

The Cross in Our Life, Part Four
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The Cross of Spiritual Struggle; Christ alone bore the Cross without guilt.

In his fallen condition, the human person is a mixture of evil and good, holiness and impurity, purity and defilement, innocence and guilt. Purity exists within him alongside impurity, and innocence alongside guilt. As a creature made in the image of God, he bears within his being an inclination toward goodness and a longing to live it in all its fullness. Yet, as a fallen creature, he also bears within himself an inclination toward evil and an attraction to becoming firmly rooted in it. Two natures struggle within him. He longs for a Source whom he often neither knows nor apprehends except through sensible things. These, in turn, frequently distract him and lead him away from his original goal. At times he submits to them; at other times he rebels against them and against himself, desiring to fulfill his true self and attain the fullness of life.

“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do; but what I hate, I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. In that case, it is no longer I who do it, but sin dwelling in me... For the desire to do good is within my reach, but the doing of good is not. For the good that I want to do, I do not do; but the evil that I do not want to do, that I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin dwelling in me”
(Romans 7:14–20).

The cross comes to us because of our failure through what we call our sin. In its spiritual sense, sin means “missing the mark.” This is the meaning of the word “sin” in Greek. The human person frequently misses the mark because of the confusion arising within him from the mingling of light and darkness—in other words, from the presence of impurity amidst the purity that Christ grants him.

Herein lies the human person’s inner conflict. Within himself, he experiences a fierce struggle between good and evil. He is capable of becoming one of the greatest among the good, but he is equally capable of becoming one of the

greatest among the wicked. At times, this struggle exhausts him, and in despair he is tempted to surrender to his condition. Yet his soul finds no rest and continues to cry out, even in silence, seeking the stability and peace it has lost. Then that which comes from God within him begins to stir, filling him with zeal and determination—especially when, from time to time, he tastes something of the joy of choosing the divine light, which Christ nourishes within him.

In this inner conflict, the human person does not struggle only against himself, but also against the spiritual forces of evil—the demons. For “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Through the grace of God and his own steadfastness, therefore, the one who struggles spiritually acquires divine strength and immunity against evil. These free him from it completely, so that he may radiate goodness, joy, and peace wherever he goes and wherever he may be.

The weight of the believer’s cross increases in proportion to the intensity with which he combats the evil within himself. At times, he may ask: Why all this effort? Why must I, in particular, bear this cross? When experiencing severe exhaustion, he may imagine that God is punishing him for one or more sins he has committed. Yet after he passes through one of the rounds of this spiritual warfare and God touches him with divine consolation, he forgets all his weariness and is encouraged to continue the struggle until the roots of evil within him are destroyed. He comes to find this inner struggle sweet, because the joy he tastes through the victories he achieves, through divine consolations and through God’s visitations, cannot be compared with earthly pleasures of any kind.

One night, Saint Anthony the Great wrestled with the devil in an exhausting struggle until he defeated him. At dawn, the Lord appeared to him, clothed in light and gazing upon him tenderly. The saint cried out, “Where were You all night, O Lord, while I was engaged in this battle?” The Lord gently replied, “I was beside you, strengthening you and rejoicing in your victories, O Anthony.”

The cross of this struggle is, preeminently, a cross of purification, cleansing, growth, and maturity. The human person does not mature except through trials. For this reason, some saints would grieve when trials were absent from their lives for a long time, considering this a sign that God was no longer visiting them.

We bear this cross for the sake of our personal growth toward perfection, whereas Christ bore it not for His own sake but entirely for the sake of others, for their perfection and salvation. Therefore, when the believer regards his cross as a participation in the Cross of Christ, its meaning is transformed: from a cross of suffering into a cross of resurrection, freedom, maturity, and glory.

Our cross can be powerfully illumined by the Cross of Christ, who bore it though He is perfectly pure and innocent. He is the One who will raise us up, provided that we do not remain wallowing in our weakness. The perfect purity and innocence of Christ are filled with active power, revealed in the truth of His bearing the Cross out of His overwhelming love for humankind. Since there is absolutely no evil in Christ, the power of His Cross and the power of His love extend themselves before all who desire to open their hearts to Him—the One who suffered for our sake.

Through the Cross of Christ, this power reaches human nature and all those who seek union with Christ. This is why Christians love the Cross so deeply and are so closely bound to it. They cannot forsake it, for in doing so they would reject all growth and progress in their spiritual journey along the path of holiness. The absence of the cross is the absence of Christ working and acting within the human person and accompanying him toward true and eternal life. The Cross possesses saving power. It is a cross that I bear not only because of my own sins but also, following the example of Christ, because of the sins of others.

The person who recognizes his failings and is conscious of his guilt toward others will not fail to become a true human being. Whoever is willing to acknowledge his guilt becomes aware of his personal responsibility and recognizes his inadequacy in his work. He therefore continually looks toward

what is better and does not shrink from enduring the hardships of his journey toward perfection in all things.

But if a person does not recognize his mistakes, he will become aware of his responsibility only with the greatest difficulty. By refusing to acknowledge his errors, he shows that he rejects his role as a responsible partner in dialogue and relationship with God. He acts as one who does not acknowledge at all that God addresses him with a word—a word to which he is called to respond.

There is yet another cross here: the cross of selfishness and ignorance. It is a cross that the person does not deliberately seek, yet his ignorance lays it upon him and leaves him without hope. The suffering of the selfish and self-centered person is more severe than that of the person who recognizes his responsibility and desires to develop and elevate himself. In refusing to assume responsibility, we attempt to leap over sin. Yet the truth of the world and the truth of our own personhood can be lived fully and rightly only when we are conscious of our responsibility and our errors, and when we desire to bear our cross with knowledge and understanding.

There is an Arabic proverb: “Whoever seeks the heights must keep vigil through the nights.” Whoever aspires to new life willingly accepts the cross of putting off the old man, so that, through Christ, he may attain the new man.