

The Cross and the Chain of Love (Part I of V)

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“Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But, rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed, you may also rejoice exultantly... blessed are you, the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Peter 4:12-14)



I was reflecting on this text after finishing a spiritual direction session. With Bible in hand, I flipped on the evening news and thought about the question of my directee. How does a loving God permit bad things to happen?

Just like when my kids forget their gym clothes, I often tell them, “Sorry, you’ll have to do PE [physical education] in your street clothes.” I don’t cause this difficulty for my kids, but I do utilize it. Sometimes, the pain of this is the stimulus that helps them mature and grow in responsibility. With six kids, I have never had the time to be a hover parent and to shield my kids from growth pains.

God is even more of the same with us; God is not a hover parent. He loves us too much to not to teach us how to be more like Him and in sync with our mission for Him. We have to keep in mind that each one of us has limited time and a tremendous potential for holiness. We can do our part to cultivate our capacity to deal with adversity. How?

This Lent, in a series of four posts, we will explore what Venerable Concepción Cabrera and her spiritual family of the Cross, tell us about a “new spiritual way of perfection” to and through the Cross. She was a mother, a wife and a faithful Catholic who received the “Spirituality of the Cross” from Jesus at the peak of the Mexican Revolution, 1914-1937, when priests were being killed and churches closed by the Mexican government. Although her ideas prefigured Vatican II by about thirty years, she speaks to the heart of people of today, for we hear of nation rising against nation, of millions of babies aborted every year and the threat of losing our religious freedom, and economic livelihoods. Often, we live a long ways from the ideals of “the land from sea to shining sea.”



Venerable Concepción tells us that the Cross of Jesus is not a static reality that we simply commemorate as something that happened nearly 2000 years ago. The Cross is a living reality that we can learn to fruitfully encounter in the heart of our deepest struggles. It takes awareness and attentiveness.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 618, copyright 1994) says that “he [Christ] has in some way united himself to every man, ‘the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery’ is offered to all men.” When we encounter bad things, the Cross, it shows us that He desires to associate us with His redeeming sacrifice. Like He told Concepción, “your mission, [our mission] is to save souls” (Philipon, M.M., O.P. “Conchita: A Mother’s Spiritual Diary”, Alba House, New York, 1978).

How did Concepción, a married lay woman, save souls by coming to love the Cross? She came to see the Cross, as the “kiss of Jesus” and a living force that she could tap into in the moment of action and prayer. Progressively, she learned to intentionally glance towards Jesus with the wink of her attention. In happy times, this was easy, but when she suffered it was difficult. In the hustle and bustle of a big family, she would forget that Jesus was with her. Jesus inspired her from 12 PM to 3 PM, the hours He hung on the Cross, to start each new hour and activity with an acknowledgement of His presence with her. He tutored her to make each “wink of her heart” towards Him an offering

with Him that could save souls. She learned to cultivate union with Jesus, while praying before the tabernacle, chasing after her nine children, attending a concert with her husband, and receiving the news that the Mexican government was killing priests and closing churches.

She practiced the “Chain of Love,” fourteen principles of the spiritual life that we will unpack in coming posts that helped her get herself out of the way of God in order to be an offering for the world with Him. She was daring and unflappable in reaching towards God and being holy for others no matter the cost. She learned how to order her life and how to be generous even when she had to love those causing her pain. She encountered holy priests and priests with stone cold sinful hearts. The Lord showed her the power of making her life a simple, free offering to secure graces for their transformation. She shows us the power of baptism that makes us all an offering, and a living sacrifice.

The “Chain of Love,” a pattern of life that we each can follow to live this priesthood or self-offering for others, deals with the qualities of savoring the Cross that an intentional disciple of Jesus must develop and receive personally from God. In the next post, we will explore what the “Chain of Love” shows us about praying at the Cross, and about living in Christ to do this.



Art: Venerable Concepción Cabrera de Armida, used with permission. *Cross on Anna Jagiellonka's Chain* (gold, sapphires), from the Royal Casket, 2nd half of 16th century; photo made before 1939 [Sepia], PD-US, Wikimedia Commons.