

THE GETHSEMANI HOLY HOUR

"Could you not watch one hour with Me?"

Words of Our Divine Lord to His Apostles from Mtt:XXVI:40, 41.

Its Origin and Purpose



The Eternal Word of the Father, His only begotten Son, became man to redeem all those who, of their own free will, would believe in Him and accept the Divine life which He would win for us by His sufferings and death.

By human birth He was a Jew. He obeyed the laws and customs of the Jewish people. He died at their hands. His first followers were Jews. When He founded His Church he placed a Jewish fisherman in charge of it. In one Jewish Day, from sundown to sundown, He gave Himself to us in the Holy Eucharist, suffered His terrible agony in Gethsemani, allowed Himself to be arrested, tried, scourged, sentenced to death, and, having dragged His cross to Calvary, died a cruel and terrible death on it. The soldier, making sure he was dead, drove the sword through His side right through His Heart, opening it as he did so. His Body was taken from the Cross and buried. All was completed in one Jewish Day.

On that first Holy Thursday night, when He had given Himself to us in the Holy Eucharist, He left the supper room and, together with His apostles, He went to the Garden of Gethsemani. There He entered into an agony the intensity of which could never be adequately described in human language. Centuries later, speaking of this agony to St. Margaret Mary, He said: "No mere creature can adequately understand what I have suffered on that occasion." It has been stated by theologians /ft that it is agony could have caused death a number of times to an ordinary mortal.

When Christ came to redeem us He could have redeemed us in whatever way He wished. He chose to do so by suffering. In order to be able to suffer, He took to Himself a body and soul like ours. His human nature was so refined and so perfect that He was capable of a much greater degree of suffering than we are. Being a Divine Person, His every least action had an infinite value and capable of redeeming all men of all time. But in order to show His love for us, He chose to suffer everything that His human nature was capable of suffering and die a terrible death on the Cross not only to prove His love for us but to testify to the awful nature of sin, and the necessity of making satisfaction for it.

Though His sufferings began with His Incarnation, they must have increased as His human nature developed. His public ministry must have provided frequent occasions when His sufferings were more acute than during His private life at Nazareth. But it was during His agony in Gethsemani that His sufferings reached a degree of intensity which was far greater than at any other time during His Passion. How do we know this? Because Christ Himself said so in His Revelations to St. Margaret Mary at Paray-le-Monial in France, which took place during the latter half of the seventeenth century. The Gospel account of His Crucifixion might lead us to believe that He suffered most during His three hours on the Cross. But Christ made known to St. Margaret Mary that it was during His agony in Gethsemani that His sufferings were greatest. We know, from our own experience that mental suffering can be much more terrible to bear than physical suffering. Soldiers suffer more the night before a battle than during the battle. A patient suffers more the day before an operation than during the operation. Thus, we can understand that Christ suffered more in Gethsemani than during his Crucifixion.

We know that the cause of His sufferings was sin - the sins of every member of the human race. On the night of His agony in Gethsemani His infinite knowledge provided His human intellect with a clear picture of every sin of every kind, past, present and future, which every member of the human race would commit. He not only took the responsibility of all sin but He invested Himself with them as though He Himself had committed them. In this terrible state He approached His eternal Father and asked for mercy and His Eternal Father treated Him as though He had committed all sin.

The other factors which increased His sufferings were the knowledge that many would be lost for ever despite His redeeming love. Judas, and many like him, passed before His Divine mind; those who would believe in Him and love Him for a while and then turn away and be lost for ever. He saw, too, the coldness and indifference of so many of His followers towards Him, especially those consecrated to Him. He saw every detail of His physical sufferings and His dereliction on the Cross. All this crushed His human nature so much that His Precious blood flowed from His Sacred Body down upon the ground. In the midst of His anguish, He got up on two occasions and turned towards His Apostles to find that they were sleeping. This provoked the reproach: "Could you not watch one hour with me?" But there was one more heartache to suffer - as soon as His enemies arrested Him His apostles fled and left Him to His fate.

It was His Infinite Love, which caused Him to suffer so much for us in order to redeem us. All this He explained to St. Margaret Mary in His Revelations to her at Paray-le-Monial. He asked her to appeal on His behalf to all who believed in Him and loved Him to spend an hour with Him in memory of his agony in Gethsemani. She described His appeal in the most touching terms:

"It was then that He revealed to me the marvels of His pure love, and showed me to what extent He had loved men, from whom He received only ingratitude and slights". "I feel this more than all I suffered in my Passion". Then He made His appeal to her for the Holy Hour as follows: "Every night between Thursday and Friday I will make you share in the overwhelming sadness which I felt in the Garden of Olives; and this sadness will reduce you to an agony harder to endure than death itself. In order to keep me company you will rise between eleven o'clock and midnight and remain prostrate with Me for an hour, not only to appease the Divine wrath by begging mercy for sinners, but also to mitigate in some way the bitterness I felt at finding myself abandoned by My apostles, which obliged Me to reproach them for not being able to watch one hour with Me".

His request thus made was accepted by the Church after the usual thorough investigations of the Revelations. So began the Holy Hour as we know it. The Beatification and Canonization of Margaret Mary Alacoque were an indication of the acceptance of the veracity of her Revelations of Christ.

As many as five Popes have recommended the practice of the Holy Hour. They were as follows: Pope Pius VIII, on 23 December, 1829; Pope Gregory XVI, on 27th July, 1831, Pope Pius IX, on 19th October 1866, and on the occasion of the great Jubilee of our Redemption in 1933, Pope Pius XI decreed that the Holy Hour be celebrated throughout the world on Holy Thursday of that year. In St. Peter's in Rome, the signal honour of preaching the Holy Hour on that occasion (the Jubilee) was conferred on Cardinal Pacelli, later to become Pope Pius XII. His preaching was later published in pamphlet form, the title being "A Holy Hour".

The Holy Hour is an exercise in mental or vocal prayer, or a mixture of both, having as its object some aspect of the Agony of Our Divine Lord in Gethsemani. The threefold purpose of the Holy Hour was explained to St. Margaret Mary by Our Divine Lord as follows: 1) to appease the Divine wrath, 2) to ask for mercy for sinners, and 3) to console Our Divine Lord in His Agony.

Readings may be anticipated. The public Holy Hour is a very appropriate spiritual exercise for the Holy Season of Lent. It is an Hour during which great graces can be obtained from God. St. Margaret Mary testified that it was during her Holy Hour that she obtained marvellous graces from God. Let us listen to her appeal and respond with generosity and fervour.

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