

On August 9, 1945, when an atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki, Japan, the Urakami Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and the worshippers inside were obliterated, only a burn-scarred wooden statue of Mary whose face had taken on a profoundly sorrowful expression was found intact. Fr. Oshida, a Japanese Dominican priest, took the statue to his mountain retreat and placed her on a meditation path in the woods for the benefit of all who came to pray and meditate with him. He inscribed a brief poem there with the statue of Mary in the mountain forest which reads: "We shall stand, without disappearing, in the infinite sea of tears."

I thought of this image and poem when I contemplated the suffering of Our Lady of Sorrows at the foot of the cross watching her sinless Son, conceived in her virgin womb of the Holy Spirit, as he was derided and dying, suffer on an instrument of torture and death. We who have experienced deep sorrow in our own lives can only imagine what she was feeling as she was suffering with her holy child on the cross just above her, where as the medieval hymn "Stabat Mater" describes so poignantly, the sorrowful mother was standing.

The traditional seven sorrows of the sorrowful mother cited in the form of the devotion dating back to at least the thirteenth century are the prophecy of Simeon that a sword would pierce her soul, fulfilled as she watched her beloved son die; the flight from the murderous King Herod into Egypt with Joseph and the baby Jesus; losing the 12 year old Jesus during a festival in Jerusalem and finally finding him in the temple; meeting Jesus carrying his cross on his way of sorrow to Golgotha; standing with John at the foot of the cross watching Jesus suffer and die in the crucifixion; receiving his lifeless and brutalized body from the cross; and placing her divine son in the tomb Joseph of Arimathea provided.

In all of the sorrows of Mary pictured in scripture and tradition, we notice that her sorrow is evoked not by her own suffering but the suffering of Jesus. The sorrowful mother is the compassionate mother. She feels with our Lord, she feels his pain, his struggle to breathe, his misery. Though she has reason to grieve for herself, to complain, to question his fate, Mary's sorrow is for the suffering of her son. She knows who he is, she carried him for nine months in her womb, the first tabernacle of the Real Presence, she fed him at her breast, led him by the hand when he was learning to walk, she watched Joseph teach him carpentry, she was there

when he turned water into wine at her request for the sake of a newly married couple, and all the while she knew he was the Lord, and that her baby that she loved was God and man. And now she watches him wearing a crown of thorns and dying on a cross of pain.

We can only be inspired by Mary's undying devotion amidst her sorrows, learn compassion from her—to feel for others more than to pity ourselves as we go through the vagaries of life in this fallen world. To care for ourselves—yes—but not to make our own suffering the center of the world to blind us to the suffering of others. To never harden our hearts toward the pain others experience.

And to do what we can whatever the sorrow or struggle we may face, to do what we can and trust God for the rest, for Mary in her sorrows never despaired, and in the infinite sea of tears, she stood before the cross and loved her son, and trusted in God, and lived to see him risen.

And in the divine mystery of God's grace, like John, we also stand with her at the foot of the cross, like John, we have also become her children, taking her into our lives as the mother of our Savior, the compassionate mother of the Body of Christ into whom we are baptized; and so we ask our mother for her prayers, and we share in our mother's sorrows and her joys as she shares in ours, for we know, like John, that her divine Son who became one with humanity in her womb died for us, and that he truly is the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ.