

## Suffering

“Many are the troubles of the just man, but out of them all the Lord delivers him” (Ps 34:20). Suffering is described as great tribulation, distress, troubles, misery, pain, sorrow and torment. At present, there probably is not a person who does not suffer. The Apostolic Letter “*Patris corde*” mentioned above arose just from the suffering that the whole world is experiencing right now: the Coronavirus pandemic. In it, Pope Francis writes, “Each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble.”

Martin Luther King said an interesting thought: If the world looks back to the last century, it will cry. Not because there was a lot of suffering, but because good people were silent. Among those good people also belong a righteous man, St. Joseph, and a suffering woman, Alphonse Marie. Although they both suffered a lot, they did not complain, they were silent. Father Dominic De Domenico, O.P., in his book “*True Devotion to St. Joseph and the Church*” says that Joseph offered his sorrows for the sins of the world in union with the sufferings of Jesus and Mary. Thus, he cooperated in the work of redemption. Since God had required his cooperation in the work of redemption, He necessarily required the suffering that was inseparable from that cooperation.

Alphonse Marie also was ready to participate in the mission of the Redeemer by participating in His suffering and thus she responded to God’s love. She offered her sufferings for the conversion of sinners and for the salvation of the immortal

souls. The Redeemer Himself asked her to do so and participate in the redemption of the world from slavery of sin. Let us see what these two co-workers of God have endured in the work of redemption.

Father De Domenico writes that the Gospels ‘speak’ about seven sorrows of St. Joseph (cf. De Domenico, D.: *True Devotion to St. Joseph and the Church*, p. 73-79).

## **1. The Doubts**

The first sorrow presents St. Joseph’s doubts mentioned above, when Mary “*was found with child through the Holy Spirit*” (Mt 1:18). How great the mental suffering was that overwhelmed Joseph! What excruciating pain gripped his heart! A heart of a man, who loved his bride purely and intensively! Should he, a righteous man, let her be stoned as the Law of Moses commended, a Law given by God, whom he loved above all? The idea that he should put to death the life that had only begun, as well as the life of this young mother, an excruciating pain, even agony pierced him. However, he did not want to break God’s commandments also. No, he was blinded neither by the extreme passion nor an injured feeling. Since for him nothing in the matter was sufficiently clear, he believed that it pertained to justice to be separated from Mary. He felt sorrow from the loss of the most precious above all, his loved bride. However, because he was a righteous man, he decided to save lives and to dismiss Mary in secret.

Although the whole previous chapter was devoted to the doubts of Alphonse Marie, now let us see how much sorrow it caused to her. When the parents refused to let Alphonse Marie to enter the convent, it was “*a hard blow for her. She asked again, on*

*her knees implored them that the salvation of her soul depended on that. The father and mother ... could not be prevailed upon... Obediently she submitted, but she was filled with deep pain”* (PERRIN, J. M.: *The Life of Mother Alphonse-Marie*, p. 18). A bitter period began for Alphonse Marie. Prayer, which she loved, became a torment. Even her confessions and Communions appeared to her as sacrilegious, as offenses against God. When she confessed it to her confessor, he reassured her and directed her. *“But this soul, robbed of every sensible consolation, no longer understood. Her interior sufferings continued; in fact, they increased more and more. The struggle in her tormented soul was adamant and relentless”* (ibid, p. 19-20). This heavy burden of interior suffering, which Alphonse Marie had borne for a whole year already, caused her health to decline. Her friends also complained that she spoke so seldom with them. However, even in this tormented tepidity she was steadfast and calm and silently bore her sufferings.

## **2. Looking for a Shelter**

The second time the pain gripped Joseph when, according to Caesar’s decree, he had to go to Bethlehem to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. What sorrow and disappointment! He went from house to house, from one door to another, and he could not find a place to accommodate his wife, who was about to give birth to her child. Already then, Christ’s word was fulfilled, *“The Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head”* (Mt 8:20). He was refused everywhere because of the “lack of room”. By this suffering, Joseph participated in

the work of redemption of Christ. *“While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn”* (Lk 2:6-7). How this man of God had to suffer greatly because he was unable to provide a suitable place for the coming of the Son of God into the world. He found only a cold cave outside the city. However, he accepted this sorrow silently, without a murmur and with surrender to God's will.

Alphonse Marie also was looking, yet not for a shelter but consolation. In her deep dejection, she would have liked *“to find consolation and help from her friends. At times, she would indeed return to her friends, but when she stood in their midst, she found that she was and could say nothing about her inner sufferings”* (PERRIN, J. M.: *The Life of Mother Alphonse-Marie*, p. 21). She experienced that in the hours of bitterest suffering, she found herself alone before God. Even her relatives and people of her close surroundings did not understand her. They were impatient and blamed her for her helplessness. She was told her illness consumed the family's earnings. They derided her piety. All these she bore silently and patiently asking God for help.

### **3. The Circumcision**

The third pain grasped Joseph's heart *“when eight days were completed for his [Jesus'] circumcision”* (Lk 2:21). Joseph saw that Jesus shed His precious Blood for the first time. This was a “foretaste” of the future Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, where His sweat became like drops of blood

falling on the ground and He experienced the further passion of the scourging, crowning with thorns, carrying the cross and finally crucifixion, and after His death the piercing His side by a soldier. Joseph silently united himself with the redemptive suffering of Christ. During this service, Joseph gave the name to Jesus as the angel told him, because in this name the whole world will be saved.

The physical and mental suffering of Alphonse Marie were enormous. She drew the strength to bear this burden silently and patiently from meditation on the passion of Jesus Christ. When she meditated on His scourging, she saw Jesus covered with wounds, torn by lashes, streaming with blood, yet silent, uttering no complaint, shedding no tears, quiet, submissive, and praying for those who were beating Him. She says, *“These pious thoughts and sentiments lead us to consider why and for whom Jesus suffered so much.”* And she adds, *“We see that it was for the sinners, that means, for the enemies of His glory and His name and that it happened out of love for them”* (Hérissard, D., *Rekindle the Gift of God that is Within You*, II p. 14-15). In order to let herself be penetrated more deeply into the passion of our Redeemer, Alphonse Marie asked herself questions. Her soul was so deeply touched that she felt the pains of the passion on herself – they became her own pains. As St. Joseph did, Alphonse Marie was also silent and she united herself with suffering Christ, who shed His precious Blood.

#### **4. The Presentation in the Temple**

The fourth sorrow struck Joseph, when while presenting Jesus

in the temple, he heard from the mouth of the elderly man, Simeon, a prophesy that this child *“is to be a sign that will be contradicted”* and the soul of his wife, whom he loved dearly, *“a sword will pierce”* (cf. Lk 2:27-35). Was not Joseph pierced by sword at this time? His two, the most beloved persons, will suffer cruelly. Jesus, who will redeem the world from sins, is offered as a sacrifice now in the temple as a bloodless victim, but later He will shed all His blood for the salvation of the world. Joseph, with Mary, offers the price that must be paid to redeem us from slavery of sin and the devil, and to satisfy for sin and the punishment due to sin. This is a preview of the sacrifice of the cross.

Deeper knowledge of the life of Alphonse Marie will convince us that her sufferings were not purposeless. It was a sacrifice, a sacrifice for others and a sacrifice for the immortal souls. At the age of 13, she had physical sufferings and did not disclose all of them to her parents. She offered them to God praying, *“My Jesus, I want to bear these pains for love of You; only give me a heart like Yours”* (PERRIN, J. M.: *The Life of Mother Alphonse-Marie*, p. 12). Kissing the cross, she united herself with suffering Jesus.

Twenty years later, she was seized by a strong desire to suffer with Jesus in order to lead to salvation many souls. She urgently asked the Lord to fasten her with Him to the cross, so that she could make reparation for the many who despise His love. Suddenly, her soul was filled with great suffering. But the Lord assured her, *“See, my daughter, these sufferings that I am sending you have great value. You will soon understand that it is along this way that you are to walk. In the new Order that you will establish, you will have to teach the others how they*

*are to conduct themselves in such trials”* (ibid, p. 42). Bl. Alphonse Marie and St. Joseph were penetrated with sorrow over the redeeming sacrifice of Christ and they silently united themselves with this suffering.

## **5. The Flight into Egypt**

The fifth sorrow bit into Joseph’s heart, when he was forced to fly into Egypt with Mary and the child Jesus. When magi departed, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, *“Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him”* (Mt 2:13). And Matthew continues that Joseph rose by night. He rose, filled with the horror that a child is in danger of death. With a painful heart, he awakened Mary, and they quickly prepared the necessary things and set out with the child. How pain and fear he must have experienced at the thought of escaping the persecutors or other pitfalls of the journey! How much danger lurked on them on this journey! Although he escaped dangers, he certainly suffered greatly at the thought of how he could provide his family when he came to Egypt, to a foreign and unknown world. In Egypt, he had to start from nothing and yet he did not grumble, but he quietly did his job to survive this exile.

Alphonse Marie was also “forced” to leave her newly established convent and her fellow Sisters, for whom she was a mother, and to travel to Strasburg. Bishop Räss summoned her to make the retreat. This order of the Bishop was a recommendation of Pope Pius Bolo IX, who said that it would

be wise that *“this virgin who has revelations and believes to have received from Our Lord Jesus Christ ... to have her spirit tested through other priests”* (PERRIN, J. M.: *The Life of Mother Alphonse-Marie*, p. 68) For evil tongues accused Alphonse Marie, yet she did not defend herself, but endured it in silence and humility. Even a strange letter was addressed to Bishop Räss, which warned him about Sister Alphonse Marie from Niederbronn. *“The devil has crept into the interior of this virgin and sits on the throne of pride and ignorance that reigns there. She has set herself up as a prophetess, and the enemy of all that is good can hide his falsehood behind the veil of truth. In short, this poor ... is Satan’s puppet, who uses her for his own ends. She finds herself in a very dangerous position, between truth and error, between God and His enemy”* (ibid, p. 46). As a sword pierced into the heart of Alphonse Marie, about whom her spiritual director, Father Reichard, wrote to Bishop Räss, *“All her words speak of a holy devotion and of the merciful meekness of the Divine Redeemer. All sinners are invited and asked to return to the good Shepherd of our souls. Our Seer never wanted to give the impression of being a prophetess. Her docility of heart and spirit never wavered a moment since her childhood. Nor it is possible for me to find these “certain small days”, on which she was betrayed by the father of lies...”* He ends the letter with these words, *“I solemnly assert that I have never had to combat that devilish vice in my parishioner. On the contrary, I always had to calm and allay her fears because of her excessive anxiety and the great consciousness of her own nothingness. In pain that constantly fills her soul, she finds peace only in the afflicted hearts of Jesus and Mary”* (ibid, s. 77).

The enemy of God's things never sleeps. He uses lies: Herod said to the magi that he would go to pay homage to the newborn Child and an unknown writer wrote to Räss that Alphonse Marie is making herself a prophetess, to cause turmoil among people. However, St. Joseph and Bl. Alphonse Marie suffered this sorrow quietly and thus cooperated in the work of redemption.

## **6. The Return from Egypt**

The return from Egypt also caused sorrow to Joseph, and it was for the sixth time. Although those, who sought for Jesus' life already died, but their descendants were perhaps even more cruel. Certainly, Joseph listened with joy to the angel's words, who appeared in a dream to him, "*Rise, ... go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead*" (Mt 2:20), and immediately set out for his homeland. However, when he learned that in Judea reigned Herod's descendant, he was afraid to go there. He felt that the Child Jesus was still in danger, which caused him great mental pain. He considered as his primary duty to protect the Child entrusted to him. And in Judea danger was still lurking for the Child. Where should he go now? Anxiety also was added to the fatigue of traveling from Egypt. The joy from arriving to the homeland was replaced by fear and anxiety about the Child's safety. However, these did not exceed his trust to God. Warned by an angel in a dream, he went to Galilee and settled down in Nazareth. Joseph accepted this sorrow in silence for the salvation of the world.

During the retreat of Alphonse Marie in Strasburg, the Bishop conversed with her for several hours each day. Eight days later,

the Bishop wrote to Father Reichard, *“I think that the wishes of the Pope and of the Church have been carried out, so I permitted Mother Alphonse Marie to return to Niederbronn. I am very satisfied with this retreat. I am sure that God will bless it and I hope that much good will come from it”* (PERRIN, J. M.: *The Life of Mother Alphonse-Marie*, p. 69) To his friend, the Bishop of Speyer, he wrote, *“Alphonse Marie responded with a joyful ‘yes’ to my summons, and went immediately to the convent I had designed. I questioned and tested her daily for two weeks and I was strengthened in the good opinion that I had of her. ... Her courage, her zeal, her love have been enkindled anew, yet she does not neglect the temporal interests of the Congregation”* (ibid, p. 69).

However, after returning to Niederbronn, Alphonse Marie had to regulate very urgent matters. What sorrow was in her heart, seeing that there was no food for the Sisters and for the poor who came daily to the convent door for their noon meal! What should she do? Should she buy a field for vegetables? But where to get money? Other worries also afflicted her motherly heart. She was the administrator of the house, so she had to provide for their livelihood. She also was the Mistress of Novices, whom she had to introduce into a religious life. Yet she should not neglect the charism: to care for the needy, the poor and the sick. She received requests from every side to send them her Sisters. Although she sent her very young Sisters to care for the sick in their homes, they always returned to the community and shared their joys and sorrows, they met during their duty. And now, not even after two years of the Congregation’s existence, should she, these not quite ready Sisters, send to the missions far away from her? Yet trusting

God, she also hugged this cross silently and brought her Sisters to the new stations. However, the greatest sorrow hit her heart when the Sisters, first in Vienna, then in Würzburg, and lastly in Sopron, separated for the Motherhouse in Niederbronn. Her heart was bleeding as she quietly offered this greatest sacrifice of her life to the Lord.

## **7. Finding Jesus in the Temple**

It was already the seventh time that Joseph's heart was grasped with sorrow. Twelve year old boy Jesus was lost. Joseph and Mary were looking for Jesus with anxiety in the innumerable crowd of people who came to Jerusalem for the feasts. They journeyed for a day thinking that he was in the caravan with people returning to Nazareth. He was neither there, nor among their relatives and acquaintances. "Where can he be? Hopefully, nothing bad happened to him." With such fears swirling in their minds and the pain that deeply sank inside them, they returned to Jerusalem. When finally after three days they found him in the temple, Joseph remained silent, but Mary expressed what they both experienced, "*Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety*" (Lk 2:48). Thus, Joseph and Mary participated on the cross, which God sent them. Although they did not understand Jesus' answer, that He should be in His Father's house, in silence they embraced this cross.

When Alphonse Marie started to attend school, she was happy that she could hear much from God and get to know Him better. But she was very disappointed already on her first visit in school. The teacher made her sit down with children who

spoke foul words. Her resistance was so great, and her heart was so anguished that she cried and her joy turned into dislike. She could not sleep at the thought of school. She told about her suffering neither to the teacher, who asked her why she was crying, nor her parents. She carried this cross silently. Her inner suffering lasted as long as she had to be with these children at school. However, she did not reveal her suffering to anyone. When school was over, she separated herself from these children who brought contempt with them. When she was finally moved to another place, another great sorrow pierced her heart. She was not allowed to attend lessons given by the priest, because the children of her age all had to leave. She would like to stay, but obedience distracted her from it. So as she left, she looked back sadly with tears in her eyes. She hid her inner suffering and complained only to God (cf. REICHARD, J. D.: *The Life of the Young Elizabeth Eppinger*, p. 14-15)

It is difficult to understand the inner pain of a soul where God's things are concerned. Joseph and Mary did not understand that the Child Jesus should be there where God's things are concerned. Likewise, Alphonse Marie, as a child eager to know God better, did not understand why it was not granted to her. The truth is that they quietly embraced the painful torment of seeking God.

*By suffering, God leads us into the mystery of His redemptive work. It is an opportunity to grow in love for God, even though there is darkness in and around us and we do not feel the tender touch of God. Let us be guided by Him.*