

Harbor for Our Hope, On Acquiring Peace Amidst Suffering

by St Ignatius Brianchaninov

Sorrows

When over the gloomy and deep abyss of grief, sorrows suddenly open before us, carry on up on the wings of faith! Do not be moved by disbelieving waves of human thoughts. Walk boldly over them with the courageous steps of your faith and under your feet they will turn from soft, moist waves into solid marble or granite plates. Furthermore, timidity and doubt do not suit you. As you look upon the powerful winds there is one who calls upon you to walk among the sorrowful seas that separate you from your brethren: It is the Lord Himself. This calling is also a blessed election! Christ marks "His own" with the seal of suffering. He found your soul useful for Himself and that is why He marks it with his seal! And the small flock stands out, as part of Christ, from among other people; Christ's flock holds in its hands the sign of being chosen by Christ, the cup of Christ. On their shoulders there is a banner: the Cross of Christ. Far, far were they flung from the children of the world!

The measureless crowd, with noise and in strange rapture, chase after temporary comforts and pleasures. Time, in their sight, has been transformed into eternity! They spend their careless lives, succeeding only at things that decay. Forgotten by God they do not attract the antagonism of the devil, because they are pleasing the devil and are a part of him. Christ's chalice opens the way for the spiritual mind that is the spiritual state. Those who enter and take the Communion meal of comfort become dead to the world, senseless to temporary tribulations and deprivations. They begin their earthly pilgrimage, so to speak, carried in the air above everything on the wings of faith. The fetters of the mind pull us toward the earth, the country of torment; being on the earth we cannot help but be exposed to torments. As is written in the Scripture, "For in the abundance of wisdom there is abundance of knowledge. And he who increaseth knowledge will increase suffering" (Eccl 1:18). Faith lifts us from the earth, frees us of the shackles of sorrows, raises us up to Heaven, and leads us to spiritual comfort. Those who enter this peace rest in cool comfort, taking delight on luxuriously covers, precious resting places within visions of God.

Here is an irreconcilable war, there is an endless battle, a bloody struggle between the Israelites and foreign nations. Among the foreigners who stand against Israel are the giants, the sons of Anak, sorrows that bring us fear, paralysis, and despair. The spy of Israel that is intelligence proclaims to her soul and forces: "The land through which we went as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are of great stature" (Num 13:32). Exactly! Reasoning, based on a common course of things, thoughts substantially and only human in origin brings "And there we saw the giants; and we seemed like grasshoppers to them, but so we actually were" (Num 13:33). But the true Israelite is faithful to God, is guided by faith in God; he is equipped with complete armor.

"I will pursue mine enemies, and overtake them, neither will I turn back, until they are dead. I will smite them, and they shall not be able to stand; they shall fall under my feet. For Thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle; Thou hast crushed under me them that rose up against me. Thou hast made mine enemies also to turn their backs upon me, and thou hast utterly destroyed them that hated me. They cried, but there was none to save them; even unto the Lord, and He did not hear them. I will grind them down as the dust before the face of the wind; I will trample them as mud in the streets" (Ps 17:38-43). Not endorsed in this war are the many and subtle reflections, which the mind tries to force, enamored of itself, on its own powers, relying on the quantity and reach of its own knowledge, resisting the crowds of pressing strangers that are foreign thoughts. "The children of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows" announces the Prophet—"turned back in the day of battle" (Ps 77:9). Human reason cannot resist the thick

legions of foreign thoughts! They will mislead, producing resentment and confusion in the mind!—Then victory is on their side!

For certain success in the invisible battle with the lords of the air, with evil spirits and dark forces one needs armor, given to us by faith and by the power of Christ. “Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25). The reasonings and teachings of faith are strange and terrifying to the earthly mind; but no sooner shall man see in his own experience, glimpse with his own inner sensations, the power of faith, then he will instantly and happily submit to its lead. He will be as one who has received a priceless mentor and turns away with contempt from the human wisdom that has been rejected by God.

Here are the weapons that the words of Christ’s teaching give to the servant of Christ for battle with the sons of Anak^[Descendants of a race of giants who inhabited part of the Promised Land. See Numbers 13]: the battle against dark thoughts and feelings of sadness that confront the soul in images of fearsome giants ready to wipe out and swallow it:

First, “Glory to God for everything.”

Second, “Lord! I surrender to Thy Holy Will! May your Holy Will be done.”

Third, “Lord! Thank You for everything, that You were pleased to send me.”

Fourth, “According to my deeds I will accept all; remember me, Lord, in Your Kingdom.”

These brief words, borrowed, as you see, from the Scriptures, were used by holy monks with excellent success against foreign thoughts of despondency. The Fathers never reasoned with the dark thoughts that appeared to them; no, no sooner did the foreign strange thought appear than they grabbed their wonderful weapon and shoved it in the face, right in the jaw of the stranger! That is why they were so strong, trampled all their enemies, became warriors of faith, and by means of faith became instruments of grace and accomplished supernatural feats.

At the appearance of depressing thoughts or longings in your heart, immediately grasp your weapon, and from the bottom of your heart, speak one of the above phrases; enunciate it quietly, without haste, without heat, with complete attention, loud enough for your hearing alone. Speak this phrase until the foreign thought disappears completely and your heart senses the arrival of the Divine Grace to assist you. This Grace arrives in your soul as a sweet, comforting peace, the peace of the Lord, and for no other reason whatsoever. In time the strange thoughts will again approach you, but grab your armor once more, as the ingenious leader, Caesar, told his troops, aim directly for the face of the enemy: no other part of the body is so damaging as a strike in the face. Do not wonder at the strangeness or apparent uselessness of the weapon of David! [A reference to the catapult used by David, when as a shepherd boy he defeated the giant Goliath. See 1 Sam 17.] Use it in your own battle and you will see the sign! These weapons, the mace and the stone, will win more battles than all the collected, deep-thinking judgments and rare theories of theologians or of any wordsmiths, whether German, Spanish, English, or American! Using these weapons in your work will gradually transform you from the path of reason to the path of faith, and this will lead you into the immense and marvelous country of the spirit. There one is served manna as the hidden meal; to this land Christ admits only the victorious. You are brought into this unseen warfare in order to become a victor, and in this state you inherit spiritual treasure. All this Christ gives you, having loved you, clearly counting you among “his own.”

Gazing from the very shore of this dark, deep sea of sorrows, upon the distance, the azure of the sea merges with the azure of the heavens. Looking at this dark, boundless expanse that frightens

faith, I listen to the angry murmur of the waves, to their monotonous and unfeeling splashing, but do not indulge in melancholy or permit this sad sea of thoughts in my soul. There is more peril here! It is easier to drown here in this interior sea than in the exterior sea of sorrows.

You are on the seashore of sorrows in order to swim to the opposite shore of joys: the other shore is there, even though it is invisible to the eyes of human reason. That shore is an inner heaven, replete with spiritual delights. Those who reach this forget, in their ecstasy of pleasure, all the grief endured by them in the sea. Step fearlessly into the light ferry of faith and be carried as by wings over the wet hillocks! Faster than you imagine, you shall be carried over the sea, transported into paradise. But between spiritual paradise and earthly carnal and ordinary life, where most people reside, there lies the vast sea that is the cross and the crucifixion. There is no other way to heaven! Whomever God wants to elevate into heaven, that person first begins his path to heaven through the cross. "The sign of God's election, wrote one ascetic Father, is when endless sorrows encompass a man." Let us endure the sorrows that mortify our life on earth, in order to become worthy of receiving the living God, with the help of the real, fully perceptible aid of the Spirit. Let us endure the decay of this world in order to acquire the Spirit! Surrender to God completely! Cast yourself into the saving abyss of faith, as if into a sea from a high rock!

Leave people behind as instruments of Providence! They are blind instruments themselves who have no power, no movement! "You could have no power at all against Me," said the Lord to Pilate, "unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). While Pilate, led by the judgment of men, admitted and argued (and with this, without any doubt each person agreed with him in his judgment) that he has power to crucify the Prisoner standing before him, as well as the power to release Him. Do not be concerned about any contacts with people, nor trouble yourself with explanations before them! Such interactions and explanations only disrupt the peace in your heart and will not bring any benefit. Frail people are like flowers that appear for a short time on the surface of the earth! You dream a lot about yourself, you ascribe a lot to yourself, but you are all frail people! You honor yourself with self-rule, and nonetheless you do not cease to be instruments, blind instruments, tools of others! And you cannot see and thus do not know that you are instruments! You are autocratic, that is so! "You cannot but take bribes for your own deeds." But by virtue of the infinite wisdom of God these independent ones are actors without the least bit of power, without any autonomy. "Jesus of Nazareth," said the Apostle Peter to the Jews, "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23). "I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:17-18). In matters concerning God's Providence, people are blind. That is why the Lord did not count people worthy, apparently bereft of all power, to have any answers! That is why He called up the chalice, prepared by evil-wishers, demons, and bodiless spirits, as the cup given by God himself.

Please accept these lines as an echo of the soul, which participates with you and has sincere compassion in your sorrows and earnestly wishes you receive consolation from our Lord.

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