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Flight into Egypt: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

The Church's Magisterium,
saints and Christian poets
reflect on the flight of Joseph,
Mary and the Child into Egypt.

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VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

Now when the wise men had
worshipped the Lord, they return not
by the same route by which they had
come . . . to baffle Herod's design,
who, under the cloak of homage, was

planning a wicked plot against the Infant Jesus. Hence when his crafty hopes were overthrown, the king's wrath rose to a greater fury. For reckoning up the time which the wise men had indicated, he poured out his cruel rage on all the men-children of Bethlehem, and in a general massacre of the whole of that city slew the infants, who thus passed to their eternal glory, thinking that, if every single babe was slain there, Christ too would be slain. But He Who was postponing the shedding of His blood for the world's redemption till another time, was carried and brought into Egypt by his parents' aid, and thus sought the ancient cradle of the Hebrew race, and in the power of a greater providence dispensing the princely office of the true Joseph, in that He, the Bread of Life and the Food of Reason that came down from heaven, removed that worse than all famines under which the Egyptians'

minds were labouring, the lack of truth. Nor without that sojourn would the symbolism of that One Victim have been complete; for there first by the slaying of the lamb was fore-shadowed the health-bringing sign of the Cross and the Lord's Passover.

*from Pope St. Leo the Great, Homily 3
on the Epiphany (5th c.)*

Suffering is a part of our human existence. Suffering stems partly from our finitude, and partly from the mass of sin which has accumulated over the course of history, and continues to grow unabated today. Certainly we must do whatever we can to reduce suffering: to avoid as far as possible the suffering of the innocent; to soothe pain; to give assistance in overcoming mental suffering. These are obligations both in justice and in love, and they are included among

the fundamental requirements of the Christian life and every truly human life.

Great progress has been made in the battle against physical pain; yet the sufferings of the innocent and mental suffering have, if anything, increased in recent decades. Indeed, we must do all we can to overcome suffering, but to banish it from the world altogether is not in our power. This is simply because we are unable to shake off our finitude and because none of us is capable of eliminating the power of evil, of sin which, as we plainly see, is a constant source of suffering. Only God is able to do this: only a God who personally enters history by making himself man and suffering within history. We know that this God exists, and hence that this power to "take away the sin of the world" (*Jn* 1:29) is present in the world.

from Benedict XVI, "Spe Salvi," no. 36

VOICE OF THE SAINTS

Why are you afraid, Herod, when you hear of the birth of a king? He does not come to drive you out, but to conquer the devil. But because you do not understand this you are disturbed and in a rage, and to destroy one child whom you seek, you show your cruelty in the death of so many children.

You are not restrained by the love of weeping mothers or fathers mourning the deaths of their sons, nor by the cries and sobs of the children. You destroy those who are tiny in body because fear is destroying your heart. You imagine that if you accomplish your desire you can prolong your own life, though you are seeking to kill Life himself.

Yet your throne is threatened by the source of grace, so small, yet so great, who is lying in the manger. He is using you, all unaware of it, to work out his own purposes freeing souls from captivity to the devil. He has taken up the sons of the enemy into the ranks of God's adopted children.

The children die for Christ, though they do not know it. The parents mourn for the death of martyrs. The child makes of those as yet unable to speak fit witnesses to himself. See the kind of kingdom that is his, coming as he did in order to be this kind of king. See how the deliverer is already working deliverance, the saviour already working salvation.

But you, Herod, do not know this and are disturbed and furious. While you vent your fury against the child, you are already paying him homage, and do not know it.

How great a gift of grace is here! To what merits of their own do the children owe this kind of victory? They cannot speak, yet they bear witness to Christ. They cannot use their limbs to engage in battle, yet already they bear off the palm of victory.

*from St. Quodvultdeus (5th c.),
Sermon 2 on the Creed*

In this [death] is represented the precious death (Ps. 115:5) of all Christ's martyrs. The fact that little children were killed signifies that through the merit of humility one comes to the glory of martyrdom, and that unless one has turned and become as a little child (Mt. 18:3), one will not be able to give one's life for Christ.

Nor should we mourn their death as much as we should rejoice about their attaining the palm of righteousness. Rachel must groan

over each of them when, through torments, they are driven away from this life—that is, the Church which begot [them] escorts them with mourning and tears, but when they have been driven out, the heavenly Jerusalem, who is the mother of us all, soon receives them into another life by ministers of gladness who are ready at hand, and introduces them into the joy of the Lord to be crowned as his forever.

from St. Bede the Venerable (7th-8th c.), Homily on the Holy Innocents

"We have seen his star in the East, and have come to adore him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. This scene is still repeated today. Faced with the greatness of God or with a person who has made up his mind — with a decision both deeply human and profoundly christian — to live up to the demands of his faith,

there are people who find it strange and in their surprise they even get scandalized. It seems they are unable to countenance a way of life which does not fit into their limited earthly horizons. They smirk at the generous actions of those who have heard God's call. They are frightened by such dedication, and in some cases that appear frankly pathological, they do all in their power to thwart the holy determination of those who with complete freedom have given themselves to God.

On some occasions I have witnessed what could be called a general mobilisation against those committed to dedicating their whole lives to the service of God and souls. Some people think that our Lord ought to ask their permission before choosing others for his service. Apparently they believe man is not free to say an unequivocal yes or no to this proposal of Love. To people who

think that way, the supernatural life of each soul is something secondary. They do believe it has to be reckoned with, but only after petty comforts and human selfishness have been accommodated....

Take the case of Herod. He ranked among the powerful of this world and had the opportunity of availing himself of the help of the learned. "And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born." His power and knowledge do not lead him to recognize God. In his hardened heart, power and knowledge are instruments for evil. His futile desire is to annihilate God, and he has only contempt for the life of innocent children.

from St. Josemaria, Christ Is Passing By, no. 33

VOICE OF THE POETS

THEY scarcely waked before they
slept,

They scarcely wept before they
laughed;

They drank indeed death's bitter
draught,

But all its bitterest dregs were kept

And drained by Mothers while they
wept.

From Heaven the speechless Infants
speak:

Weep not (they say), our Mothers
dear,

For swords nor sorrows come not
here.

Now we are strong who were so
weak,

And all is ours we could not seek.

We bloom among the blooming
flowers,

We sing among the singing birds;

Wisdom we have who wanted words:

here morning knows not evening
hours,

All's rainbow here without the
showers.

And softer than our Mother's breast,

And closer than our Mother's arm,

Is here the Love that keeps us warm

And broods above our happy next.

Dear Mothers, come: for Heaven is
best.

by Christina Rossetti (1877)

Holy Innocents Day

Dear Soul, couldst thou become a
child

While yet on earth, meek, undefiled,
Then God Himself were ever near,
And Paradise around thee here.

A child cares nought for gold or
treasure,

Nor fame nor glory yield him
pleasure;

In perfect trust, he asketh not
If rich or poor shall be his lot.

Little he recks of dignity,

Nor prince nor monarch feareth he;

Strange that a child so weak and
small

Is oft the boldest of us all!

He hath not skill to utter lies,

His very soul is in his eyes;
Single his aim in all, and true,
And apt to praise what others do.
No questions dark his spirit vex,
No faithless doubts his soul perplex,
Simply from day to day he lives,
Content with what the present gives.
Scarce can he stand alone, far less
Would roam abroad in loneliness;
Fast clinging to his mother still,
She bears and leads him at her will.
He will not stay to pause and choose,
His father's guidance e'er refuse,
Thinks not of danger, fears no harm,
Wrapt in obedience' holy calm.

For strange concerns he careth
nought;

What others do, although were
wrought

Before his eyes the worse offence,
Stains not his tranquil innocence.

His dearest work, his best delight,
Is, lying in his mother's sight,
To gaze for ever on her face,
And nestle in her fond embrace.

O childhood's innocence! the voice
Of thy deep wisdom is my choice!
Who hath thy lore is truly wise,
And precious in our Father's eyes.

Spirit of childhood! loved of God,
By Jesu's Spirit now bestow'd;

How often have I longed for thee;
O Jesus, form Thyself in me!
And help me to become a child
While yet on earth, meek, undefiled,
That I may find God always near,
And Paradise around me here.

by Gerhardt Tersteegen (1731)

*translated by Catherine Winkworth
(1855)*