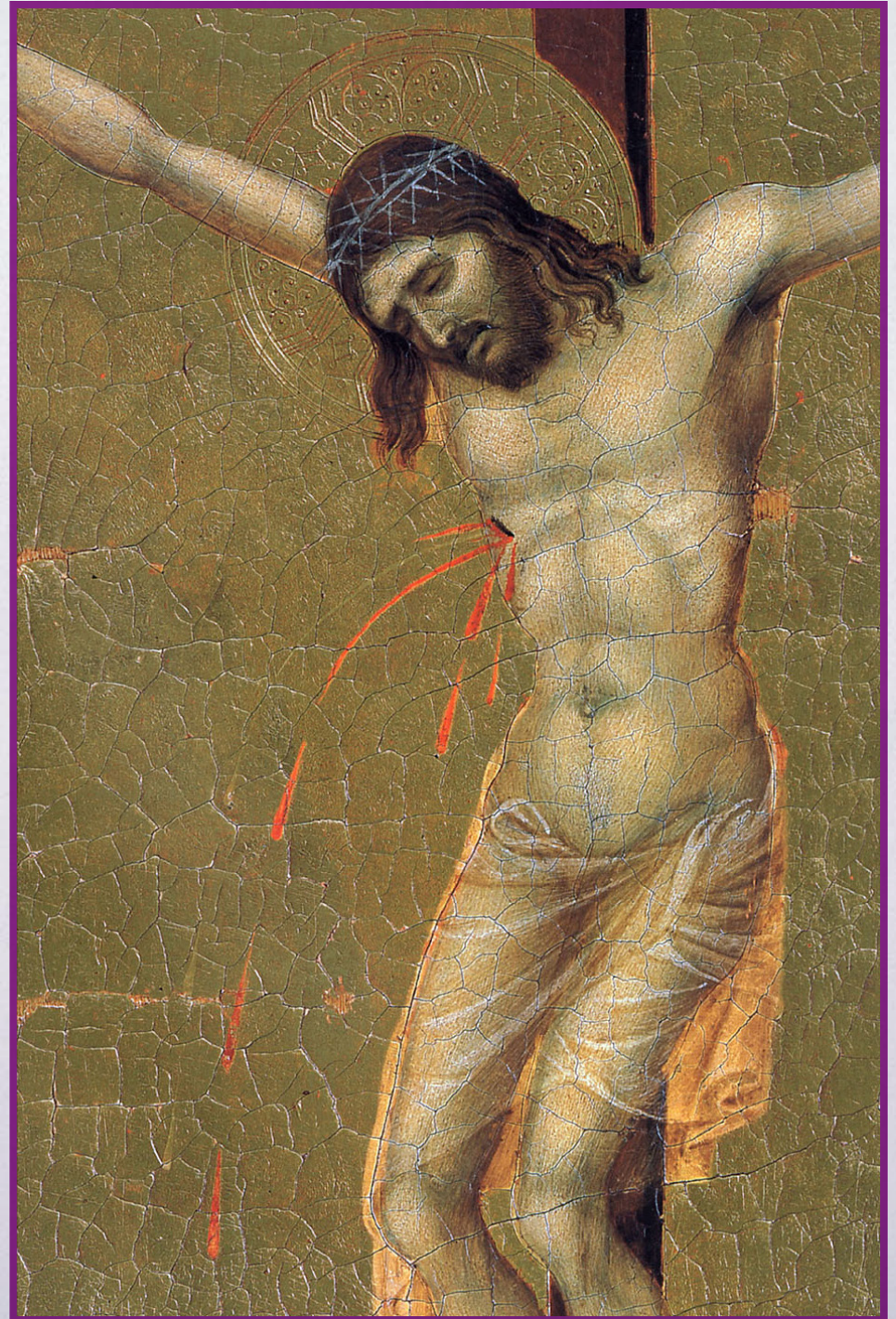
And where do find the strength to do that?

Only by meditating on the crucifix, because there we discover that Jesus is truly and utterly faithful.

His blood-stained cross proves for ever that he will never abandon us, that he really is worthy of our trust; that no matter what we might do to him, and no matter what might happen to us, he will keep on loving us; he will bring resurrections out of our crucifixions, just as he did with his own.

That's his promise, and it's a promise we can count on.

His total love for us, shown so brilliantly in the red-stained wood of the Cross, frees us to love him totally by trusting him even while we suffer the pain of our own crucifixions. And that trust is what allows his grace to flow more and more freely in our souls, bringing us the abundant life that we were created for.





## SECOND MEDITATION

### *St. John Gualbert*

Christ's love, revealed on the Cross, enables us to trust God, and to love as Jesus loved.

The story of St. John Gualbert is a powerful example of this.

John was the founder of a monastery outside the city of Florence, Italy, in the eleventh century, a monastery that has been a factory of holiness ever since.

But John didn't start out as a saint. He was a young nobleman who thoroughly enjoyed all his aristocratic privileges. Besides pleasure, his main passion was revenge.

His brother Hugh had been murdered, and John felt it was his duty to put the killer to death — not a very Christ-like ambition.

For a long time he searched for the culprit, becoming angrier the longer he searched. One Good Friday as he was returning to Florence from a short journey, he was making his way through a narrow pass in the road when his prey entered the same pass from the other side.

There was no escape. John drew his sword and prepared to avenge his brother's death. But the killer cast himself on his knees, spread his arms out in the form of a cross, and begged for mercy.

At that moment, his sword poised over his enemy's neck, the man's posture made him think of Christ, hanging on the cross and loving his enemies. He couldn't bring himself to carry out his long-contemplated plan. Instead, he sheathed his sword, embraced his brother's murderer, and forgave him.

After the encounter, he went to the nearest church to pray. He knelt before the crucifix there, and as he prayed, he saw the head of Jesus on the crucifix bow and nod in approval of his deed of mercy. That's when he discovered his vocation and began the adventure of becoming a saint.

By pouring out his lifeblood for us on the Cross, Jesus shows us his love, and that enables us — as it did St. John Gaulbert — to abandon ourselves to that love, to trust him, and to follow his will instead of our own.





## SECOND MEDITATION

### Conclusion & Further Reflection

Jesus knows that in this fallen world, where so many things are upside down, and where suffering lurks around every corner, it's often very hard for us to trust him, to obey or accept his will when it hurts.

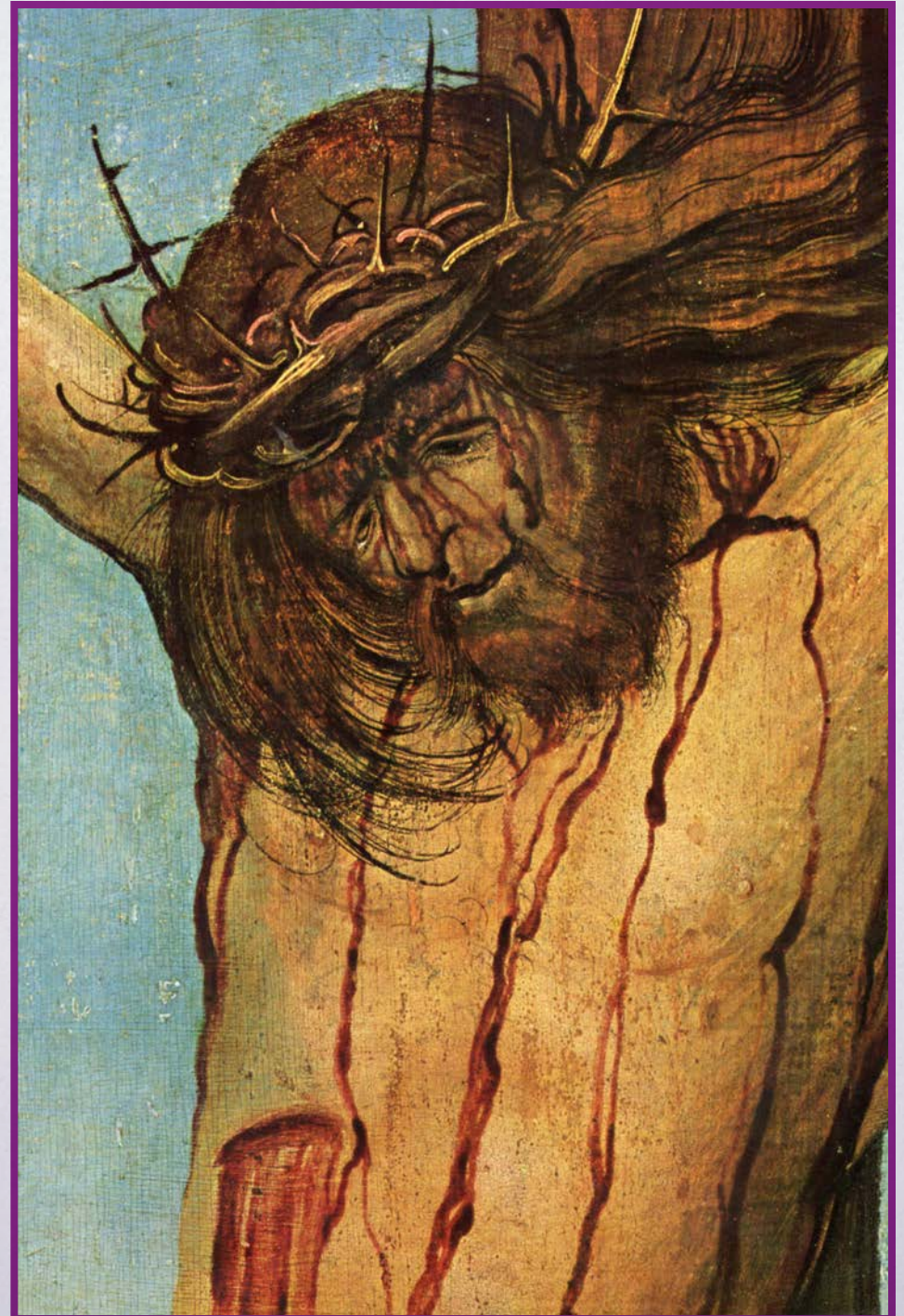
And he knows that we can only do that if we are truly convinced that he is worthy of our trust, that he truly and fully loves us and will never abandon us.

And he never will — no matter what.

That's the message of the second color of the cross: the red stain of the blood of Christ.

Let's take some time now to allow the Holy Spirit to remind us of this truth, and if necessary to convince us afresh that God is trustworthy, that his will is always connected to his love — a love so personal and so total that Jesus suffered to the extreme to prove it to us.

- 1 Why did Jesus have to suffer *so much* to redeem us from our sins? Why wasn't it enough for him to suffer just a little bit?
- 2 How deeply am I convinced of God's personal, total love for me? When have I experienced that love most powerfully? Gazing at the crucifix, remember those experiences and talk to Jesus about them.
- 3 In the past, when have I found my trust in God put to the test, what did I learn from the experience? In the presence of the Eucharist, or looking at a crucifix, ask the Holy Spirit for light, then write down all the reasons that come to mind for trusting God no matter what.







Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

– James 1:2–4



Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us. For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

– Romans 5:3–8



My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes keep to my ways...

– Proverbs 23:26



Trust in the LORD and do good, that you may dwell in the land and live secure. Find your delight in the LORD who will give you your heart's desire. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will act.

– Psalm 37:3–5



Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in company with scoffers. Rather, the law of the LORD is his joy; and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; its leaves never wither; whatever he does prospers.

– Psalm 1:1–3



I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us.

– Romans 8:18



We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

– Romans 8:28



What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. Who will condemn? It is Christ [Jesus] who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:31–39



## CONFERENCE

### *Participating in Christ's Cross*

We have meditated on the value of Christ's Cross for our salvation: through the cross, Jesus reversed the evil of original sin and showed us the totality of his love — those were the first two colors of the Cross.

But now we need to get practical and ask how we can carry our own crosses as courageously and fruitfully as Jesus carried his.

Here is where the third color of the Cross comes into play — the skin-flesh-and-bones color of Christ's humanity. Jesus, hanging on the cross, was fully human. For this reason, we know that he understands everything we go through; we never have to suffer alone.

All we have to do is identify our crosses — to name them and accept them — and then unite them to Christ's Cross by “offering them up,” as the old saying goes.

We have to turn *our* crosses into a participation in *Christ's* Cross, that's what “offering it up” means.

It's not really that complicated: it's simply a question of activating our faith when we feel the weight of our crosses, and lifting our hearts to God through a little prayer of self-surrender.

When we do that, our crosses become channels allowing God's saving grace — which began to flow into the world through Christ's Cross — to continue flowing and spreading into our lives and the lives of those around us.





## CONFERENCE

### *The Four Pillars of St. Peter's Basilica*

The Church gives us a beautiful and powerful illustration of this inside one of its most magnificent buildings: St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. This Basilica was constructed over the tomb of St. Peter.

The main altar is located above the tomb, and the 157 meter high dome that rises above that altar was designed by Michelangelo and completed in 1590.

The inside of the dome is decorated with blue and gold mosaics depicting angels, Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, the Twelve Apostles, and the Blessed Virgin Mary, all surrounding Jesus: it is a portrait of heaven.

This colossal structure is supported architecturally by four huge pillars. Niches were carved in each of those pillars, and large statues of four saints were sculpted to fill those niches.

One common theme connects these four saints: They all participated, in some way, in Christ's passion, in the drama of Christ carrying and dying on his Cross.

This is not just coincidence.

The message is clear: in order to climb to the heights of holiness, to reach the glory of heavenly light, we have to pass through the sufferings and sorrows of the Cross.

The monks of Middle Ages created a phrase summarizing this theological lesson: *per crucem ad lucem* — *through the cross, to the light*.

That theological truth is embodied architecturally in the dome of St. Peter's Basilica and the four statues placed in the pillars supporting that dome.

Let's look at these statues, to learn better how we can offer up our sufferings and carry our crosses.





## CONFERENCE

### *St. Helen: Finding Our Crosses*

The first sculpture is of St. Helen.

Helen was a Roman empress — mother of the great Constantine, who legalized Christianity in the year 313, ending almost three centuries of Roman persecution of the Church.

Her son was a good emperor in many ways, and he died as a baptized Christian. But along the way, he fell into a lot of the same sins that seem to beset powerful men of all eras: jealousy, anger, infidelity, murder...

At a certain point, Helen decided to do penance for her son's worst sins. She made a vow to go to the Holy Land and search for the True Cross — the wood of the actual cross on which Jesus had been crucified.

Local traditions had long held that the wood of that cross had been hastily thrown into a ditch near Calvary during the frightening aftermath of Christ's crucifixion.

She traveled to the Holy Land to find it. With the help of St. Macarius (the bishop of Jerusalem at the time) and a miracle, she found it. After finding it, she venerated it, and had the whole Christian world venerate it with her.

A relic of the True Cross used to be kept in the little chapel built into the pillar just above this statue of St. Helen.

We can learn a key lesson from St. Helen: we don't need to be afraid of our crosses. We should uncover our crosses, name them, and face them, and see in them our share in Christ's Cross.

The Cross can take so many forms: physical pain, moral or emotional pain, financial hardships, betrayal, even our own weaknesses and failures can be crosses.



Following the example of St. Helen, we should bring them to light, identify them, find them, name them, embrace them, and venerate them as a privileged opportunity to be more united with Jesus.

The first step to offering up our sufferings to God is always identifying them, naming them, and accepting them.

*Per crucem ad lucem.*



## CONFERENCE

### *St. Longinus: Staying Close to Christ's Heart*

The second sculpture in the pillars of St. Peter's Basilica is that of St. Longinus.

Longinus was the Roman soldier who pierced Jesus' side with a spear to make sure he was dead. St. John's Gospel tells us that as the spear entered Our Lord's breast, "immediately blood and water flowed out" (John 19:34).

Some early Christian sources tell us that the blood and water worked a miracle on Longinus, curing an eye ailment that he had, and paving the way for the gift of faith.

Longinus's spearhead was preserved as a relic by the early Christians, and used to be kept in a small chapel built into the pillar above this statue.

St. Longinus was close to Jesus as he died on the cross — so close that he was able to pierce Our Lord's Sacred Heart.

Staying close to Jesus as we carry our crosses; allowing his grace and his love to flow over our weaknesses, our blindness, our desperation — this is another way to make our crosses fruitful, to "offer up" our sufferings to God.

When we feel weak, confused, hopeless — that's when we need to immerse ourselves in God's grace and love, just as Longinus plunged his spear into Christ's heart.

We can do this especially through the sacraments of the Eucharist and confession. The blood and water that flowed from Christ's wounded side symbolized and prefigured the sacraments of the Church.

Jesus wanted his heart to be pierced, so that we would know that he is always open to us and waiting longingly for us to take shelter in his wounded heart.

It is no coincidence that Jesus chose to remain with us in the Eucharist under the appearance bread — bread is a source of strength for our bodies, and Jesus wants to be the source of strength for our souls.

We need to let him do that: *per crucem ad lucem*.





## CONFERENCE

### *St. Andrew the Apostle: “Fix your gaze on Jesus”*

The third statue in the pillars of St. Peter's Basilica depicts the Apostle St. Andrew — Peter's brother.

After spreading the Christian faith through northern Greece and southeastern Europe, Andrew died a martyr's death by being crucified on a cross in the shape of an X.

Some of his relics used to be kept in the chapel built into the pillar right above this monumental statue.

St. Andrew fled from Calvary on the first Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified. He was weak and frightened, like all the other Apostles, and watched the crucifixion from a distance.

But after the victory of the Resurrection, and after receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, his love was strengthened, and he stayed faithful to Jesus to the point of martyrdom.

The striking thing about this sculpture is where St. Andrew puts his attention. Even as he wraps his arms around his own cross, he is gazing upwards, seeing Jesus, either in a vision or in prayer.

Andrew knew that he was not going to be alone on his cross. He knew that Jesus had suffered the same hideous death before him. This gave him hope, confidence, and peace. And it can do the same for us.

Whatever shape our cross takes, whatever sufferings come our way, we know that Jesus can identify with them, that he suffered in the same way.

And so, no matter how heavy our crosses get, we know that we never have to carry them alone; Jesus is always with us, if only we will lift our gaze to see him, if only we will look at *his* cross while we feel the weight of *ours*.





Maybe we are experiencing physical suffering — Jesus knows what physical suffering is like; he is there with us.

Maybe we are experiencing loneliness, misunderstanding, criticism, rejection, betrayal — Jesus on the cross experienced all those same things.

Maybe we feel the weight of failure, of frustration, of helplessness — Jesus on the cross felt the same.

Maybe we suffer because someone we love is suffering — Mary felt that too, as she stood on Calvary watching her son's life ebb away.

As we feel the weight of our crosses and wrap our arms around them, we should keep in mind that Jesus knows what we are going through; that he is with us; that he is not a distant, abstract God.

Like St. Andrew, we can offer up our sufferings by linking them, through a simple act of faith, to Christ's sufferings — *per crucem ad lucem*.

As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:



*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God.*

— 12:1–2





## CONFERENCE

### St. Veronica: Comforting the Body of Christ

The fourth statue built into the pillars of St. Peter's Basilica is that of St. Veronica.

An ancient tradition describes Veronica as a Christian disciple who comforted Jesus as he carried his cross up to the hill of Calvary. She used her veil to wipe away the blood, sweat, and grime from his Holy Face. Jesus, in gratitude, comforted her by leaving on that veil an image of that Holy Face.

Veronica's veil used to be kept in the little chapel built into the pillar just above the statue.

This incident is very revealing. It shows us that Jesus wasn't a Lone Ranger, and that his Kingdom is not made up of Lone Rangers. It shows us that Jesus allowed himself to be comforted by the gentle courage of a fellow human being, and comforted her in turn.

Likewise, as we know from Scripture, he allowed himself to be helped in the carrying of his cross by St. Simon of Cyrene.

In Christ's Kingdom, we are meant to lean on each other and assist each other in the same way — we are meant to be connected, not isolated.

We can comfort one another *directly* by helping others bear their crosses, and by letting others help us, as St. Veronica and Jesus comforted each other on the road to Calvary.

And we can also comfort and strengthen each other *spiritually*, by offering our sacrifices to God for the benefit of others who are in need.

Just as Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice in order to win graces for us, so we can offer up our sacrifices — our crosses — to obtain graces for our brothers and sisters in the Church.

This is possible because we are mystically united to Jesus through our baptism, through grace; therefore our sacrifices can share in the redemptive value of his.



This opens up new dimension of meaning in all of our sufferings — *per crucem ad lucem*.

Here is how St. Paul put it in his Letter to the Colossians:



*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church...*

— 1:24

This is what St. Veronica teaches us, to offer our love and our sacrifices for the benefit of the whole Body of the Church, to stay connected, to give and receive comfort in and through our crosses.



## CONFERENCE

### *Conclusion & Questionnaire*

Jesus was fully human; the third color of the cross is the color of his flesh-and-blood humanity.

By suffering in all the ways we suffer, he opened up to us the possibility of turning our crosses into instruments of grace and pathways of divine light.

Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ (as we say during the Mass), our sufferings can build up Christ's Kingdom of humility, love, and trust in our own hearts and in the hearts of others.

All we have to do is:

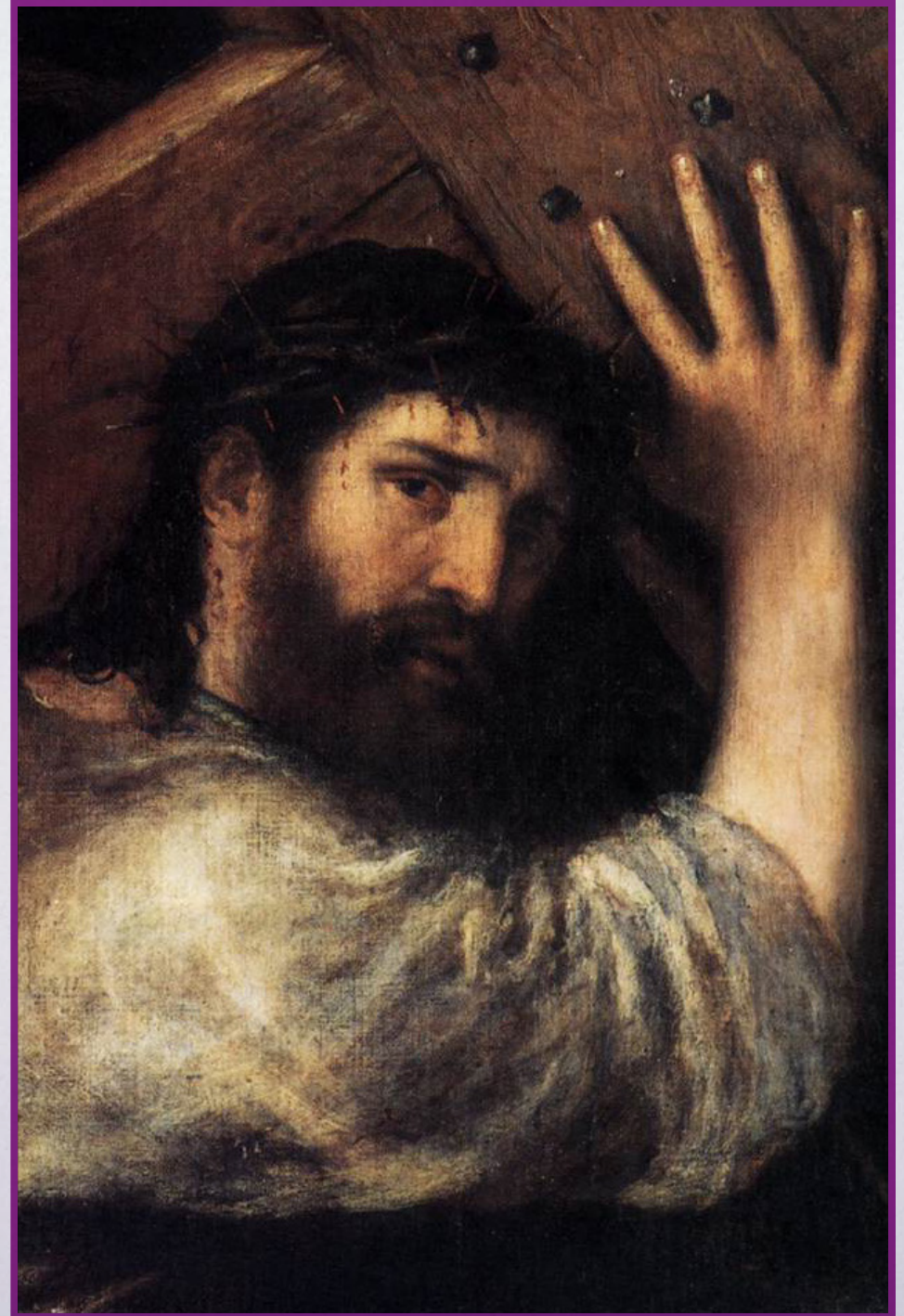
- discover, face, and name our crosses, like St. Helen;
- stay close to Christ's heart when we feel the weight of the cross, like St. Longinus;
- keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, like St. Andrew;
- and allow ourselves to comfort and be comforted by others in the Mystical Body, like St. Veronica.

"Offering it up" is a simple thing, really, even it isn't a crystal-clear mathematical formula.

It just means fertilizing our crosses with faith and prayer, so that they can become the "Tree of Life" that God wants them to be.

Take a few minutes now to reflect on how you carry your crosses, and how, with God's help, you may be able to carry them better.

The following questionnaire may be useful. It's not a test, but a springboard for reflection and prayer.





1 What are the most common crosses of my daily life (name them — no matter how small or petty they may seem)?

*If you are having trouble identifying your crosses, you may want to try the Complaint Test. Ask yourself: What are my most common complaints? The things you complain about are your common crosses.*

2 How would my daily life change if I were to carry those crosses with more faith, hope, and love, "offering them up" more consciously and intentionally?

3 How firmly do I believe that I am not alone in my sufferings, that Jesus is truly with me, that he knows and understands and cares about what I am suffering?

4 When have I experienced spiritual comfort in the midst of my sufferings? Remember, savor, and learn from that experience.

5 Looking back on my biggest crosses from the past, would I change them if I could? Why or why not?

6 When I am in the midst of my Good Fridays, what usually makes it hard for me to remember that Easter Sunday will be coming?

7 Which of my crosses do I try to carry alone? Why?

8 Who in my life is carrying a heavy cross right now, and what can I do to help comfort them and lighten their load?

9 When was the last time I purposely made a small sacrifice in order to unite myself to Christ and to obtain graces for his Mystical Body?

10 What role do crucifixes play in my life, if any? What role should they play?





## FURTHER READING

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### *For Reflection & Prayer*

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *A Doctor at Calvary*,  
Pierre Barbet
- *The Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ*,  
Alban Goodier, SJ
- *Jesus of Nazareth, Part II: Holy Week*,  
Pope Benedict XVI
- *Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus*,  
John Croiset, SJ
- *Tears of God*,  
Benedict Groeschel, CFR
- *Inside the Passion*,  
John Bartunek, LC

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