



A Way of the Cross

Inspired by St. Alphonsus Liguori

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Introduction

St. Alphonsus Liguori, who founded my religious community, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists) in Italy in 1732, wrote a series of meditations on the Way of the Cross. The meditations and prayers of St. Alphonsus are a source of comfort and hope to all who read them, especially in troubled times like these. This popular version of the ancient Christian devotion to the Via Crucis is still used in many places throughout the world.

I offer the reflections below as a way of praying the Stations of the Cross in response to the coronavirus pandemic that has caused so much suffering and death in our time and that has millions of people anxious and afraid. The Way of the Cross is a journey we make with Jesus as a pilgrim people. By sharing in Christ's suffering and death, we affirm our closeness to him and to all our sisters and brothers worldwide.

The traditional 14 stations are each listed below followed by the words of St. Alphonsus, which begin with "Consider." I then offer a brief reflection in my own words.

Each station should be preceded by the traditional antiphon:

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. Because by your holy Cross, you have redeemed the world.

After each station, we are invited to pray an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and the Glory Be.

Station 1: Jesus is Condemned to Death

Consider how Jesus, after having been scourged and crowned with thorns, was unjustly condemned by Pilate to die on the Cross.

Reflection

Life is not always fair. No one deserves to die from a deadly virus. No one, especially the poor and vulnerable, should have to suffer from inadequate health care or neglect. As we walk with Jesus, who was himself the innocent victim of injustice, and who was abandoned by many who were close to him, let's pray for the courage to stand with all our brothers and sisters in this difficult time.

Station 2: Jesus Bears His Cross

Consider how Jesus, in making this journey with the Cross on His shoulders thought of us, and for us offered to His Father the death He was about to undergo.

Reflection

In his darkest hour, Jesus doesn't think about himself. He is carrying his Cross, enduring this hardship, for our sake. Let's ask Jesus to help us offer up the hardships we must endure for the health and well-being of others. May we carry our crosses willingly for the sake of the sick and dying, for their caregivers, and for all who place themselves at risk in order to serve the needs of others.

Station 3: Jesus Falls the First Time

Consider this first fall of Jesus under His Cross. His flesh was torn by the scourges, His head crowned with thorns, and He had lost a great quantity of blood. He was so weakened that he could scarcely walk, and yet he had to carry this great load upon His shoulders. The soldiers struck Him rudely, and thus He fell several times in His journey.

Reflection

We cannot help but stumble and fall as we try to respond to this completely new and unprecedented situation that the whole world is facing. Perhaps we will lose patience and lash out in anger at someone close to us. Or maybe we'll become so fearful that we're tempted to give up.

Jesus knows how we feel. Let's ask him to help us get up again after we fall so that we can help others in their time of need.

Station 4: Jesus Meets His Mother

Consider the meeting of the Son and the Mother, which took place on this journey. Jesus and Mary looked at each other, and their looks became as so many arrows to wound those hearts which loved each other so tenderly

Reflection

What a comfort it is to have such a loving, tender mother! That's why we always turn to Mary in times of war, pestilence and famine. That's why we seek her intercession, her consolation and her unfailing help. Mary's heart was wounded by the suffering inflicted on her Son. She feels our pain and shares our sorrow. Holy Mary, Mother of God and our mother, plead with our Loving God for an end to this pestilence and for the health and safety of all your children.

Station 5: Jesus is Helped by Simon

Consider how the Jews, seeing that at each step Jesus from weakness was on the point of expiring, and fearing that He would die on the way, when they wished Him to die the ignominious death of the Cross, constrained Simon the Cyrenian to carry the Cross behind our Lord.

Reflection

Simon the Cyrenian was at best a reluctant helper compelled by the Roman soldiers to help Jesus carry his Cross. If we're honest, none of us is eager to burden ourselves for the sake of another, but as Simon learned, true charity is its own reward. By helping others to carry their crosses, our own burdens become lighter. Let's ask Jesus for the grace to face our own unwillingness so that we can help others lighten their load.

Station 6: Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

Consider how the holy woman named Veronica, seeing Jesus so afflicted, and His face bathed in sweat and blood, presented Him with a towel, with which He wiped His adorable face, leaving on it the impression of His holy countenance.

Reflection

In times like these, we learn that simple acts of kindness can have enormous impact on those who are sick, suffering or afraid. Tradition says that Veronica offered a towel to Jesus so that he could wipe the sweat and blood from his face. In return, Jesus returned the towel indelibly marked with his own image. Let's ask our Lord for the grace to be kind and loving. Let's face this time of trial and uncertainty with confidence that we have the face of Jesus embedded on our hearts.

Station 7: Jesus Falls a Second Time

Consider the second fall of Jesus under the Cross—a fall which renews the pain of all the wounds of the head and members of our afflicted Lord.

Reflection

St. Alphonsus says that the second fall of Jesus under the Cross “renews the pain of all the wounds of the head and members of our afflicted Lord.” Today, we might say that our Church is all too painfully aware of the wounds inflicted on the Body of Christ by the sins of bishops and priests who failed miserably in their duty to care for God’s people. Let’s ask Jesus to help our wounded Church get back up again, as he did, and to continue carrying our crosses for the sake of all God’s people.

Station 8: Jesus Speaks to the Women

Consider how those women wept with compassion at seeing Jesus in such a pitiable state, streaming with blood, as He walked along. But Jesus said to them: Weep not for Me, but for your children.

Reflection

The women who weep for Jesus share with him their love and compassion, letting him know how much they care for him. It is surely a great comfort to him to know that he is not alone even on this solitary journey to his cruel death. But, as always, Jesus is not concerned about himself. He cares for us. “Weep not for me, but for your children” is the Lord’s way of admonishing them, and all of us, to care for our families and for one another especially in these troubled times.

Station 9: Jesus Falls a Third Time

Consider the third fall of Jesus Christ. His weakness was extreme, and the cruelty of His executioners was excessive, who tried to hasten His steps when He had scarcely strength to move.

Reflection

St. Alphonsus speaks of the excessive cruelty of Christ’s executioners such that he falls a third time with “scarcely strength to move.” There is something exceedingly cruel and uncaring about a disease that seems to target elderly and infirm people. To counteract this cruelty, let’s ask Jesus for the grace to be excessive in kindness and generosity. Let’s care for one another with extraordinary charity—like the Good Samaritan in St. Luke’s Gospel.

Station 10: Jesus is Stripped of His Garments

Consider the violence with which the executioners stripped Jesus. His inner garments adhered to His torn flesh, and they dragged them off so roughly that the skin came with them.

Reflection

Imagine having your clothes ripped off with such violence that it opens your wounds and tears the skin from your body. The humiliation that Jesus had to endure on the Way of the Cross anticipated the pain and suffering of the Christian martyrs who came after him. It also showed that he understood what victims of the coronavirus, and all fatal diseases, experience in their darkest moments of anguish and uncertainty. Let's pray for all who suffer and all who care for them.

Station 11: Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

Consider how Jesus, after being thrown on the Cross extended His hands, and offered to His Eternal Father the sacrifice of His death for our salvation. These barbarians fastened Him with nails, and then, raising the Cross, allowed Him to die with anguish on this infamous gibbet.

Reflection

As Jesus was lifted up on the Cross, he offered himself to the Father for our sake. He accepted the cruelty and injustice of this hideous form of capital punishment out of obedience to his Father's will and out of love for us. As difficult as it is for us to understand and accept the current pandemic, Jesus shows us the way to let go of our fear and anger trusting that God is with us always. Let's pray for acceptance and fidelity to God's will.

Station 12: Jesus Dies on the Cross

Consider how thy Jesus, after three hours' Agony on the Cross, consumed at length with anguish, abandons Himself to the weight of His body, bows His head, and dies.

Reflection

Death is a great mystery. We don't understand it, and we resist it with every fiber of our being. Jesus was no different. His humanity fought valiantly against it for three hours until "consumed at length with anguish" he abandoned himself to the loving hands of his Father and died. With Mary, his mother and ours, we mourn the loss of this tremendous lover. With the certainty that comes only from faith, we know that he is the resurrection and the life. But, in this moment, the sorrow and grief are overwhelming. Let's pray for all who mourn the loss of loved ones during this terrible time. Let's pray that they will experience the consolation of Mary and, all the saints and angels, during their time of sorrow.

Station 13: Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross

Consider how, after the death of our Lord, two of His disciples, Joseph and Nicodemus, took Him down from the Cross, and placed Him in the arms of His afflicted Mother, who received Him with unutterable tenderness, and pressed Him to her bosom.

Reflection

We have all seen images of the Pietà by Michelangelo and other great artists. There's something about this scene that is both profoundly sad and deeply consoling seeing the crucified Christ cradled in the arms of his loving mother. During this time of worldwide suffering and death, let's pray that all victims of the coronavirus—living and deceased—will find consolation and hope in the loving arms of Mary, the Sorrowing Mother and the Mother of Holy Hope.

Station 14: Jesus is Placed in the Tomb

Consider how the disciples carried the body of Jesus to bury it, accompanied by His holy Mother, who arranged it in the sepulchre with her own hands. They then closed the tomb, and all withdrew.

Reflection

Our faith assures us that the holy sepulcher, the tomb in which Jesus was laid, was not to be his permanent resting place. But at the time the disciples placed his body there, it must have seemed like a bitter end to all their hopes. The confinement we are experiencing now has a tomb-like quality. We are frozen in place unable to go out and live our lives as we normally would. And many of us cannot give our beloved dead the funeral and burial services that they deserve! Let's pray that this virtual entombment ends quickly. Let's pray that, through the resurrection of Jesus, we will be redeemed by God's love and, so, experience once again the joy of Easter!

St Alphonsus Liguori, Pray for us! Amen.

