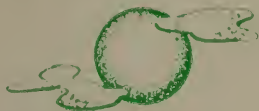


The
Queen
of **SEVEN**
SWORDS



By THE RT. REVEREND
FULTON J. SHEEN

The Queen of Seven Swords

by

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Dedicated to

Mary Immaculate Mother of God

Advocate of Sinners at the Triune Throne

Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son,

Spouse of the Holy Spirit.

The Queen of Seven Swords

1. The Prophecy of Simeon

Forty days had passed since the angels sang their Gloria to the white chalked hills of Bethlehem. It was now the second day of February. According to Jewish Law, every mother after giving birth to a male child was to present herself at the Temple of Jerusalem to be purified, and to offer her child to God in testimony that all gifts come from Him. And thus it was that the Lord of the Temple was brought to the Temple of the Lord.

The priest at the Temple on that day was Simeon, a devout Israelite already bent with the burden of years, but happy in the divine intimation that he would not die until he had seen the Messias.

When Our Blessed Mother laid the Divine Child in his arms, it was the moment of union of the Old and New Testaments, or better, the passage from the Old to the New.

Once Simeon's weary arms bore the weight of the Eternal and yet refused to break; once aged Simeon embraced Youth Who was before all ages; he

could now take his leave, close the book of prophecies and bid adieu to his own life. And so in that age when old men cease to sing, Simeon opened the vents of song, and in the silence of the Temple, there arose like sweet-smelling incense, the sweet strains of the *Nunc Dimittis*. It was the compline of his life, as it is now the daily compline of the Church, the song the Church will sing in her old age when the Lord comes in the clouds of heaven on the day of the sunset of the world.

But all the light which flooded Mary's soul was soon obscured, as a black cloud sometimes hides from us the face of the sun. Simeon's words of joy turned into sorrow, as he spoke of the part Mother and Son were to play in the Redemption of the world: "Behold this *child* is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted; And thy own soul a sword shall pierce."

It was a solemn announcement that she was to guard the Victim until the Hour of Sacrifice and be the Shepherdess until the Lamb should be led to slaughter on the sign of contradiction, which is the cross. It was an echo back to the Garden of Eden, where a tree brought the ruin of the

first Adam, and at whose gates stood an angel with a flaming sword to guard the gates until the appointed hour of salvation. Simeon was now saying that the hour had come. The tree of Paradise that brought ruin would be transplanted to Calvary and be His cross; the sword of the angel would be lifted from his hands and driven into Mary's heart, as a first witness that only those who are pierced through and through with the sword of sacrificial love shall enter the everlasting Eden of heaven.

“A sign of contradiction”! Mary did not need to wait for Calvary's cross! She saw now that He Who is Love, would be hated; that He Who is Peace, would be a pretext for war; that He Who is Life, would be an occasion for death; that He Who is Truth, would be the theme of all errors and heresies until the end of time; that He Who is Light would drive souls away by the very splendor of His Light; that He Who came to save the world, would be contradicted and crucified by the world; that He would be the touchstone of all hearts; that from now on men would have to take sides; that there would be no more one-fisted battles, no more half-drawn swords, no more divided loyalties; that souls would either gather

with Him, or they would scatter, and that their contradiction of Mercy would make their rejection the more fatal and merciless.

As Mary left the Temple that day she understood as she never understood before why the Magi brought with their joyous gifts of gold and incense, the bitter, sad, and sorrowful gift of myrrh.

PRAYER

Mary, if thou hadst been separated from thy Divine Son, like a quiet peaceful garden with the sun playing on it, far away from the storm-enveloped glory of Calvary, thou wouldst never have been really our Mother. How terrible the sea of human sorrows would be were not thy moonlight shining upon it! But now that thou art called to suffer with Our Redeemer, thou dost become the Mother of the afflicted! Wipe away our tears, for thou understandest sorrow; mend our broken hearts, for thine was broken. Draw out all swords, for the hilt is in thy hand. Mary, thou art the Mother of Sorrows, but if thou were not, then thou couldst never be the Cause of Our Joy.

2. The Flight Into Egypt

Centuries and centuries ago, the people of Israel in Egyptian bondage made their Exodus to the Promised Land. History now reverses itself. The Exodus is toward Egypt, and the leader is not Moses but the Infant Saviour. The occasion which prompted it was the order of Herod the Great, that all male children under two years of age in Bethlehem should be put to death by the sword. Herod heard from the Wise Men that they sought a Child Who was to be a King, and he was fearful of His power, as if He Who brought the golden Kingship of heaven would ever think of taking away the tinsel kingship of earth. It was not hard for Herod to order a slaughter of the babes, for their blood was but a drop in the crimson river of crime. It was hard on the poor mothers of Bethlehem whose cries mingled with Rachel who would not be consoled, but it was harder still on Mary, whose only crime was that she bore in her arms a Child Who sheathed the beautiful grandeur of the Godhead in the scabbard of an infant's flesh.

On a dark night when poor mothers who denied her a home on Christmas eve wandered homeless through the

streets, an angel appeared and bade Joseph take Mary and the Child and flee into Egypt. Mary had no treasures to gather up, but only the Treasure which she bore in her arms. The wilderness, the desert, heathendom confronted her. And as the night winds stirred, and the moon, which was one day to be pictured beneath her feet, now shone upon her head, she stole out of Bethlehem into the sands.

This exile of the Creator from His chosen creatures was the second sword to pierce the heart of Mary. It was all the more keen, because her Child was hated!

Why should any one hate a Babe? What had He done to a king that he should be so unkingly? Jesus was hated!

The bitterness of this sorrow was that it seemed—I say only seemed—to be so much outside the order of Divine Providence. We all can easily bear the sorrows which come to us directly from God; His very fingers which reach tiny crosses to us seem to lighten them by His touch. A sickness we can bear, or even a death, because they too come directly from God. But the injustice and ingratitude of men! That is the more terrible, because we never know when it

will end! God is more merciful. Thus when David, because of his sin of pride, was offered a choice of punishment, the injustice of men or a pestilence, he cried out: "It is better that I should fall into the hands of the Lord (for his mercies are many) than into the hands of men." And so he chose the pestilence.

Mary's sorrow was of that more bitter kind—it came from the wickedness of men! From the injustice of a pagan! It therefore seemed all the more terrible because God did not seem to have a hand in it. But added to it all, was the tragedy that this sad note had to be struck far down in the scale of sorrows—in a stranger's land, away from home.

PRAYER

Mary, by this thy second dolor teach us that God's ways are hidden in everything, even in those things that seem as far away as Egypt. Often during our life, when we are bidden to leave the peace and quiet of religious contemplation where we are so much at home, to take up those duties and tasks of a workaday world, which seem in comparison like an Egyptian exile, remind us that there is nothing in life that cannot be spiritualized and turned into a prayer,

provided we do it in union with thy Son! Mary, I am slow to learn, tardy to understand, reluctant to dare, but do thou impress me with the great truth that we can make a Holy Land out of the pagan Egypt of our daily toil, provided we bring with us thy Infant Child.

3. The Three Days' Loss

The only time artists ever represent Our Blessed Mother without her Child is when she is joyfully looking up to heaven, as in the Immaculate Conception. But there was one time when she was childless and did not look up, and that was when she looked down to the desert in the sorrowful quest of her Child. Our Blessed Lord was then twelve years of age.

In that year, He went up to Jerusalem at the Pasch with Mary and Joseph.

When the Feast was over, the throngs departed, the men by one gate, the women by the other, to be reunited at the resting place for the night. The children went either with the father or the mother. Each suspecting the Divine Child was with the other, it was not until nightfall that His loss was discovered. Never before were there two such lonely hearts in all the world, not even when

Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Pleasure. For three days they searched and finally found Him in the Temple expounding the Law to the Doctors and astounding them with His wisdom.

But Mary and Joseph must have searched for Him in the Temple the first day. Where was He then, and during the nights? We can only conjecture, but I love to think that He probably visited the future scenes of His Passion; stopped outside the Fortress of Antonia where Pilate would later try to wash His Blood from his hands; gazed in at the house of Annas who would later charge Him with blasphemy; made His way outside the city walls to a little hill where the world would erect a Cross and call it His Throne; and, finally, spent a night in the Garden of Gethsemane under the full Paschal moon where twenty-one years later His Apostles would sleep as He drank the bitter dregs from the Chalice of man's sin.

But wherever He was until the third day, in this third dolor Mary's soul was plunged into the densest darkness, for she had lost her God! It was in this dolor that the Mother Immaculate became in a more true sense the Refuge of Sinners. It strikes us first as a bit incongruous

that she who was sinless should be the harbor of the sinful. How could she who never had remorse of conscience be a refuge for those whose conscience is full of bitterness? How could she who never lost her God know the pangs of a soul that through sin lost its God?

The answer is this. What is sin? Sin is separation from God. Now in these three days' loss Mary was physically separated from her Child, and she too had lost her God! The physical separation from her Child was but a symbol of the spiritual separation of men from God. The third dolor makes it possible for her to divine the feelings of sinners and still keep her soul inviolate. Thus she was suffering in atonement then for all minds who once had faith, and lost it; for all those souls who once loved God, and then forgot Him; for all those hearts who once prayed, and then abandoned Him. All the spiritual homesickness for Divinity, all the nostalgia for Heaven, and all the emptiness of hearts who emptied them of God, Mary felt as if it were her own—for now she was without the Redeemer. If an earthly mother weeps at the physical death of one of her children, what must have been Mary's grief at the spiritual death of millions of men

whose Mother she was called to be by God!

PRAYER

Mary, by this thy third dolor, teach us that if we should be so unfortunate as to lose God, we must not seek Him in new faiths, new cults, and new fads, for He can be found only where we lost Him—in the Temple, in prayer, in His Church. Those other times when our soul is as arid as a desert, our hearts seem cold, and we find it hard to pray, and even begin to believe that perhaps God has forgotten us, because He seems to be so far away, whisper gently to us the sweet reminder that even when we seem to have lost Him, He is still about His Father's business.

4. Mary Meets Jesus Carrying the Cross

Twenty-one years have whirled away into space since the third dolor. During that time, eighteen years were passed in the calm and quiet of a Nazarene home. Mary's life was an endless ascension in love of her role as the Co-Redemptrix of the world. Each hour was like a novitiate in which she learned more deeply her share of the Cross.

It is simply impossible to describe what it means to spend eighteen years mothering God and still being fathered by Him; eighteen years of receiving obedience from Him, and still being His sweet slave of love! If God were not Love, we could never use that word to describe the ecstatic life of Mary!

After those eighteen years she parted with Him. He was now thirty, and He must be about His Father's business. He had His thirty years of obeying; He would now have His three years of teaching; and then His three hours of Redeeming. The three years quickly passed, and He Who came to give Testimony of the Truth saw Pilate, standing between the pillars of his Judgment seat, wash his hands of Truth. The world had succeeded in contradicting Him, and in symbol of their triumph they gave Him the Cross. The procession began: There was the centurion leading; following were the heralds bearing the sign that would be nailed over the cross, the two thieves with their crosses, and the Scribes and Pharisees who sent Him to death in the name of loyalty to Caesar—but the irony of that procession was, that it moved over a road scattered with withered palm branches. Mary fol-

lowed, treading on the very Blood which she worshipped. She saw every drop of it; she saw the glittering spears, too, which looked like palms; she saw the thieves; she saw the weeping women; and yet she saw only one thing: Jesus bearing Eden's transplanted tree as she was wearing the angel's transported sword.

This new dolor of Mary's was a revelation of her Son's words, that if we are to be His Disciples we must take up our cross and follow Him. Every life must climb to Calvary, not alone and unburdened with hands white and empty, but bearing the very instruments of crucifixion, the very elements of the sacrifice itself. As Isaac carried the wood of sacrifice, as Jesus carried His cross, as the priest carries bread and wine to the altar, so Mary carries a cross in her own heart. The cross need not always be on one's shoulders: the sick in bed with burning fevers, the mother with her arms embracing children, the father at his daily toil, have no shoulders free for a cross, but they have a heart free for it, as Mary did. The spirit must go on even doing that which the flesh cannot do, for every act in the heart will be accounted equivalent to the work done. Simon for a moment relieved the shoulders

of Jesus of His cross, but He did not relieve His Will to suffer. The crowd saw at the moment but one cross, and that was on the shoulders of the Cyrenian. There really were two, both hidden in the hearts of Mother and Son carrying their burden to the altar of Sacrifice.

PRAYER

Mary, by this new sorrow, impress thy poor children with the lesson of cross-bearing. Remind me that I am not free to accept His cross or to leave it. The choice is not between going through life with a cross, or going through life without it. I must take it. The choice is whether I shall accept it like thee, or have it thrust upon me like Simon. Shall I be impelled to embrace it, or shall I be compelled to take it? Mary, let me see that the only real cross is the refusal to take it, and that by embracing it through love like thee, it ceases to be a cross and becomes a scaffolding leading me on to the Kingdom of God.

5. The Crucifixion

Christ is now on His Cross. And as that great Chalice of all common miseries dripped silently, slowly, and mysteriously the red drops of salvation, the hungry earth at its quaking

opened its mouth to receive them, as if groaning more for redemption than the thirsty souls of men. The Seven Words rang from the Cross like seven swords into Mary's soul. It seemed that she was listening to Him sing His Own funeral dirge. Any mother's heart would have broken at the sight of that Great Sanctuary Lamp of Life and Truth and Love emitting not red rays over Calvary, but dropping red beads in a rosary of redemption. Any mother would have collapsed at the vision of the beautiful wick of His Soul flickering in death as the wax of His Body and Blood burned itself away. Not all mother hearts have the same capacity for suffering; they vary with tenderness. The more delicate and tender the heart, the keener the suffering. But no mother in all the world has a heart as tender as the Mother of Motherhood. She was as delicate as a rose-leaf, responsive to the gentlest breath of the evening breeze; hence her sorrow was so deep that even the greatest of martyrs have saluted her as their Queen. It was all the more bitter because there was nothing she could do to ease her suffering Son. Grief must always be doing something, even if it is only stroking a fever stricken brow, for the very wants of the one who suffers

are the luxuries of the one who consoles. And yet what could Mary do? The pillow of the crown of thorns could not be smoothed; the bed of the cross could not be freshened; the nails which folded in His hands and feet could not be taken away; even when He cried, "I thirst," there was nothing she could offer but her tears. Magdalene collapsed at His feet—it seemed she was always there in an attitude of penance. But Mary would not give way. The Evangelist who was at the cross tells us that she stood. If Eve stood at the foot of the tree, she, the new Eve, would stand at the foot of the Cross—gazing upon a Crucifix.

And because she stood ready to serve, there came to her from the cross her second Annunciation, not from the lips of an angel, but from the very mouth of God. Looking down from His Throne, Jesus saw her and John, His beloved disciple, and "He saith to His mother: 'Woman, behold thy son': After that, He saith to the disciple: 'Behold thy mother.'" He called her not 'Mother,' but 'Woman,' to denote that she was now to become the universal mother of the human race which John symbolized. It was seemingly a poor exchange: a disciple for a Master; a creature

for a Creator; a fisherman for a King; a son of Zebedee for the Son of God—and yet Mary accepted it gladly. She saw that just as at Bethlehem she became the Mother of God, she was now on Calvary to become the Mother of Men, and that just as at the Crib she begot the Captain of Salvation, so now at the cross she would bring forth His soldiers. She saw too that this could not be done without suffering, for although she brought forth the Innocent without pain, she could not bring forth sinners without sorrow. It would cost her her own Divine Son to become the Mother of Men but she would pay the price.

And thus her title as Mother of Men became hers not by mere external proclamation, but by the right of birth. She loved Him, because He was God; but she loved us, because it was God's will to save us. The first love was her martyrdom; the other her sacrifice. The one was like a tempest on the ocean, but the other was like its calm. Even in sorrow, peace was hers, for she was joined to an Eternal Father in the offering of a common Son.

PRAYER

Mary, in thy fourth dolor thou

didst show us how we are to carry our cross, and in this, the fifth, thou dost show us how to stand by it. Thy Son has told us that only those who persevere until the end will be saved. But perseverance is sometimes so difficult. Few of us are, like thee, willing to stand by the Cross for three full hours until the Crucifixion is ended. Most of us are deserters from Calvary, half-crucified souls. Many of us have high resolve in the dawn; but few sustain it through the day. Thy own soul did not falter, because thy Son's did not. He kept till evening the promise He had made to the morning sun rising red like blood. He had finished the work given Him to do. Beg for us the grace then, like thee, to remain three full hours on Golgotha, so that when the lease on our life has ended, we can pray with Him and thee: "I have finished the work. Now God, take me down, and lift me up into everlasting union with Thee."

6. The Taking Down From the Cross

And after three hours Christ died of thirst—not of a thirst for the pure water of Galilean brooks, nor the refreshing draughts of Jacob's well,

nor the heart-warming wine of the Last Supper, but of a thirst for love, which came nearest to being quenched, not as a Roman reached him vinegar and gall, but as an obscure thief reeling in the darkness of death gave Him the love of his bleeding heart. Christ was dead! The last chord of the Divine Harp snapped—it was the rupture of a heart through the rapture of love.

There now came to the hill of sorrow two notable citizens of Jerusalem and the Sanhedrin: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus—the twilight companions who before wanted to be friends of Christ and yet not appear as such. With gentle hands and adoring hearts the King Who staggered to His throne is now lifted from it in seeming defeat. Each nail is extracted from hands that even then might have lifted the portals of all the kingdoms of earth from their hinges. One wonders as the Nails, the Crown of Thorns, and the Cross came into Mary's hands if all Nature did not respond. The very iron in the dark womb of earth must have shuddered, because it had nailed its God. Every thorn must for the moment have hidden itself for shame under the petals of every red rose. Every tree must have shook in sor-

row, because it bore the burden of the Crucified, and lifted its leafy arms in prayer that henceforth it would be cut by a sacrificial ax to become a cross beckoning hearts back again to God.

Finally the Body of the Saviour was taken down and given to His Mother. It was like a red rose withering on her knee. The Prodigal Son was coming home again!

Mothers live on last looks, and Mary must now take hers. As she looked, the sun setting in the golden tabernacle of the west threw on the hill the lengthening shadow of the Cross, as sorrow was now throwing its lengthening cross upon the heart of the Mother of the world. When she delivered her Son over for burial, she came as close to priesthood as any woman ever came, for was she not equivalently offering on the paten of her arms, the Immaculate Host of the Bread of Life. It was a great sorrow to give Him up; it seemed the world had Him so long, and she had Him so little—but that was because she loved Him so much more. To her, sorrow is God's revelation; it is the wounded hand of Christ pushing aside the clouds which curtain His throne where all sorrow is turned to joy.

PRAYER

Mary, most of us in moments of sorrow dispense ourselves from duties, refrain from work in the hour or our grieving, and look to human sympathy to ease our aching heart. But thou, O sorrowful Mother, during this sixth dolor, sought out no human consolation, in order to remind us that God loves most to come to lonely hearts which no other love can fill. Neither didst thou make thy grief a burden to any one; thou didst help lay the Host on the Immaculate Corporal of thy lap; thy heart was broken, but no one knew it. By thy calm resignation, dear Mother, teach us that our sorrow must never be in the way; that every cross we carry must be a cross only to ourselves; that heaven most consoles the inconsolables of earth, and that a broken heart, like thine own, is the favorite sanctuary of God.

7. The Burial of Jesus

The night had now come when Mary became the sower of seed, for was she not bearing the Eternal Word to the grave where in three days He would break the bonds of death and rise forth to everlasting life? She had borne her Son in many sorrowful

journeys before, once through Bethlehem to a stranger's cave; now over Golgotha to a stranger's grave—an eloquent reminder, indeed, that human birth and human death were equally foreign to Him. There was only one sacrifice left for Mary to make; only one rich consolation which she could put off to be utterly poor, and that was to leave her Son in the rocks under the guard of Roman soldiers. She would keep for herself only one thing—a pierced heart as Simeon's last sword found in it its scabbard. By that token Mary would be the consolation of all those who have lost dear ones; of all mothers who mourn over sons; and of all loved ones who grieve over spouses. She understands sorrows, because she lost more than any one else. Some have lost a mother; others a son; others a spouse; but Mary lost everything, for she lost God.

Mary now leans on John, a symbol of the poor compensation we all are to her and steals a glance at the cross—the first one ever to see hope in it. Tens of thousands of hearts, under her sweet inspiration, have looked on it since, and were glad their hearts were broken by it, that through the rent God's love might enter.

Mary retraces her morning pil-

grimage, making for the second time the way of the Cross, from the fourteenth station to the first. This time it seemed more terrible than the first, because of the very nature of sorrow. All love tends to unify, and in a love such as that of Jesus and Mary, their two hearts were but as one. No power but death could dare render asunder so exquisite a union—and yet death did it. The result was that when she left Him her heart was rent in two; now that she is left alone, the stream of her life can hardly flow; it is not merely that half her life and love is gone. It is something more than that. It is as if her own fountain had run dry like a summer stream. Their lives were one; their deaths are also one. Her sorrow then was deeper than any sorrow on the earth before; it made her weep not just because she lost Him, but because she loved Him. Hers was a love bent wholly on Jesus; a love greater than all mothers' love, even if they might compact their myriad loves into one intensest, nameless act; a love that could bear anything, because what was within her was stronger than anything without; in a word, a love so ecstatic and heavenly that if she could have had her will she would have built all her Thabors on Calvary. With such a

love in her heart, who then can doubt that as she tramped over the blood-stained streets of Jerusalem she once more, in tones more enraptured than ever, chanted the Magnificat?

PRAYER

Mary, Mother of Sorrows, thy Seven Dolours are like a Holy Mass. In thy first dolor, thou wert appointed sacristan by Simeon to keep the Host until the Hour of sacrifice; in thy second dolor, thou didst leave the sacristy to serve the altar as thy Son's visit sanctified Egypt; in the third dolor, thou didst recite the Confiteor at the foot of the altar as thy Son recited His Confiteor to the Doctors of the Law; thy fourth Dolor was the Offertory as thou didst make the oblation of His Body and Blood on the way to Calvary; thy fifth dolor was the Consecration in which thou didst offer thine own body and blood in union with thy Son's for the redemption of the world; thy sixth dolor was the Communion when thou didst receive the body of thy Son from the altar of the Cross; and thy seventh dolor was the *Ite Missa est*, as thou didst end thy sorrow with an adieu to the tomb.

Mary, thy Heart is everything to us; it is a living altar-stone on which

the sacrifice is offered; it is the sanctuary lamp which jumps with joy before its God; it is the server, the beatings of which are like the responses of the liturgy; it is the Paschal candle which lights the sanctuary of our souls by the sacrifice of self; it is the thurible which gives the sweet odor of incense as it burns in love for us; it is a whole angelic choir singing voiceless songs into ravished ears of the bleeding Host, Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Mary, sacristan of souls as thou wert the sacristan of Jesus, a good life is worth nothing if it be not crowned with a happy death. We shall spend our whole life therefore asking this of thee, if it be only to gain it at the end. Thy Divine Son said He would not leave us orphans. But Mary, we shall be orphans unless thou art our Mother.

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