

How Suffering Can Be Sanctified

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Hello, I'm Father Taylor Reynolds. Today I will be talking to you about how is suffering sanctified. Before we begin, let's dive into the heart of God through prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Most merciful God, you desire to show your love for us in the suffering heart of your son, Jesus, given up to death for us. Lord, we pray that as we encounter sufferings in our own life, we may also encounter the hope you have for us. We pray that we may come to experience the greater truth of your love, of your protection, and above all the promise you have in store for us.

Lord, we pray that we may endure our suffering with courage, with patience and with compassion. Above all, we may find that we are not alone, for you journey with us, you suffer with us, you give us strength. And Lord, we pray that we may continue in all things to become the saints that you call us to be. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

How is Suffering Sanctified?

Well, again, today I will be talking about how is suffering sanctified. It seems like almost an oxymoron, suffering and sanctified, or holiness. You know, it would seem that there is nothing more human than the experience of suffering. And it would seem that that experience at times can be the farthest thing from the experience of holiness. You know, nobody enjoys suffering, nobody finds any good in suffering. Any of us who have truly suffered or seen someone who suffers, we know there is, you know, it's a very, almost despairing situation. So today I'm hoping to give you hope, hoping to give you, again, that way in which we can find what God has done. How has God taken this most human of experiences and made it actually a means for us to reach heaven, to become the saints that God calls us to be.

And so, first of all, I want to start off with that. You know, there is no simple answer. How is suffering sanctified? There is no one simple, single answer because the entire Christian faith is the answer. The entire Christian faith is the response to that reality, is the response to that experience, that again, is so human, that Christianity is so tied with the human experience and is so tied with the answer.

Every single individual part of the Christian faith in itself answers the question, as well as each individual part forms the greater answer. Everything, from the church's, you know, gift of the sacraments and baptism, to the example of the saints, to, you know, the teaching of Mary. All of these realities, every single thing the church teaches that we as Christians practice and pray, all in their own way respond to that, respond to suffering and how is it sanctified. And each of them all

together, as the whole Christian journey, give us the answer, how we sanctify suffering. So, there is not one single answer, but it is drawn up into the entire walk, the entire Christian faith, every aspect of it. So that's my first, you know, kind of thing to begin with. For each one of us is that there's not just one simple little remedy, it is walking as Christians, it is, again, believing as Christians, praying as Christians, doing all of these things. Everything the church gives us, in their own way, will respond, will give us strength, will help to make suffering something that can be sanctified.

What is Suffering?

So, the next thing, I think, that's important, is to really diagnose and say, "what actually is suffering?" First of all, suffering is not God's will. God from the beginning did not will, and still does not will that we suffer. God does not find pleasure in our suffering. You know, the Psalms tell us that, you know, God does not rejoice with the death of the just man. You know, Christ himself wept at the death of Lazarus. You know, there are all these various experiences that we see in the scriptures, in the lives of the saints, where, you know, sorrow takes place in the face of suffering, which is very much, again, the heart of God. And we look again how God originally created the world, that suffering was not a part of it.

You know, we look, and we say that suffering was a result of original sin. We can say that with original sin, whenever man sinned, when Adam sinned, ultimately what happened was he broke a communion with God, he broke an order with God, he brought in this chaos. You know, there was originally this beautiful cosmos, this beautiful harmony and symphony of all of creation with God, of all things that exist with God, His plan and how things would play out. And when man sinned, that broke. You know, not only did man and God break, but all the created world, everything inside of man as well, you know, broke union with God. And so, then what happened is we had the introduction of evil. You know, what I mean by this, that God had originally created that there would be sort of various distinctions and levels of good, you know, that there would be various higher goods, lower goods, all in a beautiful kind of hierarchy that would ultimately lead back to God.

You know, you can almost kind of use the image of a symphony, each sort of individually playing its own music according to its creation, how it was made, everything forming a union with God. And whenever man sinned, they entered into this disharmony. You know, all these different things no longer are seeking God, and so now lower things are trying to override higher things, higher things are seeking after lower things. You know, there's no longer this unity or pursuit of God.

Two Kinds of Evil

And so, we have entering in what we will say is two main kinds of evil: physical evil, and then moral evil, I'll talk about those in a little bit. Physical evil, again, becomes literally the physical created world that is, again, itself no longer in communion, is no longer United together in its pursuit of God. That it now pursues different things. It acts, you know, not in accord, necessarily, with its final destiny, its final good. You know, and so what you have now is you have the introduction of things such as hurricanes, you have, you know, mudslides that will come in and

then destroy a school. You know, you have fires that will go and devastate, you know, a city. You know, all these things that in their own way, in their own form of creation were, you know, were created good, but now are disordered. One of my seminary professors, he used the image of, you know, imagine there's this child and he's playing outside, and a tornado comes by, and you know, obviously sweeps him up and he's killed, which thing was doing wrong? You know, the child was just doing what a child does, he's outside playing, the tornado was just wind currents, you know, just blowing. They all were sort of doing their own thing, but again, there was a certain disorder. You know, the winds weren't necessarily blowing or turning in the way that would be becoming to man. You know, man was not necessarily listening to prudence in that moment or that child obviously was not aware, you know? And so, all those things created an experience of suffering. So that's one experience, you know, is the physical evils that bring about suffering.

Suffering ultimately being the deprivation of a good that we seek. You know, that the suffering in a physical way is us being deprived of some good that should be there. You know, so a sickness that comes into our life is depriving us of the health that we're supposed to have. You know, the loss of a loved one is depriving us of a good we should have with them. So that's in a very physical way, what physical evils are and in a sense physical suffering. I'm not talking about of the body, I'm talking about kind of in that union of physical evils.

So that's one thing, then there is, again, what we call moral evils and what this is a little harder to dissect, but it is kind of the internal disordering of goods, of priorities, of principles, of ideals within the heart of man, within his emotions and his passions and everything, that also bring about suffering, that bring about struggle. And this can be the traumatic experience of, you know, one man murdering another person, you know, of two people who are friends and one betraying the other, you know, these things that there's not, it's not as clear-cut, it's not as clear-cut that there was, you know, some kind of a physical evil, there's some choice. And ultimately what we have to say with this is that, again, God created man with free will and he left man free to make the choice of his free will. But again, from original sin, man's passions, man's intellect, all these things are darkened or, you know, they're misinformed, and his lower passions no longer listen to his higher ones.

So, we experience, again, these moral evils where man makes choices that are not good anymore, you know? And we unfortunately experience that again and again, through the wars we see, through the fighting, the riots, you know, all the disordered world, you know, is people making choices, their free will coming from some sort of a disordered, you know, priorities in their own life. So those two main things will make suffering.

More Love for Things, More Sorrow

The other thing that will also make suffering, tied with those physical evils, ultimately is what Catherine of Siena would say, just the reality that the more things we love, the more sorrow there is. because again, sorrow is the experience of being deprived of something we love. If we love too many lower things, if we're in love with so many lower things of this world and we're deprived of them, we're not able to get them, that makes more sorrow. you know, if I'm so in love with food, I'm so in love with my reputation, if I'm so in love with this physical thing, that,

you know, status or all these different things. When I'm in love with those things to a high degree, well, when I don't achieve those things, then I'm sorrowful, I feel suffering, you know? So, there's that reality as well. So that again, can help us, you know, is the experience and the understanding of what is suffering, I think, first of all, can help us to paint the page.

It's God Himself

Okay, so now, how is suffering sanctified? We still haven't gotten necessarily to the clear-cut answer. Again, as I said, every aspect of the Christian faith is going to respond to it in its own unique way, but one of the first major things is, you know, God himself, and what we'd say His divine providence. because I think sometimes the question comes up, "well, if God is all good and God is all-powerful, why doesn't he prevent those things? Why doesn't he stop them?" You know, it's one of the great questions we see, and we hear about, again, even in the scriptures, you know. "If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross." You know, that great cry that, you know, "God, if you are God, you will prevent, you will stop suffering," which again, you know, God does not will it, but at the same time, God does not contradict our free will or the necessary kind of flow of how nature is now moving, nature is now journeying and trying in its own way to come back to Him. And so, what God does is He proves His goodness and His power by making a greater good actually come from evil.

I know that sounds very hard, and sometimes in the moment it's very hard to experience it, but I take an example that J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of the Lord of The Rings, used when he wrote The Silmarillion, which is kind of the creation story of Middle-Earth, and he basically, you know, paints the picture that the creator of Middle-Earth and of that time, was this kind of great conductor, and all of creation was literally sung into existence. Everything was sung and, again, in its own kind of unique harmony, in its own unique sort of voice tone, everything. And again, he was the conductor that made this beautiful symphony.

Well, there was, again, a Satan figure, an antagonist, who enters in and sort of in the midst of this symphony starts to introduce, you know, these flat notes and these just, you know, very kind of low and horrendous noises, to try and mess with the symphony. Well, the conductor, you know, instead of just stopping the symphony and trying to kick out those, you know, those musicians or those instruments and trying to start again, the conductor continues with the symphony, but actually incorporates in all those sounds and is able to make an even greater, bigger and more beautiful symphony, because it includes, you know, the valleys and the troughs rather than just the peaks and the crests, you know?

And so, this is, again, what God desires to do to bring about a greater good. And in His providence, God's Providence, He can do that. You know, He is able to bring that about. And there will always be, throughout our life, this reality that points, again, to the fact that everything is journeying, and God is leading it, God is ultimately leading everything to its final home, to its final good. And so, we look and say that all these things in their own way, even the suffering and the hardship, it points to the fact that this world is in a journey, this is not our final place, but God is leading it all and is drawing it up to himself.

God is Love

And again, the reality of divine providence can even play in with the moral evil. It's a little harder because, you know, again, we have to say that there's a free will that God respects, but God is still able to bring about good through it. And so now, how do we see that? The other way then is through love. You know, the scripture says that love covers a multitude of sin, and so we can say again that now God has brought love into the world. God, who is love, has introduced love. And so in the face of this struggle and this suffering, God enters in with "compassio", literally suffer with, compassion. And so love is this reality that now can increase and grow in the face of this evil, because now there is a cause and a place in which love can enter in, in which we can suffer with others, others can suffer with us, and love can draw love, which is the greatest good.

And again, remember, that suffering comes when we are deprived of a good, but when we're brought to the greatest good, when we're given the final good, you know, then suffering can be ended. You know, Mother Teresa, she was so accustomed to this reality and would see suffering every day, but she would also see how when love is present, there is no more suffering, you know, because love is the response, love is what brings about, again, this greater end. And so, we see that love in itself gives that final response. And, you know, we live in a world that sees the ending of suffering as the greatest good. The only good that exists is to end suffering. You know that we have to eradicate all suffering and that is the only good, and every person, every society, can only be measured according to that quote, how much do they stop or end suffering.

But again, it's sometimes just chasing our tails because what they end up doing is it leads them into abortion, it leads them into euthanasia, it ultimately leads us into, ultimately, depriving us, depriving others of goodness, you know, of creating more evil, creating more suffering, really, you know, by the attempt to avoid that. It's the image that someone gave that, you know, in man's attempt to make bread out of stones, unfortunately, man will many times give stones in the place of bread. When we try to eradicate suffering, we end up just providing ultimately worse sufferings, you know? And that is our calls, ultimately, you know, through compassion, to say, you know, we suffer with, ultimately, yes, we do try to overcome these evils, but we always have to love the good is there.

You know, I love some of the beautiful organizations such as Let Them Live, that help women struggling with abortion, because they hope to journey with them, to accompany them, to give them, you know, more than just a simple answer out of, you know, this situation, but ultimately how to, you know, live, again, and how to have accompaniment and journeying, you know?

Jesus is the Answer

And so now we lead to the final and really the greatest answer, which is Jesus himself. Jesus, in taking on a body, in taking on a physical body, took on a body that could suffer, took on a body that did suffer, took on a body that experienced in every way what it means to be human, and most supremely, He suffered in that body. You know, He physically endured pain, everything from hunger, everything to the cruelty of other men, to the death on the cross. You know, and He really drew into His body that experience of suffering. And we remember that, again, this is why

there's no single answer to our faith, because in drawing it into His body, we as the church are the body and that suffering is drawn in, but then at the same time that body that suffered was the same body that rose. You know, when Jesus rose from the dead, it was His same body, the same body that suffered on the cross, the same body that rose. You know, that promise of overcoming suffering.

You know, I love the image of when Jesus appears to the apostles after the resurrection, He shows them His hands, you know? And the wound marks, and for some of us, you know, that could be an experience of shame, you know, "oh my gosh, I betrayed Him. Look, He's showing these wounds to shame us." No Jesus is showing those wounds so that He can show, "these wounds are no longer an image or a point of suffering and shame, but now they are the fountains of peace and mercy." You know, and the same issue in the body, you know, for us now who suffer, suffering is now this promise that one, God is so near us, God is so close to us.

You know, when we suffer, we know that we are close to Christ because Christ suffered, and we suffer, you know, just like the body. You know, the image of the Bible, when one member suffers the whole body suffers. When we as the members suffer, the head experiences that and is drawn into that. You know, so we experience and we can know a closeness to Christ in suffering. You know we're invited to unite our sufferings with Jesus, you know, ultimately, to take whatever we're going through, no matter how little or how big, and if it's offered to Jesus, if it's united to Him, you know, again, as the body, it unites and with His great offering of His suffering to the Father.

You know, what does St. Paul say? You know, "I make up in my body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ." Not that Christ's suffering, you know, in any way was lessened, but me as the body, I still have to take my suffering and make it that offering to God, and we do that when we suffer, you know? And so that's the hope that is ultimately given is that finally we see and we know, we're already given the promise that Christ has been victorious, He's overcome every suffering to give us peace, to give us hope. You know, hope is not saying that the darkness is not there, but it's saying the light is greater than the darkness. And we ultimately can rejoice to say that, you know, whatever suffering I'm enduring, Christ has already been victorious. What I see, the victory taking place in the head, I know me and the body, I will share in it. And so I know that this suffering will lead me in, ultimately, my road to heaven.

Grace and Suffering

You know, I end with the beautiful quote of St. Rose of Lima, who said that, you know, "The gift of grace is in proportion to the gift of suffering." That the measure in which we suffer is the measure in which we share in the grace of God, that the more suffering we experience, the more the gift of grace comes into our life. So, the more we experience suffering, the more that suffering is in our life, the more we are also given a share of the grace to cover it and to overcome. And ultimately, outside of the cross there is no other stairway to reach heaven. You know, and that's the reminder that through suffering we do unite ourselves with God. Through God's Providence He now takes it and makes it a channel to reach heaven.

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So I hope and pray that this gives you hope in the experience of suffering, helps to give you inspiration and strength, and allows you as well to take your suffering, offer it up to Jesus, see through the Divine Providence of God, how He's leading to something greater and how your love can increase and you can find the greatest good, which is union with Christ, even in suffering. And may Almighty God bless you, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.