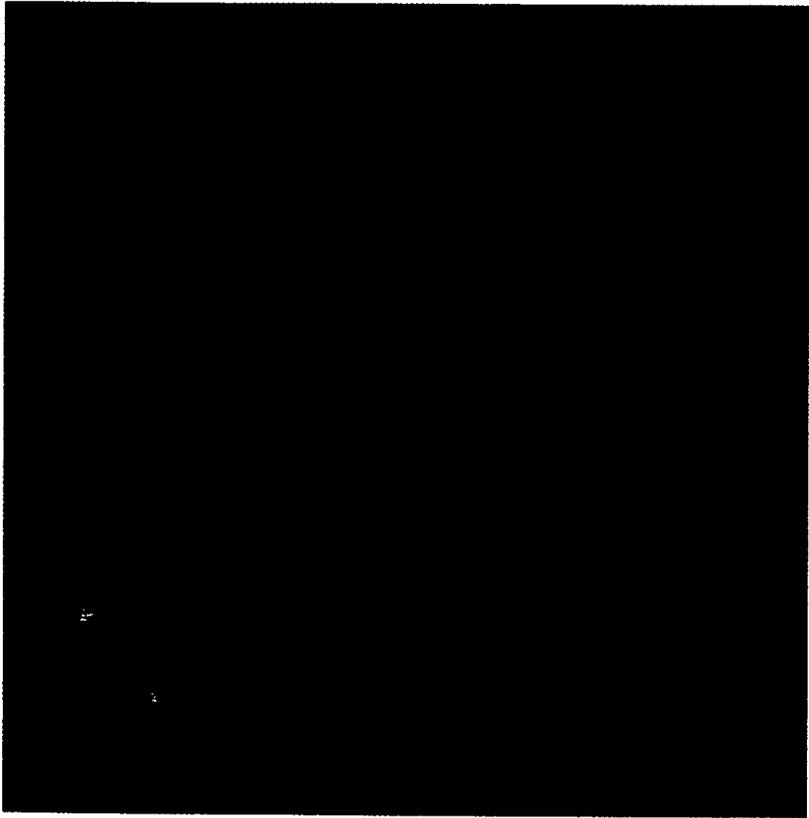
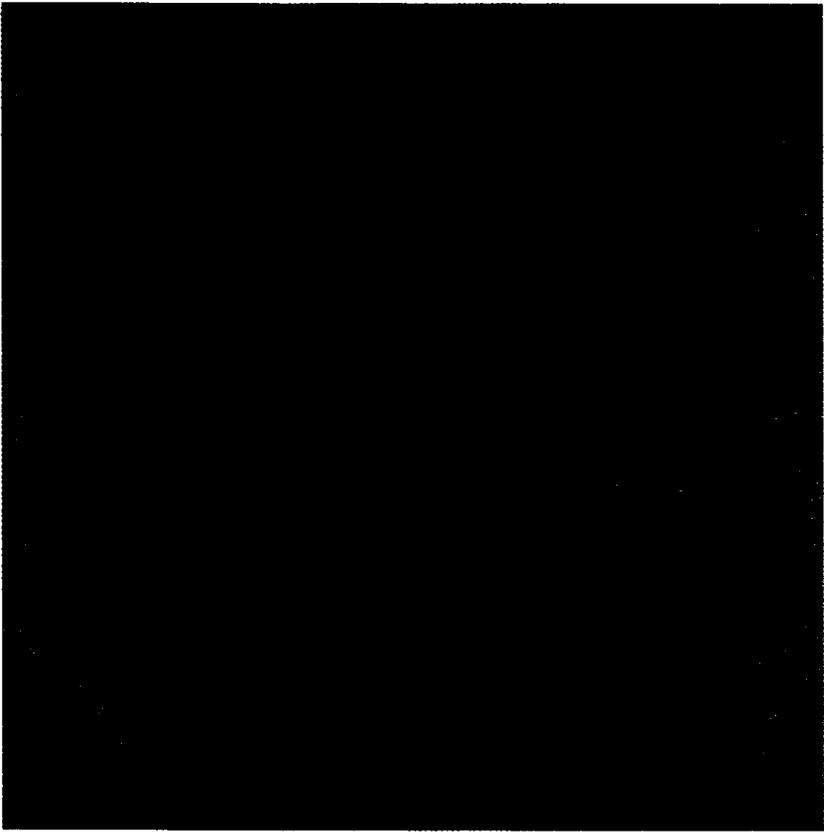


Father Matta El-Meskeen

# The Mystery of the Cross



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The Monastery of St Macarius  
*Scetis*

# **The Mystery of the Cross**

Father Matta El Meskeen  
*The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius the Great*

## **The Mystery of the Cross**

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**The Mystery of the Cross**  
**by Father Matta El Meskeen**

- Incarnation and the Cross.
- The Types of Sufferings Accepted by Christ.
  - \_ The Physical Sufferings Borne by Christ.
  - \_ The Sufferings of the Redemptive death.
- The Sufferings of Christ in relation to our daily life and Eternal Salvation.

# THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

Father Matta El-Meskeen

## Incarnation And The Cross:

**I**N order to get deep into the first roots from which the cross sprang and the sufferings mounted to their climax through redemption, we have to turn straight to incarnation, so that we may link "*The Word became Flesh*" with the "Flesh" broken and bleeding on the cross. Without incarnation, that is to say without the Son of God becoming a human possessing body, soul and spirit just like us, he could not have gone through agonies leading up to atoning death.

Let us contemplate this fact so that we may never lose sight of the living and essential relationship between incarnation and the cross. The Word became flesh that he could effect redemption and perfect it with his body through the blood of his cross.

In order to advance more deeply towards the mystery of redemption in which we see ourselves saved and redeemed by Christ's blood, we have to ascertain our position in regard to the mystery of incarnation since it is the mystery leading up to redemption.

It is well known that incarnation is a perfect union between God and man in the person of Christ. Hence our acceptance of redemption and our union with the person of Christ (by drinking his blood) mean that we have entered into the mystery of union between God and man – i.e. the mystery of Christ. This, in fact, is the return of man to God, the return of the life of communion between man and God which was broken off by Adam.

As to the means whereby we enter into the mystery of union between God and man to restore our relationship with God, this was consummated by Christ through the blood of His cross,

through the agonies of death, through redemption which is the laying down of a soul in place of another soul, so that he might bind us with God by his sufferings and death.

Now whosoever believes in the cross of Christ, i.e. enters into the mystery of redemption, and drinks of Christ's blood for salvation, is identified with Christ, thus entering into the mystery of incarnation, which is the mystery of union between God and man. This is the reality of the reconciliation attained by Christ for man with God through the blood of His cross.

Thus, in brief, incarnation created redemption, and redemption in turn created the union with God which had been severed. Union means conciliation and salvation. In this way the cross is closely and fundamentally linked with incarnation in regard to our salvation. The Son of God became flesh to save us by His sufferings and death in the flesh, or in the words of St. Irenaeus of Lyon "The Son of God became the Son of Man (by incarnation) so that man may become the Son of God (by death on the cross)."

That is the mystery which remained hidden throughout the ages, and now revealed by God to the whole world through the death and resurrection of Christ: that God had the intention right from the beginning to uplift the sinful and fallen creation to the state of adoption, that He might become one with it through the incarnation of His Word through whom He accomplished its redemption from sin and death by death on the cross.

It is thus that the counsel of God was carried out on two stages:

1. God was first revealed to humanity by incarnation which became the crown of creation and its divine perfection in the person of Jesus Christ: "Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh." (I Tim. 3:16).

2. Then the eternal life which was reserved for us by the Father was revealed and endowed to man by the death of Christ on the cross when He arose destroying the power of death, for the resurrection of Christ became the "Firstfruits of those who

slept.”

Consequently, the Holy Ghost – the spirit of life in Christ Jesus – was poured on humanity, and eternal life was thus transmitted to man across incarnation and the cross, then death and resurrection.

Thus appears incarnation as a fundamental stage in the perfection of humanity and its uplifting to the level of its original image honored in God, in the person of Christ Himself.

Then appears redemption through the death of Christ on the cross as a necessary stage for the consummation of the purpose of incarnation (union), necessary from the viewpoint of God, from the love with which God loved the world to raise all humanity from perdition to an everlasting life in the state of adoption.

It is therefore clear that incarnation and redemption are two concomitant, basic and even imperative processes:

Incarnation: union as an effective pattern.

Redemption: the endowment of this union as a gift.

Such is the divine dispensation for the perfection of creation and its uplifting from enmity to a state of adoption, and from separation to union with God through Jesus Christ.

The redemption which Christ accomplished on the cross to restore to us our lost communion and union with God rests upon the theological basis of incarnation, as incarnation is responsible for the gift of redemption, that is the restoration of the union between man and God.

### **The Types of Sufferings Accepted by Christ:**

There are two main types of sufferings accepted by Christ:

1. The sufferings which befell Him through His acceptance of human nature with all its needs and weaknesses. So, the agonies of hunger and thirst, fatigue and grief due to accusations, harassments, clashes, betrayals and insults – all these Christ accepted like any human, for He became like us in everything except sin, “But was in all points tempted like as we are yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

This type of suffering He accepted compulsively out of love, truth and humility, and in compliance with the divine counsel which decreed incarnation. On the other hand there was no compulsion on Him to accept those sufferings considering the wickedness of men and the injustice and disorder of nature. Surely He was able to shun and defeat them, for He Who walked on the water was able to avoid fatigue from travelling on land, and He Who told the Samaritan woman that He could give "living water of which whosoever drinks shall never thirst but the water shall be in him a well of water springing up to everlasting life" – He was able to drink straight from her copper bucket, and He who fed thousands out of five loaves was able to shun hunger, or at least to avoid asking for food to satisfy His hunger, and He who raised Lazarus from the dead was able to destroy or silence the wicked Scribes and Pharisees who lay in wait for Him, slighted Him and uttered insolent and wicked words against Him.

It is therefore evident that He accepted these sufferings of body and soul as a matter of course because He was committed to love, humility and communion in our sufferings in this world "Tempted like us in everything," but not obliged to succumb to the injustice of the wicked and ungodly, the weakness of nature or the tyranny of fate. They are in fact sufferings resulting from communion in our nature which befell Him as a matter of course and which He accepted out of love for us and regard for our weakness and humiliation.

2. The sufferings of redemption, of the cross and of death. These did not befall Him as a matter of course, rather He deliberately took upon Himself "For this hour I have come" and He accepted their necessity from the hand of His Father in accordance with the primordial counsel; "The cup which the Father gave me shall I not drink it" (Jn. 18:11).

The cross was primordially calculated: "For as much as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from

your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these times for you" (I Pet. 1:18-20).

Even the act of crucifixion wherein Christ Himself was slain on the tree was preordained and perfected in the divine dispensation as a complete deed accomplished in the divine counsel waiting only to be manifested in accordance with human reality "Whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

The redemptive sufferings of the cross in fact have two aspects: a hideous earthly aspect represented by the malice, wickedness, enmity, falsehood and calumny of the Jews along with the tyranny and violence of the Gentile justice, and a heavenly aspect overflowing with divine love, goodwill, incredible sacrifice toward the world. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," as well as fairness to truth, consummation of eternal righteousness and deep and all-embracing salvation.

The hideous earthly aspect, however, did not dissuade Christ from meeting the requirements of the heavenly aspect which is full of love, obedience, glory and honor to the Father, together with deep and eternal salvation for man.

It is owing to this heavenly aspect that Christ's acceptance of the ignominy of the cross which included all sorts of humiliation is deemed a glorious triumph of the divine love, the glory of God in heaven and the salvation of man on earth.

The cross was therefore the way of humility, nay the deliberate humiliation which carried Christ to the height of victory and divine glory, and along with Him the new creation – millions of redeemed human beings whom He raised to the same glory and victory and whom He led into the eternal life in the communion of the Father and the everlasting joy.

Let us now compare and contrast the natural sufferings, the sufferings of daily life which came to Him as a matter of course by virtue of His incarnation and assumption of the shape of

servant, and the sufferings which He deliberately assumed and preordained before the foundation of the world as sufferings of redemption, one of the great ends of incarnation, a stage in the perfection of creation by divine glory.

<p><b>THE PHYSICAL SUFFERINGS BORNE BY CHRIST</b></p>	<p><b>THE SUFFERINGS OF THE REDEMPTIVE DEATH ACCOMPLISHED BY CHRIST ON THE CROSS</b></p>
<p>Include: Hunger, thirst, grief, false accusations, lying, calumny, expulsion, treachery, insult, insolence.</p> <p>1. The sufferings of natural communion with men through daily life.</p> <p>a. The sufferings caused by the condescension of divine love toward men (hunger, fatigue, oppression and insult).</p> <p>b. Sufferings befitting the form of the servant alone "I serve among you as a servant." – sufferings of servants in appearance, quite normal and borne by a normal person.</p> <p>c. Sufferings appropriate to the life of incarnation on earth.</p> <p>d. Sufferings not penal in their</p>	<p>Include:</p> <p>A. Scourging, hitting on the head, nails, crown of thorns, thirst, bleeding and death.</p> <p>B. Forsaking by the Father, the curse of the cross, the bearing of sins.</p> <p>1. Supernatural sufferings: sufferings of death for the transformation and renewal of human life in its entirety:</p> <p>a. The sufferings of the obedience of divine love to the Father.</p> <p>b. Sufferings befitting the only Son alone essentially divine, deep, extremely mystical, unique in their kind and surpassing the power and comprehension of man.</p> <p>c. Sufferings which terminated the mission of incarnation on earth and exhausted its content.</p> <p>d. Penal sufferings involving</p>

divine content, but communion not involving death.

e. Sufferings meant to prove the truth of the incarnation as a human reality.

f. Natural sufferings on a normal body subject to the laws of nature and the traditions of man.

Natural sufferings, the natural acceptance of which was an easy introduction to the sufferings of the cross emphasizing that they are real pains.

death: a most hideous punishment in its divine content (curse).

e. Sufferings meant to fulfill the purpose of incarnation, expounding its reason, encompassing and polarising its meaning.

f. The condemnation of an entirely innocent, holy and superhuman person to meet the requirements of a superhuman justice.

Sufferings which in their human reality are the maximum to be borne by a man with a human body, but in the divine reality are not within human ability, for they are the sufferings of atonement and redemption, necessitating absolute holiness and righteousness.

Hence, the sufferings of the cross and the redeeming death by no means belong to the type of daily natural sufferings; they exceed the agonies of body or soul and strike deep into the mystery of the unfathomable divine love—in the Father and the Son—extending in their influence across creation and time to unfathomable depths.

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**THE SUFFERINGS OF  
CHRIST IN RELATION  
TO OUR DAILY LIFE AND  
ETERNAL SALVATION**

The Sufferings of Communion	The Sufferings of Redemption
<p>God shared with humanity its natural daily sufferings which were formerly deemed a curse because of sin. By the incarnation of His Son the sufferings of our daily life are no longer regarded as a curse or penalty. The toil and sweat for our bread with which Adam was punished was shared by the Word of God in person. He divested Himself of His glory and endured all sufferings and trials like us in order to remove the curse from our effort, toil, sweat and pain, and transform them into a communion of love with God in Christ, changing the whole life so that its end might be an inheritance with God in Christ. "Wherefore in all things it behoves Him to be made like unto His brethren that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted He is able to succour</p>	<p>Here the sufferings borne by Christ even unto death (death being the height of pain) are a propitiation for redemption, hence they are superhuman sufferings. They are levelled straight at sin: not merely for the forgiveness of sin, not merely for conciliation with God, but for the eradication of sin itself from its roots and for the rescue from the power of sin and the tyranny of death. That is the exact meaning of redemption "Through the blood of His cross." (Col.1:20).</p> <p>These are not mere sufferings but sufferings for death, and the triumph which was won over sin, death and Satan was not won merely by enduring sufferings but by accepting death so that the resurrection might be accomplished. Death is a basic atonement act, but it is not the end in itself. It is death for resurrection. Resurrection is here linked to death, and the redemption is the cross and the resurrection together. Whosoever accepts the death of Christ on the</p>

them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:17,18).

"That they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (II Cor. 5:15).

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31).

But how? Christ did not merely polarise the daily natural sufferings when He carried them to the redeeming death for the removal of sin and the annihilation of its power, but He transmitted the whole of life to His own credit. Henceforth we toil and suffer for the sake of God in love for and communion with Him. Because sin brought about Adam's separation from God and his entry into the curse of the sufferings of daily life "Cursed be the earth for thy sake" but because Christ annihilated the power of sin which is the cause of the curse by His atonement on the cross, He took off the element of curse pervading the sufferings and daily troubles which were the penalty of life.

Thus toil and pain for every man who lives in the redemption and the cross is a sharing of life with Christ Who accepted the curse of death in Himself and

cross accepts resurrection and acquires redemption. Therefore by virtue of resurrection the death of Christ became a victory over death. Hence the belief in Christ's death on the cross is not only for the mere acceptance of forgiveness or reconciliation with the Father, nor for the attainment of acquittal or justification, but also for the acceptance of victory over death and the power of sin through accepting resurrection as an eternal life, a new life, a new creation in the Holy Spirit.

ended separation from God.

We no longer live for ourselves and consequently no longer suffer for ourselves, because the Son of God died on our behalf to restore us to life with God, and He suffered on our behalf to remove the curse from pain that it may no longer be regarded as a chastisement but a communion in the sufferings of Christ.

Hence the daily sufferings have become for all the redeemed the communion of love, a fuel that daily enkindles the heart with divine love so that we do not suffer alone, nor for ourselves but to come nearer to God and to grow in love for Him and in full life in Him.

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### **CONCLUSION:**

The Action of the Power of Christ's Death on the Cross in Human Nature:

The immediate result of Adam's acceptance of the curse of death owing to his transgression of God's commandment was man's loss of the life-giving relationship which linked him to life with God. Both the soul and the body lost the intimacy and bond which attached them to God and became susceptible to disintegration and disruption, and consequently to infirmity and separation – that is death and corruption. But God created man to be incorruptible. So that corruption here is casual and not in the very nature of his beautiful creation, "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). It is rather the manifestation of death. Here death falls on the flesh, for the soul does not die. Therefore there remained hope for man. And the death of

Christ fulfilled this hope, the hope of the conquest of death by the payment of the wages of sin. The flesh rose from the dead "His soul came and united with His body" (The Coptic Liturgy) and Christ became "the Firstfruits of them that slept," that is to say He gave them all the hope and even the power of resurrection – the resurrection of body and soul in the communion of the Holy Spirit through union with Christ Who is the resurrection and the life. Thus the death of Christ on the cross has itself become the power to annihilate death and impart the force of resurrection.

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