

The Seven Sorrows of Mary

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Foreword

The devotion to the Seven Sorrows of Mary appears to date back to the mid-thirteenth century and to the Servite Order. Shortly after they were founded in 1240, they chose a devotion to Mary at the foot of the cross as a special object of their devotion. Over the course of its history, the devotion has seen various forms, sometimes five sorrows of Mary and other times seven sorrows. In its present form, the devotion addresses the following moments in the life of Mary, her seven sorrows:

1. The prophecy of Simeon at the time of the presentation of the child Jesus in the Temple.

2. Mary and Joseph flee with Jesus into Egypt.
3. Mary and Joseph lose the child Jesus in Jerusalem and find him in the Temple.
4. Mary meets Jesus on his way to Calvary.
5. Mary stands at the foot of the cross on Calvary.
6. Mary is present as Jesus is taken down from the cross.
7. Mary is present at the burial of Jesus.

Some of these events have a specific scriptural text that is associated with the sorrow and are rooted in John's Gospel, which places Mary at the foot of the cross. Others events, such as meeting Jesus on the way to Calvary and being present when Jesus' body is taken down from the cross for his burial, are part of our tradition and are found in the Stations of the Cross.

This Seven Sorrows devotion has served as a way to deepen our appreciation of Christ's love for us, and also for Mary's courage throughout her life as she listened to the Word of God and acted on it, living out her response to the Angel Gabriel: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Readers may wish to listen to music as they read these reflections. Sometimes music touches the heart more deeply. There are a variety of versions of the Stabat Mater that might be helpful, including works by Palestrina, Pergolesi, Rossini, Dvorak, and Vivaldi. Or any quiet, soothing music might help to provide a reflective environment for reading this pamphlet.

Introduction

When I was growing up, I knew only one grandparent, my father's mother. She was a strong, solid German. My grandfathers had died when my parents themselves were young, and my maternal grandmother died in November 1954, four months before I was born. My mother told me once that she asked her mom what the most difficult thing in her life had been. Her mother had raised five children virtually on her own; the oldest was 14 when her husband died. She raised the family through the Great Depression of the 1930s. Yet, in response to my mother's question—What was the most difficult thing in your life?—she said: "The death of my first child, John." My mother said that she didn't hesitate for a moment in responding.

She had given birth to six children; John lived only a couple of months. In the midst of all that she had experienced in her life, she held this ongoing sorrow, the loss of her firstborn son. We have a word for spouses when the other spouse dies: widow or widower. We have a word for children when their parents die: orphans. But we have no word to describe parents who lose a child.

Mary has many titles which we often hear mentioned in litanies: Mother of Sorrows, Mother of Mercy, Comforter of the Afflicted, Star of the Sea, Queen of Heaven, and so on. All of these names capture something of who Mary is. Yet none of them touch on what is undoubtedly the greatest sorrow of her life, the loss of her only child. We call her Mother of Sorrows, even Queen of Martyrs. Indeed, these titles refer to the suffering in Mary's life, but no title captures the deepest sorrow of her life.

The following meditations focus on the sorrowful mother, Mary. By reflecting on her, I hope that we may come to love and admire her more fully and to see in her a model to imitate in our own lives, which are so frequently marked by suffering and sorrow. Indeed, Mary can be a light to shine on us and to lead the way so that we may understand how to be disciples of her Son with greater love and integrity every day of our lives, even in the midst of sorrow.

In Pope Benedict XVI's second encyclical, "On Christian Hope," he offers us the image of Mary as a guide. He recalls a hymn from the Catholic tradition called "Ave Maris Stella" or "Hail, Star of the Sea." Comparing our lives to a journey on an often stormy sea, Pope Benedict underscores the importance of stars to guide us. The saints are such stars, he suggests, and Mary is perhaps the most significant. She "shines

with [God's] light," he says, and guides us "along our way."

As we recall moments from the life of Jesus and Mary, may our hearts burn with a love for them and burn as well with compassion for the Jesus who is suffering today in our brothers and sisters in this world. May these reflections on Mary and the sufferings of her Son bring us to a deep compassion for all of God's people whom Jesus came to redeem.