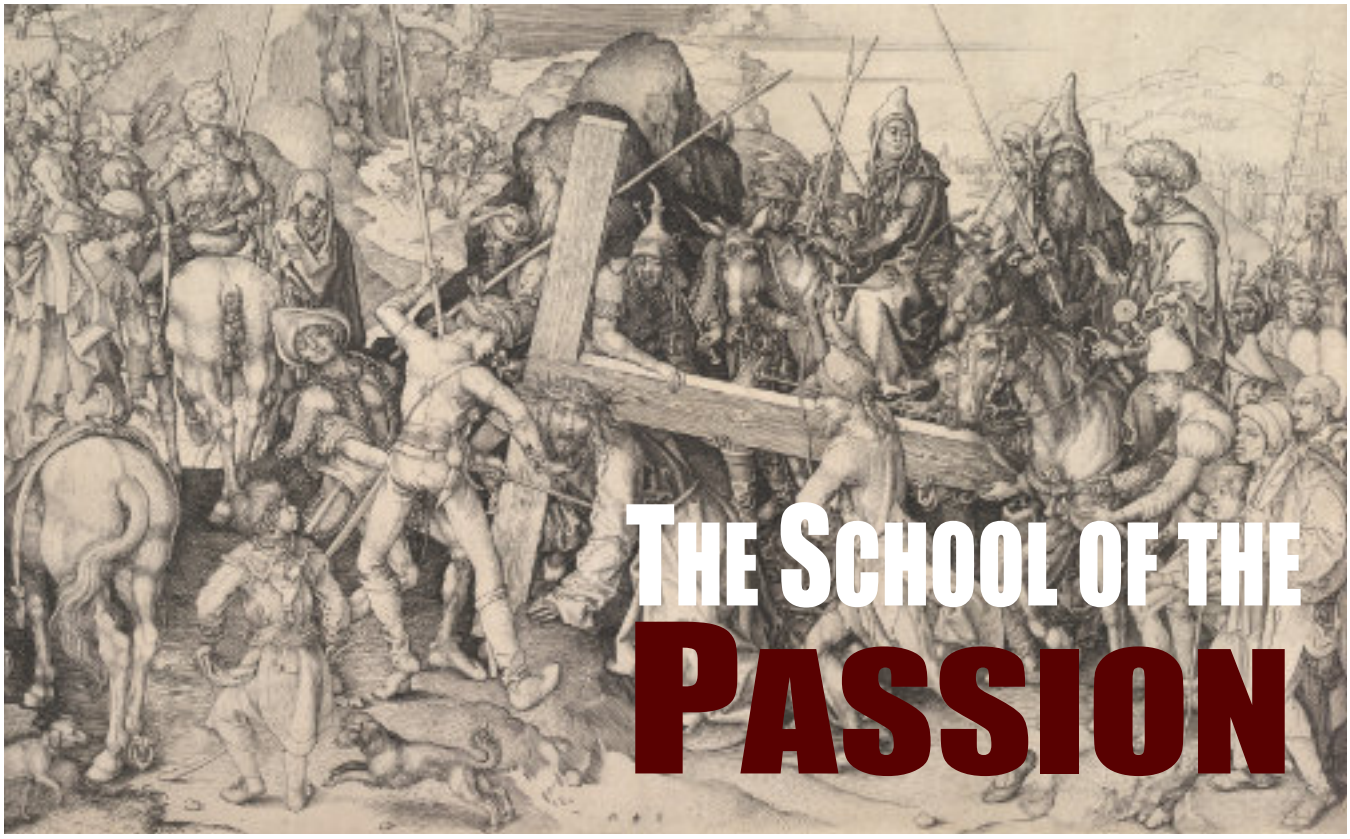

The School of the Passion

Christ Carrying the Cross by Martin Schongauer. c1475-1480.

By nature, we all have a deep desire for knowledge and understanding. Men are constantly striving to penetrate the mysteries of the world of nature. We desire to know and understand the mystery of ourselves, the world within us, the nature of our souls and bodies. We desire to know the world above us. We long for some understanding of the spiritual world, the world of God and the angels.

In a special way, as we enter into the Lenten Season, we place before our mind's eye one of the deepest mysteries of all, one of the most awe-inspiring and fascinating mysteries—the mystery of God suffering and dying for love of His creatures. The knowledge of this mystery constitutes one of the highest and most desirable kinds of knowledge possible. Shouldn't it be one of our ambitions and goals in life to come to a greater understanding of this mystery? The nature of this knowledge is such that it is open to all. This knowledge is not just for those who have a high level of intelligence and who have the time to devote to study.

> "...there are three places we can go to gain a greater understanding of the mystery of the Cross, three schools as it were. There is the school of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the school of the Apostles and the school of suffering."

Who really understands this mystery? Who has been able to penetrate its depths? Who can teach us about it? If you are looking for someone to lead you into a deeper understanding and appreciation of this greatest of mysteries, to whom would you go? The ones who have the deepest grasp of this mystery are not necessarily the learned theologians in the universities. This is not principally a knowledge that is learned from books. I would suggest that there are three places we can go to gain a greater understanding of the mystery of the Cross, three schools as it were. There is the school of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the

school of the Apostles, and the school of suffering.

If we are looking for a guide into this mystery, we could find none better than the Blessed Virgin Mary. She was drawn into this mystery in an altogether unique way. When we attempt to look with the eyes of faith into the heart of Mary as she stood beneath the Cross, what do we see? What were the sentiments of her heart? Was she full of bitter reproaches against God for what He was permitting her Son to suffer? Was she full of anger and resentment because of the hostility of the Jewish authorities, because of the cruelty of the Romans, because of betrayal of Judas and the cowardice of the Apostles? These would have been natural and understandable reactions. But these clearly could not have been the sentiments of our Blessed Mother's heart. But then we have to ask ourselves: how is it possible that she was not consumed by these emotions? The only possible answer is that by the light of God in her soul she could see the deeper reality of what was happening. She knew she was witnessing the greatest act of God's love. She also knew that she was witnessing not only the redemption of all men, but she was witnessing her very own redemption. All the great graces and privileges that the Blessed Mother enjoyed were the fruit of Christ's passion—they were bought at the price of His blood. And so in the midst of her suffering, her soul must have been filled with deep gratitude and thanksgiving. At the end of the Good Friday service in the Maronite liturgy, we sing a hymn where we find these interior sentiments of Our Lady beautifully expressed. She asks Jesus to give her the wings of an eagle so she can fly throughout the world and summon everyone to the banquet of Christ's death. Anyone who has tasted or been touched by the divine love coming from the heart of Christ on the Cross feels compelled to tell the whole world about it.

Diego Velázquez, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

"Christ is not King in spite of the fact that He suffered and died, but that it is *precisely* in His suffering and passion that He was reigning as King."

Then there is the school of the Apostles. At the time of the passion and death of Our Lord, the Apostles were filled with confusion and incomprehension. But after the coming of the Holy Spirit, when the Apostles and Evangelists go to write the Gospels in order to proclaim and to communicate to the world that Jesus really was, in fact, the long awaited Messiah King, we find something quite surprising: They don't concentrate their attention so much on the resurrected Christ, as if the Kingship of Christ were most evident in the triumph of His resurrection. Rather, the Evangelists are at pains to show us that Christ is not King in spite of the fact that He suffered and died, but

that it is *precisely* in His suffering and passion that He was reigning as King. They want us to see that the Cross really is this King's throne. They want us to see that the Kingship of Christ is manifested, above all, in His suffering and His sacrifice on the Cross, because it is here, above all, that the power of divine love is on display; it is on the Cross that Christ conquers the forces of darkness and destruction by His redeeming love. They were expecting a King who would make use of force and violence to defeat His enemies and, instead, God showed them a King whose only weapons are love and truth.

Finally, there is the school of suffering. One can only enter into a deep understanding of the mystery of the Cross by participating in it. This precious knowledge comes at a price. I would like you to consider: What is the greatest thing you have done in your life? What is your greatest achievement? When you stand in the light of God at the end of your life, what will God especially commend you for? Have you ever freely chosen to suffer in order to be faithful to God, in order to be faithful to His commandments or His counsels or His inspirations? Have you ever freely chosen to forgive someone who hurt you, and perhaps hurt you deeply? Have you ever spent yourself or sacrificed yourself out of love for someone? Perhaps these achievements at times don't feel like love, but, in reality, are we not participating in the love of Christ on the Cross when we do them? These are all divine–human achievements. These are the kinds of realities that most manifest the divine power working in the human heart. When we study the lives of the saints what impresses us the most? Is it their ecstasies, their visions, their miracles? Or is it not, rather, their ability to willingly and, sometimes, cheerfully suffer for love of God and for love of their neighbor?

"We should not live our lives in fear. Suffering is one of the most efficacious means for the enrichment, the divine enrichment, of the human spirit. Suffering shows us our neediness."

No doubt all of us, at the present time or in times past, have suffered some terrible affliction. It may be a physical affliction, a psychological affliction, or simply having to witness the suffering of someone we love. In the midst of our affliction, we may turn to God and ask Him for a miracle and that is all perfectly in order. But I ask you to consider: What would be the greater miracle, what would be the clearer manifestation of the divine power? That God would work a miracle and deliver us from our affliction, or that He would give us the ability to bear our sufferings in a spirit of great peace, resignation, and acceptance? God's power and love shine forth (for those who have eyes to see) more in the Cross of Christ than in His resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is simply the outward manifestation of the glory of Christ already present on the Cross.

We should not live our lives in fear. Suffering is one of the most efficacious means for the enrichment, the divine enrichment, of the human spirit. Suffering shows us our neediness. It shatters any illusion we may have of our self-sufficiency. Suffering, freely accepted in faith and out of love for God, drives us deeper into the heart of God. It has the ability to purify us, to detach us from the passing things of this world; it helps us to judge things aright, with right judgment; it puts the passing pleasures and things of this world in the right perspective and it forces us to look to the future for which God created us. St. Gemma Galgani once

wrote: "If you really want to love Jesus, first learn to suffer, because suffering teaches you to love". And, in the end, as St. Paul assures us: *"...this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison ... For I consider these present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* (2 Cor. 4:17, Rom 8:18)

✣ ✣ ✣