

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

Dear Brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

As we begin Lent, let us do so by reflecting on Mary, a true disciple of Jesus, who can help us enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love for us during this holy season. The Scriptures say much about her witness and reveal to us her role as disciple.

But let us focus on the cross of Jesus Christ, where his death is played out once and for all time, and reflect on Mary's role in this eminently significant and dramatic moment in the life of her Son. Mary is a mother who suffers the death of her child, a child whom she held in her arms when he came into the world and now will hold again having left this world. What sorrow she must have felt. What pain must have pierced her heart, that pain of which Simeon, the prophet, spoke: "(And you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:35). What is Mary doing at the foot of the cross? She is not trying to stop the execution; she is not protesting Jesus' innocence. Mary's presence is mentioned only by John in his Gospel. He says she just stood there (John 19:25). Perhaps this is a position of strength and courage. Maybe, just maybe, Mary was pondering, in the biblical sense of the word.

To ponder, in the biblical sense,¹ is to hold, carry, and transform tension so as not to give it back in kind. Obviously, Jesus models this kind of pondering for us as well. He took in hatred, held it, transformed it, and gave back love and forgiveness. To ponder biblically is to be like a water purifier; it takes in all kinds of impurities with the water, but holds the impurities inside of itself and gives back only pure water. Mary shows the path a model disciple should follow: ponder, meditate, treasure in the heart, hold and transform tension.

I would like to invite you, sometime during this Lenten season, to set aside time to contemplate Mary at the foot of the cross of her Son. In that reflection, put yourself in Mary's place. What do you see

¹ Cf., writings of Ron Rolheiser, OMI, president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He is a community builder, lecturer and writer. His books are popular throughout the English-speaking world. He has a regular column in the *Western Catholic Reporter*, Canada's largest religious weekly, which is also carried by more than 50 newspapers worldwide.

as you look upon the face of the suffering Jesus? What are you pondering? What are the tensions that you are experiencing in your own life at this moment, which you need to hold onto, which you need to carry for awhile and then, with the grace of God, you need to transform?

I want to expand a little on the different words: hold, carry and transform:

- **Hold** means not to let go of immediately, to learn to accept. How difficult it is at times to accept when that which causes us tension can be embarrassing, uncomfortable. We have the immediate tendency to want to get rid of it, to drop it, to run away from it.
- **Carry** means to take the time to work through a process of reconciling oneself with the tension. This often means reconciling ourselves with those who provoke the tension that exists in our life. Reconciliation is not something that can happen immediately. It takes time. It takes patience. It takes courage. It takes understanding. It takes humility.
- **Transform** means to remake anew. It takes work. It takes struggle. It takes a lot of giving, as well as forgiving.

As we look on Mary, at the foot of the cross, pondering the face of her suffering Son, as we look to her Son, where do we see his suffering face today? It should not be very difficult for us, who are called to contemplate the face of Jesus in the face of the suffering poor whom we evangelize and serve, to see the faces of the poor in the face of the suffering Jesus.

- Look upon the face of the suffering Jesus and see those children abandoned by their own parents and wandering the streets of most major cities of our world today.
- Look at the suffering face of Jesus and see a young teenage girl who does not know what to do because, after not heeding the counsel of her parents with regard to the people with whom she associates, she has to break the news that she is pregnant. Does she listen to the counsel that thinks her suffering can be eased by encouraging her to abort? Or does she listen to herself and the temptation to run away, or even, in the extreme, out of fear of confronting her parents, to take her own life.
- As you contemplate the face of the suffering Jesus, see the face of the thousands and thousands of men, women, teenagers, and children who have fled from their homelands as immigrants with the hope of finding “a better life in another world,” which many times has been

created through the modern means of advertisement and marketing today.

- As you look upon the suffering face of Jesus, see the thousands upon thousands of refugees who flee from their homelands to avoid violence and genocide, the experience of the hatred of brothers and sisters against brothers and sisters.
- As you look upon the suffering face of Jesus, see those same immigrants who are refugees being discriminated against or rejected by their host countries because they are different, because they are dirty, because their skin is a different color and they cannot speak the language.
- As you look upon the face of the suffering Jesus, see the face of the thousands upon thousands who die of hunger, malaria, AIDS, and other diseases, and whose cries for help appear to fall on deafened ears, because there are so many of them.
- As you look upon the suffering face of Jesus, see the thousands and thousands who fear for their lives in their own villages, in their own barrios, in their own towns, in their own homes because young people roam the streets in gangs with no fear of anyone or anything and with no respect for human life.
- As you look on the suffering face of Jesus, see also the thousands upon thousands of men and women who are imprisoned in inhuman conditions, many times awaiting long procedures for justice and feeling that justice will never come because they are poor and “who hears the cry of the poor?”

In his first encyclical, Benedict XVI speaks of contemplating the suffering of Christ.

“It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation, *we discover* the path along which *our life* and love must move.”²

I pray that your contemplation of Mary, at the foot of the cross of her Son, Jesus, over the period of these 40 days of Lent, be a healing experience, as well as a journey through the heart of pain and despair of the poor of this world that gives way to hope. Jesus’ own passion, death and resurrection assert that the evils of this world are not incurable and that injustice does not have the last word. Ponder

² Cf., BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 12.

then, the suffering face of Christ. Take hold of the injustices of this world. Carry them in your heart and ask the grace of God to transform them and then give back tenfold justice, peace, understanding, reconciliation, love.³

As we do so, my brothers, let us contemplate the words of Blessed Marcantonio Durando, which is part of a prayer that the Nazarene Sisters say as they begin their night service of the sick and the poor.

Jesus my Nazorean, here I am bowed down at your feet, to ask your blessing.... I intend to pass "this night" (this Lent) in prayer to honor the many nights that you spent in prayer for me and especially the night preceding your painful Passion.⁴

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General

³ Note: I would like to thank Fr. John Sledziona, C.M., for some of the ideas in this letter. They are taken from a reflection that he gave on Mary and the Eucharist to the confreres of the New England Province.

⁴ Marcantonio Durando, cited in LUIGI CHIEROTTI, *P. Marcantonio Durando*, Genova, Cooperazione Vincentiana, 1970, p. 385.