

conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom 8:29). “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23).

Why does God allow so much suffering among the righteous? “For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6). Suffering thankfully before God is meritorious. With Christ there can be innocent victims of expiation for the world’s sins, and by patiently enduring suffering we can expiate our own sins.

It has been said, “The slightest pain in purgatory will be greater than the most severe pain while living.” St. Thomas Aquinas quotes St. Augustine as saying that *“This fire of Purgatory will be more severe than any pain that can be felt, seen or conceived in this world...Therefore it follows that the pain of Purgatory, both of loss and of sense, surpasses all the pains of this life.”* (*Summa Theologica*,” Appendix I, Question 2, Article 1). St. Bonaventure and St. Robert Bellarmine have pointed out that what this actually means is that for one and the same sin, the smallest suffering in purgatory is greater than any corresponding suffering on earth.

Is it not possible that God, in His mercy allows those He loves to suffer in this life in order that they do not have to suffer in purgatory?

Suffering is redemptive and never wasted when we offer it to God for the salvation of souls. Col. 1:24 “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my

flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” By offering trials and suffering one can make reparation for the insults to God by unbelievers, and strengthen the body of Christ.

Saint Paul also wrote in 2 Cor. 1:24, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.”

The Evangelization Station

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: evangelization@earthlink.net

www.evangelizationstation.com

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The Mystery and Meaning of Suffering

Victor R. Claveau, MJ

The Mystery of Suffering

Suffering is a law of human life. Every person will experience it; some to a greater extent than others. What Job wrote so many years ago is as true now as it was then: “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower, and withers; he flees like a shadow, and continues not” (14:1-2). The entire Scripture narrative from Adam to Jesus is a record of sin, sorrow and suffering.

However, if tribulation is a law of human life, it is also, thank God, a law and condition of Christian progress towards perfection. It is a means ordained by Heaven for our sanctification and salvation.

“We must remember that if by prayers and supplications we are not delivered from evil, we should endure our afflictions with patience, convinced that it is the will of God that we should so endure them. If, therefore, God hears not our prayers, we are not to yield to feelings of peevishness or discontent; we must submit in all things to the divine will and pleasure, regarding as useful and salutary to us that which happens in accordance with the will of God, not that which is agreeable to our own wishes.

“Finally, the pious bearers should be admonished that during our mortal career we should be prepared to meet every kind of

affliction and calamity, not only with patience, but even with joy. For it is written: *All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution*; and again: *Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God*; and further: *Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and so enter into his glory?* A servant should not be greater than his master; and as St. Bernard says: *Delicate members do not become a head crowned with thorns*" (*Catechism of the Council of Trent, Part IV: The Lord's Prayer*).

"We rejoice in our sufferings," says the Apostle Paul, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:3-5).

Rejoicing in suffering seems to be such a contradiction. We should rejoice because nothing happens to us that God does cause or allow. What we might call accidents are links in the chain of our immortal destiny. For if even a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without our heavenly Father's will, surely no misfortune can befall us without His consent.

We should rejoice because when God sends afflictions, it is not because of hatred and caprice, but as a mark of his Fatherly love.

Finding Meaning in Suffering.

In order to discover the fundamental and definitive meaning of suffering "we must

look to the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists" (*Salvifici Doloris*, 13).

"The answer to the question of the meaning of suffering has been 'given by God to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ' (*ibid.*, 13). Suffering, a consequence of original sin, takes on a new meaning; it becomes a sharing in the saving work of Jesus Christ (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1521). Through His suffering on the Cross, Christ has prevailed over evil and enables us to overcome it. Our sufferings become meaningful and precious when united with His. As God and man, Christ has taken upon Himself the sufferings of humanity, and in Him human suffering itself takes on a redemptive meaning. In this union between the human and the divine, suffering brings forth good and overcomes evil" (Pope John Paul II - *The Christian Response to Suffering*, Message of the Holy Father For the World Day of the Sick, for the Year 2002).

The mystery of suffering is so deep that many people have lost their faith trying to solve it by reason alone. Only in the Passion of Christ can we find meaning in suffering.

Suffering entered the world with the sin of our first parents. In the beginning suffering did not exist. Man broke God's law and justice demands restitution.

Both divine and civil law speak of suffering as a punishment. Reason recognizes the justice of suffering when it is inflicted on the criminal, but why does God allow the suffering of the innocent? Isn't this suffering a violation of Justice? The answer is found in Christ's agony. Here we

find that suffering is not always punishment as Jesus was sinless. His innocence and purity is not something easily grasped by minds clouded by sin. As He hung, dying an ignominious death for the sins of mankind, it was said, "Certainly this man was innocent!" (Lk 23:47), and "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54).

If the Son of God, innocent as He was, suffered so, then surely the guilty have no cause for complaint. However, how about the good person, the relatively sinless; why must they suffer? St. Peter answers this question when he wrote:

"For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? However, if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:19-25).

This is why we are called. Our vocation is to suffer with the innocent Christ, not only because of former sins, but also to become like the Sinless Sufferer. "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be