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COMFORTER OF THE AFFLICTED

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HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of visitors who toured Europe and the holy places during the Marian year thrilled as they contemplated the splendor with which man has endowed stone and canvas for the honor of Mary. It would have taken a lifetime for any one pilgrim to exhaust the overwhelming array of artistic beauty which floods Rome, Paris, Florence, and Madrid. The galaxies of Madonnas which adorn the massive walls of cathedrals, basilicas, and shrines give eloquent testimony of the part Mary has played throughout the ages in inspiring artistic genius. The towering majesty of Notre Dame in Paris and Chartres are only two of the hymns in stone which sing out the glories of the most loving of Mothers. Art seems to have reserved its most tender touch and enlightening beauty for the brush, pen, hammer, and chisel which chant the story of our Blessed Lady in the litanies of canvas, wood and stone.

But to men without a living faith, the songs heard and the stories read in these works of art are only lifeless, meaningless parables. For them the stones lose their warmth and become cold; the canvases refuse to speak as if veiling the truth from unbelieving minds.

Many of these works of art such as the Madonnas of Raphael depict Mary in her rôle as Mother—of Jesus and of us. The famous *Pieta* of Michelangelo in the Vatican, the exquisite painting, *Mother of Sorrows*, by Sassoferrato, capture the sorrow of the woman who was the Mother of the Man of sorrows. Still others, like the well known coronation scenes by the Dominican Fra Angelico, tell of Mary's glorious role as Queen of Heaven and Dispenser of all graces. To the foolish and unbelieving the value of these works is judged solely by the technical craftsmanship

revealed in the finished product with little or no appreciation for the motive of the artist or the spiritual beauty of the thing signified. Their measure is solely the pleasure which the work brings to the eye and not the consolation and peace it can offer the mind and heart.

To the faithful, whether they be learned in the ways of art or not, these works are vital and alive. They offer truth to the mind and peace to the soul. In the painting of a Madonna they see a Mother, tender and devoted, who has a ready ear for their troubles and offers a comforting hand to caress an anguished soul. The faithful beholding the *Mother of Sorrows* see not just a Mother whose soul has been pierced by the loss of her Son, but a Mother to whom they can carry all their own trials and tribulations, a Mother who understands perfectly the sufferings of her children.

What peace of soul is had by those who contemplate the works of art which depict Mary as Queen of Heaven and Dispenser of all Graces! For in this role they learn that she can pour forth her healing love or impart to them the grace and light to see the place of suffering in the Providence of God and to understand the Christian paradox of a Cross whose sign is death but whose fruit is Life. The Christian who allows his faith to inform his very being transcends the geometrical proportions, the skilful and sensitive arrangement of color which have given us these masterpieces of art, and plumbs the depths of truth—the truth which can make us free. Those who would glean the real meaning to be found in the masterpieces which depict Mary as our *Mother*, the *Sorrowing Mother* and our *Queen and Dispenser of all Graces*, must attain a deeper penetration and understanding of the invocation in her Litany which titles Mary the *Comforter of the Afflicted!*

In this title who are the Afflicted? Who is the Comforter? We do not have to go beyond our own small lives to answer the first question. All of us, some more, some less, are subjected to trial and suffering whether it be loss of health, friends, wealth, reputation or the mere monotony of our state in life. The inevitable storm of war, pain, and insecurity always leaves sorrow in its wake. Since the fall of Adam the question of "why suffering?" has been on the lips of men. Since that fateful moment fear, sorrow, death, and pain hang as a sinister backdrop on the stage of life. It is a drama begun by man which will continue until God in His own good time decrees that the final curtain be drawn. One

cannot expect to solve the riddle unless he places his doubts at the foot of the Cross and there repeats the words of Him who died on this Cross; "not as I will but as thou wilt" (Matth. 26: 39).

But our Lord in His Divine Mercy did not leave us to suffer alone. From the very Cross on which man chose to afflict Christ, Christ gave to man a Comforter, His Mother. Mary, the Mother of the Crucified, was to become the Comforter of the Afflicted. She was to mother the motherless, comfort the comfortless, enlighten the unenlightened. Before her feet we are to lay our sufferings and into her ear we are to whisper our torments of soul. With Mary we are to share our sorrows and in their stead we will receive peace, comfort, and strength.

We might ask why God chose Mary to be our Comforter? Why is she the best one with whom to share our sorrows? Let us return to our works of art and with the light of faith examine each one separately. The Madonnas point out the intimacy and love of a Mother. Secondly, the canvases and marble which have captured the sorrow of Our Lady teach us that our Mother is one who knows what it is to suffer and can thus sympathize with the sorrows of her children. Lastly, the works of art which depict Mary as Queen of Heaven and Dispenser of all Graces gives us new hope for we learn that this most loving of Mothers can and will relieve our sorrows. Thus in examining these masterpieces under the light of faith and tradition we shall discover that the truths which they teach are only bits of the great mosaic which depicts Mary as our *Comforter of the Afflicted*.

WE SHOULD TAKE OUR SORROWS TO MARY
FOR SHE IS OUR MOTHER

Sympathy was once defined as "two hearts tugging at the same load." A smile breaking through the tear-stained face of a little child often tells us that two hearts can bear a weight too heavy for one. Now everything is all right simply because mother has listened to and understood the tiny troubles. The burden was lifted because it was shared.

Only to a mother does a child most freely open his heart. He could tell his ills to playmates or to a neighbor, but no, he runs to his mother. Why? The reason is to be found in the fact that pain and suffering are so personal, so intimate and deep within oneself, that they simply can't be shared with *anyone*. The more intimate the suffering the more intimate must be the person with

whom the difficulties can be shared. In the child's eyes no one fills this role better than mother. The child has received its flesh and blood from that of his mother. She nourished him, clothed him, guided his first stumbling steps. From her lips he learned how to talk to God in prayer. The child looks upon her as the font of all he is and has and thus feels an unexplainable but compelling inclination to love her and to place his entire confidence in her.

The union between child and mother is so close that he looks upon her as his other self. Her sorrows become his sorrows. And because he knows that his sorrows are her sorrows the child naturally desires to share all of them with her. When one burns his hand it is instinctively brought close to the body, usually near the heart, the center of life, and there it is clutched closely until the initial pain subsides; when a ship is damaged or threatened by an approaching storm, it returns to the safety of a harbor. So does a troubled child naturally rush to the harbor of his mother's arms, and there clings tenaciously until the dark clouds of fear, uncertainty or pain have passed. This union and oneness between them is so real and intimate that a warm smile or a caress of the hand heals hidden wounds and brings more peace than the salve of a thousand lesser friendships. A mother's touch is the panacea for a child's wounded heart.

A child naturally clings to its mother when it is confronted with troubles and this is what we adults should also do. Our Lord Himself urged us to become as little children. Like children we should share our troubles and like them we should share them with someone very close to us. There are many who can fill this role. There are our own mothers, brothers or sisters. There are some sorrows which can only be understood and thus can only be shared by parents. The persons with whom we are able to share our own particular troubles will vary with the nature of the difficulty and the degree of our intimacy. But there is one person with whom *all* can share *all* their troubles, and this person is Mary, the Mother of God and *our* Mother. There is no sorrow too personal, too intimate, too within oneself to be shared with her since next to God she is closer to us than anyone else.

Mary is truly *our* Mother. The beautiful attributes found in our earthly mothers are found preeminently in Mary. Our earthly mothers conceived us and brought forth our tiny bodies. Mary conceived us spiritually at Nazareth and with much labor and love gave birth to our spiritual life on Calvary. Our mothers fed us—Mary has given the Bread of Life. Our mothers clothed us—

Mary, through Christ, has won for us the garment of grace which protects us from the winds of temptation and the cold of sin. Mary did not win this grace by any independent act on her part but only by her union with the Redemption of her Son.

When the Angel of the Annunciation extended to Mary the divine invitation to become the Mother of God, Mary knew that by accepting she would also become our Mother. By her "Fiat; be it done to me according to Thy word" (Luke 1:38), she consented to give natural life to Christ and supernatural life to us. Christ was formed in the womb of the Virgin not solely to become man but also to become the Savior, the Redeemer of all men by means of the nature which he received from her flesh. "As a result, Mary while bearing the Savior in her womb, may be said to have borne likewise all those whose life is contained in the life of the Savior. . . . She is 'the mother, spiritually indeed, but truly the mother of the members of Christ, which we are.'"¹

Mary is more truly our Mother than our earthly mothers, for who can compare the value of the supernatural life of the soul with the mere natural life of the body. If one could measure the warm love and devotedness which a mother bears toward her child he would not even have begun to fathom the depths of Mary's solicitude and love for us. The love of earthly mothers, great as it may be, pales before the splendor of Mary's maternal love as do the stars when the day ushers in the sun. We should share our troubles with her for she is closer to us than any other creature—for she is truly *our* Mother!

But the fact that Mary is so close to us is not of sufficient weight to merit perfectly the title, *Comforter of the Afflicted*. To be a true comforter one must not only be close to us but must also understand our sorrows, and this can be done only by one who has also experienced sorrow. The reason for this is that one receives much peace of soul from the person to whom they lay bare their sorrows if he has also suffered for he can thus perfectly understand and sympathize with the anguished soul. Next to Christ, Mary most eminently fulfills this role, for next to Christ no one has suffered more nor been more afflicted than she.

WE SHOULD TAKE OUR SORROWS TO MARY
FOR SHE TOO HAS SUFFERED

Not too long ago a Dominican Brother attended a funeral of a friend who was the mother of eight children. While all were

¹ *Ad Diem Illum*, Encycl. of Saint Pius X. Feb. 1904.

leaving the cemetery he found himself by the side of the youngest child of the deceased mother. She was only eight years old but that did not exempt her from experiencing the pain and sorrow which is the lot of all when loved ones pass away. Something vital had been lost and the void that remained in her soul was excruciating. Her little eyes were full and her heart was even fuller. The Brother searched for something to say but the words failed him. He wanted to help her in her sorrow for he himself knew the agony she was going through. The words which finally came were, "I know the sorrow that must be in your heart for I too lost my mother not so long ago." With that the little girl stopped and looked up at him. Soon a smile came upon her face. It seemed that those simple words of the Brother had lifted a part of her burden because she now knew that someone understood her sorrow for he too had lost his mother. They had something in common and to her that seemed to make all the difference in the world.

If the consolation of simply opening our hearts to another alleviates some of the oppression of sorrow how deeper the amelioration if the other is willing and able to share the sorrow itself. This is only possible if the person in whom we confide is an intimate friend who has experienced sorrow. Such a person is capable of sincere sympathy for true sympathy requires someone who perfectly understands our cross, and loves us enough to be willing to share our own sorrow. Again, our Holy Mother fulfills this role perfectly for besides Christ, no one is more willing to share our sorrows, and besides Christ, no one has suffered more than she. Being the mother of the "man of sorrows" she has rightly been called the "woman of sorrows."

When Mary assented to become the Mother of the Redeemer by the words, "Fiat; be it done to me according to Thy word" (Luke 1:38), she consented to collaborate in all the works of the Redemption. The rest of her life flowed from that supreme act of faith and charity. When she consented to be the Mother of the Savior she accepted in advance all the sufferings which her part in the Redemption would involve. She did not forget her irrevocable resolution to cooperate in the Divine plan, but rather it became stronger as the drama of the Incarnation was unfolded before her eyes.

From the very beginning Mary knew the role she had freely chosen since the prophets had long ago told of the man of sorrows. At the Presentation the words of Simeon lifted the curtain

of obscurity and made explicit the sufferings of Mary's Son and pointed to the part she would play; "Behold this child is set for the fall and for the resurrection of many in Israel and for a sign which shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce" (Luke 2: 34-35).

This co-suffering of Mary with her Son partly explains the many gifts bestowed upon her. It was fitting that the heart of Mary be immaculate so that it might unite with the spotless Heart of her Divine Son to form one canticle of love and reparation to the Eternal Father. Christ's joys were her joys, and Christ's sorrows were her sorrows.

Mary's *fiat*, spoken once only, remained fixed in Mary's Immaculate Heart all the days of her life. Each sorrow in her life had its scene and the slowness of their accomplishment made her entire life a complete holocaust. It would seem that Mary was given a heart whose sole purpose of existence was to be wounded for the Child for Whom alone it beat.

Mary clothed her Son with her own flesh and thus one can imagine that Christ must have been like His mother. It is very probable that her friends and relations called attention to the fact that Jesus looked so much like her. And being a true mother she must have rejoiced in this. But in the supernatural order it was the other way around—Mary resembled her Son. Christ was innocent, sinless, and full of grace—this is said of Mary too. The mission of Christ was one of Redemption—Mary was to be a co-redemptrix. The lot of Christ was one of suffering—and so was Mary's.

To attempt to understand the sufferings of Mary one has to examine the love Mary had for Christ. Her sufferings were in proportion to her love for her Crucified Son. Mary loved her Son with a love so deep that it defies definition and even transcends the limits of the pen of a poet. Mary's love was completely selfless and the object of her love was Love Himself. She not only loved her Son but adored Him since He was also her God. Her suffering "was measured by her love of God Whom sin offended, by her love of Jesus crucified for our sins, and by her love of us whom sin had brought to spiritual ruin."² Mary saw Innocence crucified by sin, and she saw the sinner for whom He died, but still her love did not diminish but waxed stronger. Mary was full of grace,

² *The Mother of the Saviour*, Rev. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., Herder, 1953, p. 188.

full of love, and thus full of suffering. She could truly say in the words of Jeremias, "O all ye that pass by the way, attend, and see if there be any sorrow like to my sorrow" (Lam. 1:12). Never for a moment during her life did she cease to offer her Son who would be both Priest and Victim, and herself in union with Him. When we share our sorrows with Mary we are sharing them with one who has drawn heavily from the bitter chalice of suffering. The cup was drained when the cruelty of man reached its peak and the Creator was crucified by the creature. It was a two-edged sword which pierced her heart for this Crucified Child was both her Son and her Creator.

The will of Mary reached such a degree of oneness with that of Jesus that Pope Leo XIII has written; "She made a voluntary offering of her own Son to Divine Justice, and in her heart died with Him, pierced through by a sword of sorrow."³ Hate constructed but one cross yet it supported two victims—the nails of iron held Christ and the nails of love held Mary.

The life of Mary teaches all men the true meaning of suffering and by her unflinching patience and courage we receive consolation in our own sufferings. Mary's crown of sorrow was replaced by a crown of glory. If we follow the lead of Mary in our own sufferings we too will rise above our sorrows and will share in the glory of Mary and her Son. By taking our sorrows to Mary in prayer we are taking them to one who has suffered more than any other creature and thus perfectly understands our anguish and wishes to comfort us. Mary is our Mother and because she knows what it is to suffer she desires to help us. Not only does she wish to comfort us but she has the power to do so.

MARY HAS THE POWER TO COMFORT US

Mary deserves the title of *Comforter of the Afflicted* because, being our Mother she is so close to us, and having suffered she perfectly understands our sorrows. But there is still another reason for attributing to her this great title, and thus another reason for carrying all our sorrows to her maternal heart. We can with confidence take our sorrows to Mary for she has the power to do something about them.

The role of a mother does not end with the nativity of the child, but it is only the beginning. At the birth of a child the life of the mother is in the balance. She has given her offspring her

³ *Jucunda Semper*, Encycl. of Pope Leo XIII. Sept. 1894.

own flesh and blood, and if need be she will give her own life. A mother is the personification of mercy. When her child is sick her prayer is selfless—that she might suffer in its place. Over and over again a mother offers herself to God as a victim so that her child might be spared. She wants to do all but in reality there is so little she can effect for the power of a mother to help her children is limited. The power of Mary to help her children is limitless. What mother would refuse to relieve the sorrow of her child if she could. This virtue is also true of Mary but she not only wishes to help her children but she can for she is the Queen of Heaven and the Dispenser of all Graces.

“Without thy command, no one in all the earth shall move hand or foot.”⁴ On the Feast of Mary Mediatrix of all Graces these words are used in describing the intercessory power of Mary, Queen of Heaven. Mary as our Queen and Mother possesses the keys to the infinite treasury of grace. At her will the doors unlock and grace pours forth upon her children for Mary is the Dispenser of all Graces. Mary united herself to Christ upon Calvary in winning for us all graces, and now she is united to Him in distributing them. This is what prompted St. Pius X to write; “From this community of will and suffering between Christ and Mary ‘she merited to become most worthily the Reparatrix of the lost world’ and Dispensatrix of all the gifts that Our Savior purchased for us by His Death and by His Blood.”⁵

Nor should one be surprised that Mary was predestined to have such dominion over us and grace. Mary has dominion over creatures—but didn’t she first possess within herself the Creator? Mary opens the treasury of grace so that we might be saved—but wasn’t she first the Mother of the Savior, the Author of all grace?

God could have arranged for the Incarnation to have taken place in some other way than through Mary. But the fact remains that in His Wisdom He chose Mary to be the channel, the Mediatrix, by which grace comes to us. Of course Christ has the right to distribute all graces, for He is their source and “of His fulness we have all received” (John 1:16). But according to the plan of God and in the words of St. Bernadine of Siena grace comes to us “from God to Christ, from Christ to the Virgin, and from the Virgin to us.”⁶

⁴ May 31. Benedictus Antiphon.

⁵ *Ad Diem Illum*, Encycl. of Saint Pius X. Feb. 1904.

⁶ Sixth Sermon for Feasts of the Bl. Vir. Mary, on the Annunciation, 1, 2.

In the Gospels Mary appears as distributing graces. John the Baptist was sanctified in the womb of His mother at the salutation of Mary, and "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost" (Luke 1:41). The incident at Cana affords us a perfect example of the way Mary anticipates the needs of her children and even wards off unforeseen evils. Neither the servant nor the host were aware that the wine was running low, and thus they could not even ask for help. But Mary knew and she foresaw the embarrassment which would arise if something was not done about it. Her merciful heart was so moved that she anticipated their need and asked her Son to perform His first public miracle to forestall this sorrow. At her request her Son commanded that six waterpots of stone be filled with water. Then, as the poet Richard Crashaw has put it, "the unconscious waters saw their God, and blushed!" The compassion Mary showed to her friends was so great that she did not wait for the calamity to come about but instead she pleaded with her Son to prevent its very beginnings. How many times Mary has removed hidden obstacles from our paths will never be known while we are still upon this earth.

But we might ask, if Mary has such dominion over grace and possesses such influence with her Son why is it that we have sorrow at all. Since it is within her power to remove all suffering and sorrow from our midst why doesn't she do it? The answer can be found in the fact that Mary is not only merciful but also most wise for being Mother of Eternal Wisdom, she is called the "Seat of Wisdom."

Mary knows full well that sin is the greatest evil that can befall us for the Cross of her own Son was constructed by sin. To prevent sin in our own lives she will permit physical evil and disappointments. Her wisdom shows her that it is sometimes better to give us the grace to bear the sorrow than to take it away altogether. Prosperity often makes one presumptuous while suffering sometimes has the power to make one face reality. Mary knows that pain and sorrow can be medicinal and therefore she often allows us to suffer for our greater good. A life which is a continual succession of good fortune and happiness can often make one forget that this world is not a lasting kingdom. Sorrow can be the cold water needed to shock one into realizing that true happiness is not to be looked for nor found in this life but in the next. Mary enlightens us by her grace so that we can properly weigh the value of success, failure, joy, and sorrow. She shows us what they are in themselves and the place

they hold in the Divine plan. Having been enlightened as to the true meaning of trials and sorrows they no longer appear ugly nor disturb the soul but are seen as coming from the hand of God and are lovingly embraced for they serve to raise our eyes and heart above this world.

Mary permits suffering and sorrow in our lives because she knows that it can be creative. The day appears all the brighter because of the preceding darkness, the fire the warmer for the preceding cold, and the joy all the greater for the preceding sorrow. Was it not from the sorrow of Magdalen for her sins that one of the greatest lovers of God was born! Did not the generous submission of the good thief to his sufferings merit the consoling words of Christ, "this day thou shalt be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43)! We know the significance of a seed by the knowledge of its perfection; an acorn means nothing to one who has never thrilled to the grandeur of an oak tree. So does Mary know the significance of suffering and sorrow for she knows what fruit it can bear—a saint!

Yes, Mary is our Mother and to her we should carry all our sufferings and sorrows in prayer. We have seen that a painting of a Madonna speaks not only to the eye but to the heart. It places before us a Mother, our Mother, who loves her children and desires to comfort them. The *Pieta* tells us that this most loving of Mothers perfectly understands and sympathizes with our sorrows for she is the *Mother of Sorrows*. Finally, the exquisite masterpieces of art which sing the praises of Mary as Queen of Heaven and Dispenser of all Graces teach us that our Mother has the power to comfort us.

She loves, consoles, and strengthens. She knows that her Son is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6) and she wishes to see Him born in us. She wants us to accept and appreciate suffering and sorrows as did her Son. Christ combined sorrow and death upon the Cross so that there might be love and life. As the Cross gradually casts its shadow upon our lives Mary will help us see the victory beyond the defeat, the joy beyond the pain, the resurrection beyond the death. Christ had His Cross, Mary her sword, we our own particular trials, but when shared with Mary our burden becomes light and our yoke sweet. We take our sorrows to Mary in prayer for she is our Mother, the Mother of Sorrows, the Dispenser of all Graces—she is truly the *Comforter of the Afflicted!*