

*Inside the church that encloses the Holy Sepulchre, almost at the foot of Calvary, and also within the same enclosure, one sees a magnificent rotunda, with a gallery and a majestic dome resting on a circle of sixteen tall pillars. Right under that dome, from which comes the only light in the rotunda, is erected in the middle, a white and yellowish mausoleum in the form of a sarcophagus: this is the monument that encloses the Sepulchre of Jesus Christ.*

*One enters from the eastern side. From there, just after passing by the door, one enters the "Chapel of the Angel", the inner walls of which are lined with marble. In the centre is a pedestal supporting a stone that measures 45 cm. on one side. This is the stone on which the Angel sat on Easter morning, when he said to the women who had come to embalm the body of Jesus: "Surrexit: non est hic!", "He is risen: he is no longer here".*

*It would almost seem that God, in his goodness, through the serenity of the ambient and the thoughts of life and joy that are awakened in the soul, desired to temper, here, the overwhelming sorrow that would have been caused on suddenly seeing the Sepulchre of Jesus Christ. Instead, the voice of an Angel seems to say to the Christian today, as he then said to the women, "Be comforted! He is not here!", "Non est hic!".*

*In front of the pedestal one perceives an opening, a small door, low and narrow, from which beams a very bright light, and which can be entered only by bending very low. This leads to a small room, not much more than three square metres, about two and a half metres in height, and illuminated by forty lamps, the smoke of which escapes through three openings made in the ceiling. To the right one sees a marble table, occupying the whole length of the room and half its breadth. This room is the Holy Sepulchre, and that is the slab on which the body of Our Lord Jesus Christ was placed, with the head towards the west and the feet towards the east. The tomb and the table have both been chiselled entirely from the rock itself. In the course of time they were lined with marble, as a protection against the pious but reprehensible custom of pilgrims, who considered it licit to break off a little piece to take away with them.*

*The Franciscan Fathers, who have a small residence within the enclosure of the church itself, sing a solemn Mass inside the Holy Sepulchre, every morning at 5.00 a.m. The singers remain outside, but the priest celebrates in the Sepulchre itself, on a portable altar which is removed later, after the divine office.*

*I will visit the Holy Sepulchre every day it is open during Lent. Meanwhile, I entered it last Saturday, and spent the last three days before Ash Wednesday there, in deep recollection.*

*(Fr. Geramb.'s Journey to Jerusalem, 1836)*

During those disturbing days when people seemed to know no other temple than banqueting halls and theatres, I felt anxious to climb up Calvary and there do just reparation for the errors of sinners, and for those most harmful pleasures that I, too, had tasted in my life. It was a precious occasion for me to express sorrow and repentance and, through deep meditation, to express the gratitude I owed to the infinite goodness of God for having saved me from the precipice. How sweet were the moments that I could spend near the tomb of my Saviour! How sweet, were the hours of night and of silence! So different from those in which people, inebriated with insane joy, between their dancing and their gormandising, forget their own eternal salvation and the God who redeemed them, immolating tranquillity, sacrificing their health, losing for ever that very soul that they had received from the Creator!

On my knees, I prostrated on the stone that had received the sacred Body of Jesus, and meditated on all that was done for us by our Saviour, so good, so loving, so merciful. My thoughts followed him every moment of his poor and laborious life, in the suffering he took upon himself, from the humble crib of Bethlehem, where I had adored him a little earlier, to the Cross of Golgotha, on which he willed to consummate his sacrifice in expiation for our sins; up to the cold Sepulchre which I now touched, and in which he remained three days as a prisoner of death. Never before as in that moment, had I understood so clearly, nor perceived so deeply, the excess of love with which Jesus loved human beings. With what excessive ingratitude he has been rejected. For this, in the depths of my heart I asked him to pardon the world as well as myself, who, unfortunately, had imitated its errors.

But in the meanwhile another thought began to pervade my mind: alone, in the silence of the night, and in adoration of that Sepulchre, I experienced a new kind of happiness, which cannot be described in words. The love of Jesus spoke to my heart, as forcefully as it would have if that tomb, opening itself, were to show me to what state he had been reduced by his torments and death, which he himself had overcome. I saw his holy head, that forehead pierced by thorns, his hair dripping blood, those hands and feet that were pierced. Immediately after that, I saw him risen and victorious, feeling myself almost crushed within his loving arms. While I tasted the ineffable sweetness that he sends to those who want to serve him, to those who want to belong entirely to him, a voice, in my heart, cried out: "You, what have you done, to deserve not being confused, during these days, with those unfortunates who, while such a pure happiness fills your heart, abandon themselves to vain pleasures, to a foolish gaiety, to a brief and fleeting delight, which will later change into a long series of remorse and disgust?". Hearing that voice, I felt myself driven to deep gratitude, made even more profound by the most vivid awareness of my unworthiness. I did not know how to thank heaven for having granted me, a repentant sinner, such a great grace that it could constitute a reward worthy of a saint.

Similar thoughts filled the days indicated by the Church as preparation for the sublime mysteries of our Redemption, which were followed by the most sorrowful and glorious days on which the Man-God gave his life for us. What inexpressible sentiments then penetrated the depths of my soul! What silence! What consternation! What dark clouds surrounded me! What a sombre and solemn night enveloped the entire atmosphere with its heavy gloom! It lay heavy on a silenced earth, whose vast territories lay inert, lifeless, uninhabited. The astonished air wailed and held its breath, and the cold silence of death reigned supreme over nature, who, causing dismal mourning, proclaimed to the universe that its Author, its supreme Ruler, lay there in that Sepulchre. A dismal calm and mournful silence reigned supreme; such that I felt nothing but my own heart-beats and heard only the sighs of my soul.

Kneeling on the threshold of that venerated tomb, I humbly adored my Saviour, bowing my head towards the sacred floor, holding my tear-drenched face in my hands. The Son of the eternal God, of the love of a living God: He, the splendour of divine light, to whom the heavens pay homage with the name of the Most High, and whose word created the universe, Jesus, the object of my love, was inside that solitary Sepulchre, enclosed within walls of rough stone! Oh,

adorable Body, disfigured by the most atrocious torments and by a most cruel death, allow me to wash you with my tears! Those torments were truly indescribable. Not even the heavenly voices suffice to relate them, even when mixed with the canticles of praise that echo around the Throne of God.

How pale are those cheeks today, which, with sweet enchantment, wonderfully combined with divine greatness and heavenly peace, expressed the grace of pardon, human goodness, the mercy of an infinitely merciful God! His eyelids are closed; and those bright eyes, the sanctuary of divine love that could look at man only with tenderness, are now lifeless, even though perhaps moist with some tears, the sure sign of inexhaustible charity. His mouth is closed with the seal of death. Those adorable lips, from which came words of life, whose heavenly smile promised all the delights of Heaven and which often opened to announce mercy and bestow pardon, I see them now livid and swollen! I see, pierced and bleeding, those hands that generously bestowed great graces! Cold and wrapped in funeral cloths, is that divine heart, that had once been open to all who were unhappy. That side, pierced by a lance, and the open wounds! Those feet, always ready to pursue the lost sheep, so cruelly pierced! Oh Jesus! Oh my beloved Jesus! Listen to my cry of anguish: tormented by such a sorrowful scene, frozen with inexpressible terror, the strength of my spirit seems to fail me!

What a detestable crime! What an abominable shame! How it must have hurt the heart of the Father, who, filled with pity at the fate of his slaves, had sent them his only Son, in order to reconcile them with their offended Master; seeing them, on the contrary, brutally immolating their own generous Liberator! Oh Heavens! Who, then, is the monster that dared to stain his murderous hands with the blood of God's beloved Son? Who is the wicked person who dared to plait on his august head, the crown of thorns, sprinkled with his most precious blood? Oh Jesus! The most amiable, the most beautiful of all human beings! Who disfigured you so cruelly? Who scourged your adorable body? Who tore that divine flesh over which I now shed a torrent of tears? Who? Draw near, you sinner! Come and contemplate the horrible sight, and then tell me, if you, know, whose arm *had* inflicted the heaviest blows! You become pale! You step back with terror! No! Come! Draw nearer! Raise your hand above that livid corpse, above that bleeding face, and then swear, if you dare, that you are not his assassin!

But, what sudden disturbance fills my heart? While I shudder with horror and indignation, why do I feel my heart beating desperately? Panting with fear I tremble, even to the marrow of my bones! O just God! Am I, perhaps, the guilty one? Here a terrible voice resounds in the depths of my heart. I try in vain to smother it, but it cries out: "Yes, you scoundrel, you are the one!" I? "Yes, just you!" I, the author of the most atrocious offence? Of the most monstrous crime? I, the assassin of a God! I, a deicide! How can I have these thoughts without my heart breaking into two? Without bursting out into a torrent of tears? How can I not experience terror, at hearing the voice of Jesus saying to me continuously: "Yes! You scourged me, through the hands of my murderers! You wounded me, you crowned me with thorns! The murderers are your sins!". Oh, my soul, humiliate yourself to the lowest degree of contemptibility! Oh sin, abominable monster! Who will not be struck with horror at the sight of you? Who will not flee even your shadow, knowing that you caused the death of God! And what a death! The torment of the Cross!

What a wonder! Ineffable mystery! The wicked one sins, and the innocent one is punished. The unjust person is spared, while the just one succumbs to unheard-of harshness. The Eternal One abandons his Son to redeem a base slave! The Author of life lets himself be led to the slaughter like a timid lamb! The lethal blade opens his veins, and blood spurts out and spreads throughout the world, to cancel the sins of his creatures. What a miracle of mercy! What an excess of compassion!

Jesus! The one promised by the Most High, faithful and patient, you have given us new life in the blood and suffering of your death! Liberator, Redeemer, Saviour of us all! Jesus, the

only perfect friend! God of my life! Love of loves, divine heart and inexhaustible fount of mercy, pardon, generous and constant tenderness, unprecedented and unlimited goodness! Yes! From today I return to you, and do not wish to go away from you for even a single moment, nor to shift my spirit and my heart from the thought of you, of your blessed love! From now on, I want to place all my glory in belonging to you, loving you, serving you, conforming myself in everything to your divine will!

Would I not be the greatest of sinners, if I were to deny my heart to a God who loved me so much as to give his life and his blood for my salvation? Certainly! The price of my soul is the blood and the life of Jesus. I know its value, from knowing how much it cost. No human mind in existence, my Jesus, can understand your indescribable sorrows, nor the infinite patience with which you bore them. More righteous than all mortals and heavenly spirits, you were made to suffer the torments of Hell. You wore the purple robe of derision while your enemies insulted and mocked you; your Royal right hand held a contemptible rod instead of a sceptre; your divine head was crowned with a diadem of thorns! You were dragged up the infamous hill, and the cruel wood supported your body and blood! You groaned with a burning thirst that consumed you, and the bitter gall defiled your dying lips. The long agony of the Cross consumed your immortal life.

O divine tomb! You enclose all my affection, all my hopes. Jesus, my Saviour! Jesus, whom I love and adore with all the strength of my heart and soul! O my sweet Jesus! The best, the most merciful of all masters, because you wish to be obeyed only to bring happiness to the one who serves you. You spent all your days in bestowing continual benefits and with your inexhaustible goodness, made the blind see the heavens and the deaf hear their brethren. You, who loved the poor and unfortunate so much, healed the sick and raised the dead to life! Jesus, who lived only to suffer and to pray, to teach the unchangeable truths and then to suffer still more and drink to the dregs, the chalice of dishonour and sufferings! My beloved! You sleep, away from the torments of the most atrocious martyrdom! You sleep, but it is like your sleep on the turbulent waves, which did not prevent you from hearing the cries of your disciples; that sleep that does not leave you deaf to the secret prayer of my heart.

Because, your eternal and omnipotent divinity never sleeps. Resting in this sepulchre are only the earthly remains of the uncreated Being, not subject to corruption, like mine, and like those of all mortals. Always vigilant over your creature, with your divine presence you know all my most hidden thoughts. Not a word escapes my trembling lips, not a sigh rises from my oppressed heart, but you, Lord, who sees everything, know it already! You, whose strong right hand has every power, whose sublime and sacred Name cannot be pronounced, not even by one who invokes the Heavens! O Supreme God! The origin and fulfilment of all things, who, from all eternity, offered yourself to be immolated out of love! Yours is not a deep sleep! You sleep, so as to quickly rise again. In the same way, you created the universe in a split second, when, at your word, the flaming heavenly bodies started moving, drawing with them the obedient spheres. You sleep; but this tomb, which I press to my heart that is palpitating with anguish and with joy, which now holds your poor remains, will shortly see you, free from the shackles of death, ready to triumphantly trample the lifeless dust.

But, what do I hear? From the depths of the sacred Sepulchre, I seem to hear a heavenly voice addressing me with these loving words: "Son of my tears and my blood, do you really wish to spend your days, until that terrible moment that will terminate them, in that softness of life, in those deceitful delights, in proud ostentation and in vain glory which is the triumph of pride, in that great love for the world, my enemy, in disgust for the Cross that sanctifies souls? Son of my unfailling love! Take care of your eternal salvation, without delay. You have no time to waste. The longer you live, the closer you are to the end. Just a few days more, and you will fall, enveloped in the darkness of death. That body which you pamper and idolize, will be placed in a coffin and abandoned to the earth, to be food for the most loathsome worms. Today

you live in luxury and splendid honours, you are obeyed, admired and acclaimed! Tomorrow you will be in your tomb! Son of my heart, believe me! The joys of this world are short-lived, and they turn into eternal tears! Pleasures flash by before us like lightning, and those flashes announce the thunder-bolt that will strike wrong-doers for all eternity. Tonight, yes, perhaps tonight itself, you will have to say goodbye to the world forever, to its allurements, to its deceitful attractions. You will have to leave the vain dreams, honours, amusements and celebrations. The thread of life will be cut, prestige will be destroyed, life will be annihilated and the irrevocable abyss of eternity will be opened”.

In this way, prostrate on that stone that spoke to me, within those most eloquent walls, I stayed for some time, absorbed in profound meditation, and repentance, with its sacrifices of reparation, took over my heart. Tremendous truths struck my mind, and filled me with unspeakable terror. Then, one sweet and powerful thought prevailed over all these salutary worries: what singular and gratuitous privilege was this, that I found myself thrust out of the ways of the world? What was the still greater favour, by which I was privileged to taste, on the Sepulchre of Christ, the spiritual delights reserved for those who receive their life from the Cross?

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*Mary or The Pilgrim at Nazareth*

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*Nazareth, whose inhabitants boast that it is the most beautiful of the simple towns of the region, is in reality just a poor suburb, with nothing attractive. A general view of it shows some small, ordinary houses crowded in disorder at the foot and on the slope of a mountain that rises above it like an amphitheatre. Among the most important buildings, one is undoubtedly the convent of the Fathers of the Holy Land: beautiful, spacious and solidly constructed. The church is inside the convent, but it has never become possible to complete it, because of the jealousy of the Ottomans and the tyranny of their governors. For this reason, one who enters is immediately struck by the disproportion between the length and the breadth of the construction, which otherwise is very beautiful and preserved with the greatest care.*

*It is this very church that encloses the heavenly and hallowed place in which the ineffable mystery of mercy and salvation, the divine mystery of the Incarnation, took place. Here, the Angel Gabriel greeted Mary! Here, he announced to her the unfathomable plans of the Most High regarding herself. Here, Mary replied: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word!”.*

*A wide and magnificent staircase of white marble leads down to the exact spot where Mary was at that moment. As in all the sanctuaries of Palestine, this sacred spot is also under an altar, with many lamps burning continuously around it. Inscribed on a marble slab in large letters, one reads the memorable words that contain the most powerful expression of the infinite love of God for mankind:*

*Verbum caro factum est. The Word Was Made Flesh.*