

## THE AGONY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

### A. The word:

Agony comes from the Latin word *agonia*, a struggle; particularly, in profane literature, the physical struggle of athletes in the arena, or the mental excitement previous to the conflict.

The word is used only once in Sacred Scripture (Lk 22:43) to designate the anguish of Our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemani. The incident is narrated also in St. Matthew (26:36-46) and St. Mark (14:32-42).

### B. The place:

*Gethsemani* is an association of two Hebrew words (*gat*: press, and *semen*: oil). It is the place in which Jesus Christ suffered His Agony and was taken prisoner by the Jews.

Saint Mark (14:32) calls it *chorion*, an “estate”; St. John (18:1) speaks of it as *kepos*, an “orchard”. In the East, a field shaded by numerous fruit trees and surrounded by a wall of loose stone or a quickset hedge forms the *el bostan*, the garden.

The name “oil-press” is sufficient indication that it was planted especially with olive trees. According to the Greek version and others, St. Mathew (26:36) designates Gethsemani by a term equivalent to that used by St. Mark. The Vulgate renders *chorion* by the word *villa*, to refer to the estate. St. Luke (22:39) refers to it as “*the Mount of Olives*”, and St. John (18:1) speaks of it as being “*over the brook Cedron*”. According to St. Mark, the Savior was in the habit of retiring to this place; and St. John writes, “*Judas also, who betrayed Him, knew the place; because Jesus had often resorted thither together with his disciples*”.

### C. The Gospel explained by the Fathers of the Church:

“*And He came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed Him. And when He was at the place, he said unto them, ‘Pray that ye enter not into temptation’. And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and knelt down, and prayed, saying, ‘Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done’. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly: and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when He rose up from prayer, and was come to His disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow. And said unto them, ‘Why sleep ye? Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation,’*” (Lk 22:39-46).

#### - Pray that ye enter not into temptation:

St Bede explains that “*It is indeed impossible for the soul of man not to be tempted. Therefore he says not, Pray that ye be not tempted, but, Pray that ye enter not into temptation, that is, that the temptation do not at last overcome you*”.

“*But not to do good by words only, He went forward a little and prayed; as it follows, And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast. You will everywhere find Him praying apart, to teach you that with a devout mind and quiet heart we should speak with the most high God. He did not betake Himself to prayer, as if He was in want of another’s help, who is the Almighty power of the Father, but that we may learn not to slumber in temptation, but rather to be instant in prayer,*” teaches St Cyril of Alexandria.

“*He also alone prays for all, who was to suffer alone for all, signifying that His prayer is as far distant from ours as His Passion*” (St. Bede).

#### - Humility in prayer:

“*But what means His bending of knees? of which it is said, And He knelt, and prayed,*” asked St Gregory of Nyssa. “*It is the way of men to pray to their superiors with their faces on the ground, testifying by the action that the greater of the two are those who are asked. Now it is plain that human nature contains nothing worthy of God’s imitation. Accordingly the tokens of respect which we evince to one another, confessing ourselves to be inferior to our neighbors, we have transferred to the humiliation of the Incomparable Nature. And thus He who bore our sicknesses and interceded for us, bent His knee*

*in prayer, by reason of the man which He assumed, giving us an example, that we ought not to exalt ourselves at the time of prayer, but in all things be conformed to humility; for God resists the proud, but giveth grace to the humble,”* (James 4:6, 1 Pet. 5:5).

*“When He says, ‘Let this cup pass from me’, it is not, ‘let it not come to Me’, for unless it had come it could not pass away. It was therefore when He perceived it already present that He began to be afflicted and sorrowful, and as it was close at hand, He says, ‘Let this cup pass’; for as that which has passed can neither be said not to have come nor yet to remain, so also the Savior asks first that the temptation slightly assailing Him may pass away. And this is the not entering into temptation which He counsels to pray for. But the most perfect way of avoiding temptation is manifested, when He says, ‘Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done’. For God is not a tempter to evil, but He wishes to grant us good things above what we either desire or understand. Therefore He seeks that the perfect will of His Father which He Himself had known, should dispose of the event, which is the same will as His own, as respects the Divine nature. But He shrinks to fulfil the human will, which He calls His own, and which is inferior to His Father’s will,”* (St. Dionysius of Alexandria, de Martyr. c. 7).

- His prayer reveals His nature:

*“Now every art is set forth by the words and works of him who teaches it. Because then our Lord had come to teach no ordinary virtue, therefore He speaks and does the same things. And so having in words commanded to pray, lest they enter into temptation, He does the same likewise in work, saying, ‘Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me’. He says not the words, ‘If thou wilt’, as if ignorant whether it was pleasing to the Father. For such knowledge was not more difficult than the knowledge of His Father’s substance, which He alone clearly knew. Nor says He this, as refusing His Passion. For He who rebuked a disciple, who wished to prevent His Passion, (Mt 16:23.) so as even after many commendations, to call him Satan, how should He be unwilling to be crucified? Consider then why it was so said. How great a thing was it to bear that the unspeakable God, who passes all understanding, was content to enter the virgin’s womb, to suck her milk, and to undergo everything human. Since then that was almost incredible which was about to happen, He sent first indeed Prophets to announce it, afterwards He Himself comes clothed in the flesh, so that you could not suppose Him to be a phantom. He permits His flesh to endure all natural infirmities, to hunger, to thirst, to sleep, to labor, to be afflicted, to be tormented; on this account likewise He refuses not death, that He might manifest thereby His true humanity,”* (St. John Chrysostom).

*“For here,”* explains St. Athanasius (de Incarn. et cont. Ar.), *“He manifests a double will. One indeed human, which is of the flesh, the other divine. For our human nature, because of the weakness of the flesh, refuses the Passion, but His divine will eagerly embrace it, for that it was not possible that He should be held of death.”*

St. Bede mentions that *“in another place we read that Angels came and ministered unto Him. In testimony then of each nature, Angels are said both to have ministered to Him and comforted Him. For the Creator needed not the protection of His creature, but being made man as for our sakes He is sad, so for our sakes He is comforted.”*

- His infinite prayer leads Him to total sacrifice:

The *“sweat of blood”* must be understood literally; and medical testimony has been alleged in evidence of the fact that such a phenomenon (*haematodrosis*), though rare and abnormal, is neither impossible nor preternatural.

However, St. Bede warns us: *“Let no one ascribe this sweat to natural weakness, but rather let Him derive therefrom a declaration to us, that He was now obtaining the accomplishment of His prayer, namely, that He might purge by His blood the faith of His disciples, still convicted of human frailty.”* By disciples we should understand His disciples till the end of times.

- Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation:

*“Our Lord proves by what comes after, that He prayed for His disciples whom He exhorts by watching and prayer to be partakers of His prayer; for it follows, And He said unto them, Why sleep ye? Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation,”* (St. Bede). And we all are His disciples, who *“should not be overcome by temptation, for not to be led into temptation is not to be overwhelmed by it,”* (Theophylact).