

'WELCOME SISTER PAIN' (II)

BY

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I PASS on now to *Mental* pain which is a condition of the *soul*, and yet I do not wish to put this under the category of actual *Spiritual Pain*, because I wish to reserve for that category the pain which is entirely due to the actual intervention of God directly, and not due to the 'growing pains' of the soul.

We are probing deeper now into the mystery of pain, probing deeper, and at the same time, paradoxically, mounting higher. I speak of the condition of the soul caused by the mental pain of aridity, isolation, desolation, and the insatiable hunger of the soul for God.

Aridity is dryness in the life of the spirit. It sometimes seems as if the very *colour*, and *music*, of prayer were dead and silent. We pray, and our very words seem meaningless and hollow; there seems no response from God. We may be even utterly bored and unable to concentrate; vocal prayer seems meaningless, like speaking to a blank wall; mental prayer is impossible. It is indeed as if all the colour of life had turned grey, and all the music was mute. 'Surely', the wretched soul cries out, 'I must have sinned very greatly, have displeased God in some terrible way.' Not at all, as a matter of fact you have been found pleasing to God, so pleasing, that he is trusting you to follow him without the light and the consolations you have hitherto found so sweet.

This state of aridity is common at times to all who are striving to live the Life of the Spirit. It is the beginning in the growth in holiness. It may be an intermittent pain, one which comes and goes with some frequency. It may on the other hand be of long duration, so that each day is a weariness, a veritable 'Way of the Cross'. It is the testing of our faith, of our fortitude; it is often the prelude to an even greater pain, *isolation*, which in itself is the prelude to *desolation*, and the insatiable hunger of the soul for God.

All this *Mental Pain*, which is involved in the very growth of the soul in holiness, and ultimately in union with Christ, is understandable if we consider it as a means of making us really and actually sharers of his sufferings, and one with him. We could never be wholly his, unless step by step we follow him in suffering and in love.

First, then, we must know the aridity of being 'earth-bound', aridity which shows us how utterly dependent we are on him for any light in the soul; we are unable, being so much of the earth, earthy, to feel or know of ourselves anything of spiritual beauty or consolation.

So our blessed Lord sends (and here we see the difference between the pain of physical disease which he never sends but only permits) the mental pain of aridity to test our sincerity and fortitude. It is for us humbly to accept the burden, and offer it up to him in glad acceptance and thanksgiving for past consolations, and also as a mortification and disciplining of the soul, which loves the sweetnesses and consolations of religion, but shrinks from the hard and flinty 'Way of the Cross'.

Aridity is hard, but *isolation* and *desolation* are an agony undreamed of save by those privileged souls whom our blessed Lord deems ready to bear it. Only those who have known that isolation of mind and spirit when the soul is, as it were, 'a sparrow, alone upon the house-top', a creature in the midst of the turmoil of a busy life, who is yet internally withdrawn into the wilderness of the spirit, where neither man nor, it seems, God can penetrate the gloom, only they can gauge the horror and the pain of the Garden and the Cross. That awful 'alone-ness', even in the crowd, that isolation of spirit which leads on to the utter desolation and darkness. In vain the soul tries to penetrate the gloom, in vain do the halting phrases of well-known prayers stumble from dry lips. This is not aridity, not just dullness or boredom, this is agony, the beating of bleeding hands against an impenetrable wall, the dull throbbing of a heart which is so fearful it has ceased to be conscious even of love or desire; only fear, and darkness, and the 'alone'. Then truly is that soul privileged to share the long darkness and agony of the Garden, and as the darkness deepens, of that cry from the Cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

At the time of the great darkness, of the utter desolation, we cannot realize perhaps the immense experience. Could we, the experience would not be so intense and deep. All we can say is, 'My God, why?' But still 'My God.' To that we cling in the darkness, holding on to the great Truth with trembling hands, but still holding on.

And then we know, when the deepest darkness is penetrated by the grey light that preludes the dawn, when the throbbing of the fear-tormented heart calms down once more to the beat of conscious love and desire, that the agony and pain of that experience has done more to unite our soul with him, our puny heart with his Sacred Heart, than any sweet consolations or joyful 'uplift' we have ever known in our past life. And with trembling lips we can say, 'Welcome Sister Pain,' yes, even the pain of desolation and darkness, which has knit my soul more closely to his.

Then there sometimes follows in the 'light before the dawn' the grey glimmer that follows the darkness, the pain of *insatiable desire*.

It seems he is always so near, and yet so far; so desirable, yet so unattainable. He seems even to call us, and we seem to find

only 'an emptiness and void.' We are restless, hungry and thirsty for him; prayer is possible, perhaps even prolific, but there is always a mist between the soul and God, a mist, not a stone wall of desolation, a mist through which the soul peers, waiting for the light to break.

God is so beautiful, so utterly desirable, and the mental pain of hunger and thirst for him grows in intensity until it becomes an agony of nostalgia. 'I know no comfort or delight in all the world, save thee.' He seems so remote, and so utterly lovable.

And so the pain continues, the pain of nostalgia of the lover when the Beloved is removed from conscious sight; the pain of nostalgia of the lover, whose only desire is union with the Beloved.

Such pain, though real, intense, agonizing, is wholly desirable. 'Lord, I offer to thee the agony of my soul which longs only for thee.' Who would not say to such pain, 'Welcome Sister Pain'?

This, the pain of insatiable hunger of the soul for God, is very near to that Spiritual Pain of which I will speak next, because it is a wholly desirable pain.

'I wish to suffer,' cried St Teresa, 'because thou, O Lord, hast suffered; and may it never be the pleasure of thy Majesty, that a gift of so high a price as that of thy Love be given to people who serve thee only because of the sweetness they find thereby.'

As we probe the mystery of Pain, from its beginning in the physical, through the mental, and on into what we can only term the purely spiritual, it seems to emerge into something, if not understandable, anyway more acceptable.

So we pass on now to the consideration of *Spiritual Pain*. I call it Spiritual Pain, because although there may be outward and visible signs in the body, the pain itself is the direct gift of God. This pain is so wholly sweet in its poignancy, so entirely free from any defect, or effort or even virtue on our part, that those who have ever experienced it would never have it cease, but would, if they were able, retain that pain as long as they lived.

There have always been certain souls who have experienced so great a pain of love, and of sharing in the sufferings of the Sacred Heart, that they have held such pain to be entirely sweet and lovely. These souls know in that pain such a joy, that they would gladly die of its sweetness. Outstanding instances of such experiences are seen in the Stigmatist, St Francis, in the arrow that pierced the heart of St Teresa, in the agony of sweetness that enlarged the heart of St Philip Neri. But many there are, who in obscurity, and unknown to the world, are visited by this Divine Pain in greater or lesser degree—quite humble and unobtrusive beings, whose only merit is their intense devotion to Jesus, the union of their will with his, and the great desire to share his pain as well as his consolations. To these there may come the experience of sharing the pain of the Sacred Heart over sinners. This experience may happen only once in a lifetime, or perhaps from

time to time it will come; always unsought, unpremeditated. It may come during mental prayer, at Holy Mass, or at some quite unexpected moment, that violent pain, which is so sweet, piercing the very heart with its poignancy.

So intense, and yet so lovely, that the very soul seems to swoon in the sweetness of the pain, which is love. All the desire then of the soul is for that sweet pain to remain for ever, until the soul itself is freed from the body, and finds union in the Divine Love.

Or it may come in lesser degree, and in different form. There may be the sweet pain in hands and feet and side, in the contemplation of a crucifix, or in the reciting of the Sorrowful Mysteries, or just when lifting up the heart and mind in love and adoration.

But this Spiritual Pain, in whatever degree, or in whichever way it comes, comes as the direct gift from God, never from our own seeking or through our own merit or power.

But to those who experience it, it is of all consolations the most sweet. 'I know not whether it were love or pain,' has been said by one who experienced it. And the answer is, 'both.'

One such, in contemplating the Sacred Heart, was so overwhelmed by the sorrow it beheld in it because of sinners, that this soul in its love greatly longed to share some of that pain. Instantly, so piercing a pain pierced this human heart, followed by such sweetness, that the person knew not whether to cry, 'Withhold,' or 'Forever.' 'Welcome Sister Pain' is most truly said by the recipients of this Spiritual Pain.

Under the term Spiritual Pain, I would also include what is so great a mystery, *vicarious* suffering.

To some comes the 'vocation of pain,' the direct call of our blessed Lord to be a *holocaust*, a victim of the Divine Love. This is a very mysterious truth, but such a vocation is as certainly a vocation as that of the priesthood, the religious, or the married state. Such an one knows when our Lord desires this, and he can, as in any other vocation, refuse to answer the call. But if he responds, then only is that man living fully his life and exercising all his powers.

This is not a very usual vocation, but perhaps more are called than *dare* answer the call. I say *dare*, because in answering the call such a soul has, as it were, to abandon itself wholly and without reserve, ready to suffer in body, mind and spirit, as an act of reparation, knit up with our Lord's utter surrender and sacrifice on Calvary. In doing this, the soul no longer has *self-will*, but is flung in entire surrender on the sacrificial altar of the Cross. It needs courage; but more than courage, it needs a very abandonment of love.

Then there is vicarious suffering when the soul offers itself on behalf of another, or others. 'I offer my whole being to thee, Lord. Let me suffer—let me know all the pain so that A. may be spared,

or this soul may be saved. Let me bear in my body the pain that would be his.'

God does not always accept such an offering; but sometimes he does, and in some wonderful way another life is spared, another soul is saved, through the willing pain and suffering of this suppliant. How joyful to bear pain, even death, that some soul may be saved, or some young life freed from disease, or some valuable and useful individual, more valuable and useful than oneself, may be preserved for his or her work!

Who would not say, 'Welcome Sister Pain' under such circumstances?

The problem of pain, looking at it as we have tried to look at it, tracing its fruitfulness from the lowest physical to the highest spiritual pain, presents no real stumbling-block to the Christian. It can be *salutary, reparative, the means of union with Jesus*. It may be a foretaste of purgatory, or the promise of heaven. It is all a question of, 'Am I ready to accept it in these ways, or am I indignant, rebellious, despondent, whining?'

Christ, the Lamb without spot, suffered *Pain* because of *sin*. Can I, who falter after him, who am so sin-stained, expect to be immune? No, should pain and suffering come my way, let me rather hold out both hands, and say, 'Welcome Sister Pain,' accept, offer up, and let its power be the means of closer union with our blessed Lord, in the sharing of his Passion.

PROFITENTES UNITATEM

Sequence for the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity

THIS sequence is one of the many which were current in the Middle Ages but which have been removed from the Missal now used. It has been transcribed from the 13th century MS. Dominican Gradual preserved in the library at Blackfriars, Oxford. It was written by Adam of S. Victor and may be consulted in Digby Wrangham, *The Liturgical poetry of Adam of St Victor* (1881 vol. i, pp. 130-134); there he inserts an extra stanza before the last.