

## **The Embalming of the Body of Jesus**

The Blessed Virgin seated herself upon a large cloth spread on the ground, with her right knee, which was slightly raised, and her back resting against some mantles, rolled together so as to form a species of cushion. No precaution had been neglected which could in any way facilitate to her—the Mother of Sorrows—in her deep affliction of soul, the mournful but most sacred duty which she was about to fulfil in regard to the body of her beloved Son.



The adorable head of Jesus rested upon Mary's knee, and his body was stretched upon a sheet. The Blessed Virgin was overwhelmed with sorrow and love. Once more, and for the last time, did she hold in her arms the body of her most beloved Son, to whom she had been unable to give any testimony of love during the long hours of his martyrdom. And she gazed upon his wounds and fondly embraced his blood-stained cheeks, while Magdalen pressed her face upon his feet.

The men withdrew into a little cave, situated on the south-west side of Calvary, there to prepare the different things needful for the embalming; but Cassius, with a few other soldiers who had been converted, remained at a respectful distance. All ill-disposed persons were gone back to the city, and the soldiers who were present served merely to form a guard to prevent any interruption in the last honours which were being rendered to the body of Jesus. Some of these soldiers even gave assistance when desired. The holy women held the vases, sponges, linen, unction, and spices, according as required; but when not thus employed, they remained at a respectful distance, attentively gazing upon the Blessed Virgin as she proceeded in her mournful task.

Magdalen did not leave the body of Jesus; but John gave continual assistance to the Blessed Virgin, and went to and fro from the men to the women, lending aid to both parties. The women had with them some large leathern bottles and a vase filled with water standing upon a coal fire. They gave the Blessed Virgin and Magdalen, according as they required, vases filled with clear water, and sponges, which they afterwards squeezed in the leathern bottles. The courage and firmness of Mary remained unshaken even in the midst of her inexpressible anguish. It was absolutely impossible for her to leave the body of her Son in the awful state to which it had been reduced by his sufferings, and therefore she began with indefatigable earnestness to

wash and purify it from the traces of the outrages to which it had been exposed. With the utmost care she drew off the crown of thorns, opening it behind, and then cutting off one by one the thorns which had sunk deep into the head of Jesus, in order that she might not widen the wounds. The crown was placed by the side of the nails, and then Mary drew out the thorns which had remained in the skin with a species of rounded pincers, and sorrowfully showed them to her friends. These thorns were placed with the crown, but still some of them must have been preserved separately. The divine face of our Saviour was scarcely recognisable, so disfigured was it by the wounds with which it was covered. The beard and hair were matted together with blood. Mary washed the head and face, and passed damp sponges over the hair to remove the congealed blood. As she proceeded in her pious office, the extent of the awful cruelty which had been exercised upon Jesus became more and more apparent, and caused in her soul emotions of compassion and tenderness which increased as she passed from one wound to another. She washed the wounds of the head, the eyes filled with blood, the nostrils, and the ears, with a sponge and a small piece of linen spread over the fingers of her right hand; and then she purified, in the same manner, the half-opened mouth, the tongue, the teeth, and the lips. She divided what remained of our Lord's hair into three parts, a part falling over each temple, and the third over the back of his head; and when she had disentangled the front hair and smoothed it, she passed it behind his ears.

On Good Friday, March 30th, 1820, as Sister Emmerich was contemplating the descent from the Cross she suddenly fainted, in the presence of the writer of these lines, and appeared to be really dead. But after a time she recovered her senses and gave the following explanation, although still in a state of great suffering: 'As I was contemplating the body of Jesus lying on the knees of the Blessed Virgin I said to myself: "How great is her strength! She has not fainted even once!" My guide reproached me for this thought – in which there was more astonishment than compassion – and said to me, "Suffer then what she has suffered!" And at the same moment a sensation of the sharpest anguish transfixed me like a sword, so that I believed I must have died from it.' She had had an illness which reduced her almost to the brink of the grave.

Sister Emmerich said that the shape of these pincers reminded her of the scissors with which Samson's hair was cut off. In her visions of the third year of the public life of Jesus she had seen our Lord keep the Sabbathday at Misael – a town belonging to the Levites, of the tribe of Aser – and as a

portion of the Book of Judges was read in the synagogue, Sister Emmerich beheld upon that occasion the life of Samson. Sister Emmerich was accustomed, when speaking of persons of historical importance, to explain how they divided their hair. 'Eve,' she said, 'divided her hair in two parts, but Mary into three.' And she appeared to attach importance to these words. No opportunity presented itself for her to give any explanation upon the subject, which probably would have shown what was done with the hair in sacrifices, funerals, consecrations, or vows, etc. She once said of Samson: 'His fair hair, which was long and thick, was gathered up on his head in seven tresses, like a helmet, and the ends of these tresses were fastened upon his forehead and temples.

His hair was not in itself the source of his strength, but only as the witness to the vow which he had made to let it grow in God's honour. The powers which depended upon these seven tresses were the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost. He must have already broken his vows and lost many graces, when he allowed this sign of being a When the head was thoroughly cleansed and purified, the Blessed Virgin covered it with a veil, after having kissed the sacred cheeks of her dear Son. She then turned her attention to the neck, shoulders, chest, back, arms, and pierced hands. All the bones of the breast and the joints were dislocated, and could not be bent. There was a frightful wound on the shoulders which had borne the weight of the Cross, and all the upper part of the body was covered with bruises and deeply marked with blows of the scourges. On the left breast there was a small wound where the point of Cassius's lance had come out, and on the right side was the large wound made by the same lance, and which had pierced the heart through and through. Mary washed all these wounds, and Magdalen, on her knees, helped her from time to time; but without leaving the sacred feet of Jesus, which she bathed with tears and wiped with her hair.

The head, bosom, and feet of our Lord were now washed, and the sacred body, which was covered with brown stains and red marks in those places where the skin had been torn off, and of a bluish-white colour, like flesh that has been drained of blood, was resting on the knees of Mary, who covered the parts which she had washed with a veil, and then proceeded to embalm all the wounds. The holy women knelt by her side, and in turn presented to her a box, out of which she took some precious ointment, and with it filled and covered the wounds. She also anointed the hair, and then, taking the sacred hands of Jesus in her left hand, respectfully kissed them, and filled the

large wounds made by the nails with this ointment or sweet spice. She likewise filled the ears, nostrils, and wound in the side with the same precious mixture. Meanwhile Magdalen wiped and embalmed our Lord's feet, and then again washed them with her tears, and often pressed her face upon them.

The water which had been used was not thrown away, but poured into the leathern bottles in which the sponges had been squeezed. I saw Cassius or some other soldier go several times to fetch fresh water from the fountain of Gihon, which was at no great distance off. When the Blessed Virgin had filled all the wounds with ointment, she wrapped the head up in linen cloths, but she did not as yet cover the face. She closed the half-open eyes of Jesus, and kept her hand upon them for some time. She also closed the mouth, and then embraced the sacred body of her beloved Son, pressing her face fondly and reverently upon his. Joseph and Nicodemus had been waiting for some time, when John drew near to the Blessed Virgin, and besought her to permit the body of her Son to be taken from her, that the embalming might be completed, because the Sabbath was close at hand. Once more did Mary embrace the sacred body of Jesus, and utter her farewells in the most touching language, and then the men lifted it from her arms on the sheet, and carried it to some distance. The deep sorrow of Mary had been for the time assuaged by the feelings of love and reverence with which she had accomplished her sacred task; but now it once more overwhelmed her, and she fell, her head covered with her veil, into the arms of the holy women. Magdalen felt almost as though her Beloved were being forcibly carried away from her, and hastily ran forward a few steps, with her arms stretched forth; but then, after a moment, returned to the Blessed Virgin. Nazarene to be cut off. I did not see Dalila cut off all his hair, and I think one lock remained on his forehead.

He retained the grace to do penance and of that repentance by which he recovered strength sufficient to destroy his enemies. The life of Samson is figurative and prophetic.' The sacred body was carried to a spot beneath the level of the top of Golgotha, where the smooth surface of a rock afforded a convenient platform on which to embalm the body. I first saw a piece of open-worked linen, looking very much like lace, and which made me think of the large embroidered curtain hung between the choir and nave during Lent.

**It was probably worked in that open stitch for the water to run through. I also saw another large sheet unfolded. The body of our Saviour was placed on the open-worked piece of linen, and some of the other men held the other sheet spread above it. Nicodemus and Joseph then knelt down, and underneath this covering took off the linen which they had fastened round the loins of our Saviour, when they took his body down from the Cross.**

**They then passed sponges under this sheet, and washed the lower parts of the body; after which they lifted it up by the help of pieces of linen crossed beneath the loins and knees, and washed the back without turning it over. They continued washing until nothing but clear water came from the sponges when pressed. Next they poured water of myrrh over the whole body, and then, handling it with respect, stretched it out full length, for it was still in the position in which our Divine Lord had died—the loins and knees bent. They then placed beneath his hips a sheet which was a yard in width and three in length, laid upon his lap bundles of sweet-scented herbs, and shook over the whole body a powder which Nicodemus had brought. Next they wrapped up the lower part of the body, and fastened the cloth which they had placed underneath round it strongly. After this they anointed the wounds of the thighs, placed bundles of herbs between the legs, which were stretched out to their full length, and wrapped them up entirely in these sweet spices.**

**Then John conducted the Blessed Virgin and the other holy women once more to the side of the body. Mary knelt down by the head of Jesus, and placed beneath it a piece of very fine linen which had been given her by Pilate's wife, and which she had worn round her neck under her cloak; next, assisted by the holy women, she placed from the shoulders to the cheeks bundles of herbs, spices, and sweet-scented powder, and then strongly bound this piece of linen round the head and shoulders. Magdalen poured besides a small bottle of balm into the wound of the side, and the holy women placed some more herbs into those of the hands and feet. Then the men put sweet spices around all the remainder of the body, crossed the sacred stiffened arms on the chest, and bound the large white sheet round the body as high as the chest, in the same manner as if they had been swaddling a child. Then, having fastened the end of a large band beneath the armpits, they rolled it round the head and the whole body. Finally, they placed our Divine Lord on the large sheet, six yards in length, which Joseph of Arimathea had bought, and wrapped him in it. He was lying diagonally upon it, and one corner of the sheet was raised from the**

feet to the chest, the other drawn over the head and shoulders, while the remaining two ends were doubled round the body.

The Blessed Virgin, the holy women, the men—all were kneeling round the body of Jesus to take their farewell of it, when a most touching miracle took place before them.

The sacred body of Jesus, with all its wounds, appeared imprinted upon the cloth which covered it, as though he had been pleased to reward their care and their love, and leave them a portrait of This refers to a custom of the Diocese of Munster. During Lent there was hung up in the churches a curtain, embroidered in open work, representing the Five Wounds, the instruments of the Passion, etc. himself through all the veils with which he was enwrapped. With tears they embraced the adorable body, and then reverently kissed the wonderful impression which it had left. Their astonishment increased when, on lifting up the sheet, they saw that all the bands which surrounded the body had remained white as before, and that the upper cloth alone had been marked in this wonderful manner.

It was not a mark made by the bleeding wounds, since the whole body was wrapped up and covered with sweet spices, but it was a supernatural portrait, bearing testimony to the divine creative power ever abiding in the body of Jesus. I have seen many things relative to the subsequent history of this piece of linen, but I could not describe them coherently. After the resurrection it remained in the possession of the friends of Jesus, but fell twice into the hands of the Jews, and later was honoured in several different places. I have seen it in a city of Asia, in the possession of some Christians, who were not Catholics. I have forgotten the name of the town, which is situated in a province near the country of the Three Kings.