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Embracing Our Cross: Redemptive Suffering

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Hi, and welcome back. My name is Joshua Mazrin, and in this talk we'll be going over redemptive suffering. Let's pray.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank You and we praise You for this opportunity to draw from the well of Your love, to draw the Holy Spirit from the scriptures, and to receive deep healing, especially as we meditate on the Passion of Jesus Christ. Mother Mary, please intercede, that, like you, we would suffer well, and that we would truly come to know the meaning of suffering. We ask this through your intercession as we pray. Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst 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.

So again, suffering. There's a lot we could say about that. Basically, I think - maybe some of this is from my personal meditation, or maybe from some reading - but it seems to me that all the religions of the world are trying to escape one thing: Suffering. It seems like our day-to-day lives, people that live in the secular world, we do things to try and be comfortable. We do things to try to get away from suffering. We work hard, we buy things, we try to get a nice car, a nice house, or the newest phone, or... You know, we take care of our health, we go on these fad diets and all of these things to try to be comfortable and to get away from suffering. It seems to be kind of the MO of the world. "Let's be comfortable."

And the crazy thing is that it makes you suffer more, because you become so preoccupied with trying to fill this void, with trying to fill all of these empty spaces that we have. And, you know, you hear that you have this hole in your heart, and it's a God-sized hole, but you're trying to fill it with everything else. But there is some truth, even though that may be a little cheesy, there's some truth to this. We're constantly after the newest thing, or getting rid of little obstacles or barriers or inconveniences in our lives, ultimately to get away from suffering. And all the other religions, besides Christianity, are doing the same thing. Even the Jews for a while were after "How can we have this worldly power?" God was building up their people, and they would pray for this physical comfort. And you look through all the Old Testament, they're trying to get themselves in a good position materially speaking.

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But look at all the other religions, and even look at... I want to focus on one - maybe it's a religion, maybe it's a philosophy - but Buddhism. So Buddhism is trying to achieve this harmony, trying to achieve this sense of peace through detachment. So the reason I want to talk about Buddhism is because there is a similarity here with Christianity when it comes to detachment, but we're going to talk about it from completely different ends of the spectrum. Buddhism is trying to detach yourself from everything in the world, everyone, every material thing, every possession. Complete detachment from all, so that nothing can make you suffer. Because attachments, they believe, are things that make you suffer.

So, 1, you can't actually completely detach yourself from things. But also, they're getting rid of the good with the bad so that nothing can harm them, and they think this brings them to a state of tranquility. So it's actually impossible to truly detach from everything, because you've still got physical pain. You might convince yourself that you're detached from physical pain, but you still have it. So, basically, I think that's what these religions of the world are trying to do. We're running away from suffering. But Christianity handles it differently. Instead of Jesus coming to take all of our temporal suffering away, His method for saving us is the most excruciating suffering of all.

So basically, what the devil uses to try and bring us down and harm us, God takes and flips it over on him. He takes the devil's biggest weapon against us and turns it into a weapon against him. That's amazing. So we're saved through suffering. And then even in Romans 8, where it says we'll be glorified with Him, provided we suffer with Him. So Christianity isn't about escaping suffering, it's about embracing it and using it, to where you will still have it - you're not going to get away from the difficulties of the world. Maybe you can avoid some of them, but we're going to have suffering no matter what.

So it's about taking what's going to be there inevitably, and utilizing it for our own holiness, and also to save other people. So, eventually, or soon, we're going to get to talk about witnessing to loved ones. This is something that I want you to keep in mind: That you can take your suffering and use it, 1, to witness to other people, but also to merit for others' salvation, as well as your own. So we utilize suffering in this positive way, instead of just passively, like "O, offer it up," that you hear all the time. Suffering is this beautiful thing.

And the crazy, mysterious, miraculous, supernatural thing that happens here is, as the saints get holier and holier, as we grow in holiness, it's possible for us and will happen - and I'll go over the detachment from a Christian perspective in a second, specifically a Catholic perspective - but as we go through this growth and holiness, suffering starts to become sweet to us. And that's not in some weird masochistic

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kind of way, but truly spiritually. Suffering becomes this beautiful thing, because it's uniting us to Christ. We start to participate in His life. And the school of holiness, as taught to us by Christ, is the school of the cross, or the cross is the school of holiness, however you want to say it. Basically, the closer we get to Him, the more united we are in His Passion, and the less this suffering can kind of hold us down.

It's crazy to think about now, and I know many of us when hearing this will be like "Oh my goodness, that's not me," but saints like Padre Pio would actually crave more suffering, would ask for more, because he knew the redemptive power and quality that came with suffering, and his biggest thing was to be united to Jesus Christ. So that suffering was uniting him. And it's not that he wanted to experience pain, it's that he had become so united to Jesus that he wanted more and more and more for his own growth in holiness, but particularly for everyone else. And this is what Christianity does; it gives suffering a purpose, and the purpose is our salvation and the salvation of others.

And this is really, you know, as I said before, we're not called to just be good Catholics, we're not called to sit and say our prayers only; we're meant to have a very intimate, deep, personal relationship with God. That's what we're created for. We're not created to have a nice life, to live a test, and then to go to heaven. I don't like looking at this life as a test. This is a time that we get to do so that we can prepare ourselves for our eternal relationship with God, you know, where we end up in heaven. Like, there is a hierarchy - you will end up higher or lower. Yes, everybody will be completely filled with joy, but it's according to their capacity.

So maybe you grow enough in holiness to where you have a little thimble, and you get to heaven and your little thimble is filled to overflow, and you're completely content because you can't fathom anything more. Maybe you've got a teacup, because you did more on earth. Maybe you opened yourself up and you opened yourself to God more and you've got a bathtub of capacity. Or maybe, as one of my professors said at Franciscan, he's like "When people are coming up to receive the Eucharist, it's infinite that they can receive, but it depends on how much capacity they have."

So he'd make little jokes like that, and he's like "You've got the little old lady that shows up, the one that's there an hour early to pray the Rosary, and she really lives her faith. She's the one, you know, backing up with the dump truck to receive the grace. It's the same thing with us. As we get to heaven, we're going to be filled according to our capacity to receive love, and you'll be completely full, so wouldn't it be better to have a greater capacity? And this happens through this

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uniting our sufferings to Jesus on the cross, so that we suffer with Him, so that we can also be glorified with Him. That's really the point to all of this.

But I want to talk about that purification and detachment now. So Catholics, we have this great mystical tradition. I highly recommend reading particularly St. John of the cross and St. Teresa of Avila. But I want to start with in Matthew 16:24. It's what Garrigou-Lagrange calls the law of universal mortification. And it's a little theological, but basically it's Jesus saying "He who would wish to follow Me, deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow Me." So right there, three things. The first part is the purification, and then we have the mystical life. So it's asceticism and mysticism.

So this is what holiness is. All of us are called to truly grow in holiness. And what holiness is, again, isn't just sitting and being a good praying Catholic in the pews, but it's about allowing that prayer, and especially allowing the sacraments, to transform your life into what looks like Jesus. So holiness is actually being filled to overflow with the presence of God, with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Being transformed, being rid of our sins, our vices, and the negative, the bad usage of our passions - which is basically vice or sin, depending on what you're doing.

So it starts off with trying to get rid of all the mortal sin, and then you're trying to get rid of all the venial sin, and then you're trying to get rid of all the vice, and then you're trying to grow in virtue, and then habitual virtue, to where that's where holiness comes in. It's not all about action, but it's about basically the disposition of your heart. So it's not the perfection of action, but your disposition. How much you love Jesus, and how much love you receive from Him on a regular basis.

Of course there are ups and downs but, ultimately, you want to be going forwards. And as you get closer, this is something a lot of people don't realize. It's not about just doing good stuff, it's about growing in a relationship that changes you. And as you get closer to God, your relationship with Him should accelerate. So you don't sit at a casual seventy-five miles an hour going to the Lord - we're down in Florida here, so we drive kind of fast - it's not going the same speed, but you constantly accelerate. And Thomas Aquinas talks about this: If you have an object of large mass falling towards the earth, it doesn't go the same speed, but it goes faster and faster and faster. So, as we get closer to God, this, you know, object of large mass, the gravitational pull causes us to accelerate.

So our growth in holiness should be exponential. We should be getting holier, faster now than yesterday. We should have a greater desire to be in a relationship with God today than yesterday. We should have a greater zeal for the Eucharist today than yesterday. And Garrigou-Lagrange even says this. As you go to approach communion, if possible every day, you should want it more today than

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yesterday. And that would be a good measure of your relationship with God. Not on an emotional level, but just how much you desire to be in communion with Him. And, again, we're human, so sometimes you can just be feeling lazy. Don't think of that as a discouragement. But we want this trend of going faster and closer and closer.

So I want to go through that Matthew 16:24. First, you deny yourself. So that's mortification. So that's "I'm choosing to give up cheesecake." That's "I'm not going to sleep in, I'm going to get up right when my alarm goes off." That's "I'm not going to use seasoning on my food." Those are some of the physical mortifications. That's "I'm choosing to pray right now instead of do this," "I'm choosing to not go see this movie because it's inappropriate." Things like that. So it's the active stuff that you do to detach from the world.

So it starts with getting rid of all the bad stuff - the worst stuff, and then less worse stuff, and then things that aren't that bad - and then just willingly choose to sacrifice even good things so that we have more room in our heart for Jesus. That's really what Lent is all about specifically, but we're called to live it every day of our lives. It's not "Oh, I'm just giving this up because it's tradition," it's "I'm getting rid of something, I'm clearing out the garage, the crawl space, I'm making some room in my heart, where I've got this junk that's just taking up space."

So it doesn't even have to be bad stuff, it's just getting in the way, so that I have more room for God in my heart. So maybe think about some of these things that you have that are just kind of clogging up space, taking up your attention. Some of them are bad, some of them are neutral, and maybe it's time to clear out some of that neutral stuff that you justify by saying "Well, it's not bad." But maybe there's room for more good. Maybe God has a calling for you that's bigger.

So first, you're denying yourself. Then, this is what we're primarily doing with this retreat, take up your cross. So the first is the willing stuff that we choose to do. Now we're dealing with the things that are given to us. The sufferings that we encounter, the difficulties maybe in our job and our family, obstacles and things like that that are out of our control. We take that as our cross that's given to us maybe just by the world, you know, things that we encounter through everyday life. Or maybe it's actually a cross that God is giving you to carry specifically, meant tailor-made for you to overcome your personal vices. So you've got to pick that up. So now, it's... You went from asceticism - this is called active purification - we went from doing things ourselves, to now passive purification - which is the stuff that we can't take care of ourselves. It's what God has to purify in us. And then it leads us or puts us in a disposition to be brought by God, in following Jesus, to where He then brings us into a mystical union.

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So we're meant to be mystically united to God, where we experience Him in infused contemplation, in mystical union, in spiritual betrothal, and even spiritual marriage for those very few that are blessed to get that far. But the Catholic Church actually has this teaching, this trajectory that everybody follows when growing in holiness. There's different levels of prayer. We move from the lowest level, which is vocal prayer, and then to meditation, and then to reflective prayer - which is deeper than meditation - and then to the prayer of what they call "simple gaze," where it's just "I look at the Lord, and He looks at me." So those are the ones that you can do on your own.

You can go through your own purification, you know, the denying yourself to get that stuff done. But then you make a transition. From there, it takes a purification that you can't do. And this is where John of Cross, we mentioned, comes in. There's the dark night of the sense and the dark night of the soul. So the dark night of the sense is kind of this first purification, where God rids you of all of these sensual attachments to lead you into the mystical prayer. So you move past that reflective prayer and simple gaze to the prayer of infused contemplation.

So it's prayer that He initiates, where you're actually tasting the presence of God through the supernatural, the gift of wisdom. It allows you to fully experience, like you know that it's Him. You feel it, it consumes you, and you're just captivated by God's presence. And that's meant for all of us. So if you follow this simple formula of denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Him in your everyday life, that gives meaning to your suffering, and it allows you to legitimately actually be conformed to God's life. It invites you into the life of The Trinity, particularly in imitation of Christ.

So this mystical life, this universal call to holiness is for all of us. So take the time, choose to do some of those mortifying practices, really look into fasting. It's beautiful, but don't do it as this "Oh, I'm great," or "I have to do this" kind of thing, but find that beauty to where you can clear out the space so you can regulate your own passions, so that you can live your life for God. I know that all of you can think of these little things. Maybe it's something that you do in excess, or maybe it's just something that you feel God is calling you to give up or to offer to Him, so that you can live this life of Jesus in the desert, but then also this mystical life of His healing ministry and all this other stuff, these amazing things. And also including the intimate union that He had each day with the Father. So this is what I hope all of us call to mind and approach this, to know that our sufferings unite us to Christ, and to maybe say this and do this with a little more intentionality. So, again, thank you, and God bless you all.