



Bishop Barron Reflects on
THE STATIONS of the CROSS

WORD  on FIRE

STATIONS OF
THE CROSS
REFLECTIONS

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Jesus Is Condemned to Death

STATION I



When Israel dreamed of a new David, it dreamed of a king who would unite the nation, cleanse the temple, defeat Israel's enemies, and then reign over the whole world. It's only against this loamy backdrop that we can appreciate what Jesus was doing and how he was perceived. The first words out of his mouth—and the central theme of his preaching—concerned the kingdom of God. He announced a new reign, centered on himself.

These were taken, quite rightly, as fighting words, for if a new kingdom is to come, the old kingdoms have to give way, and if a new King has arrived, the old kings have to cede. Jesus endeavored to unite the nation, to bring the tribes back together. This was the point of his open table fellowship, his reaching out to sinners and tax collectors, his inclusion of the sick, the marginalized. In David's city, he cleansed the temple and promised that he would establish a new temple. And throughout his life and ministry, Jesus opposed the old kings. We see it from the very beginning, in the infancy narratives themselves. Jesus is presented as an alternative to Quirinius and Augustus, and his arrival, even as a baby, is enough to frighten Herod and all Jerusalem.

This confrontation between the old and new orders comes to its highest expression as Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, the local representative of Caesar. Pilate, undoubtedly sure of his power and authority, sizes up this criminal: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate means this in a purely political and worldly way: "Are you trying to seize political control of this part of the Roman empire?" But the scene is packed

with irony, for any Jew would have known the full import of Pilate's question. He was really asking: "Are you the king of the world? Are you the new David, destined to reign over all of the nations?"

Jesus tells him, straightforwardly enough, "My kingdom does not belong to this world." This does not mean that Jesus is unconcerned for the realities of politics, with the very "this-worldly" concerns of justice, peace, and right order. It means that the reign that he has been announcing is not a new political order, based like the others on threats and violence. This is why he immediately clarifies that his attendants are not "fighting to keep me from being handed over." It is the reign of God that he announces, God's nonviolent and compassionate ordering of things. Unimpressed, Pilate asks, "What is truth?" And then he condemns Jesus to death. He plays the typical worldly game of power politics, and by all appearances, he wins, as ruthless and violent people seem to do.

But through the cross and Resurrection, Jesus defeated him. He outmaneuvered the violence of sin and swallowed it up in the divine forgiveness. He defeated the enemies of Israel. And he thereby established his own body as the new temple—which is why blood and water flowed out from it. He gathered all people to himself, as the Davidic king was expected to: "When the Son of man is raised up, he will draw all people to himself." He was, in short, the new King, the one to whom final allegiance is due.

Jesus Takes Up His Cross

STATION II



All of us sinners tend to see the universe turning around our egos, our needs, our projects, our plans, our likes and dislikes. True conversion—the metanoia that Jesus talks about—is so much more than moral reform, though it includes that. It has to do with a complete shift in consciousness, a whole new way of looking at one’s life.

Jesus offered a teaching that must have been gut-wrenching to his first-century audience: “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” His listeners knew what the cross meant: a death in utter agony, nakedness, and humiliation. They knew it in all of its awful power.

So why does the Son take up the cross? Because God the Father is angry? Because he wants to lord it over us? Because God needs something? No, he comes purely out of love, out of God’s desire that we flourish: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” God the Father is not a pathetic divinity whose bruised personal honor needs to be restored; rather, God is a parent who burns with compassion for his children who have wandered into danger. Does the Father hate sinners? No, but he hates sin. Does he harbor indignation at the unjust? No, but he despises injustice. And thus he sends his Son—not to see him suffer but to set things right. St. Anselm, the great medieval theologian who is often unfairly blamed for the cruel theology of satisfaction, was eminently clear on this score. We sinners are like diamonds that have fallen into the

muck; made in the image of God, we have soiled ourselves through violence and hatred. In his passion to reestablish the beauty of his creation, God came down into the muck of sin and death and brought the diamond up and polished it off. In so doing of course, he had to get dirty. This sinking into the dirt——this divine solidarity with the lost——is the “sacrifice” which the Son makes to the infinite pleasure of the Father. It is a sacrifice expressive not of anger or vengeance but of compassion.

If God is self-forgetting love even to the point of death, then we must be such love. If God is willing to break open his own heart, then we must be willing to break open our hearts for others. The cross, in short, must become the very structure of the Christian life.

There’s a line from the illuminator of the St. John’s Bible that states: “We have to love our way out of this.” There’s nothing wimpy or namby-pamby or blind about this conviction. When we love extravagantly, we are not purposely blinding ourselves to moral realities——just the contrary. Love is not a sentiment but “a harsh and dreadful thing,” as Dostoevsky said.

This is just what Jesus shows on his terrible cross. And this is just what we, his followers, must imitate. Taking up the cross means not just being willing to suffer, but being willing to suffer as he did, absorbing violence and hatred through our forgiveness and nonviolence.

Jesus Falls for the First Time

STATION III



On the way to Calvary, Jesus—the Son of God—fell under the weight of the cross.

Some years ago, I delivered a homily on the subject of God's benevolent and providential direction of the cosmos. I felt the sermon had been inspiring and informative, and the numerous people who complimented me afterward confirmed my own assessment. But after everybody else had streamed past me, an older man approached, and eyeing me warily, said, "Father, I'm on a quest, and your homily didn't help." I responded, "Well, what do you mean?"

He then proceeded to tell me a terrible story. He had two granddaughters, ages five and seven, both of whom were suffering from a terminal disease that the doctors could neither control nor fully understand. All they knew for sure was that both girls would die and that, before death, both would go blind. He told me that the elder child had just lost her sight and that the younger was lying awake at night crying in terror as she contemplated her own future. "Father," he said, "my quest is to find out why God is doing this to my granddaughters. I've been to priests, ministers, rabbis, and gurus, and I've never gotten a very good answer—and frankly, your homily shed very little light." Well, I was flabbergasted, stunned. Never had the problem of evil—reconciling the goodness of God with the presence of suffering—appeared to me so concretely and in such a challenging way.

I told him that I didn't have a concrete answer to his question, but that his question itself was a holy one, because it meant

that he had not given up on God. He was still searching for God. And if you follow that question all the way, you'll be led to the heart of the Christian mystery, which is that God the Father sends his Son into the very worst of our suffering, into what frightens us the most. And in that we have the answer— not one maybe that satisfies our curiosity completely, but a deeply powerful spiritual answer: that God doesn't take away our suffering, but he enters into it with us and thereby sanctifies it.

Jesus Meets His Blessed Mother

STATION IV



STATIONS OF THE CROSS REFLECTIONS

The *Passion of the Christ* was one of the most provocative and popular religious movies in decades. One thing that especially struck me when I saw it is the role played by Mary, the mother of Jesus. We are compelled to see the scenes through her eyes. Early in Luke's Gospel, we are told that Mary "contemplated these things, reflecting on them in her heart." She is the theologian par excellence. She is the one who understands.

If Mary is the one through whom Christ was born, and if the Church is indeed Christ's Mystical Body, then she must be, in a very real sense, the mother of the Church. She is the one through whom Jesus continues to be born. We hear in the Gospel that, as he was dying on the cross, Jesus looked to his mother and the disciple whom he loved, and he said to Mary, "Woman, behold, your son," then to John, "Behold, your mother." We are told that "from that hour the disciple took her into his home." This text supports an ancient tradition that the Apostle John would have taken Mary with him when he traveled to Ephesus in Asia Minor and that both ended their days in that city. Indeed, on the top of a high hill overlooking the Aegean Sea, just outside of Ephesus, there's a modest dwelling that tradition holds to be the house of Mary. Immaculate Mary, the Mother of God, assumed body and soul into heaven, is not of merely historical or theoretical interest, nor is she simply a spiritual exemplar. Instead, as "Queen of all the saints," Mary is an ongoing presence, an actor in the life of the Church. In entrusting Mary to John, Jesus was, in a real way, entrusting Mary to all those who would be friends of Jesus down through the ages.

This is not to confuse her, of course, with the Savior, but it is to insist on her mission as mediator and intercessor. At the close of the great “Hail Mary” prayer, we Catholics ask Mary to pray for us “now and at the hour of our death,” signaling that throughout one’s life, Mary is the privileged channel through which the grace of Christ flows into the Mystical Body. Her basic task is always to draw people into deeper fellowship with her son. The Church’s conviction is that the Blessed Mother continues to say yes to God and to “go in haste” on mission around the world. She does so usually in quiet, hidden ways, responding to prayer and interceding for the Church. But sometimes she does so in a remarkable manner, breaking into our world strikingly and visibly.

God delights in drawing secondary causes into the dense complexity of his providential plan, granting to them the honor of cooperating with him and his designs. The Virgin Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, is the humblest of these humble instruments—and therefore, the most effective.

*Simon of Cyrene Is Made to Help
Jesus Bear the Cross*

STATION V



A donkey is a beast of burden: a humble, simple, unassuming animal, used by very ordinary people to do their work. The wealthy and powerful might own horses or a team of oxen; a political leader might ride a stately steed; but they would have little to do with donkeys.

All of his public career, Jesus had resisted when people claimed Messiahship for him. He sternly ordered them to be silent. When they came to carry him off and make him King, he slipped away. But on Palm Sunday, he is willing to be proclaimed—precisely at the moment when he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. And the Gospel is clear: it is a colt, the foal of a donkey, on whom no one had ever previously sat. In other words, this is a young, inexperienced, unimpressive donkey. And this is the animal upon whom Jesus rides into town in triumph.

The humble donkey, pressed into service, is a model of discipleship. Our purpose in life is not to draw attention to ourselves, to have a brilliant career, to aggrandize our egos; rather, our purpose is to serve the Master's need, to cooperate with his work as he sees fit. What was the donkey's task? He was a *Christopher*, a Christ-bearer. He carried the Lord into Jerusalem, paving the way for the Passion and the redemption of the world. Would anyone have particularly noticed him? Probably not, except perhaps to laugh at this ludicrous animal. What is the task of every disciple? Just the same: to be a *Christopher*, a bearer of Christ to the world. Might we be unnoticed in this? Sure. Might we, if we are noticed, be laughed at? Well, of course. But the Master has need of us, and so we perform our essential task in the theodrama.

During Christ's Passion, there is one figure who imitates the donkey, and that's Simon of Cyrene. The Romans didn't want Jesus to die before the crucifixion. And so they pressed into service (how like the donkey!) a man from Cyrene, in North Africa, probably a visitor coming to Jerusalem for the Passover.

How perilous and dangerous this must have seemed to him! But he seizes the moment and carries the cross, bearing some of Jesus' suffering. Simon of Cyrene must have had many other plans for his life, many other dreams and ambitions. But at the moment of truth, the Master had need of him—and he responded.

And his story is told to this day. "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." Your life is not about you. Remember: the Master has need of you. Whether and how you respond is all that matters.

Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

STATION VI



Tradition has it that a woman called Veronica wiped the blood and sweat from Jesus' face as he made his way to Calvary, leaving his image miraculously imprinted on her veil.

What do we see in the face of Christ? We see the Son of God, the divine Word made flesh. To use Paul's language, God has brought to light "the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ." In and through his humble humanity, his divinity shines forth. The proximity of his divinity in no way compromises the integrity of his humanity, but rather makes it shine in greater beauty. This is the New Testament version of the burning bush. The Jesus who is both divine and human is the Jesus who is evangelically compelling. If he is only divine, then he doesn't touch us; if he is only human, he can't save us. His splendor consists in the coming together of the two natures. This is the Christ who wants to reign as Lord of our lives in every detail.

And we see, in the veil of Veronica, the suffering Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The Lord of Life came, and we killed him. Therefore hiding, denying, covering up, pretense, excuses, subterfuges—all the ruses of self-justification—are permanently out of the question. Our own dysfunction is on public view in every wound on the body of Jesus. When we direct ourselves toward the brilliance of the crucified Christ, every smudge on the windowpane of the soul becomes visible. In the tormented face of the suffering Christ, we know that something has gone terribly wrong with us; that no one is okay; that we're like prisoners chained inside of an escape-proof prison; that we are at war with ourselves;

that Pharaoh has enslaved the Israelites and pressed them into service; that we are under judgment; that all we can do is cry, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

But in that veil of Veronica, we also see the face of mercy. When we had wandered into the cold and distant country of sin, God's love came to search us out; when we had sunk under the waves, that love went deeper; when we had closed ourselves up in the somber cave of our self-regard and self-reproach, that love crouched down, and with a candle, entered in. And this is why we Christians don't hide the awful face of the dying Christ. This is why we show it to the world. In Jesus' agonies, God is taking our agony away. We know it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us; we realize that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. The Church doesn't *have* a mission; it *is* a mission, and its purpose is to cause the merciful face of Jesus to gaze upon everyone in the world.