

SECTION IV.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR LADY'S DOLORS.

The characteristics of our Lady's dolors are, as might be expected, closely connected with the fountains out of which they spring, and these must now be the subject of inquiry. Although they will come out strongly and clearly as we consider the different dolors in succession, yet a general view of them is necessary in order to a true idea of her martyrdom as a whole. When we have once seen it as a unity, we shall the better understand the marvellous details which a nearer inspection will disclose to us. The first characteristic of her sorrows was that they were lifelong, or nearly so. It is generally agreed that our Blessed Lady did not know she was to be the Mother of God before the moment of the Incarnation. Until that time, therefore, she might have had such a gift of prophecy as to foresee confusedly that her life was to be one of great sorrow and heroic endurance, but her particular dolors could not have been distinctly before her. But when she actually bore within herself the Eternal Word made flesh, a great change must have come over her in this respect. She was in such unutterable union with God, and understood so deeply and truly the mystery of the Incarnation, and such a light was shed for her upon the depths of Hebrew prophecy, that it is impossible not to believe that the Passion of Jesus lay clearly before her, with all the Thirty-Three Years of poverty, hardship, and abase-

ment, and consequently with it, at least in its main outlines, her own Compassion. This is the least we can think, but in truth we think much more. We cannot agree with those writers who make her dolors to begin with the prophecy of Simeon. No doubt God may have been pleased at that moment to bring the whole sorrowful future more distinctly before her, and to have painted the vision in more vivid colors. That Simeon's words were divine instruments for effecting a change within her soul is more than probable. But it seems hardly honorable to her to conceive that during the nine months of her intimate union with the Incarnate Word she should not have understood His mission of suffering and blood, or the laws of expiation and redeeming grace, or the certainty that she also would have to drink deeply of the same cup with Him. At all events, from the time of Simeon's prophecy, if not from the first moment of the Incarnation, her sorrows were lifelong. Like those of Jesus, they were ever before her. She had no bright intervals over which impending evil cast no sorrow. There was an inevitable uniformity of shade over her path. The darkest destinies of men are unequal, and in this inequality there is relief. The sorrow that clings closest sometimes relaxes its hold. The clouds now and then give way before strong sunshine, even though it be but for a while. The misfortune, which occasionally dogs a man all through life, at times seems to grow weary of its chase, and turns backward, as if it had forsaken its prey, or at least allowed him breathing-time. But Mary's subjection to sorrow was riveted upon her as if with iron. It never relaxed. It never

grew milder. It gave her no respite. It was in her life, and only by laying down her life could she extricate herself from its inseparable companionship. The Passion was not a dark end to a bright life, or an obscure sunset after a checkered day of light and gloom, or an isolated tragedy in sixty-three years of common human vicissitudes. It was part of a whole, with consistent antecedents, a deepening certainly of the darkness, but a portion of a lifelong darkness, which for years had known, in this respect at least, no light. We must bear this in mind throughout, if we would understand her sorrows rightly. They were not so much separate events; they were the going on of a charmed life, round which heaven had wrapped a singular law of sorrow, only with a stronger light cast upon some of its abysses than upon others.

But her sorrows were not only lifelong; they were continually increasing. The more she became familiarized with the vision of them, the more also she realized them, and the more terrible they seemed. This growth of them does not appear incompatible with the immensity of her science, or do any dishonor to it. They gave up new features, new pains, new depths, new possibilities to her continual meditation, just as in a far lower degree they do still to ours. The more we occupy our minds with the mysteries of the Incarnation, the more do we learn about them. The horizon grows wider the higher we climb. When our eye gets used to the peculiar soft darkness, the more unfathomable do we perceive the depth of the abyss to be. What then must all this have been to her, whose penetrating steadfast gaze was so unlike

our cursory distracted meditation, whose meditation was unbroken for years, and whose own heart was so deeply interested in the subject? Moreover, as they came nearer, they naturally became more terrible. They threw a deeper shadow. They inspired greater fear. The first breaths of the storm began to blow cold upon her heart. She clung to Jesus. He seemed more beautiful than ever. But there was no hope. The wide sea was around her, without a harbor. She had no home but the great deep. It was the will of God. Meanwhile Jesus waxed more beautiful day by day. The first twelve years ran out, leaving results of heavenly loveliness and love beyond our power of summing. Then the next eighteen, when every word, and every look, and every meek subjection were thick with mysteries of heaven. Her life had almost passed out of her into Him, so exceedingly had He become her light, and life, and love, and all. Then came the three years' ministry, and it seemed as if the Babe of Bethlehem, or the Boy of Nazareth, had been nothing to the Preacher of love, whose words, and works, and miracles appeared to charge the world with more of supernatural beauty than it could bear, so that men rose up madly to put out the light which hurt them by its strong shining. As this loveliness increased, her love increased, and with her love her agony; and all three were continually increasing, with majesty and with velocity. The transcendent beauty of the three years' Ministry seemed to make it impossible for her to endure the Passion; and did it not seem to show as if by the beauty of His preaching alone, and by His human tears, and His vigils on the mountains,

and His footsore journeys, and His hunger, and thirst, and sweet patience, and the persuasiveness of His miracles, and the wondrous enticing wisdom of His parables, the world might be redeemed, and Calvary be spared? It is a short word to say, but there are volumes in it: Jesus had become a habit to her; could He be torn from her and she survive? And so one motive grew to another, and one thought quickened another, and one affection intensified another, and thus her dolours grew, quicker than the gourds grow in summer, and all the quicker as the time grew near.

It was also a characteristic of her sorrows that they were in her soul, rather than in her body. Not that her body was without its fearful and appropriate sufferings. We have seen that already. But they were nothing to the sorrows of her soul. The one bore no proportion to the other. Physical pain is hard to bear, so hard that when it comes to a certain point it seems unbearable. It lays hands upon our life, which shrinks away at the touch. No one can think lightly of bodily pain. Yet how light is it compared with mental suffering! Even to us the agonies of the soul are far more dreadful than the tortures of the body. Yet we are gross and material, compared to our Blessed Lady, almost as if we were creatures of another species. The more refined and delicate the soul, the more excruciating is its agony. What then must have been the pains of a soul which was such an immaculate vessel of grace as hers was! We have no standards by which to measure what she felt. Her powers of suffering are beyond our comprehension.

All we know is that they transcended all human experience, and that the two Hearts of Jesus and Mary were raised into a world of suffering of their own, where no other hearts of flesh can follow them. Her pains were martyrdom reversed; for the seat of the anguish was in the soul, and flowed over, blistering and burning, on the sympathetic flesh; while with the martyrs the soul poured sweet balm into the wounded flesh, and the heaven within burned more brightly than the lighted fire or the wild beast's eye without. In this also she was distinguished in some respect even from Jesus. His Soul was crucified in Gethsemane, His Body upon Calvary. On her body not a wound was made; from her veins not a drop of blood was drawn. His Body and His Blood had come from hers, and it was enough that His should suffer for them both. This perfectly interior character of her dolours, so often independent of external circumstances, and requiring in order to its just appreciation a spiritual discernment, must not be lost sight of as one of their most distinguishing characteristics.

If we may make bold to think for a moment of what theology calls the Circuminsession of the Three Divine Persons, the way in which Each lies in the lap of the Others, it will carry us far beyond any prerogatives of Mary, putting a simply infinite distance between the Creator and the creature. Nevertheless, the idea of that eminent unity will draw us out of our low thoughts more nearly to a just appreciation of the union between Jesus and His Mother. The Heart of each seemed to lie in the Heart of the other. This was especially true of Mary. His beauty drew her

out of herself. She lived in His Heart rather than her own. His interests were hers. His dispositions became hers. She thought with Him, felt with Him, and, as far as might be, identified herself with Him. She lived only for Him. Her life was His instrument to be done with what He willed. In this union sometimes she was the Mother, with her whole heart poured out upon her Son, rejoicing in all she was, in all she had, in all she could do or suffer, simply as so much material to sacrifice for Him. Sometimes it was almost as if she were the child and He the Father, she so leaned upon Him, and obeyed Him, and had not a thought which was not His, hardly a thought even for Him. It was for Him to think and to dispose; she would follow, minister, sympathize, agree, worship Him with her love. We read wonderful things of the saints, and of their union with God; but there never was any to compare with this union of Jesus and Mary. It stood alone in degree; it stood alone in kind. It was like itself, and it was like no other union, except that which it distantly, and yet so softly and so truly, shadowed, the Unity of the Most Holy Trinity. Now, she lived far more vitally in this outward life than in her inward life; or, to speak more justly, this outward life, this life in Jesus, was more inward, more really her own life, than the other; and it was one of the characteristics of her dolors that they were not so much in herself as in Him whom she loved far more than self. There are some human sorrows which have faint parallels to this. Shadows of it have crossed widowed mothers' hearts, when their first-born stood glorious on manhood's threshold, and

death put out his light and drew him under. But none have felt as Mary felt, for none have lived in such union with the object of their love, and none have had such an object at once divine, and human, and their own, which they might so dare to love, with a love which they need not be at the pains to distinguish from absolute worship.

Another characteristic of our Lady's sorrows is the union of their great variety with the fact of their being interior, that is, of their being unitedly felt in one place, her heart. Indeed, this follows from the fact of their being interior, and is the cause of a very peculiar kind of suffering. When the instruments of torture went from one limb of the martyr to another, there was almost a relief in the vicissitude. We most of us know what the concentrated pressure of pain upon one nerve is like, especially when that pressure is kept tight for hours, or days, or even weeks. It is quite a different sort of agony from flying, shifting pains, or even from the fiery shooting pains which are so hard to bear. But when we transfer this uniform pressure from a limb or a nerve to the heart, the result of suffering must be incalculable. The variety of her sorrows was almost infinite. Both His Natures, human and divine, supplied countless diversities of grief, multiplied its motives, intensified its bitterness. The bodily pains of the Passion, the mental sufferings, the deep abasements, the cries, the faces, the very visible thoughts of the multitudes around, were so many different kinds of pain to her. And then the complete unity of her undivided affections added immensely to them all. She loved only One. The causes of her

martyrdom were all centred in one. There was no other object in her heart to call off some portion of her grief and distract it from its overwhelming fixity. How sweet are the child's cries to the fresh widow's heart! what an eloquent distraction, better than if an angel spoke! Oh, that cry is like a great grace from heaven, strong-shouldered to bear so much of the dark burden! But Mary had no diversion to her woes. Innumerable as they were, they ran up into one supernatural, many-headed point, and pierced with all their might the very centre of her life, the beautiful sanctuary of her loving heart.

But this was not all. Not only was she without other objects, other duties, other loves, to distract her in her misery; but actually that which should naturally have alleviated her sorrows only embittered and poisoned them. What should have been light was worse than Egyptian darkness. What ought to have given life was in her case enough to kill. The goodness of our Blessed Lord put a special barb of its own on every shaft that pierced her heart. It was His holiness that made His death so awful. His love of her, which in its own nature was more than a consolation to her, nay, was positively her life, was the grand cruelty of her Compassion. Had she loved Him less, or had He loved her less, her dolours would not have so far transcended all human parallel. The exquisiteness of each torture was precisely in her love. But His Divinity! the secret glory of His bright impassible Nature, might she not pillow her weary head thereon? O dearest of all the dogmas of the faith! how many an aching heart and outworn spirit and

tempest-troubled soul, when all the world had gone to shipwreck round it, has lain down upon thy soft and welcome bed, and tasted peace when all was trouble above and beneath, within and without! To how many thousands has that doctrine been like an angelic visitant, bidding the storms cease, and smoothing even the bed of death! And shall it be nothing to her who has more to do with it than any other of God's creatures? Nothing? Oh, far from that; it shall be to her a new abyss, unknown hitherto, of human sorrow, in which she shall sink immeasurable depths and yet find no end. It shall so swathe her in suffering that she shall lie to all appearance helpless on a vast sea of sorrow. Every thing went by the rule of contraries in her martyrdom. The very things which of themselves would lighten her load were like murderous hands that held her under the dark waters with cruel force. And because she was too strong to suffocate, she suffered the more terribly. This also is not without parallel in human sorrow, though none such ever came nigh to hers.

But a sorrow without a sympathy is a rare phenomenon, even on this unkindly earth. Yet where shall she find sympathy with hers? There is but one in the whole world who can understand her, and it is He who, by His sufferings, is inflicting all this suffering upon her. She will give all her sympathy to Him rather than seek it from Him. She must bear in secret. St. Joseph knew her well, but he never knew her fully. Her heart is a mystery even to St. John, although he had been initiated into the secrets of the Sacred Heart. And that dear apostle himself needs

her love to keep him upright beneath his Master's Cross. Even in the eighteen years it is not easy to think that Jesus and Mary talked much of their future sorrows, or sought sympathy in each other's love. To me it seems more probable that they never spoke of the matter at all. Besides which, her sympathy with Him was simply worship; it was love indeed, true, fond, maternal love, yet it was worship also, and unlike all common sympathy with grief. When she slowly walked away from the garden-tomb on Friday night, she re-entered a world where not one soul could understand her, not even the holy passionate Magdalen. It was darkness without one gleam of light, a wilderness all terrors, a life without one point of attraction, one resting-place for her broken heart. She shut her sorrows up within herself, enduring them in a hot-hearted silence, and there were none who could do more than guess the aching void that was beating like a wild pulse in that maternal heart.

These were the characteristics of her sorrows; and what is every word that has been said but a deepening shade to the dark, dark picture? What then shall we think of that last characteristic of her dolours, which so amazed St. Bernard, the moderation with which she bore them? Who is ever able to forget, when they meditate upon our Blessed Mother, the heavenly tranquility of her "Behold the handmaid of the Lord," at the Annunciation? The same tranquility is unbroken even when her heart is breaking beneath the Cross. Except in the case of very high sanctity, and even there the exception does not always hold, moderation in sorrow would imply something like coldness

or insensibility. We should hardly love very tenderly any one the even tenor of whose way deep affliction could not disturb. In the case of the saints the love of God acts as a countercharm to the spells of sorrow. It at once distracts and compensates, and so makes endurance easier. But with Mary it was just in her love of God that the exceeding bitterness of her agony consisted. If then we figure to ourselves the bewildering complications of misery, the enormous weight of sorrow, the supernatural aggravations also of it, which she had to bear, and then the way in which with such resistless might it bore down upon her solitary heart, it is amazing to see it all break upon her tranquility, as a billow breaks in idle foam upon some huge promontory, which quivers to its base as it flings the wild waters back, and yet remains unbroken. So it was with her. She was not insensible like the cold granite. On the contrary, the tempest went through her, searched every corner of her capacious nature, filled to overflowing every possibility of suffering, and drenched with bitterness every faculty and affection. Yet not a ruffle passed on her tranquility. Her peace within was as untroubled as the cavities of the ocean when the surface is wildly rocking in the storm. Nevertheless, this tranquility was no protection to her against the intensity of suffering. It rather enabled her to suffer more. It allowed the grief to penetrate more unresistedly into every part of her. Yet there was no wildness, no loud sighs, no broken sobs, no outspoken words of complaint. Still less—the thought is one which would never have crossed the mind of an intelligent lover of Mary, if careless, untheological pictures

had not indecorously brought it before so many of us—still less were there any vehement attitudes of grief, any contortions of the venerable beauty of her face, any womanish wringing of the hands, any negligence of dishevelled hair, any prostrations on the ground as of one overcome with mortal anguish, least of all any fainting away, any need of a supporting arm around her, whether it were that of John or Magdalen, any suspension of that glorious reason which sleep even had not interrupted in its magnificent exercises since the very first moment of the Immaculate Conception. Let us in indignant love give to the flames these ignorant, dishonorable representations, and drive out of ourselves the odious images which their skill and beauty may have left upon our minds. Mary “stood” beneath the Cross: that is the simple grandeur of the scriptural picture, which represented the actual truth, and whose artist was her own Spouse, the Holy Ghost. And it was on the picture of that calm standing woman on which her fond child, St. Bernard, gazed in admiring love. This too is the attractiveness of our Lady’s apparitions in the revelations of Mary of Agreda, compared with her portrait in the visions of Sister Emmerich. The instincts of the Spanish nun were more true than those even of the artistic soul of the ecstatic German. Never then must we put away from ourselves the thought of this moderation of Mary in her woes. There was nothing wild, nothing unsettled, nothing dramatic, nothing passionate, nothing demonstrative, nothing excessive; but she stood in calmest, queenliest dignity, quiet, not as a sweet evening landscape, or a noon-tide summer sea, or a green wood at dawn, or a moon-

lit mountain-top, or as any other image in the poetry of nature, but quiet, in her measure and degree, as the Divine Nature of our Lord while the tumult of the Passion was trampling His Human Nature to death. Her tranquility was the image of that tranquility. It was one of many participations in Himself which Jesus gave to her in those dark hours.

SECTION V.

HOW OUR LADY COULD REJOICE IN HER DOLORS.

Having thus considered the characteristics of our Lady’s dolors, we must now pass to a peculiarity of them which it is necessary always to bear in mind, namely, their union with the intensest joy. That her dolors were accompanied throughout with floods of heavenly joy, she herself revealed to St. Bridget. But indeed it could not be otherwise. Can we suppose it possible that a sinless, rational creature can ever be otherwise than bathed in joy? Beatitude is the life of God, and it is out of that life that torrents of gladness inundate His whole creation. It is sin only that brings sorrow, and if the sins of others can make the sinless grieve, they can never interfere with that abiding gladness deep down, which union with God must of necessity produce. Moreover, there is no merit where there is no love. If our Lady’s dolors had not risen out of her love and been animated by it, they would not have been meritorious. But in truth love was the very cause of them. Out of the excess of love came the excess of sorrow. Now, it is undeni-