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He suffered and endured great pain for us, . . .
He was wounded and crushed because of our sins;
by taking our punishment, he made us completely well.
He was painfully abused, but he did not complain.
He was silent like a lamb being led to the butcher,
as quiet as a sheep having its wool cut off.
He was condemned to death without a fair trial.
Who could have imagined what would happen to him?
Although he is innocent,
he will take the punishment for the sins of others,
so that many of them will no longer be guilty.
The LORD will reward him
with honor and power for sacrificing his life.
Others thought he was a sinner,
but he suffered for our sins and asked God to forgive us.

—Isaiah 53:4–5, 7–8, 11–12
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WEEK 28

Jesus Surrenders to His Passion

Guide: Agony and Love

The photo this week was taken in the Jesuit chapel at the University of Central America in San Salvador, El Salvador. This is the Jesuit community whose members, along with their housekeeper and her daughter, were brutally assassinated. This photo is one of the stations of the cross in the chapel showing, in powerful drawings, the images of the unjust torture of innocents.

Throughout the centuries, the account of the passion of Jesus has been told to help believers understand the mystery of suffering and how Jesus' surrender defeats the power of sin and death.

At this point in our retreat, we are prepared to contemplate, in detail, the passion of Jesus. Our desire is to enter into the Gospel story and to be there with Jesus. We want to be touched by the power of this drama. The one we love and want so much to be with invites us into his story to experience his suffering, with him. The depth of our compassion for him leads to an even deeper intimacy.

Take each part of the story and experience its meaning. The garden struggle to surrender; the betrayal, the arrest, and abandonment by his disciples; the trials; the mockery, the crowning with thorns, the beating, and the way of the cross are scenes we want to become very much a part of our consciousness this week.

Throughout each day this week, we want to know the profound love of Jesus for us. As we go through the ordinary struggles of living, and face the most difficult challenges of our lives, we want to experience Jesus' solidarity with us. As we contemplate the meaning of his passion, we want to see his solidarity with all who have, are, and ever will suffer.

Use the resources this week to get started in prayer and to enter these reflections more deeply. You might consider praying the Stations of the Cross, a powerful centuries-old devotion, as a resource for our journey this week and next week. You will find an online version of the stations of the cross at the Creighton Online ministries Web site. Go to the online retreat home page and click on the "Stations of the Cross" link on the left.

Every night, let us give thanks for the graces we receive by walking through our lives more conscious of the passionate love of Jesus for us.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

We begin this week by reading Matthew's account of Jesus' passion (Matthew 26:14–27:66). It is perhaps the most familiar story in our imagination, but we can refresh it by letting it become the conscious focus of our week. This will give us vivid images that we can reflect on in the context of our everyday life this week.

The Last Supper (Matthew 26:14–30)

We reflected on the Last Supper last week. Now we focus on it as the beginning of the Passion. When we read about Judas's betrayal and Peter's promise never to deny him, we have fruit for our week. We can say, with Peter, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never say I don't know you." Throughout the week, I can become more highly conscious of times I hide how much I know Jesus.

The Garden (Matthew 26:36–56)

The garden is a powerful image of Jesus, asking his disciples to pray with him. Instead, they fall asleep. All week, in small in-between times, we can remind ourselves how much Jesus wants us to be *with him* in prayer about his Passion this week. It is important for us to see Jesus *agonize* in prayer over his surrender. His words can come to us throughout the week, to shape the way we make our choices to open ourselves to God's desires in us. To pause here to be with Jesus, as he is kissed by a betraying friend and as all his friends just run away, is a powerful communion with the one we love in a moment of deep abandonment.

The Religious Trial (Matthew 26:57–68)

Caiaphas and the religious leaders can't find an opening in their hearts for Jesus. How painful it must be for Jesus to face his failure to win over the very people he came to save. To mock his self-revelation as the indictment for his execution must have stung bitterly. All week I can focus on this part of his Passion as I observe how little he is accepted in so much of our culture today.

Judas and Peter (Matthew 26:69–27:10)

They both betray him. Judas can't perceive how God could forgive him, and he kills himself. How much Jesus must have grieved Judas's despair. Peter becomes transformed by his denial. He is able to be used by Jesus to lead in great humility and gratitude.

The Roman Trial (Matthew 27:11–21)

The Roman trial is full of ironies. He will not have his death sentence commuted. Pilate will wash his hands of the whole affair, and he will say he finds him innocent but then have him whipped and executed. We can place this trial in our memory this week as we are filled with a sense of sadness, outrage, gratitude for what Jesus went through, for me.

The Way to Crucifixion (Matthew 27:22–66)

We have provided an online prayer experience, “The Stations of the Cross,” to help with this part of the contemplation on the Passion. Perhaps we can do one or two stations a day, to enter more deeply into the journey of Jesus into intimacy with our suffering. The grace we desire is to experience a growing compassion with Jesus and to know most intimately that this is all an experience of his love, *for me*.

Pray with Psalm 22. The Gospel writers must have found it to be a powerful source of inspiration about how Jesus must have used this prayer in his struggle and trust in God.

Begin each day by focusing on a part of this mystery, perhaps just for a few moments while doing something very routine (putting on slippers, while showering, while dressing). Throughout the day, recall these reflections in the background of our consciousness. Notice the mystery of the Passion of Jesus revealed in the smallest of things I see and experience in my day. End each day expressing some gratitude for what I am learning and feeling in Jesus’ Passion this week.

For the Journey: Handing Over

We move with Jesus this week from the upper room where he washed the feet of his friends to the garden of obedience where he washes the earth with his bloodlike sweat. He is separated from all his support except that of his Father, with whom he now speaks face-to-face.

This week of watching moves us into a silence and a humility that all this is for me and us. The stage is cleared of all other characters and we join the apostles off to the side. They have seen him pray alone before and so drift off to wait for the next exciting installment of his and their lives. We in our turn are accustomed to this scene and we know what is coming soon. For just some time, we watch this holy man in spiritual combat. There is the inner conflict in him between his human desires to live into many exciting installments and his divinity, which has been molded to conform to his Father’s will through the installments of his entire life.

There was the garden of disobedience, where this drama began. God’s love for us was interrupted by our indulgent love for our selves. There was a tree from which we were not to eat. Now we watch Jesus, the new Adam, kneeling in a garden, fully aware of the good and evil around him, preparing to eat of the fruit of the tree that will bring us all back to life. Evil is about to have its way in one last grand hurrah. It is silent now and he senses a presence of the Divine Good, which he has felt before, saying that he is the Beloved. He is the Good, who will soon struggle with the forces of disobedience.

The noise of these forces intrudes on our silent watchings. Abandonment and denial become central characters, but keep your eyes on his. He receives the challenges to his goodness from the soldiers and his friend Judas. We hear him respond, “I am He.” He begins his final hours of fidelity to who he knows himself to be, the Anointed, the Lamb now being led to the sacrifice.

These prayer times for us are quiet and sensitive. We make ourselves available to be impressed by the God-made-man struggling to reveal to us his faithful love and the importance of our fidelity to who we are. We also are the anointed led into our own struggles against the forces of evil. Watch his eyes as he looks for Peter during and after Peter’s own encounter with his failures. Jesus is not a puppet playing out some charade

of life. Listen to the noise around his silence and watch his physical responses to the abuse and violence.

With Ignatius, we have watched the Creator hand over all creation to us. In our prayer we have seen God handing over to us personal gifts and mercies of all kinds. This week we watch Jesus handing over his body and all for us. He also hands on to us the invitations to stay faithful in our own struggles between our good and our evil. Watch his eyes as they meet your own.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

I came to prayer this week to be with you in your suffering, but the first thing I saw was the photo for the week. I enlarged it and stared at it. What does this have to do with you? I want to pray about and for you, not some people I don't even know. But wait. Maybe my agenda isn't the same as yours.

I look at the photo of the drawing from El Salvador that has been made into one of the stations of the cross. I see the whip marks across the backs of this man and woman. The horrible way their bleeding hands are tied up behind them. I can see only their backs, but I realize that the woman has no top on. She must feel so vulnerable, exposed, and helpless, as her persecutors attempt to take away every shred of dignity she has.

And I stay with you in the Gospel, as you are whipped, beaten, mocked, and stripped. I watch as you struggle to surrender yourself to God. I see the fear and vulnerability you must feel, even as you give your total trust to God. You never stop praying as they batter you with questions, treat you with derision and condescension. You are with your Father in spirit, because that is the only way you know to continue this journey God sent you on.

This week I will walk with you and spend time with you in these events. I will again join you at the Last Supper and

in the garden. I can't bear to watch as you are in the trial and I feel so helpless watching you, my dear friend, be pushed into this inevitable death. I know these next hours will be so terrible and I want to be there for you, but I find myself hiding with Peter, pretending I don't know you, afraid for myself.

It is only as I do the stations of the cross that I can take each step with you in this. I can walk with you each little way as I see how you have done all of this for me. How can I thank you for all you have done? I will carry those images with me throughout this week.

Then I look again at the photo of those two people. I want to be with you in your familiar story this week. But I keep thinking of the people in this photo. What happened to them? How have they been tortured and abused in your name? Your story is old and familiar to me. Theirs is not. And yet they are very real too. Where are those very real people today, Jesus? Are they still alive? Where are you, Jesus?

I look at the photo again and now I see you. How could I have missed you before? You've been there all along, standing with them as they are whipped, tied, naked, and vulnerable. You are next to them in their pain and suffering, sharing it with them, there for them, bringing them closer to God.

Thank you, Jesus, for being with them in a way I cannot. Thank you for being with me. Please, let me be with you in each moment of your agony this week, as I try to recognize you in the daily sufferings of my life.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 50:1-7

Psalms 22

Philippians 2:6-11

Matthew 26:14-27:66