

Matthew the Poor



The Deep Meaning of Fasting

Fasting and the imitation of Christ¹

The Church imitates Christ. All that Christ has done the Church also does; He becomes its life. Christ's call to Matthew ("Follow me") was intended by Him to mean "Take my life for you." The Church has adopted this call as a scheme of its own.

Fasting, in the life and works of Christ, ranks as the first response to the act of unction and of being filled with the Holy Spirit. It represents the first battle in which Christ did away with His adversary, the prince of this world. In His forty days' experience of absolute fasting, Christ laid down for us the basis of our dealings with our enemy—along with all his allurements and vain illusions. "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting" (Mk. 9:29). For when a person enters into prayerful fasting, Satan departs from the flesh.

As the Son of God, Christ did not need fasting, nor did He need an open confrontation with Satan or baptism or filling with the Holy Spirit. Yet He fulfilled everything for our sake so His life and deeds would become ours. If we know that Christ was baptized to "be revealed to Israel" (Jn. 1:31), it follows that being filled with the Holy Spirit meant "being tempted by the devil." This was so He could be revealed before the spirits of darkness, and openly enter into combat with the devil on behalf of our race. Fasting was to elevate the flesh to the level of war with the spirits of evil, those powers that hold sway over our weaker part, the flesh.

The reader may notice that baptism, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and fasting form a fundamental and inseparable series of acts in Christ's life that culminated in perfect victory over Satan in preparation for his total annihilation by the cross.

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It is then extremely important to accept and to feel the power of each of these three acts in our depths and draw from Christ their action in us as they worked in Him, so that His same life may identify with ours. The ultimate aim of baptism, of being filled with the Holy Spirit, and of fasting is that Christ Himself may dwell in us: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Ga. 2:20).

In baptism the connection with our old Adam is cut off for us to receive our sonship to God in Christ. In being filled with the Holy Spirit, our connection with the devil and with the life of sin is cut off for us to receive the Spirit of life in Christ. And in fasting, the connection between instinct and Satan is cut off to give the flesh victory in its life according to the Spirit, in Christ.

We can never sever these three acts from each other; baptism grants spiritual fullness, and spiritual fullness grants (by fasting) victory for the flesh to walk in the Spirit. By the three together we live in Christ, and Christ lives in us.

The dimension of time in these three acts does not weaken their merging together, nor does it separate one from the other. Baptism in childhood, the spirit's fullness in mental and psychic maturity, and fasting, which concludes these three acts, could not be seen separately in the spiritual vision. Although they occur separately in time, out of human necessity, they are one act spiritually. They spring forth to us from Christ who is "One Act," "One Word." In all three acts, Christ dwells in us personally to give us His fullness, image, and life, so that we might live Him as One Act and One Word, and no longer live our own selves in our torn and disrupted image.

The point to understand is that fasting is a divine act of life, which we receive from Christ complementary to baptism and fullness. Since its beginning the Church has been occupied with infusing into its own body the acts of Christ's life so they would become life-giving acts to all its members. If the Church imitates Christ in its life discipline, it is because it has been given grace and authority by God to possess Christ Himself as a life of its own. The Church, which is one with Christ, is a lively and efficacious image of the life of Christ. The Gospel describes it as the "bride of Christ" united with her Bridegroom. Though the Gospel declares that the Church has become one with Christ, it still reiterates that Christ will remain a Bridegroom on His own, no matter how much He offers Himself. Neither does Christ become a Church, nor the Church become a Christ. This confirms to us that we, as members of the body of Christ, always need to strive to acquire Christ to become more like Him and to be a bride "without spot," a betrothed "pure bride" in a perpetual state of betrothal like the Virgin who conceived and bore the Logos. Virginity here is "to keep oneself unstained from the world" (Jm. 1:27). Being stained is the ungodly union between Satan and "the lust of the flesh," "the lust of the eyes," and the "pride of life" (1 Jn. 2:16). These three bonds were united and shattered by Christ during His fast on the Mount of Temptation. He gave us the shattered bonds as an inheritance to live out and carry into effect by fasting in the fullness of the Holy Spirit and in the sacrament of baptism.

Fasting in this sense is one of the fundamental phases that Christ underwent. We have never been able to claim that we live in the full maturity of Christ, or that Christ abides in us in His full measure, particularly if we overlook fasting. If baptism is one phase and crucifixion another, fasting is an extremely important stage between baptism and crucifixion. Fullness with the Holy Spirit, which Christ consummated by baptism,

elevated the flesh to the level of extraordinary fasting, i.e. total deprivation of food and drink, utter seclusion and prayer. He thus raised the flesh to the stage of the cross.

It is impossible for us to carry our cross well and get through the temptation of the devil, the ordeal of the world, and the oppression of evil without fasting on the Mount of Temptation. If being filled with the Holy Spirit does not qualify us for fasting we inevitably will be unable to beat the tribulation of the cross.

Here the Church's imitation of Christ's work is a necessary course of life for us, in which we may discover our salvation, strength, security, and victory. It was not for Himself that Christ was baptized, nor was it for Himself that He was crucified, and, consequently, it was not for Himself that He fasted forty days. The works of Christ—themselves a mighty and omnipotent power—have 'become sources of our salvation and life. Their power, however, is not imparted to us unless we experience and practice it. Those who are baptized put on Christ, those who are filled with the Holy Spirit live by means of Christ's life, and those who fast win Christ's victory over the prince of this world.

These liberating deeds of Christ and the extent to which they and His life influence us were most clearly declared by Christ Himself: "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). But how can the Son set us free from the world, the devil, and our ego except by dwelling in us and offering us His life, His works, and His victory? He reiterates often, "Abide in Me, and I in you." This in fact is the mutual action. We perform His deeds and live according to His example, and thereupon He imparts to us the power of His deeds, His life, and His example. Time and again He calls our attention: "Learn from me." Here He reveals that He has placed Himself as a model of life and works, as our "Forerunner," as the "firstfruits," that in everything we would be "like Him." He became like us so we would become like Him.

After fulfilling the course of our salvation with all these works, Christ stands there, face pale and wounds in His hands, feet, and side, and asks, "Do you believe in Me? Do you believe in the works I have done? Do you really accept Me as a Bridegroom? "He does not wait to hear us say "Yes" (only as a slothful bride); He invites us to a total communion with Him in suffering and glory alike. We thus have to prove our communion with Him in faith by having communion with Him in His works; only works testify to the genuineness of our faith. Yet He, as a true Bridegroom, did not leave us to invent works for ourselves but laid down the course of our works and life: "I am the way;" "He who *follows* me will not walk in darkness." Following Him is not so much an intellectual theory as it is tracking Him, imitating His works, and sharing communion in love and suffering.

We should notice that all the commandments of Christ regarding works—whether they be voluntary poverty, asceticism, renunciation of kindred, divestment, or bearing the cross—revolve around the person of Christ and end up in Him: "for My sake;" "come, follow Me!" "for My name's sake;" "be My disciple;" "come after Me;" "watch with Me."

Every work of Christ's, which He loved to do, He shares with us, or rather we share with Him on account of our love, our sacrifice, and our asceticism. It is from Him that all our works are derived: our asceticism from His asceticism, our fasting from His fasting, our love from His love. Ultimately, communion here is a realistic one which we develop daily by further imitating Him in mind and action and by deepening our awareness of

Him in our life, making Him active within us while keeping us free, spontaneous, and quick in response—as a bride is to a bridegroom.

All the works we perform in the name of Christ, for His sake, and in imitation of Him—whether they be fasting, vigil, patience, endurance of suffering or persecution, service, sacrificial love, or crucifixion—are but a voluntary translation of the desire to imitate and unite with Christ (“Follow me”). They express communion in spirit, heart, and intention.

Here such works may be a way to express the overt offering of the entire soul to Christ in self-surrendering love and absolute discipleship, as it was for John, James his brother, and the rest of the disciples. They offered their lives and surrendered their souls to Christ the moment they saw and heard Him. They forsook their homes and jobs and became followers: “Lo, we have left our homes and followed You” (Lk. 18:28), becoming true partners of Christ’s works, career, and suffering: “You are those who have continued with Me in My trials” (Lk. 22:28).

It is possible that such works as fasting, vigil, prayer, service, or sacrifice may express a hidden love that is added to life’s daily tasks, such as earning one’s living or bringing up children. This is seen in the many who followed Christ without official publicity, like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and others whose high level of love for Christ was by no means inferior to that of the Apostles themselves. Yet, those who actually forsook everything and followed Christ are those who, by spiritual works, most sublimely expressed a deep evaluation of Christ’s person: “We have left everything and followed you.” The word “followed” here denotes a shift from worldly work to spiritual work; Christ is great enough to fill our entire life and meet all our needs, becoming our sole work, our sole hope, and our sole interest.

This is itself the same orthodox doctrine that the Church received from the Apostles and addresses the zeal, fervor, and agony of works, the main measure of every person’s evaluation of Christ. The degree of concern and sincerity in spiritual action is that which reveals the light emanating from Christ. This consequently bears witness to the Father: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

The Apostles inherited the entire life of Christ, and were eyewitnesses and partakers of His works and acts. They inherited the lengthy fasts they saw Christ Himself perform, as Christ told them: “This kind cannot be driven out by any thing but prayer and fasting” (Mk. 9:29). They inherited night-long prayers (“Watch and pray”). They inherited agony in prayer, with frequent prostrations and sweat like drops of blood: “And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground . . . And He said to His disciples, ‘Why do you sleep? Rise and pray’” (Lk. 22:44-46). They inherited endurance and patience amid the insults of the hierarchy and the betrayal of comrades: “If they persecuted me they will persecute you” (Jn. 15:20). They inherited ministry in markets among the sick, the sinners, and the poor. They inherited agony, suffering, and crucifixion, the most precious and exquisite gift they inherited from Christ: “The cup that I drink you will drink” (Mk. 10:39); “Then Paul answered, ‘What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus’” (Ac. 21:13). All these works they inherited not as acts apart from Christ, but as part and parcel of Him. Christ dwelt in their hearts through faith when they received the Holy Spirit, and

they thus performed all the works of Christ according to His promises, even miracles and death.

The Church has inherited this living apostolic experience; it has inherited *Christ working in the Apostles*. So the importance, or rather the inevitability, of works in the Orthodox Church means that the Church focuses on Christ Himself working in us just as He did in the Apostles, doing the same deeds He did for our salvation. The Church believes in exactly what St. Paul meant when he said: “For God is at work in you, both to will and to work” (Ph. 2:13). It is equally confident that this also leads to St. Paul’s words, “Do all to the glory of God” (1 Co. 10:31). It is through Christ and in His presence that works should be done; it is only the work of Christ that leads to the glory of God: “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Ph. 2:11).

It is now clear that the Orthodox Church’s belief in works is nothing but faith in the perfect life in Christ. To this perfection belongs Christ’s whole action and, better yet, even His entire mission and compassion for all humanity. Works, then, are not limited acts done by the human will to relieve the ego. The importance of works in Church thought is based on the fact that all works must spring from the will of Christ and be perfected by His power: “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me” (Ph. 4:13). Works must end up in the glory of God the Father. In other words, they must reveal Him and testify to Him: “That they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

Henceforth, the concept of “faith and works” in the Orthodox Church is inseparable from the living person of Christ, who is the source of faith and works alike in human life. The ultimate end of both faith and works is the glorification of God the Father—an essential work that belongs exclusively to Christ: “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Ph. 2:11).

The law that correctly ensures that works are done through Christ and for the glory of the Father is the perfect imitation of Christ in every word, deed, and behavior. We should invoke the Spirit of Christ in everything by prayer, so works may be cleared of all impurities of self-will and human thought, and that they may be pure of flattery, hypocrisy, falsification, prejudice, and self-love, all of which cause works to be ineffectual, fruitless, and dead.

Sanctify a fast

When we strive to walk along the narrow way, we should be always conscious of being overshadowed by the cross, so that we can persevere, however great our hardship. To attain perseverance, it is essential that the sacrifices we offer never cease to be offered in love.

You should know that striving along the narrow way entails the risk of falling into either the negative sin of despair, or at the opposite extreme a sense of heroism and perfection in virtue. We can only reach genuine love by avoiding these two dangers that threaten our progress on the narrow way. This can be achieved if we discover how to overcome our own selves. Let us not feel sorry for our own selves lest we fall into despair, or praise ourselves lest we fall into the kind of heroism that the saints call vainglory.

If we delve deep into the essence of divine love, which is the model of love we intend to follow, we find that it only can be attained by self—denial to the point of self—renunciation, or even destruction.² This we learn from Christ on the cross and from His earlier life. To go on in love we must practice self-hatred³ till we are no longer concerned with ourselves or any of the things of this world we used to count as gain.

Fasting is a test in which the personality defies the self. It is an exercise in which the self has to be forsaken and resisted by the whole being. Fasting may therefore be considered an act of love of the highest order, a physical way of entering into the experience of the cross, and an inseparable part of that experience.

The life of the Holy Spirit is revived within us if we follow Him into the wilderness of fasting to face the destruction of the self (at least in part) just as a sheep is led to the slaughter. The secret of this revival of the life of the Spirit within us lies in how well we succeed in attaining this love offered to be slaughtered. This is the first test, if we are to follow the way of the cross to the end.

You know that the effort of fasting is felt primarily by the body, which is the physical area that contains the self where it reveals its nature and desires. Thus, when we fast we exhaust the body, and so, indirectly, subdue the self.⁴ If we subdue the self through the subjugation of the body, we have in fact come close to the destruction of the self, at least partially.

So it is that by fasting we fulfill the word of the Lord: “Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Lk. 9:24). Yet I would go back to the word “partially,” for we must aim to reach a state of accepting not the partial but the complete annihilation of the self, and this can take place only by an act of deliberate volition. In other words, if we begin with any exercise (such as fasting), which brings us to the partial overcoming of the self, we need to supplement the feeling of satisfaction that comes from accepting this state with an acceptance of the total destruction of the self. This is attained by the mental acceptance of death itself, willingly with no dismay or restraint. But we received the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves (cf. 2 Co. 1:9).

When our father Abraham offered Isaac his son, he did so partially with his hands, but totally in purpose. When Abraham proved his willingness to offer Isaac his only son, God did not leave him to carry out the slaughter; when the offering had been only partially made on the physical level, God considered the sacrifice to have been actually carried out. This, and only this, is why God redeemed Isaac with a ram— a symbol of Christ, who was to redeem those souls whose self was destroyed partially by their actions, but wholly in their intentions.

When Abraham offered Isaac his son, he exchanged him, according to the divine plan, for a ram. This signifies the destruction of the body as a ransom for the soul. Likewise, in the test of fasting, or in any act of self-denial based on sacrifice and ransom, we are called upon to have no pity on ourselves and to make the offering of our selves and our bodies a total offering in intention. That is to say, we should be content to accept a

² Destruction of the self is achieved by the elimination of its will. The degree to which we accept death is a measure of the extent self-will has been eliminated.

³ Self-hatred is an inward attempt to deliver the personality from the captivity of the self, so that we can be united with the other (whether God or man) through love.

⁴ Subjugation of the self comes when you undertake some activity which is neither agreeable or desirable. Its attainment is a side-effect of fasting (not the prime motive, which is love).

sentence of death at any moment, cherishing it deeply within ourselves as a foundation for life.

Yet, God keeps watch to keep destruction from penetrating to the soul. God redeems the soul: “Blessed is God who redeemed my soul” (cf. 2 Sm. 4:9). Christ, blessed be His name, has redeemed our souls, so there is no fear or alarm whatever in facing the experience of self-destruction, as if it would make us search for a ram to offer instead of ourselves. This would mean that our offering was incomplete and our intention weak and hesitant. When intention reaches the stage of complete self-renunciation and consent reaches self-destruction, we see the meek ram fastened with nails to the tree, offered by our compassionate Father at the right time, so that none of those who love Him and believe in Him would perish.

The meaning of all this is that if we offer anything in place of ourselves it is rejected. If we look around in search of a ram to offer instead of the self, we forfeit the promise made forever in Isaac, and even forfeit Christ Himself. For whoever fails to offer his life totally, or is dismayed at the prospect of self-sacrifice, and so of death, finds that his intention retreats and that he rejects death. He becomes evasive and offers an outward sacrifice, such as an act of service or an offering of money, or uses some other stratagem to avoid sacrificing his own self. So he loses his portion in Christ the Redeemer, for Christ redeems from death those who have accepted death.

Therefore, the experience of the destruction of our self must show no self-pity or weakness of faith. It should not be incomplete, nor should we seek to replace it by giving money or anything else in this world, nor even by giving up the whole world, for the soul is more precious than all things. There is nothing that can be offered in exchange for the soul except Christ, may His name be blessed. He alone can be offered; He in condescension and humility through creative Love put a value on His divine soul equal to that of the human soul.

Once more we repeat that Christ, blessed be His name, cannot become a ransom for the human soul unless man offers his soul on the altar of love, in death to the world, making a total offering with all his will, relinquishing himself forever, raising the knife with his own hand in determination and earnest resolve, proving that he has accepted death.

Every test, every battle against the self, and every fast in which man fails to reach this level of self-renunciation (as we see it in the knife raised by Abraham’s hand to slaughter Isaac his only son, or in God’s abandoning His beloved only Son nailed to the cross) leaves him unworthy of the ransom (Christ) that was prepared by God in exchange for souls offered in this way. A battle is no longer seen as a battle, or fasting as fasting that destroys the self. They are seen, instead, as a caressing of the soul and a strengthening of its power.

The Lord fasted on a high level. He was fulfilling in the flesh and by the flesh what He had already perfected before the incarnation; He “emptied Himself” (Ph. 2:7). He fulfilled this emptying of Himself in many ways, but fasting was the most wonderful, for in fasting He actually sacrificed His body mystically; the fast He undertook and in which He finally experienced extreme hunger and thirst for forty days, proved His clear and earnest intention to make the ultimate sacrifice.

The Lord in fact sacrificed His body before the cross. When He offered His body to His disciples at the Last Supper, He offered it crucified by an act of His will before it was

crucified by the hands of sinners, and sacrificed in intention before it was sacrificed by the rulers. He only said, "Take, eat, this is my body that is offered . . . Take, drink, this is my blood which is shed..." (cf. Lk. 22:19, 20) on the basis of an inner state at which Christ had already dealt with His soul. The sacrifice and the shedding of His blood had been carried out by His own will and intention, as His fasting bears witness and proves. It was not easy that the Lord, while sitting among His disciples and eating and drinking with them, should say, "This is my body that is offered ... this is my blood shed..." unless He had actually undergone that sacrifice, even though it were mystically as in fasting.

The Lord crucified Himself for the world before the world crucified Him. He carried out the offering of His body, His self, as a sacrifice on behalf of the world immediately after He was baptized when He was led by the Spirit. He gladly obeyed and went to face the test of fasting. This is the volitional aspect of the cross.

Thus it was that the Lord was careful to institute and celebrate the rite of the Eucharist prior to the cross, not after the resurrection, to show that the sacrifice and offering were a free act.

The mystical body that was offered at the Last Supper in the form of bread and wine is the deepest example man has known of the invisible being seen in the visible and the future being actualized in the present. Prophecy in the Old Testament was confined to providing people with a mental image of events in the obscure future, but prophecy as presented by Christ in the New Testament is the good news of the future being fulfilled in the present and a physical receiving of the invisible and the intangible. That is the meaning of "Take, eat . . . Take, drink . . . - this is my body . . . this is my blood." This was said a whole day before the crucifixion, but He saw that the coming events were completely in accordance with His will. He saw the cross standing and on it the body being slain and the blood being shed; He saw Himself content with it all. And so He took bread and filled it with the mystery of the broken body, and wine and filled it with the mystery of the shed blood, and He fed His disciples. They ate from His hands the mystery of His will and drank the mystery of His love, the mystery of His sufferings, the mystery of salvation.

Therefore, when we share in the mystery of the body and the blood in the Eucharist, we share not only in the cross, but also in a mystical life poured out and a body that has struggled with severe fasting, deprivation, want, and pain.

If we find ourselves face to face with suffering such as we meet with daily when we bear witness to the truth, we consider ourselves partakers in communion "with those [who were] so treated" (Heb. 10:33). We do not grow faint within ourselves, for the communion in the flesh and blood is an expression that means communion in the whole life of Christ that is fraught with tribulations, fasts, and suffering.

When the Lord Jesus offered His body on Thursday, already sacrificed by an act of will He had made before being crucified on Friday, He drew power from the reality of His own life. Even the cross itself was but an expression of an existing reality, since Christ had crucified Himself for the world before the world crucified Him. It would appear that the crucifixion was the final act of the Lord, but it was in fact the theme of His entire life, begun with the test of fasting, when He sacrificed His body through hunger, and His blood through thirst for forty whole days.

Moses fasted for a similar period of forty days, but this was to prepare him to receive

the Commandments and the Law, the written word of God. Elijah fasted for forty days, which was to make him worthy to see and meet with God. The fasting of Moses and Elijah was a profit to them and to mankind. As for the Lord Jesus, He fasted not to receive something but to make a free offering of Himself in an act of will and to manifest the coming sacrifice of the cross.

As for us, we fast not to receive anything or to offer anything, for we have received Christ, and in Him we have already received everything before we fast. In Him we receive everything even before we are born. No offering of ours, even if we go to our death, is of any avail in removing a single sin. Nor can our fasting be called redemptive, as if by sacrificing our bodies and blood by hunger and thirst we could redeem the smallest soul in all humanity or even ourselves. Why? Because the sin that is within us invalidates the redemptive act and makes our sacrifice powerless.

What, then, is our fasting?

We fast and offer our bodies as a sacrifice; the outward form of this is bearing fatigue, but its essence is the intentional acceptance of death, that we may be counted fit to be mystically united in the flesh and blood of Christ. It is then that we become, in Christ's sacrifice, a pure sacrifice, capable of interceding and redeeming.

Fasting, since it is an incomplete sacrifice because of sin, has to be consummated in Communion, partaking in the pure body and blood, to become a perfect sacrifice, efficacious in prayer and intercession. Every Holy Communion Has to be preceded by fasting, and every fast has to end with Holy Communion. When we receive Communion in this way it is right for us to intercede, for our offering and sacrifice are made perfect. "Pray to receive Communion worthily. Pray for us and for all Christians" (Coptic Liturgy).

In Lent we prepare ourselves for the Last Supper. We prepare for two like things coming together. How could those who do not sacrifice themselves be worthy of Him who sacrificed His life? If we eat of a sacrificed body and do not sacrifice our own selves, how can we claim that a union takes place? The Mystical Supper on Thursday, which is the intentional acceptance of a life of sacrifice, is but a preparation for accepting sufferings openly, even unto death.

Whenever we eat of the body and drink of the blood, we are mystically prepared for preaching the death of the Lord and confessing His resurrection. Every testimony to the death and resurrection of the Lord carries with it a readiness for martyrdom. And every martyrdom carries with it a resurrection.

Gethsemane and the Problem of Suffering⁵

Gethsemane is the spot where the great encounter took place, where humankind met with God.

It was not by chance that Jesus sought out a garden at night where He could be distressed and troubled and where His soul became sorrowful with that amazing sorrow unto death. Was it not in the Garden of Paradise that Adam was stripped naked by sin and went out from the presence of God, so that mankind in Adam entered into a state of separation from God and into death?

Even though it is true that humankind experienced a full encounter with God in the birth of Jesus, this was only on the foundation of Jesus' acceptance of a full encounter with us. In Gethsemane, too, we met together with Him; there is no meeting more meaningful than that which takes place in the sharing of suffering, unless it be in the sharing of death itself when we touch immortality.

The suffering that oppresses us in this life, whether in body or in spirit, was plumbed to the depths by Jesus: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Mt. 26:38). There is no sorrow that can bring the soul to the point of death except the sorrow of shame and sin. It was in Gethsemane that Jesus made the irrevocable decision to accept the shame of humanity. He consented to go to the approaching trial as a blasphemer and evil-doer, accused of the two sins that are the basis of all sin.

How did Jesus accept the shame of man?

Christ's acceptance of the shame of man must be counted a mystery. In order for us to discern it we must drain ourselves of all feelings and emotion; there are few who can attain to this. Just as the Lord took our nature and was united to it without its diminishing or changing His divinity, so too He consented that His body should, in Gethsemane, take on our stain without being soiled. He did not take sin upon Him merely in thought, or symbolically or in imagination, for as the Bible says, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree" (1 Pt. 2:24).

At this point, who can discern the mystery of Christ and the heart of redemption?

All we can say is that just as He approached the incarnation and brought it about through His will, so by His will He bore our sin in His body. And when God wills anything, it is so. If His hunger, thirst, and weariness are evidence to us that He was incarnate in a truly human nature, so His distress and grief and the sorrow of His soul are evidence that of His free will He mysteriously accepted what mankind was to lay upon Him on the cross.

⁵ **From the book** With Christ in His Passion, Death, and Resurrection **by**
Fr. Matthew the Poor, first published in Arabic in 1961.

Just as the lamb of the sacrifice in ancient times used to bear a person's sin and die with it for the sinner without the lamb itself being considered sinful, so the Son of God, the "Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:29) who takes away the sin of the whole world, became sin for us, but remained utterly sinless. "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteous of God" (2 Co. 5:21). He remained just as He was, "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (Heb. 7:26).

Just as He, in us, became sin although He remained utterly sinless, so we, in Him, have become utterly without sin, although we are sinful human beings. "He took what was our portion and gave us what was His, so let us praise and glorify and exalt Him."⁶

We met together in Gethsemane and with that the problem of suffering, which has bowed our back and crushed our soul, comes to an end forever.

Before Gethsemane suffering was a punishment

The pain and sadness that follow disasters, injustices, and hardships, and the sickness, humiliation, and degradation that accompany them, remained a question that had no answer, except in the words "sin" and "punishment."

There was no hope in suffering as long as there was no cure for sin. And sorrow was bitter and destructive as long as there was no ransom for punishment.

Moreover, the unjust distribution of suffering caused distress, anxiety, and bewilderment. An innocent child may be the victim of wrong, suffering, and torture just as much as the most evil of men. It may be that good and humble men suffer more than the recalcitrant and profligate, for there is no way to discover any law or principle that governs the distribution of suffering. Why? Because sin ruled over man instead of God, and sin knows no law. The law of sin is injustice; its rule is inequality and its principle is tyranny.

Now if we chose sin by our own desire, could we blame God that we have fallen under sin's oppressive law? So that we would not blame our Creator for the suffering that bears down upon us as a result of the sin we committed by our own capricious will, God sent His Son in a human body to suffer the sufferings of man, though He Himself did not deserve to suffer. In Gethsemane, and after, the Son of God suffered and His soul was sorrowful unto death, and His sweat fell in drops like blood, as though He were bleeding from some hidden wound.

Let us consider this: If a sinful man suffers and is oppressed by a certain amount of pain, it is because this is the law of sin. And if a good man suffers more than an evil man, it is because the law of sin holds sway over them both; in the rule of sin there is no just distribution.

And if an innocent child suffers as adults do, it is because he is a child of sin, born only to injustice and oppression.

But why is it that Christ should bear this overwhelming suffering? Why should His soul grieve with a great sorrow unto death? For He was born of the Holy Spirit and a pure Virgin; He lived without sin and said, "I am the truth" (Jn. 14:6). Must we not therefore understand that Christ deliberately accepted His unjust suffering and consented to bearing

⁶ Coptic psalmody: Theotokia of Friday.

the iniquitous sentence “with loud cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7)?

It may be true that there are men who have suffered unjustly and have been penalized more severely than their sins warranted, but what shall we say of Christ? In His suffering He bore all injustice and by the crushing sorrow of His soul He paid the penalty for all sin. As it is said by Isaiah the prophet:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole. . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth . . . although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief; when He makes Himself an offering for sin . . . He poured out His soul to death.

(Is. 53:4-12)

Then pain became a gift

So it was that God eliminated the oppression of suffering and its injustice and tyrannical law—not with a message, or a law, or a vision, or an angel, but by coming as a man, bearing that very oppression, and submitting to the law of injustice, being afflicted but not opening His mouth. Christ, by accepting suffering in this way, gave pain itself a greater value, for after ‘being a deserved punishment for sin, it became a sacrifice of love and a work of redemption. From then on suffering was no more bound to sin. Ended was the feeling that tortured man in his heart and conscience that he was under punishment and paying retribution. Such feelings as these would undermine his whole psychological condition and burden him with care, anxiety, and the sicknesses of death, but now, if we are in Christ, we can undergo suffering on the level of His suffering, not as a just consequence of sin, but as a participation in the suffering of love, self-sacrifice, and redemption. Pain, no matter what form it may take, has in Christ become a gift: “Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love . . . to the sons of men!” (Ps. 107:8).

And a participation in love with Christ

When Christ underwent the appalling suffering even though He did not deserve to bear the least pain, He transformed the meaning of the injustice of suffering. Before, a man who suffered unjustly would raise his eyes to heaven to blame God or ask for mercy, but he would receive no reply, no answer, no consolation; sin had cut the man off from his Creator and had cruelly locked together the suffering man and his offender, driving them together to death and destruction, for that is the way of sin and where it leads. Now the suffering man is forever free from sin in Christ; he sees no injustice in his suffering, no matter how great his pain or how complete his innocence. He sees and feels that his suffering has nothing to do with paying a debt or atoning for a crime, since the severest

pain, or indeed all the pain of humanity gathered together, could not atone for even a small sin. Sin is a breach with God and a departure from His presence. Were suffering a punishment and no more, and if we paid the penalty, then who would bring about the reconciliation? Even if we died to pay the price of sin, who would bring us to life again and take us into the presence of God?

But Christ abolished sin, and reconciled and brought us to life. In so doing He broke the fearful link that bound suffering to sin. For suffering is no longer a participation in the sin of Adam, but a participation in the love of Christ.

If we are in Christ, no matter how much we suffer, and no matter how severe our pain, our suffering is in no way related to whether we deserve that pain. Suffering is no longer a penalty for anything, nor is it a means of atoning for anything, or a punishment for anything. It was sin that decreed that suffering should be a form of penalty or atonement or punishment, and Christ eliminated sin after paying its penalty, atoning for it, and bearing its punishment.

It is now therefore as if man suffers for nothing, or for no reason or excuse; this is the type of suffering Christ bore! This is the liturgy of the suffering of love, self-sacrifice, and redemption. This is participation in the divinity, “provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him” (Rm. 8:17).

And finally, participation in the glory and joys of resurrection

Can we now understand the meaning of the saying, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake” (Ph. 1:29)? And discern that pain, after being a punishment, has become in Christ a gift? And that the gift of suffering not caused by sin is inevitably a participation in glory?

If we notice the words of James the Apostle, “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials” (Jm. 1:2), we discover that any suffering of any kind is unavoidably linked with Christ, and that we must receive it with joyful thanks, knowing that, “as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Co. 1:5).

So we no longer suffer for sin, but for Christ. All pain outside of Christ is sin, and the pain of sin is death.

The sufferings of a man who is living with Christ are not counted as the result of sin. They are the sufferings of righteousness; they are joy and peace: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings” (Col. 1:24); they are a participation in the supreme sacrifice of love which Jesus offered through His suffering and perfected by His death: “That I may know Him...and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death” (Ph. 3:10).

If we are in Christ, the more our sufferings increase, the more in fact, our participation in this sacrifice increases. The bond is strengthened between us and the resurrection with its joys. Thus it is that the meaning of unjust suffering has been completely reversed; having been violent oppression under the law of sin which held sway over the world, it has now become the measure of a great gift and a mark of worthiness for glory and the joy of the resurrection. “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death” (Rm. 8:2). The Apostle Peter also speaks out of his own

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experience: “For one is approved of if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly” (1 Pt. 2:19).

Thanks be to God the Father and the Lord Jesus. “Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love . . . to the sons of men” (Ps. 107:8).

All you who suffer, be comforted, for your pain is no longer a result of sin, but a participation in love and in the suffering of Gethsemane.

All you who sorrow and weep, rejoice, for your grief is not unto death; in the sorrow of Christ it is reserved for the resurrection.