

TOWARDS EASTER / 1

The suffering of Jesus, crowned with thorns

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The text published below is taken from the Commentary of Father Cornelio a Lapide (1567-1637) on the Passion according to the Gospel of Saint Matthew. The commentaries of this Jesuit and exegete, aimed above all at offering support to preachers, are also precious because they contain numerous quotations from the Fathers of the Church and other subsequent exegetes.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the pretorium. “Then” refers not to the preceding words, “delivered Him to be crucified,” but to the scourging. The soldiers scourged Jesus, and crowned Him at the same time with thorns.

Gathered unto Him the whole band, to adorn Him, by way of insult, with the royal insignia, as pretending to be King of the Jews. “For soldiers are a cruel race,” says S. Chrysostom, “and take pleasure in insulting.” It was the Prætorian Band, quartered in the castle of Antonia.

And they stripped Him, and put on Him a scarlet robe. “Making jest of Him,” says Origen. This stripping can be referred either to His scourging or to His crowning with thorns. It is consequently uncertain whether He resumed His garments after He had been scourged, and was stripped of them again and arrayed in the scarlet robe, or whether the scarlet robe was put upon His naked body immediately after His scourging.

Symbolically: “In the scarlet robe,” says S. Jerome, “the Lord bears the blood-stained works of the Gentiles.” “He bare,” says S. Athanasius, “in the scarlet garment a resemblance to the blood wherewith the earth had been polluted.” And Origen, “The Lord, by taking on Him the scarlet robe, took on Himself the blood, that is, the sins of the world, which are bloody and red as scarlet; for the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

Anagogically: S. Gregory, “For what is purple save blood, and the endurance of sufferings, manifested for love of the Kingdom?” And again, “The Lord made His empurpled ascent in a triumphal litter, because we attain to the Kingdom that is within through tribulation and blood.”

S. Mark and S. John call this a purple garment (not scarlet). S. Ambrose says they were two different garments, and that He was arrayed in both. Gretser gives authorities for there being only one garment, called indifferently purple or scarlet. Perhaps the garment had been twice dyed,—with the murex and the coccus; and garments thus dyed are of a more lasting colour. Now this was a kingly dress, and thus did they make

Christ a King in mockery. This robe or chlamys was shorter and tighter than the pallium, and soldiers wore it over their armour. The one then used seems to have been the worn-out dress of some Roman soldier, but being purple, was of the imperial colour.

Symbolically: S. Cyril says, "By the purple garment is signified the sovereignty over the whole world, which Christ was about to receive." So, too, Origen, S. Augustine, and others. But this He obtained for Himself by fighting and shedding His blood. African and other soldiers anciently wore red garments.

And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon His head. This was done both for insult and for torture. It was done, too, by Jewish insolence, and not by Pilate's order, though he permitted it. These thorns were those of the sea-rush or of the blackthorn; perhaps the two sorts were twisted together. S. Helena brought two of them to Rome and placed them in the Church of Santa Croce. S. Bridget (Rev. 1. 10) says that the crown was placed a second time on His head when on the Cross; that it came down to the middle of His forehead, and that such streams of blood flowed from the wounds as to run down to His eyes and ears, and even to His beard; that He seemed one mass of blood. He could not indeed see His Mother till the blood had been squeezed out of His eyelids. All pictures represent Him as crucified with the crown of thorns, as Origen and Tertullian distinctly assert He was. The torture of all this was very great, for the thorns were very sharp, and also driven into the head and brain. The literal object of this was to insult and torture Christ for pretending to be King of the Jews.

But Origen gives its mystical meaning, "In this crown the Lord took on Himself the thorns of our sins woven together on His head." For S. Hilary says "the sting of sin is in the thorns of which Christ's victorious crown is woven." "Let me ask you," says Tertullian, "what crown did Jesus wear for both sexes? Of thorns, methinks, and briars, as a figure of those sins which the earth of our flesh hath brought forth unto us, but which the virtue of the Cross hath taken away, crushing, (as it did) all the stings of death by the sufferings of the head of the Lord. For besides the figurative meaning there is assuredly the contumely, disgrace, and dishonour, and, blended with them, the cruelty, which thus both defiled and wounded His brows."

Tropologically: The thorns teach us to wound and subdue the flesh with fastings, haircloths, and disciplines. "For it is not fitting that the members of a thorn-crowned Head should be delicate," says S. Bernard. And Tertullian (*ut supra*) teaches us that Christians out of reverence for Christ's crown of thorns, did not wear crowns of flowers, as the heathen did. Christ offered S. Catharine of Sienna two crowns,—one of jewels, the other of thorns,—on condition that if she chose one of them in this life she should wear

the other in the next. She seized at once the crown of thorns from His hand, and fixed it so firmly on her head that she felt pain for many days, and therefore she received a jewelled crown in Heaven. S. Agapitus, a youth of only fifteen, when live coals were put on his head, said exultingly, "It is a small matter that that head which is to be crowned in heaven should be burned on earth," &c. Think, then, when enduring any kind of pain, that Christ is giving thee one of the thorns from His crown.

Anagogically: S. Ambrose (in Luke XXII) says, "This crown placed on His head shows that triumphant glory should be won for God from sinners of this world, as if from the thorns of this life."