

**Six Little Lenten Legends
Featured in Meditations On The Passion
Of Our Blessed Lord**

INTRODUCTION

There are legends connected with every part of The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

Some of them contradict The Word of God; others do not.

In evaluating those that do, we must at once brand these as false, for by their very nature they are at odds with the inspired truth.

But a sensible opinion regarding those that do not, simply terms them popular stories which may be true, or they may be false, or a subtle mixture of both.

Not being contrary to Holy Writ and yet not a part of it, these latter tales, clinging to the episodes recorded in The Scriptures like lace to the edge of linen and handed down from generation to generation like precious heirlooms, are, of course, in The Christian Religion of no authority whatever. For that reason The True Church of Jesus Christ, commonly called Lutheran, does not at all demand of her members that they believe these pious stories. They may either accept or reject them, as they will.

There is an abundance of legends clustering especially around that part of The Bible which deals with the end of Our Lord's earthly life. That is understandable. The passion and death of Jesus Christ are the most important things about Him; and being so significant, no one should be surprised to learn that numberless legends have been perpetuated down through the centuries which revolve around the precious theme of Lent.

On the following pages your attention is directed to several little legends concerned with the last hours of Our Saviour's earthly life, which commend themselves for the inspiration inherent in them. They were selected for the help they can give for a review of The Passion Story from an angle both fresh and refreshing.

They are six in number. Where this pamphlet is used for private devotions during Lent, it is suggested that one legend and the material connected with it be used for each one of Lent's six weeks.

First read from Holy Writ the sections indicated; then become acquainted with the legend for which the respective sections serve as a background.

And may God bless these words upon your heart!

PART ONE

Read

Matthew 26:17-75; Mark 14:12-72; Luke 22:7-62; John 18:1-17

By means of the lections listed above we go back in time two thousand years to a certain room in The City of Jerusalem, where Jesus is assembled with eleven faithful disciples.

He has just celebrated for the first time His Holy Supper, and with His intimate followers, He is now ready to go to a certain garden called Gethsemane, as is their nightly custom.

A peaceful moon is shining as this little group of men starts out on its journey.

But there is no peace in the breast of Christ. He knows what lies before Him. He knows He is going to a place from which He will not return. He knows the night will end in betrayal and arrest and denial, and that the dawn will usher in the most dismal day of all history.

For all this tragedy He wants His disciples to be prepared. And so He says to them, as their footsteps echo in the night: "I want to tell you something, My beloved friends. Something terrible is going to happen soon. And when it does, all of you are going to run away and leave Me to My fate."

One disciple especially listens to these words with rising indignation. That is Peter.

He protests, and loudly: "That's a pretty serious accusation, Lord! You know very well that we would rather die than ever leave you—especially I!"

Of course, Jesus is courteous enough to listen.

But then He shakes His head and says sadly: "I knew you would say that. But wait and see: all of you will forsake Me. And you, Peter," He adds, more sadly still, "you, one of My dearest friends, you especially are going to break My heart tonight; for before the cock crows twice, you shall deny Me thrice."

By this time we see that Gethsemane is at hand.

We hear Our Lord murmur something to His disciples; and then He leaves them, and going away by Himself, until He is lost to view among the ancient olive trees.

We listen. We hear Him pray: "O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me! Nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done." We hear these words again and again, ascending to Heaven in broken sobs.

And when Our Lord once more emerges from the shadows, lo, His face is streaked with bloody sweat!

But now events follow quickly on each other's heels:

There is the sound of marching feet; the glare of torches; a mob reaches the garden gates. The leader, in the person of Judas Iscariot, steps forward to greet his Master with a kiss. In another moment Christ is bound with ropes, and His enemies lead Him away to judgment.

No protest on The Saviour's part, no resistance, no display of divine power.

The disciples are amazed. The disciples are offended. The disciples are afraid. And in their fear they do exactly what Christ said they would do, what they insisted they would never do: they all forsake their Lord, and flee.

But there is one disciple who later regains his courage. Simon Peter decides to follow Christ. At a distance, of course; but he decides to follow. So when Jesus is taken to the high priest for the first part of His examination, there is Peter in the courtyard, warming himself by the fire.

Time passes; nothing happens; he seems safe enough.

When suddenly a servant girl of the high priest sees him and says: "Say, aren't you one of Jesus' disciples?"

Peter is taken off guard. "Why, no," he sputters, "I don't know what you are talking about!"

Somewhere off in the distance we hear a rooster crow, and we know it is about one o'clock in the morning.

More time passes, and another girl sees Peter. She addresses those around her: "This fellow here was also with Jesus of Nazareth!" They ask him: "Were you?"

He raises his right hand and swears: "I do not even know this Jesus!"

More time passes. A man goes by who had helped arrest Jesus in Gethsemane; he stops short when he spies Peter, and says: "Say, didn't I see you in the garden with him?" The others crowd around: "Answer! Weren't you in the garden with him?"

Peter answers indeed. He curses and swears: "I don't know a thing about this Jesus, not a thing!"

And the rooster crows a second time: five o'clock in the morning.

Suddenly we and Peter remember the words which Christ had addressed to this disciple of His: "Before the cock crows twice, you shall deny Me thrice."

And the concluding sentence about Peter in this episode: "And when he thought thereon, he wept."

This, in popular language, is the story from The Bible about the enormous denial of Simon Peter.

And now comes the little legend connected with it:

There is a tradition in The Christian Church, almost as old as The Church herself, that, from that night on until the very end of his life, whenever Peter heard a rooster crow, he would invariably break down and weep.

You do not need to know this legend in order to be saved; you do not even have to believe this legend after you know it. But it is a touching story nevertheless, and one that might well be true.

It could well be true when we consider this reference to Peter in Saint Mark's gospel: "When he thought thereon, he WEPT." The word for "wept" in the original Greek New Testament denotes "sobbing for a long time." Matthew and Luke describe this incident even more graphically: "Peter went out, and wept BITTERLY." When he reflected on what he had done, Peter shed burning tears for many minutes. And chances are, whenever he was reminded of that night in the days and years that followed by the same sound that startled him then, his hot tears began to fall once more.

There is nothing unmanly about this action of Peter; there was nothing womanish about Peter's tears. Peter wept over SIN!

We in this twentieth century weep so little over sin. We cry at the movies, or over some touching story; but how often do we shed tears over our SIN?

Of course, that is not the most important thing: not THAT we do not weep. But WHY we do not! IN all too many cases we do not weep over sin because we do not THINK thereon, or because sin doesn't BOTHER us very much. If Peter DID weep whenever he thought of his transgression, he left us an example to follow, for sorrow over sin is the first step in the right direction for getting right with God.

This legend about Peter could well be true, secondly, when we consider the KIND of sin he committed: "When he thought THEREON, he wept." His was the contemptible sin of denial, the sin of betrayal, the sin of Judas in another form. NO earnest person can forget such a sin too quickly; it must have haunted Peter all the rest of his life. And it is conceivable that, whenever he thought thereon, he would weep.

Let us realize, however, that when we see the enormity of Peter's sin, we also see our own. How many times have WE not been Peters in the courtyard of the high priest! In thought and word and deed we also have denied our fellowship with Jesus Christ. And not one day should come to a close without the realization that we have betrayed Our Lord again and again. It is so easy to condemn Peter, so easy to shudder at his transgression. Yet there is really no difference between him and us. And to think thereon should make repentance in our lives something daily and something continual.

This legend about Peter could well be true, thirdly, when we consider his later life. The crow of every rooster was for him a reminder, not only of his sin, but also of Christ's overwhelming mercy.

For he was eventually forgiven He was finally restored.

And with that assurance in his heart, he dried his tears to go out into the world to serve his Redeemer with all his strength. He died for Christ, you know. There is another legend which declares that, after a lifetime of consecration, he died for Christ crucified head down.

Thus his tears to the glory of God resolved themselves into deeds to that same glory.

So it must also be with us. Tears are important in our holy religion, but they are not enough. They must serve to wash out our eyes so that we see clearly what a wonderful forgiveness has been purchased for us through the precious blood of Christ, and what a privilege it is for us to serve Him till traveling days are done.

In the final analysis, whether this legend about Peter is true or not is unimportant; but the lessons which it teaches are certainly important indeed: continual sorrow over sin must be a characteristic of every sincere Christian, to the end that he may daily rejoice in his redemption, and ever serve The Christ who died that he might live.

PART TWO

Read

Matthew 27:1-12; Mark 15:1-14; Luke 22:63-23:23; John 18:28-40

In the previous meditation we saw Our Saviour betrayed, arrested, and denied. Like a common criminal He was bound with ropes, and taken off to judgment.

Now comes His trial.

In order to understand it correctly, we must realize that Our Lord is both a member of The Jewish Church and a subject of the Roman government; hence He is forthwith examined by both institutions.

First comes His examination before The Jewish Church.

The charge against Him is blasphemy; He is accused of claiming that He is The Son of God and The Saviour of the world. Therefore, as He stands in the presence of the high priest and his assistants, He is confronted with the question: "Art thou The Christ, The Son of The Blessed?" To which He answers, candidly and fearlessly: "I am!"

Of course, that is saying everything His enemies want to hear, and with only once exception they condemn Him to death.

Ordinarily this verdict would be carried out immediately. But The Jews are unable to do so: they are under the Roman government, and do not possess the power of inflicting capital punishment. That right lies exclusively with The Romans, specifically with the governor of The Romans in this region: a man by the name of Pontius Pilate.

So there is nothing else to do than go to him, and have Jesus condemned by Roman law; and thus the second part of Christ's trial gets under way.

But The Jews are shrewd; they know very well that Pontius Pilate will never condemn a man to death simply for claiming to be divine. Pagan that he is, religious controversies do not bother him very much. If Jesus says He is a god, what of it? What's one god more or less! The Jews have to find some other accusations against Jesus: some accusation that will make an impression upon Pilate. So, when they appear before his presence in the early hours of Good Friday morning, they accuse their Prisoner of treason.

Pilate examines Christ: "I hear you claim to be a king. Are you one?"

Jesus answers: "I am indeed."

Pilate: "Don't you know that Cæsar is king?"

Jesus: "Don't misunderstand; I am a King, but My kingdom is not of this world. I am a spiritual King."

"O I see," Pilate answers, "you are talking about religion. In that case--"

He turns to The Jews and says: "I'm afraid you have misrepresented this man; he's nothing but some kind of religious fanatic. I find no fault in him. So if you'll excuse me--"

But The Jews are not put off so easily: "Pilate, don't be misled! This man is dangerous. He is stirring up the people against The Roman government!"

"O come, you Jews, you're making a mountain out of a molehill! I haven't heard about any disturbances."

“You haven’t! Why, Galilee, the place where this man comes from, is ready for a revolution!”

“Galilee you say! Well, now, here is a coincidence: Herod, who rules Galilee under me, is in the city at this very moment. I’ll send you to him, and he can take care of this matter for me.”

Pilate is happy. He senses something extraordinary about this incident, something about this Prisoner which isn’t normal. He’ll rid himself of the case by giving it to Herod.

But his happiness is of a very short duration. Herod can do nothing with The Prisoner: He refuses to talk to him; He hardly notices him. And before Pilate knows it, Herod sends Jesus back to him, with the message that in his opinion Jesus is quite harmless.

Now Pilate is irritated (these persistent, contemptible Jews!): “Listen, friends: you bring this person to me as someone who is misleading the people; I have examined him, and he’s okay; Herod says the same thing. Now let’s stop this fooling around!”

But Our Lord’s enemies do not even let him finish; they drown out his voice in a confusion of accusations. They want their man! They’ll get their way with Pilate, even if it means standing there all day.

No doubt Pilate knows that. So he tries a different method; he says: “You know, I have a custom at this time of the year of releasing a Jewish prisoner to you people because you are so wonderful (said with crossed fingers). Now, I’ll give you a choice. I have this Jesus; and then I have another prisoner in my custody called Barabbas—you remember, that desperate robber and murderer who was arrested some time ago. Tell you what I’ll do; I’ll let you choose. Which one do you want? Jesus or Barabbas?”

You know the answer: “Not this man, but Barabbas!” That was the choice: “Not this man, but Barabbas!”

Now the little legend which ties in with this part of The Passion:

If you know Hebrew, you know that the name “Barabbas” is not really a name at all. In Hebrew the word “bar” means “son”, and “abbas” means “father”. “Barabbas” therefore means “son of a father”, which in turn signifies “son of a famous father”. So Barabbas was not actually this man’s name. There is an ancient tradition that his name was—of all things!—Jesus.

Jesus Barabbas: Jesus, the certain son of a famous father—that was the choice. Between Jesus, The Son of God, and Jesus, the son of some famous father, this was the choice: “Not this man, but Barabbas!”

There is nothing wrong in disbelieving this legend; there is nothing wrong in believing it. But whether it is true or not, accepted or not, it is certainly remarkable. And there are at least two lessons which we can learn from it that we should not forget.

In the first place, if Barabbas actually bore the name “Jesus”, we cannot help but realize how frightfully and shamefully the name “Jesus” was thus abused.

A name which was chosen for The Son of God by God Himself’ a name announced to The Mother of God by an angel from the heights; a name, according to Blessed Paul, which is above every other name, at which every knee should bow of things in Heaven and things on earth and things under the earth—such a name thrown away on a man like Barabbas!

It is true that the name “Jesus” was a common name among Jews, not reserved exclusively for Our Blessed Lord’ and yet, at the same time, to be wasted on a criminal, a robber, a murderer—what a misuse and abuse!

All of which reminds us of the distressing fact that the blessed name of Jesus is frightfully misused also today. People seem to get a peculiar and perverted satisfaction out of using it in frivolous, blasphemous oaths.

If this could be said only of unbelievers, that would be bad enough. But the most lamentable part of it all is found in the fact that even many Christians are guilty of this transgression. In church they call upon that name as their one and only hope for time and for eternity. Out of church they kick it around as if it is the most worthless thing in the world.

If the legend about Barabbas is to serve any purpose at all, let it teach us to use the most holy name of Jesus with the utmost reverence and respect.

In the second place, if Barabbas actually bore the name “Jesus”, it is also well for us to remember what this name means. It means “savior”.

In the final analysis, then, Pilate gave his audience the choice between two Jesuses: the choice between two saviors. WITH the result that those people rejected The Son of God as their Saviour and chose someone else instead.

Is that not the way it is with untold millions today? They will look to everyone and everything else for salvation except to the one Person and the one thing in all the wide world that can acquire it: Christ and His cross they case aside. They will choose to be saved by character, by good works, by penance and renunciation; but Christ and His cross they case aside.

Thus it has been since the beginning of the world; thus it will be until the end. “What is your choice?”, the world is asked; “Do you want Christ, the real Saviour, or

something which is only called a savior?" And the multitudes answer: "Not this man, but Barabbas!"

You, too, must make your choice in this vital matter.

It is still a matter of being for Christ or against Him. You cannot escape the issue by merely saying: "O yes, Christ was a good man and all that!" The point is: is He your JESUS, your Saviour, or not?

Speaking of legends, let us imagine that we are standing by your casket; some person says to another: "This individual lying here believed the heart of The Bible: the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin." Would that be a legend or a fact?

PART THREE

Read

Matthew 27:24-31; Mark 15:15-20; Luke 23:24-25; John 19:1-16

Up to this point we have followed the trial of Jesus to the choice of Barabbas by The Jews. Pilate had demanded a choice because he knew Jesus to be innocent and wanted to save Him. But The Jews turned right around and chose the very man Pilate thought they would never choose, and so at this moment he is no better off than before.

Try to understand the position in which the Roman governor finds himself: he knows Jesus is innocent; he wants to let Him go; but he also knows that The Jews will not be satisfied if he lets Him go.

So he stalls, hoping for something to happen that will get him out of this dilemma.

He has Jesus scourged. He has Him taken to the courtyard, and tied to a post, and whipped until the flesh is torn from His bones and the blood streams down His back. But The Jews want Him crucified.

Then Pilate tries to make the people laugh. He has his soldiers dress Jesus in an old cloak, with a crown of thorns on His head, and says: "Behold the man!" But The Jews do not think that funny at all; they want Him crucified.

Next Pilate tries persuasion. He pleads with The Jews: "Why should I crucify him? What evil has he done? Be reasonable!" But The Jews are beyond argument; they simply keep on shouting: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Then Pilate tries to stall by conducting another investigation; he calls Jesus into his presence, and starts asking questions asked before. But Jesus is now silent and answers not a word, and thus Pilate's stalling is forestalled.

In desperation Pilate turns to The Jews and shouts: “I’m going to let this man go!”

The Jews shout back: “If you let this man go, you are obviously not a supporter of Cæsar; whoever sets himself up as king speaks against the emperor!”

Utterly beaten, Pilate calls for a bowl of water, dramatically washes his hands, and says: “I am innocent of the blood of this just person!”

Strange words: “I am INNOCENT of the blood of this JUST person”; they mean: “This man is innocent, and yet I am innocent in putting him to death.”

After that the record says: “He delivered Jesus to their will.”

So Jesus goes away to be crucified. And Pilate goes—

Where did Pilate go? Have you ever wondered about that? Whatever happened to Pilate after Good Friday?

There is an ancient legend in The Church that from the time that Pontius Pilate and Jesus parted company, Pilate was an unhappy man. Not only because he soon thereafter lost his political office, but mainly because of his dreams. He could not sleep without dreaming. Every time he closed his eyes he would see Christ standing there in an old garment, wearing a crown of thorns. And then he would hear the words: “*Ecce homo!*” —“Behold the man!” Dreams, dreams, dreams, always the same: “Behold the man!” Until one fatal day Pilate went to the edge of a cliff, looked down at the raging waters far below, and jumped—a suicide.

Is this legend about Pontius Pilate true? It might be. It might well be that he committed suicide, because his sin is one of the blackest to stain the pages of human history.

He condemned an innocent man to death. He took from Him the most valuable possession he had; he deprived Him of the most fundamental right: the right to live. Not, mind you, because Jesus had done anything wrong, not because He was a murderer or a thief; but simply because Pilate held the scales of justice in his hand, and did not have enough strength to balance them correctly.

But that is not the whole picture. Pilate did not merely condemn an innocent MAN to death, for Christ was no ordinary man: He was The God-Man; He was God manifest in the flesh; He was all the fullness of The Godhead bodily. GOD Pilate gave over into the murderous hands of His enemies; HIM he delivered to their will!

The crime of Pilate becomes even greater when we stop to realize that he condemned our innocent Saviour to death although HE KNEW BETTER. To do something evil in ignorance is one thing; to do it knowingly is another. And Pilate did it knowingly.

He testified to Christ's innocence again and again; YET he delivered Jesus to the will of The Jews!

And it is very possible that never again after that did Pilate have any peace. His conscience gave him no rest. Until finally he longed for only one thing: he longed to die. And when death did not come quickly enough, he went out looking for it—and found it.

In the light of OUR sins, Pilate's end might well be our own. When we look at the many transgressions in our own lives, of which so many are committed in spite of the fact that we know better, we might well choose suicide ourselves.

When we hear of some person taking his own life, we should not be too surprised. Conscience can make a person suffer hell on earth. Conscience can create dreams that rob a person of his sanity. And when worse comes to worst, suicide can become very possible.

Is this legend about Pontius Pilate true? Our first answer was: it might be. Now we ask the question again, and our second answer is: it need not be. Pilate need not have committed suicide. As great as was his sin, it was not SO great that it could not have been forgiven.

If he had only been sorry for it, if he had only believed that The Christ whom he innocently condemned to death was crucified for sin, if he had only resolved to dedicate the rest of his life to God's service, he could have stopped those dreams, and quieted his conscience, and found peace once more. For it was as true of Pilate as of any other person before or after him that "God so loved the world, that He gave His Onlybegotten Son, that WHOSOEVER believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

That is why WE do not commit suicide; that is why dreams do not haunt US; that is why WE have peace with God: because by His grace we know that however great our sins, Christ's love is greater. His love has drowned them in the depths of the sea; His blood has erased them from our record; He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement which produced our peace was laid upon Him; and with His stripes we were healed.

In case you are interested, there is another legend in the Christian Church about Pontius Pilate. According to this story, he did not commit suicide at all; instead he repented of his sin, and became a follower of The Crucified.

We hope this legend is true.

PART FOUR

Read

Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26-32; John 19:17

Step by step we have been following Our Saviour in His suffering. Up to this point we have seen Him agonizing in Gethsemane until His sweat turned to blood; seen Judas come to the garden gate and betray Him with a kiss; even Our Blessed Lord arrested, and forsaken by all His disciples. We have listened to His threefold trial before The Jewish Church, and heard Him convicted of blasphemy. We have witnessed the threefold denial of Peter. We have followed Christ's threefold trial before the Roman government: before Pilate, and Herod, and then before Pilate once more. We have heard The Jews choose Barabbas instead of Jesus. We have seen Our Saviour scourged, and crowned with thorns. We have heard the representative of the Roman government condemn Him to death, and the soldiers lead Him away to be crucified.

And now we are about to follow Our Lord along The Way of Sorrows from Pilate's palace to Calvary's crest.

It is not a very long journey: about the distance of three ordinary city blocks.

But short as it is, it is the most momentous journey ever made.

The Bible does not tell us much about it. But all crucifixions by the Roman government more or less followed the same pattern; and if we wish to visualize this event to ourselves, it must, historians tell us, have looked something like this:

At the head of the procession rides the soldier in charge of the execution. Next come a few soldiers as his assistants. Then comes Jesus, with a board hanging from His neck, on which is written the accusation against Him. After Him come two malefactors, led with Him to be put to death. Undoubtedly followed by other soldiers. And all along the way frightened friends and weeping women. And the omnipresent mob, of course, striking Our Lord, and spitting upon Him, and hooting at Him, and enjoying itself immensely.

We know that on this journey Christ carried His cross. But we are not sure just what this means.

Some authorities maintain that Jesus carried an object in the actual form of a cross.

Others declare that He merely carried two pieces of wood, which were not constructed into a cross until Calvary was reached.

According to this latter opinion, the standing post was firmly fastened into the ground while the post crossing it was still detached; Christ's hands were then nailed to the shorter section, after which both He and this bar of wood were hoisted upon the other, until the desired height was reached; whereupon both pieces of wood were securely fastened together by means of ropes, and finally the feet of Our Lord were also transfixed by nails.

All these details are unimportant. The outstanding fact about this journey is that it was excruciatingly painful and shameful.

So much so, in fact, that finally Christ cannot make it alone. Long before Calvary is reached, someone has to carry the cross for Him. And the soldiers have to drag Him up the hill.

Many of the spectators, who witness this procession are Christ's enemies, and so they enjoy it.

Others are friends, and can hardly bear to see it.

Among these friends are included the people referred to in this sentence from The Passion Story: "There followed Him a great company of women."

And now a legend about one of these women, by the name of Veronica:

She especially was moved to compassion as she saw Our Lord; and, deliberately exposing herself to criticism and even, perhaps, physical abuse, she went up to Him, holding out a handkerchief with which He might wipe the blood and sweat and tears from His face. Christ is supposed to have taken it with a look of gratitude in His eyes; and, after pressing His face into it, He folded it and gave it back to her. Later on, when Veronica unfolded the cloth, she saw preserved upon it the face of Christ, outlined in blood.

We do not know if this legend is true. But the lessons we can learn from it certainly are.

In the first place, this story reminds us of the importance of WOMEN in The Christian Religion.

It was a woman who gave Our Saviour flesh and blood, and brought Him into the world. It was a group of women which supported Him during His public ministry. It was predominantly women who stood at the foot of His cross. It was women who first learned of His resurrection. It was to a woman that He first appeared on Easter Morn.

And so today much of the success of The Christian Church must be traced back to women. They have carried The Cross onward and forward under circumstances in which men have tried and failed.

If our religion has done much for womanhood, womanhood has also done much for our religion.

In the second place, this story about Veronica tells us that she received a PICTURE of Christ.

So have we. We have a wonderful picture of Christ on the pages of The Holy Bible. We read what is recorded on them, and there comes up before our eyes the vision of a perfect Man, a Man who could claim that He is God, a Man who spent His life doing good. No picture has ever thrilled the world like the Biblical picture of Jesus Christ.

And in the third place, it is significant that in this legend about Veronica, Christ's face was outlined in BLOOD. It was His blood which made a lasting impression upon that NAPKIN.

And it is Christ's blood which has made a lasting impression upon the WORLD. The Christian Religion is not simply a beautiful religion, a religion of ethics, a religion of right living. It is all that. But it is more than that; above and beyond everything else The Christian Religion is a BLOOD religion, proclaiming to all humanity that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin.

Take that fact out of The Bible, and The Bible becomes a corpse; because the blood of Christ is The Bible's life.

Whether Veronica ever received this picture of Christ on cloth is debatable; but one thing is certain: someday, by God's grace, we shall receive more—not merely a picture of Christ on cloth, but the beatific vision, by virtue of which we shall see Him face to face. For that reason He lived, for that reason HE died: that we might die IN Him and live WITH Him eternally.

PART FIVE

Read

Matthew 27:33-50; Mark 15:22-37; Luke 23:33-46; John 19:18-30

In our last meditation we accompanied Our Saviour on His journey to Calvary, and saw how the soldiers dragged Him to its crest because His strength was spent.

Now we witness the crucifixion itself, and the circumstances surrounding it.

First His executioners offer Our Lord a sedative, made of vinegar and gall, in order to ease the pain. But when Christ tastes the mixture, He refuses to drink.

Next we hear the pounding of the hammer and the sound of nails entering wood; and a moment later The Saviour is raised up between heaven and earth, to suffer for the sins of the world.

The crucifixes which adorn our homes and churches are an idealized representation of what took place on Good Friday.

Actually the scene did not look like that at all; and in this connection five things might be mentioned to disabuse our minds of certain incorrect impressions.

For one thing, Christ's cross itself was not the beautiful, smooth object which we generally display as a symbol of The Christian Religion. It was nothing more than two tree trunks, from which the branches had been removed, tied together by means of ropes. The Roman government spent very little time in making crosses attractive: measuring them, and planning them, and fitting them together. And the cross of Christ was no exception.

In the second place, it was not as big as we usually think. Many pictures of the crucifixion show Jesus high above the earth, so that the head of His mother, who stood at the foot of the cross, is even with His feet. This was by no means the case, even though there is a legend in The Church that the cross was no less than eight feet wide and fifteen feet high. Much rather was the cross an object only a little larger than a man's outstretched body, so that, when the cross was implanted in the earth, Jesus' feet were only an inch or two above the ground. The Bible definitely tells us that, while Jesus was hanging on the cross, His enemies came up to Him and pulled out the hair of His beard. In addition, they made fun of Him, and spit upon Him, and threw things at Him; simply because He was within easy reach.

In the third place, the superscription at the top of the cross was not made up of the four letters followed by periods: I.N.R.I. Those letters are an abbreviation of the Latin phrase: "*Iesus Nazarenus, rex Iudæorum*", which means: "Jesus of Nazareth, The King of The Jews". This Latin superscription was actually written out in full, and what is more, repeated in Hebrew and Greek.

In the fourth place, Jesus had no platform upon which He could comfortably rest His feet. Such a convenience would have been much too comfortable for the Romans to provide. There was nothing more than a small peg in the middle of the cross's upright post, on which Christ had to sit in order to keep His body from tearing away from the cross by its own weight; and His feet were twisted and turned in such a way that they could be nailed directly to the wood behind them.

And, in the fifth place (and let us read it reverently), Christ was naked. We adorn Him with a loin cloth on our crucifixes only out of respect. In reality He was exposed in utter nakedness to the eyes of men, that His shame might be more great.

From all these facts it is plain to see that our crucifixes today are not realistic pictures of what took place on Good Friday; they are merely SYMBOLS of the price that was paid for our redemption.

After Our Blessed Lord is crucified, the crowds entertain themselves by mocking Him. They call Him names. They laugh at Him. They especially get a kick out of saying to Him: "Save thyself, and come down from the cross!"

But Jesus lives through it all without a word.

Now a pathetic little legend:

There is a legend in The Church, almost as old as Christianity itself, that when Christ did not come down from the cross, a little bird tried to bring Him down. It flew around His head a few times, and then tried to pull the nails out of His hands with its bill; and when it could not, it flew away.

It would be amazing to find any truth in this pious story; but it teaches us a significant lesson nevertheless: this little bird was unable to save Christ and bring Him down from the cross.

Neither could Judas do it. When he saw that Christ was condemned, he repented himself for having betrayed Him, and tried to free Him from His enemies. But he could not. Christ's enemies said: "Christ innocent? What is that to us! You bothered? You see to that!" And so he went and hanged himself; and, falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out.

Neither could Pilate bring Christ down from the cross. He knew he had sentenced an innocent man to death, but his pride kept him from reversing that sentence. "What I have written, I have written," he said, "and so it shall remain!"

In fact, God Himself could not free Christ from that cross. It had to be, if the world was to be saved. The world had to be substituted for. Sin had to be punished; and Christ could not be freed from that punishment until He had suffered it to the ultimate. Therefore God Himself could not take those nails out of His Son's holy hands and feet.

But most significant of all, Christ could not free Himself. Omnipotent God that He was, it was not the nails that held Him to the cross; He could have dissolved them in a moment of time. What held Him to the cross was His love for us; and from that love He could not free Himself. That love was His life, and so He stayed on the cross until all life was gone.

So Jesus could not be saved from His death by anything—not even a little bird. He could not be saved from His death by anyone—not even Himself.

But by His death He saved everyone, including you. That is the message of Lent.

God give you the grace to believe it!

PART SIX

Read

Matthew 27:51-56; Mark 15:38-41; Luke 23:47-49; John 19:31-37

By means of these meditations we have been following Our Blessed Lord through the last hours of His earthly life from The Garden of Gethsemane to the cross of Calvary.

At this point we find Him hanging there between heaven and earth, with arms outstretched as if to embrace the world.

For six long hours He hung there: from nine in the morning to three o'clock in the afternoon.

The Holy Bible tell us that during these six hours Our Lord spoke seven times.

It is significant that the first three statements which issued from Christ's mouth were concerned with those around Him.

His first concern was for the enemies who crucified Him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" It was an amazing prayer, quite different from what we would expect from an innocent victim. Just as amazing is the fact that it made no impression upon the mob.

The second statement of Our Lord concerned a criminal crucified with Him. Upon his plea, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom", Jesus answered, "Verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise." These words also were most amazing: Jesus hanging on a cross, yet looking forward to Paradise! But once again they made no impression upon anyone save on him to whom they were addressed.

Christ's third statement concerned someone who was very near and dear to Him, and whom outside of Jesus, The Church honors more than anyone else. "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's siter Mary, the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple (John) standing by, whom He loved (especially much), He saith unto His mother: 'Woman, behold thy son!' Then saith He to the disciple: 'Behold thy mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home."

But by this time the agony of Our blessed Lord in body and soul and mind and heart had become so excruciatingly intense, that His thoughts had to revert to Himself.

Suffering there the punishment of Hell for all the sins that had ever been or ever will be committed, He next cried out: "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*, which is, being interpreted: My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

Then, in rapid succession:

"I thirst!"

"It is finished!"

And finally with a loud voice: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit!"

“And having said thus, He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost.”

In some parts of The Church Catholic, after these facts are read from The Scriptures in public worship, there is a dead silence in the church for several minutes.

But it was far otherwise on that first Good Friday.

The Bible tells us that when Christ died, the veil in The Temple, which separated the altar from the rest of the building and which was thirty feet high and sixty feet wide and four inches thick, “was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. And the earth did quake, and the rocks rent, and the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose.”

Now these words of Christ and these miracles which accompanied His exhalation made a deep impression upon the Roman soldier in charge of the crucifixion. He listened; and he watched.

And then he said” “Certainly this was a righteous man! Truly this was The Son of God!”

And now a legend:

There is a tradition in The Christian Church, the origin of which is lost in antiquity, that this Roman soldier’s name was Longinus, that he was converted to The Faith, that he spent the rest of his life in telling others about Christ, and that he finally died a martyr’s death.

There is good reason to believe that this legend is true, especially in the light of this soldier’s verdict: “Certainly and truly, this was a righteous Man and The Son of God!”

What else is that but a summary of The Christian Faith? To us Christians Jesus was a Man; and a righteous Man at that; and infinitely more: God; He was God’s Substitute for man, and man’s Substitute to God. That is what the Roman soldier said. No doubt he believed what he said; and, believing it, he became a Christian. And he may well have remained a Christian unto the end.

The veracity of this legend also seems probably in the light of history. After all, if this soldier became a Christian because he heard Christ’s words and saw His death on the cross, he does not stand in a class by himself; that is how people have been transformed into Christians down through the centuries, even as we! By the grace of God we learned about our Saviour; we studied His life and His death, His words and His works; and today we are counted among His followers.

There is something wonderful about believing that this man who crucified Christ was finally won for Christ, that he told others about Christ, and that even today he reigns with Christ in glory everlasting.

There is something even more wonderful about believing what he confessed: “Certainly this was a righteous Man! Truly this was The Son of God!” For if we believe that, then we shall one day reign with Christ in endless bliss ourselves.

THE CONCLUSION

The truthfulness of any legend connected with Christianity, even if it be in harmony with Scripture, is open to question.

Thank God, the truthfulness of this statement from Holy Writ is not: “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”