

# The Cross is the Surest Path to God

By Sister Therese Carson

It is 1937. Duluth is still in the bottomless hole of the Depression. Iron mines are closed, workers laid off, and ore ships rust in port. Years of drought have bankrupted farmers and forced them off the land. The world watches uneasily as fascist dictators threaten war. Yet, in the midst of this darkness, the Sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery are investing in the future. They have begun an ambitious building project: the Chapel of Our Lady Queen of Peace that will link Stanbrook Hall, also under construction, and The College of St. Scholastica. Workers lay the cornerstone in July 1937, and the Sisters dedicate the completed chapel in August 1938. On the first floor is the college library, and soaring above it is the nave of the chapel with its central tower high above the floor, full of summer light. On an exterior panel an invocation in Latin reads *Crux sacra sit mihi lux*: “May the holy cross be my light.” The Sisters know that the surest path to God is through the Cross.



*Crucifix in original Chapel above the altar  
(photo from Monastery Archives)*

The new worship space is full of light, simple and serene. It is designed for liturgy and contains nothing for mere show: everything serves its purpose and is well made. For the crucifix above the altar, the Sisters have asked 30-year-old Harry Eversfield Donohue, a respected Catholic sculptor from Ossining, New York, to create a large *corpus* and cross out of black walnut and oak. The decision is a blessing for both parties. Mr. Donohue is already working on a marble *Mary, Mother of Mankind* for the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., and he is intimately familiar with both Cross and Motherhood: his beloved young wife Ruth Ann is sick. In three years she will die, leaving their three children without a mother and him with an aching emptiness of soul.

Meghan O’Rourke describes grief as necessarily private: “To mourn is to wonder that grief is not written all over your face in bruised hieroglyphics.” We fear showing the dark depths of sorrow, but the artist draws on what is inside and so can give voice to our collective silent pain. As Mr. Donohue carves into marble and walnut, the emerging figures of Mary and Jesus testify to his growing sense of loss and pain and, at last, to acceptance of the will of God and exhausted peace. And, yes, to a renewal of joy.

Today the chapel and library spaces are reversed: in 1986 the Chapel moved down to the first floor and became barrier-free worship space for the aging Sisters, and the library moved upstairs into three floors carved out of the original vaulted nave. The *corpus* and cross were separated, and the *corpus* was hung on the wall of the Eucharistic Chapel. Harry Eversfield Donohue died a year later in 1987, having lived forty-seven years without his beloved Ruth Ann, who had died shortly after the birth of their third child in 1940. Ruth Ann was only 22.

Come and look at his Jesus; see him through the eyes of this suffering artist. You will see the commonplace execution of a troublesome “prophet” who is God-made-man, who in his surrender to death gave us eternal life. You will also find the unresolved grief hiding within your own heart. Look into his eyes. Jesus hangs near eye level, spat on and mocked by passersby, abandoned by his friends. Even his Father appears to have turned the divine Face away. In his anguish he looks up to the gathering darkness and cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He does not hold himself back from pain and grief. Surely the artist, as he carved Jesus’ tortured face into the rough wood, cried out inside, “Lord, you healed others. Why can’t you heal my wife?”

In *Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*, Richard Rohr, OSF, says we have to suffer to know the human situation from within. If we avoid pain we will remain small, superficial, and isolated. Pain is holy, the touchstone of spiritual growth. When we consent to feel, holding nothing back, we experience God from the inside. When we walk through the pain holding onto Christ’s hand, we make the world better by surrendering to divine will.

As Mr. Donohue recorded his suffering in the face of Jesus in his studio, his *Mary* began to wear the face of his beloved Ruth Ann. Stroke by stroke he built her, a labor of deepest love, balm to his soul and gift to all who see, until she stood before him, whole and healthy, a bittersweet joy, with arms outstretched to gather all her children in an embrace. You can see her in the crypt level Memorial Hall of the Shrine in Washington, D.C.

Ten years after he completed the crucifix and his *Mary*, Harry Donohue wrote a meditation on the Way of the Cross: “All of us know the pain that comes when one we love is taken from us and the voice is heard saying, ‘From here you must go on alone. My love is ever with you, but you must find it by faith.’ ... [Christ] grieved, not that men on earth had not given him what he wanted, but that men had not received what he had to give them – salvation. ... In his last moment Jesus Christ realized that his human body could not carry him further. ... Defeated in his human form, he cried out, ‘My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?’ Feeling, as I do, that in the lesson of [these words of Christ] lies the road to salvation, I desire with all my heart that those who look upon this crucifix may see what I so keenly realized when I made it: only by yielding to the will and love of God can man be saved.”



*Christ in Eucharistic Chapel*

Christmas is far behind us. The small child in the manger has grown into a man and has learned he is the son of God, and knows the terrible price he will pay to save us from ourselves. In this Lenten season let us love each other with nothing held back, even when it brings suffering. Let us love as Christ loves us, through death and beyond into life.