

A Story of Redemptive Suffering (featuring Saint Rafqa)

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My name is Sister Orian Pietra René, I'm a daughter of St. Paul, and it's an honor to be praying with you today. Today I am recording one of the quietest rooms of our house, but we are on a major intersection, and so if you hear noises of the traffic today, I would invite you to please pray for all of the people, all of the souls behind the wheel, as we are called to pray for all of those around us in our own localities, our own homes, and our own neighborhoods.

Today I would like to share with you the story of a Saint who you may not have heard of before. She's a saint who is very dear to me, and who has been very important in the faith life of my family. But I think in a very special way, she is a saint whose story brings together the importance of how we understand healing, which I hope and pray.

If you prayed with The Lectio Divina of the Syro-phoenician woman or the Canaanite woman, in the gospel of Matthew. You may have touched on a new angle of, and as we have discussed, what it means to unite our wounds to the Lord's cross, to offer up our suffering. I hope that this kind of in fleshes puts into flesh and blood what it means to be able to live that out in our own lives.

Before we begin exploring the story of this saint, I would like to begin with a prayer and perhaps we can bow our heads and ask, especially again for open hearts, and to ask the Lord to help guide whatever insight it is that we need. Whether we need our minds to be touched, our hearts to be touched, or our own wills to be touched and freed by him.

Opening Prayer

We pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord, you alone are our healer. One of the many names by which you are called in the Old Testament is Jehovah Rafa. The Lord heals. We ask you to heal any wounds in our mind, in our heart, or in our will to break any chains that hold us back in our understanding.

In our ability to enact, in our ability to love, we ask, especially this through the intercession. We ask this, especially through the intercession of St. Rafqa, whose story we will explore today together, and we ask this in the name of Christ our Lord, amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

The Life of Pietra

Ah, amen. St. Rafqa was not born St. Rafqa None of us are born saints. She was born under the name of Pietra. She was born on the feast of, St. Peter and St. Paul, and so her parents named her Pietra after St. Peter. She was born to a Maronite Catholic family in Lebanon. Her mother died when she was very young, and it was a loss that she held for the rest of her life.

Her father sent her when she was old enough to work in Damascus, Syria to help support the family, and when eventually she returned as a beautiful young woman, good humored, beautiful smile, her stepmother, her father had remarried, um, and other women in her life all had ideas of who she should be married to.

And this really stirred up questions for a young Pietra at that time, who did she want to be married to and did she want to be married? And eventually the tension in her family was too much for her to take. And she kind of said, forget this. And realized in herself that she didn't feel called to this at all, and one day she just got up, walked away from home and walked to a monastery to a convent. She met with the mother Superior there who determined that she actually might have a vocation to religious life, and she accepted young Pietra into the convent.

Pietra went through all of the stages of initial formation and made her first vows. She was then sent to teach in a small, remote mountain village, and it was in this village that something happened. Something very serious happened. That in a way would change her life. While Pietra was teaching in this mountain village, she was in charge of a school and she had students of different ages, both boys and girls.

At this time in Lebanon, there were significant tensions mounting between the Druze people who are historically an offshoot of Islam. They are their own religious community. Um, basically Muslim in foundation with some elements of Hinduism and other faiths mixed in, if you will. Um, and the Maronite Christians and these tensions were really exacerbated by a lot of things that different European countries were doing to leverage, um, their influences in the region.

A Traumatic Experience

But eventually these tensions erupted into a civil war. At that time when Pietra was teaching at this school in this remote mountain village as a young sister. Druze Raiders as part of this civil war, swept through her village along with many others, and were massacring all the men that were deemed to be a fighting age, including young boys that we would not count as men today. While Pietra was teaching in this village, this sweeping raid happened in front of her very eyes. She witnessed Druze soldiers, druze Raiders, come into the village and start to slaughter the men around her.

Thankfully, they did not touch the women. She was unharmed, um, physically anyway, uh, but she was watching all of this happen around her. And at one point she caught sight of one of her students, a 12-year-old boy who was being chased down by a soldier. And by the grace of God, she managed to catch hold of this boy and hide him under her skirt, saving his life. Pietra remained physically unharmed. The boy, thank God, remained physically unharmed, but both were scarred that day. This was, uh, an event that stayed with Pietra for the rest of her life, but she didn't let it turn her to bitterness or hatred or despair.

She allowed it to turn her heart to prayer later on in her life. The order that she was a part of the teaching order, she was a part of dissolved, and so the sisters who were part of this order were invited to consider joining other orders that already existed, and Pietra decided to join a cloister, a monastic order.

She entered the cloister, she had to make another novitiate, and she took the name Rafqa. At her vows with this cloistered order after her mother Rafqa.

Sister Rafqa's Redemptive Suffering

Sister Rafqa now went on to experience some very difficult things in her life. She experienced medical trauma as she experienced some real issues with her eyes. Went to the doctor and for reasons that I will not go into here because I find them difficult to talk about, she ended up losing one of her eyes. She also had extreme pain in her, in her joints, and, um, became crippled over time because of this pain. What is fascinating to me is that before these eye issues and joint issues ever began, she had a moment in prayer where she lamented not having a particular type of suffering to offer to the Lord.

She asked the Lord that if he willed it to give her some suffering that she might offer back to him as a gift to unite to the cross for him to make redemptive for others. This is a very remarkable prayer that we are not all called to make in any moment of our life, but she made with faith and trust and was indeed entrusted, if you will.

With much suffering afterwards, but she had known very particular sufferings before that as well. The loss of her mother after whom she took her religious name, being able to being exposed, if you will, to tremendous traumatic events, and yet she wanted more to be able to offer to the Lord.

It takes an incredible type of grace and spiritual maturity to be able to see this type of suffering as potentially holding a gift within it. We do not ask for suffering for the sake of suffering, suffering in and of itself. If not, united to the redemptive suffering of Christ holds no merit, no goodness, but when we unite it to the suffering of him, who is good, who is meritorious, who is our redeemer, suffering itself changes completely. Somehow instinctively Rafqa knew this and she asked for this gift.

The Value of Rafqa's Presence

Through her many sufferings she became, as I mentioned earlier, quite crippled. As she aged. She experienced real physical sufferings that the sisters around her noticed. And yet. She also became one of the most joyful, kind and wise sisters in the convent.

So much so that when the younger sisters of the convent were asked by their mother superior to go found a second house, the young sisters insisted that Rafqa accompany them even though she could not even walk really by this point, because they so valued her presence, her holiness. Her joy and her wisdom in community, she could not contribute to the community in ways that we would typically associate with being helpful or useful.

And yet the young sister saw that her contribution, her gift, went so far beyond any task-oriented, uh, gift that anyone could possibly give at the end of her life. When Rafqa passed away, she was known for her holiness. She was known for working many miracles even after her death. And I would like to share one with you that has never made the books, but is very important in my own life.

As I mentioned earlier on in this video, Rafqa experienced a very traumatic event at a young age as a young sister when she was still Pietra. Rafqa witnessed the slaughtering of her own people at the hands of another people of Druze Raiders during a civil war. Rafqa prayed for them. Her biographies only briefly touch upon this, this ongoing prayer of hers, remembering that this memory pained her very much, and simultaneously recalling her as a deeply prayerful person.

A film on her life made in Lebanon shows her praying. At the recollection of this painful memory, I would like to share with you another layer of this story. As Rafqa experienced physical pain, the loss of an eye for which she immediately forgave the doctor debilitating pain through her life, which she never let separate her from Christ.

Even one day crawling to mass when she felt inspired to attend. When her sisters were planning on having communion brought to her afterwards. She also prayed deeply for those who had most wounded her and her people.

The Influence of St. Rafqa To My Family

Generations later, several Druze converts would look to her intercession as having played a pivotal role in their finding Christ the descendants of the very people who slaughtered her own. And I count myself among that group. My maternal family is of Druze origin. We are descended from the same people who slaughtered St. Rafqa's own in that village that day. Generations later my family would find Christ. And at a very pivotal moment in my own vocational discernment, when I was asking myself and asking the Lord, why? Why have I found Christ but not others in my family? Why have some of us found Christ and not all of us found Christ? Saint Rafqa kept popping up until it became clear to me that she was praying deeply, not only for me, but for my family.

This was a huge wake up call for me. Recognizing how the prayers and the suffering offered up by a woman who lived hundreds of years ago impacted me was a channel of grace for me and my family that helped to bring us to Christ and to accept his grace in our own lives. Recognizing the power that forgiveness can have in healing intergenerational realities.

In healing family trees that St. Rafqa was not only an example of how to offer up physical suffering and how to trust Christ in the midst of mental and emotional anguish, but also she's an incredible example of how suffering turned to prayer. And offered to the Lord can serve truly as redemptive suffering for many others, not only in our own time, but in future generations.

I know that this is a very simple story. There are no bells and whistles, but I hope that it offers some encouragement for you. St. Rafqa was born in the same territory, if you will, as the Syro-Phoenician woman. A pagan woman who trusted Jesus implicitly and named him as her Lord, and by her faith won the healing of her daughter.

Have A Trust Like St. Rafqa

St. Rafqa was one who was able to truly entrust, unite her suffering to that of the Lord on the cross, trusting in implicitly that he could make it redemptive to the point where she even asked for it as a gift. We are not all called to ask for suffering in our life. Life will provide us with enough suffering of its own, but do we see the ability to offer it to Christ to make redemptive as a gift?

Suffering itself as an effective evil is not a gift in and of itself, but the ability to offer it to Christ, to make it redemptive for our souls and the souls of countless other people. That my brother, my sister, that is a gift, and Rafqa knew it, and I am one of the many beneficiaries of the gift of her faith offered to the Lord.

And so I would encourage you to trust with the trust of St. Rafqa that any suffering you face in life, whether it is emotional or mental, or physical or spiritual. While as an effective sin is not a gift in and of itself, united to the cross to Christ's suffering, which he makes redemptive that act of unity, that, that, that forming of a channel of grace, that is a gift and it is a gift that has impacts beyond our fathoming.

I would encourage you today to ask for the intercession of St. Rafqa to help you have this trust, to give you the courage to offer up your own suffering, whatever it is to the Lord, and to await the miracles that He will work through it. Let us end this time with the Glory Be, which we pray and trust for all the miracles that the Lord will work through our small offering united with his great offering today.

Glory Be

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be world without end. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.