

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

Redemptive Suffering

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Hi everyone. My name's Mary Lenaburg, and it is a privilege to be with you today. We're going to talk about suffering with joy. But first, I want to bring our lady into our time together. So we're going to open with a Hail Mary in prayer. Please join me, won't you?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you so much for joining me today. We're going to talk about suffering. And I know that's not a real popular, happy topic, especially in today's culture. The world tells us that suffering is bad. It should be avoided at all costs. The world tells us there is no... They question the existence of God, because there is so much suffering in the world.

Now, we know that, as Catholics, we realize that suffering is not something any of us want to do, right. Nobody wants to suffer. It's not my favorite thing in the world ever, and I'm sure it's not yours. But unfortunately, it's part of the fact that we don't live in the Garden of Eden anymore, right? We are in a world filled with sin since The Fall, and so therefore there's going to be hardship, there's going to be death, there's going to be sickness, there's going to be floods, and tornados, and acts of horrible violence, and all of these things. These exist because we live a world where there is sin.

We know that God does not create these things. Nothing bad comes from a loving God. Again, He allows them to happen in our lives, He allows the situations to happen, but it's the "Why" of that, "Why does God allow suffering?" That we're going to kind of get to today.

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Have you ever heard the saying “God never gives you more than you can handle”? Right. I just want to roll my eyes at that. How many times I have heard that in my life is, yeah, too many to count. But it’s true. I don’t always believe it to be true, but it is true. He only gives us what He knows we can handle.

Suffering is a personal invitation from our Lord to enter into His passion and crucifixion, right. He suffered, He offered His life on the cross for us. So by allowing suffering in our lives, He’s asking us in the most intimate way, the most beautiful invitation, “Come join Me. Come be with Me in the suffering.” In that leaning in to the cross, we rely on Him for every need and every provision to make it through these trials.

I mean think about it. When things are going great, how’s your prayer life? How... are you talking to God every moment of every day? Well, I know I’m not all the time, because things are going well. But the minute something difficult comes along, I’m like “Oh God, please, please Lord, please Lord. Spare me. Spare me.” You know, suffering is part of our path to salvation, because by allowing that in our life, who do we seek? We seek God. And what does He want from us? That’s all. He wants us to know Him, love Him, and serve Him. He wants us to seek Him.

So we have something in Catholic theology called “redemptive suffering”. And when I talk about suffering with joy, this is how you get there. This concept of redemptive suffering. Because it’s all about love, right. In Corinthians it says, “Love is patient, love is kind”, all of those things. But the end of it, it goes “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” I mean, it never fails.

The cross is about love, God’s love for us. Redemptive suffering is about us loving God. So, the definition of redemptive suffering is human suffering that’s accepted and offered up in union with the Passion of Jesus, okay. Redemptive suffering can remit the just punishment for one’s sins or for the sins of another, or for the physical and spiritual needs of one’s self or another. This is what is known as redemptive suffering. This is where the joy comes from. To know that our suffering is never, ever wasted. It’s never wasted. It has a purpose! And when something has a purpose, it becomes easier to walk through.

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St. John of the Cross said “Whenever anything displeasurable or displeasing happens to you, remember Christ crucified”, and here comes the kicker, “And be silent.”

We’re in the season of Lent, right. And what does the church ask of us? They ask for alms giving, prayer, penance. Well, penance is suffering, right. To do penance for something or something is to suffer. So how beautiful that even during this season in the Church, we’re encouraged to take on redemptive suffering. But it’s not just limited to Lent. It’s a lifetime. Maybe it’s the first time you’ve ever heard of it. Awesome, you have 6 weeks to practice it, you know. To really dig into it. And then take it outside of this penitential season for the remainder of your life.

So, to be silent; to offer up without anybody really knowing. Silence is not an easy thing for me. I don’t know if it’s an easy thing for you, but I’m still working on it. God’s still working on it with me. But this idea of redemptive suffering by giving it a name and a purpose becomes easier to bear, and when something is easier to bear what happens? There is more peace. There is more joy in your life.

So, you’re sitting there, wherever you are, watching this video, and you’re thinking “Yeah, this lady doesn’t have a clue. She doesn’t know what suffering is. She’s just telling me all of these happy little happy clappy things.” Um, no. My words come from experience. Redemptive suffering sounds hard, and it is hard, but at the end of the journey that you’re going through, looking back, it’s the easier way to get through that time of trial.

So I’ve been married for 28 years. I’ve been blessed with 2 children: my son Jonathan and my daughter Courtney. Now, when Courtney was born, I was 25 years old, I was young, my husband and I had been married 5 years. Our son came along first, and then our daughter. And when she was 5 weeks old, she began having grand mal seizures.

So, imagine a teeny, tiny little baby, you know, 7 pounds, 8 pounds, her body racked with convulsions, her lips turning blue, her face turning purple as she’s trying to breathe. It’s terrifying. It’s terrifying. And we didn’t know what to do. We didn’t know why God was allowing this suffering in our life. We didn’t know

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why He was allowing this in our daughter's life. It felt like a punishment. What had we done?

We hadn't done anything. It was just part of our path, a part of our story. Part of our journey. We spent days and weeks in the hospital fighting for our daughter, trying to figure out what was happening, how we could help her, and we begged. Oh, begged and pleaded with our Lord. "Show us the way. Give us the answer. What is it we need to do to help her?" Again and again and again.

We yelled at God. Anybody that says you can't yell at God, go read St. Thomas Aquinas. He would yell at Him quite often. Rail at God. He's a big enough God, He can handle it. "Why Lord? Why? Stop it. Make it end. Give her back to us. Restore her health." You know. I mean, so much anguish, and hardship, and difficulty, and anger, and pain. We begged for Him to show us how we could make her well again. We were at a loss for what we were supposed to do.

Well, of course God brought us physicians, He brought us pharmaceuticals to aid her, but throughout her life those seizures came every single day. There were over 50 hospitalizations, she had surgery 6 or 7 times, there was a time we had the swine flu, and we were in isolation. I mean, just... scoliosis. Just so much difficulty. Physical difficulty. Countless therapies, everything you can imagine happened.

Life with a child whose mental capacity never exceeded 9 months of age, one who was wheelchair bound, one who never spoke a word, one who could never walk, like I said, never talk, was totally dependent on us for everything in her life, every part of her care. We were... I was responsible for her. This was not how I saw my life going. This was not in my life plan. I can't imagine it would be in anyone's life plan.

But God is a good and gracious God, and He gave us the opportunity to go to Lourdes, France on a healing pilgrimage when our daughter was 7. And while we were in Lourdes, we were given kind of a plan. Now, it's not like, you know, in *The Ten Commandments*, Charlton Heston's voice, you hear the voice of God. "Mary, do this." It didn't happen that way. And it's not like He said "Okay, so on Tuesday, February 22nd, you're going to do XYZ to follow My plan." No. He just

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whispered into our hearts and kind of showed us who He saw our daughter to be. How He saw her as perfect, and whole, and beautiful.

You see, redemptive suffering is all about love, like I said in the beginning. It's about the love of our Lord, Jesus, who offered His life for us, and in turn us offering our lives back to Him. But even with this whisper in my heart, I wasn't quite sure physically how that looked, you know. I mean, we just all want to be told what to do, right? Well, I don't know. I like... I've grown to like rules. I didn't follow them so well in my youth, but as an adult I like to know what's expected of me. So I kept asking, you know, "Lord, what do You expect of me?" And He didn't really answer that. But He allowed people to come into my life to encourage me, He allowed a full understanding of what redemptive suffering is, which brought me such peace.

Remember when you were little, and you complained about something, and your mom would look at you and say "Offer it up." "Offer it up Mary Beth." And I'd roll my eyes. "I really don't want to mom. It's too hard." That's what redemptive suffering is. That's what we as Catholics believe. Our suffering has worth and value. We don't just go through these difficult times for no purpose. God wouldn't do that to us. So it has value. Love has value.

St. Paul of the Cross said "The Passion of Jesus is a sea of sorrows, but also an ocean of love."

What does that mean? To understand what he's talking about, look at the crucifix. What is Jesus doing? His arms are spread wide open in a loving embrace, to you, to me, and to the whole world. "I am doing this for you. From the east to the west." Right. His head is looking down. Who is He looking at? Well, stand at the foot of the cross. Look up. Who is He looking at? He's looking at us, as if to say to you "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? I say those words so you never have to." Right. God is with us. He is present.

Now imagine you're our Lady, our blessed Lord, pardon me, our blessed Mother. She's standing at the foot of that cross. He's looking down at her, and she's looking up, and what is she doing? She's embracing the cross. Imagine her anguish, her sea of sorrows at seeing her Baby Boy, her sweet, beautiful,

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wonderful Child, who they murdered. She's looking up at His body. He is beaten, He is broken, He is bloody. And what can she do? Nothing but offer her sea of sorrows up to God. That's her Baby Boy. She believed in God's ocean of love. Her life was a pure example of it. "Thy will be done."

She did not abandon God in that moment. She stayed. She prayed. She wept. And the love she had for her Son, and for her God and Savior never, ever wavered. That is who God is to us. God offered His only Son so that we might know eternal life. He loved us so much He gave us His most precious Son, and allowed shame, humiliation, such physical trauma, emotional trauma. The Garden of Eden. "God, take this cup from Me. But if it's not Your will, be with Me." And God was.

This is redemptive suffering. Suffering out of love for the spiritual needs of others is never an easy thing to do. It demands sacrifice and pain, often with no gratitude. No gratitude at all. Which makes it all the more difficult to do. It works on both the person doing the suffering and on our behalf... doing the suffering on our behalf, pardon me, and those witnessing, those watching you suffer. Your life is an example of God's love. What is the world seeing?

Our family's job with our daughter Courtney was to witness her life as she allowed herself to be who God meant for her to be. We couldn't help her take away her pain. All we could do was love her. All we could do was love her. And while loving her was the greatest privilege and honor, it also was a huge burden. It was a financial burden, an emotional burden, a psychological burden borne by the rest of the family. Let's just be honest, it was a burden. But what we came to understand was how beautiful that burden was. And in that understanding comes the joy. Comes the peace of that beautiful relationship with our Lord.

When we came back from Lourdes with God's whisper in our hearts, I was able to learn in time by offering it up how to dissect my day and take each difficulty in each challenge that arose and place it at the foot of the cross. My daughter hated to have her hair washed. She had beautiful blonde hair with little Shirley Temple ringlets. She hated it. And I know it was hard for her. And so I would sing while we were in the bath as I was washing her hair. I would sing Gentle Mother, offering that time up to God, asking our Lady to bless it, to intercede for us, for both Courtney and myself, as she was batting her hands away from me, and

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water's flinging everywhere, and you're trying not to get frustrated, and... I offered it up. And I was at peace in that difficulty.

When she would have a seizure, I would hold her, and the first thing I would say is "Jesus, I trust in You." That beautiful prayer that St. Faustina gave us: "Jesus, I trust in You. If this is the seizure that's going to take my daughter from me and bring her home to You, I trust in You with the plan for my life and for hers. That You know best." I would say the Hail Mary, the Our Father, the Memorare, whatever I could think of in that moment, offering that time up in redemptive suffering, offering it up to our Lord, for whatever purposes He needed it for.

Whatever He needed to use my anguish for. I gave it back to Him, because He gave it to me first. He offered His life for me, and for my daughter, and for my husband, and my son, and for the world. I was going through but a season. This too shall pass, like kidney stones, but it will pass. What a privilege to offer it back up to our Lord. All I could do was trust in His plan, and witness to the suffering, and in turn place it all at the foot of the cross.

St. Bernadette says, "It is in loving the cross that one finds one's heart, for divine love cannot live without suffering."

Divine love can't live without suffering. Without embracing the crosses in our lives, we cannot fully love Christ. The joy comes from the trust in this relationship that we're building with Christ. And guess what? When you trust, when you are building a relationship, He honors that by giving you more. He honors it by giving you more.

Now, if you're sitting there saying "But Mary, I suffered this, and now you're telling me I'm going to suffer more." Well, life is not all about one little time of suffering. You have a whole life to live. Of course more will come, and that's okay. You're building those spiritual muscles. You're learning with each step to offer up even more for our Lord. Whether it be illness, the death of a loved one, physical pain, emotional pain, whatever it is, know that God knows what is happening, and is walking with you through it.

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Again, Jesus said “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” So that you would never have to. He’s already died for your sins. He’s already suffered more than I’ve suffered, He’s suffered.

So, I’m going to leave you with this quote. Many, many theologians and saints have written about, talked about why we should want to participate in redemptive suffering. But my favorite quote, which I have in I think 4 or 5 different places in my home, is from St. Francis De Sales, and think of it this Lent as your mission statement, okay. This is your mission statement this month. It’s my every Lent, or every day of my life really.

St. Francis De Sales says “The same everlasting Father who cares for you today will care for you tomorrow and every day. Either He will shield you from suffering, or give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginings.” I’m going to read that one more time. “The same everlasting Father who cares about you today will care about you tomorrow and every single day. Every day. Either He will shield you from suffering, or give you unfailing strength to bear it. Unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginings.”

St. Padre Pio took that and he even broke it down further. St. Padre Pio took St. Francis De Sales’ words and broke it down even further.

And Padre Pio says “Pray, hope, and don’t worry.” “Pray, hope, and don’t worry.”

God’s got this. He is the creator of all the universe. He knows, He stands outside of time, He already knows how our story ends. Love Him. Offer up your life to Him. And allow Him to love you through that. This Lent, remember, try to remember that all joy and all suffering is allowed for our own salvation. The good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful. It’s all for the sake of our redemption, so that we might know Him, love Him, and serve Him.

So be at peace with that, and know that you’re loved, and know that He stands with you in the midst of your suffering, and know that He receives the gift of your suffering with tremendous joy. So be at peace. Amen my friends. Amen. We’re

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going to end by saying the Our Father, which is the prayer that Jesus taught us. Join me please.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you all.