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Assistant Professor of Systematic and Spiritual Theology
Director, Licentiate in Sacred Theology Program (STL)
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

“The manuscript tradition of *The Life of Christ (Vita Christi)* is extremely complex, and Walsh, while basing his translation on the edition, has gone beyond in providing critical apparatus that will be of significant use to scholars, as well as making the text available for students and all interested in the theology, spirituality, and religious life of the later Middle Ages. His introduction expertly places Ludolph’s work in the textual tradition and is itself a contribution to scholarship. Simply put, this is an amazing achievement!”

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"This translation will hopefully stimulate further work on the late medieval manuscript tradition of the text, its circulation, use and readership. It will prove an invaluable tool for scholars researching the late medieval engagement with the humanity of Christ, while simultaneously catering for general readers and religious practitioners interested in learning more about a traditional and influential imaginative meditational practice."

— Christiana Whitehead
Professor of Middle English Literature
University of Warwick

CISTERCIAN STUDIES SERIES: TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY-FOUR

The Life of Jesus Christ

PART TWO

Volume 2, Chapters 58–89

Ludolph of Saxony, Carthusian

Translated by
Milton T. Walsh

Comprehensive Index to Parts One and Two



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CHAPTER 58

Introduction to Meditation on the Passion

We turn now to the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, which a Christian should call to mind at least seven times a day. Bernard says that the recollection of the Lord's passion must be the Christian's daily lesson: nothing so inflames the human heart as frequent and devout meditation on the Savior's humanity and passion. Whoever wishes to glory in the cross and passion of the Lord ought to persevere in contemplating those events that above all others are deserving of a place in our hearts.† In this way, just as Jesus retains forever the scars and wounds in his body, never to be removed, so by our remembrance we will keep his passion always in our hearts.

Whoever ponders the mysteries of the passion and all that surrounds them with an attentive gaze will surely be led to a new state by this meditation. Many unexpected insights will come to one who meditates with deep devotion on the passion: these reflections produce fresh compassion, love, and consolations—and consequently a new state of sweetness that will be both a presage of and a participation in glory.*

There was once a certain devout nun who was so greatly moved by Christ's passion that she could not even look at a crucifix without fainting and being brought completely out of herself. It is important for everyone to set aside all exterior cares and anxieties,

*R 1

*William of
Saint-Thierry,
Ad fratres
1.10.3.1;
PL 184:327
‡*Massa*

**Massa*

to be present devoutly at each and every moment of the Lord's passion, and to persevere in this with an attentive mind and watchful heart.*

*this sent MVC 74
approx;
CM 153:252

Be aware that if you wish to make progress in this science, which is above all others, you must abstain strictly from all delicacies, taking only the food and drink that are necessary. Eating and drinking late at night impede prayer and contemplation and should be avoided as much as possible. Similarly, refrain from enjoying a comfortable bed and fine clothing, making use instead of what is most coarse and common, so as to be mortified in clothing as well as in food. Avoid idle chatter and vain and foolish distractions, since it is not fitting for one who wishes to enter into the sufferings of Christ to indulge in inane talk, frivolous amusements, and soft living. It will be necessary at times that in your mind you seem to be really present at the passion, and so you must speak, live, and grieve as though the Lord were suffering before your very eyes. To the extent that you make him present to yourself in thought, the Lord will make himself present to you in spirit, hearing your prayers and accepting your deeds.*

*Massa; Septem
diei approx;
PL 94:561D
‡R 2

‡In a word, if you wish to make the sufferings and passion of Christ your soul's sweet feast you must distance yourself resolutely from all sensual delights and consolations, relishing instead those things that are bitter and hard. Worldly comforts do not aid contemplation of the Lord's passion; on the contrary, they war against it. Nor can flesh and spirit be gratified at the same time, for, as the apostle says, *these are contrary one to another*.* Bernard teaches, "The cross of Christ and self-indulgence are enemies.* How can those who are avid for pleasure avoid being charged with persecuting Christ? They are guilty of his death, if not as the actual agents, at least as those who despise so great a thing."* And again,

*Gal 5:17

*Massa

*Sermo 6.3 in
Quad approx;
PL 183:183D;
SB 4:379

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom the world is crucified

to me, and I to the world.* Not only dead, Paul says, but crucified to the world, that is, by the most shameful kind of death. I to it, and it to me. All those things the world loves are crosses to me: sensual delights, riches, honors, empty human praise. And those things the world despises as crosses are the very things to which I am attached, to which I cling, and which I embrace with deep affection. Nor would it be remiss to understand the apostle's words in this way: the world was crucified to him by his estimation of it, and he was crucified to the world by his compassion, for he considered the world to be crucified by the bonds of sin, and he was crucified to it by the bond of compassion.*

*Gal 6:14

And because, as Pope Gregory observes, the soul cannot live without delight—either in what is most base or in what is most sublime—many, alas! who do not find divine solace immediately pursue the alternative, and for this reason they justly forfeit for themselves that which is divine.* Thus Bernard says,

*Sermo in
Quad 6.3;
PL 183:184CD;
SB 4:379

Your soul *refuses to be comforted** in other things if you desire to find your delight in the thought of God.* Those who pursue other consolations and do not refuse the comfort of passing and perishable joys surely deprive themselves of that grace of heavenly consolation given to those who strive to ask with devotion, seek with determination, and knock with persistence. Undoubtedly, only one who asks receives, only one who seeks finds, and only one who knocks has the door opened.*

*Mor 18.IX.16;
PL 76:46D;
CL 143A:896
*Ps 76:3

*Habitat 4.2;
PL 183:194B;
SB 4:398

*Gaufrid 67;
PL 184:472D

If you want divine consolations, do not pursue earthly ones, for, as the same Bernard says, "Divine solace is a delicate thing that is not given to those who receive any others. Do not seek it by a twofold path or by divided affections, or you will make yourself unworthy to receive it."* Again he writes, "Those who seek a heavenly blessing with wavering affections or double intention, thinking to have an alternative if they do not get it, will be considered unworthy to

*Gaufrid 66;
PL 184:472A

*Gaufrid 66;
PL 184:472B

*Wis 16:20

receive it.”* The manna ceased once the children of Israel began to eat the produce of the land. By manna, *which had in it all that is delicious, and the sweetness of every taste*,* is signified the sweetness of Jesus, which is no longer given to the children of Israel (religious) when they eat the produce of the land (worldly comforts).

*Tr John 32.2;
PL 35:1643;
CL 36:301

*Ps 76:4

*De statu
interioris 2.1.35;
PL 196:1143B
‡Mor 30.X.39;
PL 76:546C;
CL 143B:1519

†R 3

According to Augustine, “There is no place for inward delights to dwell when the mind is captivated by outward delights.”* Therefore the devout person should say with the prophet, *my soul refused to be comforted* by external things, and so also what follows: *I remembered God, and was delighted*.* Richard of St. Victor writes, “The intellect is never drawn perfectly to the contemplation of heavenly realities unless the flesh is firmly restricted to what is necessary.”* And Gregory teaches, “As soon as we cut off some worldly pleasure, we shall immediately find spiritual delight.”†

*Ps 125:5; *Massa*

*Rom 8:17

*John 6:54

*De diligendo 4.11;
PL 182:981A;
SB 3:128

*Exp Ps 118.8;
PL 15:1299A

*Suffer with Jesus our Savior, holding in your heart the recollection of his passion and his wounds, confident that if you are a companion in his anguish now, you will share in his consolation hereafter. He who longed to reveal his resurrection to Magdalen when she sought him sorrowing will not refuse his glory to those who devoutly mourn him now. The prophet said it well: *They that sow in tears shall reap in joy*.* And the apostle, too: *If we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him*.* Bernard teaches, “*He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has everlasting life*,”* that is to say, if you suffer with me you will reign with me.”* But we must suffer with Christ in body as well as in heart. According to Ambrose, “Let those who enter into the passion not do so carelessly; rather, let them fill up in their flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, as Paul did.”*

The Lord himself speaks to us in the Song of Songs:

Put me as a seal upon your heart, loving me with all your affection, and by your love becoming like me;

*as a seal upon your arm, showing your love for me by your actions, and by your deeds coming to resemble me, as wax receives the form by which it is stamped. And it is right that you should love me in both these ways, because love is strong as death, and I have loved you so thoroughly that I gave my life for you; and jealousy as hard as hell,** and I could no more be deterred by the enemy from the work of your salvation than the damned could lessen their torments.

* Song 8:6

Truly, it is *through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God.** The crucifix placed above the roodscreen separating the nave and the choir symbolizes this truth well: those who wish to enter the choir must pass under the cross, for only by way of the cross may one pass from the church militant to the church triumphant.

* Acts 14:21

God is very pleased when we treasure the memory of Christ's passion and wounds in our heart. There is a story told of a holy hermit who begged God to show him the best of all possible ways to serve him. He beheld a naked man, shivering with cold and carrying a large cross, who said in answer to his plea, "I am Jesus Christ. You have asked what the greatest service is that someone can offer me, and I will tell you: it is to help me carry my cross by bearing my passion and wounds in your heart." And having said this, he vanished. Let us joyfully help Jesus to carry his cross: in our hearts, by devout remembrance and compassion; in our speech, by frequent and fervent thanksgiving; in our bodies, by penance and mortification. In this way we can express gratitude to our Savior by thoughts, words, and deeds.¹

*There was once an elderly anchoress who ardently wished to know the number of Christ's wounds. On

* R 4

¹ This paragraph is adapted from the beginning of the *De septem stationibus passionis*, a work appended to the SHS in most manuscripts (Lutz 88).

one occasion, while praying earnestly for this intention with tears, she heard a heavenly voice say, "There were in my body 5,490 wounds. If you wish to honor them, pray fifteen Our Fathers and fifteen Hail Marys each day in remembrance of my passion; thus, in the course of a year you will have honored each one of them." The devotion that was revealed to this recluse is very pleasing to God.* (The enumeration is complete in leap years, but in other years the total is 5,475 prayers.) The number of wounds is spoken of in a poem:

**Massa*

In a dream an old woman heard a sweet voice from
heaven:
"Multiply the number five hundred by eleven;
Then subtract ten, and when you awake
You can number the wounds Christ took for your
sake."

This was evidently the number of wounds made by the lashes of the whip and the piercings by the crown of thorns.²

The constituent numbers of the total also refer to the mystery of the passion. One thousand, being the highest of numbers, suggests the greatest perfection possible in human life, and Christ in his passion certainly attained this. Five refers to the five senses, in all of which Christ suffered so that he might restore our five senses, which had been corrupted by sin. One hundred also signifies perfection, multiplied by four,

² Ludolph does not identify the woman. The custom of reciting fifteen Our Fathers and Hail Marys, together with other prayers, was popular in the Middle Ages, and it was often associated with a revelation received by Saint Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373) while praying before a crucifix in the Roman basilica of Saint Paul. However, Saint Mechtilde (1240–1298) and Saint Gertrude (1256–1302) also encouraged devotion to the many wounds of Christ.

which stands for the fullness of the New Testament revealed in the four gospels, that testament established in the blood of Christ. Ninety, which is made by multiplying nine by ten, suggests the nine choirs of angels, into whose company we are brought by observing the Ten Commandments, which we can only do thanks to the merits of Christ's passion.*

**Jordan, Sermo 189*

Benefits of Meditating on the Passion

Many and great blessings are lavished upon a person who frequently contemplates the passion of Christ with deliberation. If you wish to gain knowledge of Christ's divinity, it will come through the human nature he assumed; his human suffering is the royal road that brings you to higher truths. You can attain some understanding of the lofty grandeur, the exceptional sweetness of Christ's Godhead, only by means of the feelings of faith and love stirred up by devout reflection on the bitter anguish he endured in his humanity. If this is ignored, you will find that the higher you ascend, the greater will be your fall. This is the path we must walk, this is the gate that gives entrance to goal we desire.*

***R 5**

**Suso 1.2.2 approx*

**Suso 1.3.4*

The venerable and grace-giving passion is a veritable storehouse of spiritual riches. Where is our glory to be found, where the hope and joy of our hearts? In truth, it is in Christ, our one true and supreme good, and in the most precious treasure of his passion. Therefore, it is delightful constantly to cherish this priceless treasure in our hearts, to speak of it often, and to be always occupied with it in mind and body. Would that the thought of the passion would never grow cold in our hearts, but be fanned into flame over and over again!*

**Suso 1.14.1*

How blessed were you, Saint Paul, most eminent light of the churches, who, being raised up to the

*2 Cor 12:4

*1 Cor 2:2

*Suso 1.14.2

*Suso 1.14.4

*1 Cor 8:1

*Suso 1.14.5

hidden recesses of the Godhead, gazed with eyes more pure than those of others upon the abyss of divine glory *and heard secret words which it is not granted to man to utter.** And yet, plunging down into the depths, you ardently proclaimed praise for the passion as the treasure cherished in your innermost heart: *For I judged not myself to know anything among you, but Jesus Christ, and him crucified.** O, what pleasing words, sweeter than honey and honeycomb, worthy to be pondered continuously by devout minds, words that produce a stream of grace giving poor sinners the joys of salvation in abundance!*

For the rest, whoever wishes to receive the great blessings of eternal salvation, to ascend to the dwelling place of all virtues, to obtain knowledge and wisdom, to stand squarely between prosperity and adversity, to walk the secure way, to taste both the bitter gall of Christ's passion and the refreshing drink of his consolation—such people ought to bear Jesus Christ crucified constantly in their hearts.* Frequent recollection of the passion makes the unlearned brilliant and turns ignorant and uninstructed folk into doctors, masters not of the *knowledge that puffs up, but of the charity which edifies.** It is, as it were, the Book of Life that contains within it all that is needful for salvation, and it imparts knowledge with great sweetness. Happy are those who read it attentively, for they will progress in contempt of the world and love of God, and receive an increase of graces and virtues.*

Contemplation of Christ's passion should not be undertaken in a perfunctory or hurried way, especially when time and opportunity are not wanting; rather, we should give this subject serious and careful attention, our inmost hearts moved to tearful compassion. If this sweet wood is not chewed with the teeth of loving discernment, its savor, great though it is, will not be tasted. Even if you are unable to weep with the weeping Savior or grieve with him in his sorrows, you

can at least rejoice and give thanks for the many benefits freely given you by his passion. If you are moved neither by compassion nor by gratitude, but find that you experience nothing but dryness, even in your hardness of heart persevere in pondering the saving passion for God's glory, and entrust to his merciful hands what you are not able to obtain of yourself.*

* Suso 1.14.7

Strike the rock twice, that is, stir up your devotion by both interior recollection and bodily exertion: stretch out your hands or raise your eyes to the crucifix, strike your breast or make devout genuflections, even take the discipline, continuing these or other pious exercises until a generous stream of tears flows forth. Thus you can drink the waters of devotion in your mind, and your body, having been trained in this way, can more fittingly receive grace.*

* Suso 1.14.8

Frequent meditation on Christ's passion offers many consolations, but chiefly these four: it repels the world's three chief vices, it alleviates tribulation and penance, it banishes inordinate sadness, and it lessens the sufferings of purgatory.†

* R 6

* the concupiscence
of the flesh, the
concupiscence of the
eyes, and the pride of
life, 1 John 2:16

The first consolation appears in the Lamentations of Jeremiah: *Remember my poverty and transgression, the wormwood and the gall.*† Therefore, the concupiscence of the flesh ought to be crucified by the bitter sufferings of the Crucified, the concupiscence of the eyes by his poverty, and the pride of life by his humiliation. The luxurious and the boastful are enemies of the cross because on it Jesus endured disgrace, as are the greedy because on it he experienced utter poverty.

‡ Suso 1.14.9 approx

† Lam 3:19

As to the second, it is well known that we make bland food tasty by adding salt or seasoning. Similarly, tribulation and penance are unpalatable in themselves, but when seasoned with the salt of Christ's passion they lose their bitterness and become sweet and savory.

Regarding the third, the banishing of inordinate sadness from the soul, I will relate a story that illustrates this better than mere words. There was a man

who, early in his conversion, was afflicted by a depression so severe and deadly that he could neither read nor pray nor do any good work. Sitting in his cell one day, weighed down by profound grief and sorrow, he heard a heavenly voice in his head saying, "Why are you sitting idle, withering away within yourself? Get up and make yourself reflect devoutly on my passion; by its bitterness you will conquer your sorrow." When he heard this, that brother got up and began to meditate on the passion, and this medicine cured him immediately. He persevered in the exercise and was never troubled again by such sadness of soul.*

* *Suso 1.14.9*

Now I will indicate the fourth consolation this most useful meditation offers: it lessens sufferings in purgatory. The Author of nature allows nothing disordered in his creation and so leaves no wrong unpunished by divine justice: either here or hereafter recompense must be made. How long, do you think, will be the period of purification in purgatory for some sinner who has not made even the thousandth part of just reparation for any mortal sin, and yet must *repay the last penny*?* O, how weary the waiting of this miserable soul! O, how long and bitter the torment, how enduring and weighty the anguish, a penance more painful than any earthly affliction! But see how quickly and easily satisfaction can be made by one who knows how to profit from the treasury of the immaculate Lamb's passion. Because of the Sufferer's boundless charity, the dignity of his Person, and the enormity of his pains, this most precious treasure is not only sufficient, but superabundant. Let such people apply this treasure to themselves and devoutly draw on the merits and satisfaction of Christ's passion, and even if their sentence were a thousand years, they would be released from purgatory in no time.*

* *Matt 5:26*

* *Suso 1.14.10*

Therefore, if you want to commute the long and grueling chastisement of purgatory to a brief and light temporal punishment, strive to do as follows. First of

all, with contrite heart, afflicted spirit, and heartfelt weeping dwell on the enormity of your sins; admit your iniquity to the Lord, bitterly reflecting on what you have done, whom you have offended, and what you deserve: "Lord, my sins are more numerous than the sands of the sea."*

*Prayer of
Manasseh 9;
Suso 1.14.12

Then cast yourself down humbly before the eternal Judge, esteeming yourself to be base and, like the publican, unworthy to raise your eyes to heaven or speak with unclean lips God's glorious Name. Recognize that you are nothing more than an earthworm and that all your deeds done in reparation for your sins count for nothing. Standing at his door, poor and miserable, beg for mercy from the Judge, pleading with contrite heart, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son: make me as one of your hired servants.** Next, with deep affection praise and magnify the merits of Christ's passion, realizing that *with the Lord there is mercy, and with him plentiful redemption.** Even one tiny drop of that most precious blood streaming from the wounds that covered his body would have sufficed to redeem the whole world, but he chose to shed it copiously to prove his great love and overflowing compassion, and to console all wretched sinners.*

*Luke 15:18-19

*Ps 129:7

*Suso 1.14.13
approx

Finally, combining deep humility and fervent affection, reach out for the hand of your Helper and take hold of the merits of the most merciful Redeemer, *nothing wavering*,* because he, the overflowing Fountain of mercy, is more anxious to give than you are to ask.*

*Jas 1:6

*Suso 1.14.12-14

O gracious and wonderful Word, which should be welcomed by wretched sinners with great rejoicing, for in the passion of Christ we can wash away our sins, blot out their punishment, receive grace, and merit eternal glory!*

*Suso 1.14.15

Keep the thought of Christ's passion continually in your heart and call it to mind whenever you suffer adversity or tribulation, identifying with it as best you

can. And when, according to God's secret counsels, you find yourself bereft of interior peace and left in desolation, strive to be truly crucified by seeking no comfort other than patient endurance. Turn from yourself to your heavenly Father and cast your burdens on him. Provided that this interior desolation is united to God's will, you can be sure that the more intense your inner affliction, the more you will resemble the Crucified, and as such you will be loved by his Father. This is in fact the way the most valiant soldiers in Christ's army are tested. Entrust all your misfortunes and sorrows to the mercy of God, and keep yourself free in every circumstance, like someone who is about to leave this world. Like a *dove in the clefts of the rock*,* seek refuge in the wounded side of Jesus Christ; there you will always find generous remission of your sins, grace in abundance, and sure protection against all that threatens you.*

*Song 2:14

**Suso* 1.15.16

Christ's Passion in Summary

*R 7

*Let us proceed to the narrative we are setting before ourselves. However much you may have attended to what has gone before in this *Life of Christ*, all the more must you now concentrate your faculties on the events that manifest most completely his love, that love that should utterly consume our hearts. Not only the crucifixion and death of the Lord, but all the torments that preceded them excite compassion, bitter grieving, and amazement.*

**Massa*; MVC 74;
CM 153:252–53

What took place between that hour in the dead of the night when our Lord, the God blessed above all, was hunted down with torches and weapons and apprehended like a thief, and the sixth hour, when he was nailed to the cross? Was it not one continuous saga of sorrow, humiliation and torment?*

**Massa*; MVC 74;
CM 153:253

See and hear him, never given a moment's rest, in constant struggle and conflict: one betrays him, an-

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