

Catholic

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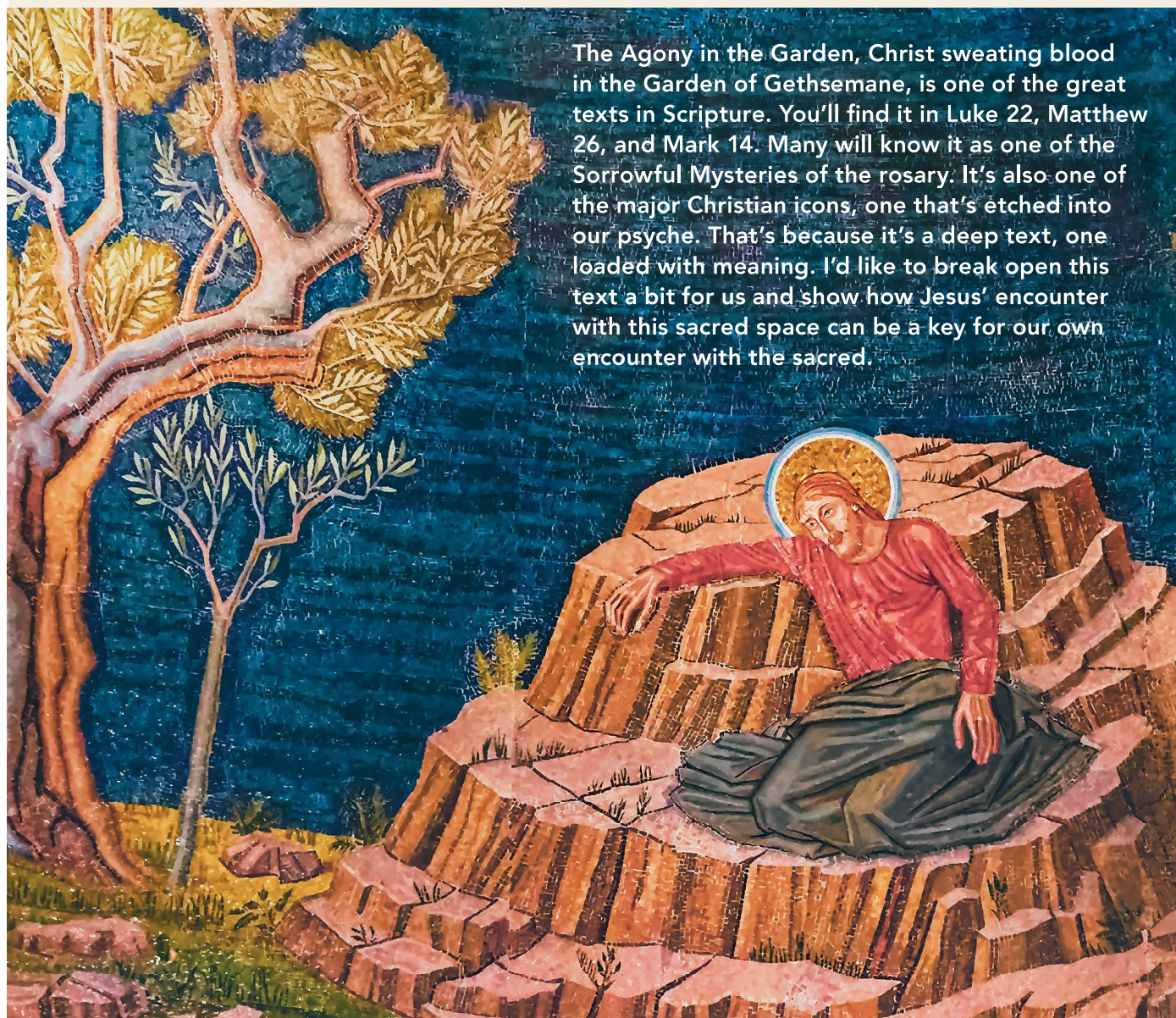
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Agony in the Garden

UNDERSTANDING THE PASSION OF JESUS

RONALD ROLHEISER



The Agony in the Garden, Christ sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, is one of the great texts in Scripture. You'll find it in Luke 22, Matthew 26, and Mark 14. Many will know it as one of the Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary. It's also one of the major Christian icons, one that's etched into our psyche. That's because it's a deep text, one loaded with meaning. I'd like to break open this text a bit for us and show how Jesus' encounter with this sacred space can be a key for our own encounter with the sacred.

In the few hours after the Last Supper, Jesus had to prepare for his death. That's a lot of pressure, the kind that brings life sharply into focus. What would you do if you knew you were in your final hours? How could that type of insight affect the choices you make between now and then? That's what the Agony in the Garden is all about.

In this *Update* we'll look at three major aspects of the scriptural text. First, we'll talk about the passion of Christ, the context for the Agony in the Garden. Then we want to enter with Jesus into the Garden. What is the real drama of the Garden of Gethsemane? Finally, we'll take a look at some of the deeply moving images that are written into this text.

THE MEANING OF AGONY

The word *agony* is not just a pious term from the rosary or other traditions; it's a term from Scripture. In Greek they talk about Christ's *agonia*. We know what agony means in English, but in Greek, at the time of Jesus, it was also a technical term for what athletes did warming up for the Olympic Games. During that warm-up, the Greek athletes would produce a certain sweat that would warm up their muscles and ready them for coming combat. That sweat, that lather, was called their *agonia*.

Luke tells us that Jesus does an *agonia* to get ready for his passion. In essence, Luke is saying, we don't move from day-to-day life to dying on a cross without some preparation. The Agony in the Garden is the warm-up, the readying, the *agonia* for the passion that follows.

But what is the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ? The English word *passion* gives you a false image. In English, *passion* refers to something very deep in terms of feeling love. But although you certainly can have passion and love, you also can have passion and suffering. When we think of Christ's passion, we think of all the suffering that Jesus did. It's more a sense of passivity, or passiveness.

In Jesus' passivity he gives his death for us, unlike during all his active life up until the Agony in

the Garden, when he gives his life for us. We often lump these together and miss the distinction. Christ gave his life and his death for us. We give our lives for each other in our activity; we give our deaths for each other in our passivity.

When blood and water poured out of the crucified Jesus (see John 19:31–37), we see not only a sign of baptism and Eucharist, though clearly that is part of the story. We see also another sign. What are blood and water? Blood is the life principle that flows between us. It makes us alive. Water washes us. So what the evangelist is saying at another level is that Jesus died in such a way that it makes us freer. We're able to live life; life flows more easily and we're able to live cleanly. That is when we are free of guilt.

DRAMA OF THE GARDEN

Do you ever wonder why that drama happens in a garden? It's the Agony in the Garden, it's not the agony in the temple, the agony in the synagogue, or the agony on a mountaintop, or in the boat at sea. In Scripture, where something takes place is always much more than geography. At a deeper level, the geography is spiritual; it's a place in the heart.

Why a garden? Gardens don't appear that often in Scripture, but they're important. In spirituality, gardens have nothing to do with cucumbers, radishes, garlic. Gardens are where lovers go. That's important in getting to the drama of the Agony in the Garden. This is a drama inside of love. That's why the beginning, where Scripture opens up, we're in the Garden of Eden. In the garden you can be naked. There's no shame in the garden.

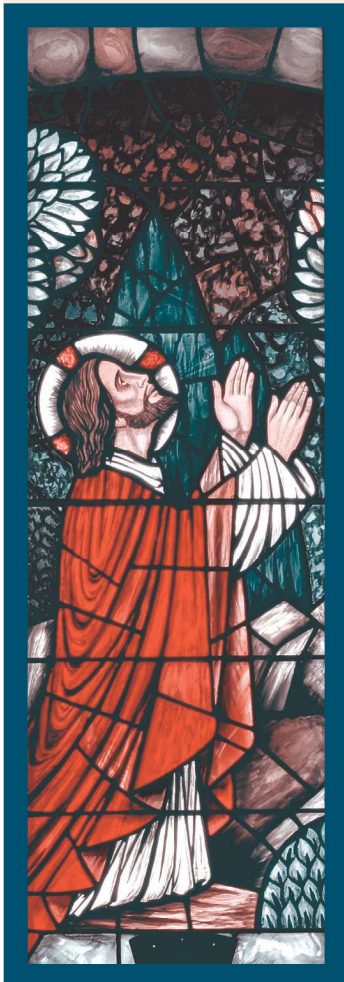
Where does Mary Magdalene, who was the great lover in Scripture, find Jesus on Easter, in the morning? In a garden. Remember the wonderful old gospel hymn that Elvis Presley famously recorded: "I come to the garden alone, and he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we feel when we tarry there...." That's Jesus as a lover, and he calls us into the Garden.

Nothing against Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, but Jesus wasn't a physical athlete. The evangelists don't emphasize the whips, the beatings, the thorns, the blood, the nails. They emphasize he was alone, betrayed, humiliated, hung out to dry. Nobody stood up for him.

When you read Mark's Gospel, Jesus is saying in the Last Supper that he is dreading what's going to happen. He doesn't speak about the ropes and the whips and the chains, he doesn't say, "You know, I'm really going to get beaten up out there." He says, "You're all going to betray me. I'm going to be alone."

"AFTER WITHDRAWING ABOUT A STONE'S THROW FROM THEM AND KNEELING, HE PRAYED, SAYING, 'FATHER, IF YOU ARE WILLING, TAKE THIS CUP AWAY FROM ME; STILL, NOT MY WILL BUT YOURS BE DONE...' HE WAS IN SUCH AGONY AND HE PRAYED SO FERVENTLY THAT HIS SWEAT BECAME LIKE DROPS OF BLOOD FALLING ON THE GROUND."

LUKE 22:41–42, 44



THREE TESTS OF THE GARDEN

I remember a teacher I had in grade school who explained Jesus' sweating blood as a kind of pious moment for a Jesus who knew how everything would turn out. But it's more than that. Sweating blood in the Garden is about the drama inside of love—the drama that's deepest inside of your loneliness. What's happening in the Garden is a test of love. In essence there are really three tests that tie together into one test in the Garden:

1. Lose the resentment

The first test is: Can you give your life over in love without resentment and bitterness? Henri Nouwen says: "The sensitive world is not bound up between those who are bound to duty." You know we have to take care of sick mothers and work inside the Church and take care of kids and take care of parishes and cook the holiday dinner because nobody else is going to do it. All sensitive people are bound to duty—some do it resentfully, others give it over freely. The first part of the major drama in the Garden of Gethsemane is that Jesus has to give himself over to this death, which is hard, which is suffering, which is sacrificial. But he has to do it without resentment. He has to carry the cross and not send the bill.

Jesus was going to die anyway. But his great gift was that he *could* die, he gave his life over without bitterness, without price tag, without anger, without resentment, with complete forgiveness. The resurrection is *all* about forgiveness. Jesus came back and he never challenged anybody with, "Where were you when I needed you?" He came back in pure grace, transforming suffering into deeper compassion.

2. Face humiliation

But tied to that, Jesus has to face a powerful humiliation. We don't get the drama of the crucifixion unless we really enter into this powerful humiliation of Good Friday. Consider what the risen Jesus tells the disciples on Easter in the morning on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24).

Luke says on that morning two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the Church. It was their faith dream but it was also the place of humiliation. And they are walking toward Emmaus, a spa. Today it would be like Las Vegas. The disciples are going for some human consolation and meet Jesus on the road, yet they don't recognize him. Why not? Because they have written him off, because they've seen him humiliated.

Then Jesus says to them: "Wasn't it necessary? Wasn't it necessary that the Christ should so have to suffer and enter into his glory?" What's the necessary connection? Essentially what Jesus is saying to the disciples on the road to Emmaus is that you can't get Easter Sunday if you don't get the humiliation of Good Friday.

What suffering or humiliation does for us, if we get it right, is to give us moral intelligence. You learn it from your own humiliations. I remember a lecturer, James Hillman, who said, think of all the things that have made you deep in your life. In virtually every case, do you know what brought that depth into your life? Some humiliation you wouldn't want to talk about. You know, some powerlessness, whether it was being beat up on the playground, being the girl who was never asked to dance,

having a drug-addicted mother or alcoholic father, being a victim of sexual abuse when you were a child, whatever—powerful sufferings. They have made you deep. They have given you character. We see the same in the lives of many of our saints who suffered. They, like Jesus before them, allowed suffering to bring them to compassion, not to bitterness. That's the test.

3. Sacrifice for the greater good

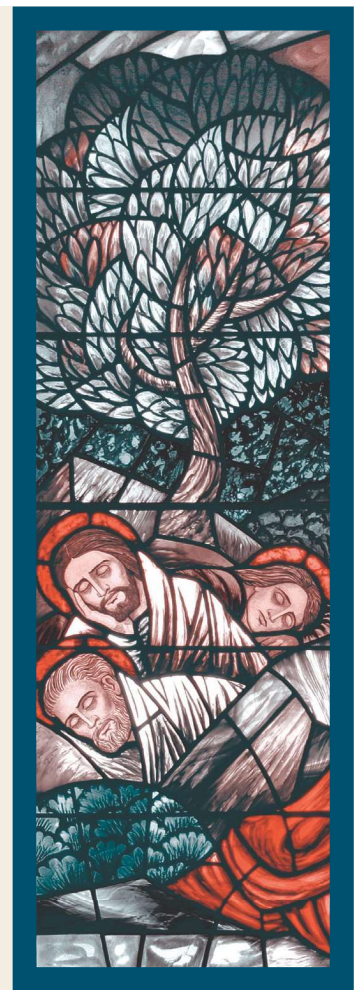
The final test is this: Can you give your life over and sacrifice today—your career, pleasure and everything else—for something that's more long-range? Jesus had to die at age thirty-three. That's not easy to do: It's not easy to die at any age. Yet to give his life over in trust for something long range, where it wasn't going to pay off today, is the opposite of despair. That's what real hope is.

So many of our sins are sins of despair. They're not sins of malice. Rather, they're what I call practical despair. They're sins where we say, "Given my life, I'm going to settle for second-best or third-best because 'first best' is never going to happen for me anyway."

My dad wasn't very educated, but he knew the Agony in the Garden. There was always a picture hanging in our house of Jesus in Gethsemane. My dad always told me, "If you're going to be faithful in anything, whether you're going to be a priest, whether you're going to be married or whatever, you better learn how to sweat blood because that's what it's going to take." Truly, if you're going to be faithful to anything—to marriage, to a priestly or religious vocation, to anything—learn how to sweat blood, because that's what it's going to take.

What we get in the Garden of Gethsemane is Jesus, deeply. That's because Jesus is our model. He is the person we all look up to when we suffer—we know we're not praying to somebody who didn't taste it in all its darkness.

Remember the old translation of the Our Father? In place of "and lead us not into temptation," we used to say, "and do



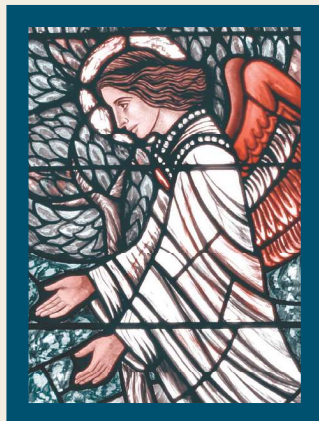
"WHEN HE ROSE FROM PRAYER AND RETURNED TO HIS DISCIPLES, HE FOUND THEM SLEEPING FROM GRIEF."
LUKE 22:45

not put us to the test.” What is the test? We’re telling God something like, “God, in my life I know you can test me the way you tested Jesus. I know you can make me sweat blood, but cut me a little slack. Make these things a little easier for me in my life so I don’t have to taste that complete darkness.” See, though, that darkness is the test of the moral athlete, inside of our moral loneliness. It’s not the test of our physical capacity to withstand pain.

That’s why we need to move beyond the scourging metaphor of the Stations of the Cross. There’s much more to the stations. The passion is not about the blood and the ropes and the whipping and how much Jesus endured. It’s about something we’re meant to imitate. It’s about our moral and emotional athleticism the next time we have temptation. It’s about the test inside of love, and it happens in a garden.

“AND TO STRENGTHEN HIM AN ANGEL FROM HEAVEN APPEARED TO HIM.”

LUKE 22:43



THE SLEEPING APOSTLES

We have examples in Scripture of the rich things in the Garden. Luke’s Gospel, for instance, says, “Jesus went to the garden and he told his disciples, ‘Pray that you may not undergo the test’” (Luke 22:40). Rather than telling them to join in his prayer, we’re supposed to learn something by watching Jesus. Then he has this drama in the Garden and finally gives his life over to his father. He says: “Not my will but yours be done.”

Then he turns around and, as Luke says, “they were all asleep.” Out of what? Tiredness? No. Luke says they were asleep out of grief (22:45), sheer sorrow. That’s an incredible line. They were asleep out of what? They were asleep out of depression. It was just too depressing to get the lesson. Most of the time when we’re asleep, we’re not asleep physically. When we don’t get something, it’s just too depressing to get.

DIG DEEPER

In what way was the Agony a preparation for what would follow?

How can Jesus’ Agony be a key for our own encounter with the sacred?

Name some practical ways to live the three tests of the Garden.

THE MOMENT OF GRACE

About a month before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered for his moral bravery, he recounted one of the many threatening phone calls he received. He said the phone rang and a person said, “If you come here we’re going to kill you.” And he said, in telling the story, that he had heard those life-threatening calls many times before, “but that night, for whatever reason, it shook me to my roots. I couldn’t go back to sleep. I brewed some coffee. I drank the whole pot.” He said: “I began to cry at the kitchen table, and I lost all my courage.” He said: “I put my head in my hands and I thought, *I can’t do this anymore. I don’t want to die.*”

And he said: “At that moment I felt this strength in me that I had never felt before. I knew what to do, what I needed to do.” You see the Agony in the Garden, and it’s only after the agony that the angel can come. See, then Jesus got up. Then he was the athlete who was ready. Then he could walk to his passion.

When Jesus left the Last Supper room, he couldn’t do it. That was the great transition. Only after he had broken down, had sweat the blood, had told his Father many times, “I don’t want to do this,” he finally broke down and accepted it. How many of us, in our own way, experience that frustration, that same sense of abandonment? Yet, at the moment of acceptance, God’s liberating grace flows. As Luke says of Jesus in the Garden, the angel comes. That’s a deep theology of grace.

Fr. Ronald Rolheiser is a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate and president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, TX. He’s a lecturer and writer, both of award-winning newspaper columns on several continents and of numerous books.

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