

Learning How to Embrace the Cross

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Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, His mercy endures forever. Hello to all my brothers and sisters in Christ continuing with us on this Pray More Healing Retreat. I am Father Ricardo Pineda with the Fathers of Mercy, and I am particularly excited to guide you in this reflection on suffering and embracing the cross.

Is God's Plan For My Life Good?

The prompt for this reflection was, "Is God's plan for my life good? How can it be if it involves suffering?" And I'm thinking, of course God's plan for our life is good. Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "Plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." 1 Corinthians 2:9 says, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him." And we get a sense of the big picture in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "For this is the will of God for you, your sanctification."

Some people ask, "Uh, doesn't God just want us all to be happy?" No. God first and foremost wants us to be holy, your sanctification. And from that will flow the true and lasting happiness. God's plan for us is nothing less than what the Greek fathers of the church called divination, to share in the divine life of God, to live like God, to love like God in a divine way, to cooperate in the salvation of immortal souls, and in the end, to enjoy perfect, loving communion with God in the happiness of heaven. So yes, the plan's very good, but when we are faced with a lot of suffering, we can tend to doubt the goodness of God's plan if we don't have an understanding of how the cross fits into our Christian life. So let's dive into this difficult topic with a prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Dear Heavenly Father, we praise you for creating this world and for making it in the beginning completely good with no suffering at all. We thank you for your desire to preserve us from all harm, most especially the harm of sin. We thank you for sending us your Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from sin by means of His suffering and death on the cross. Enlighten our minds to understand the blessings of the cross and to carry our crosses with great love for you and for souls. We ask this in the name of Jesus through the intercession of Mary, our mother, St. Joseph, our guardian angels and patron saints, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

Mark 10

All right. In the Gospel of Mark chapter 10, James and John, request of Jesus, "Grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory." Jesus tells them, "You do not know what you are asking." And He asks them, "Can you drink the chalice that I drink or be baptized with a baptism with which I am to be baptized?" And they say, "We can't." He says, "You will drink the chalice that I drink, and you will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit at my right and my left is not mine to grant."

And for years I would think, oh, poor James and John. Not only did they not get what they wanted, but now they're going to have to suffer a lot too. They should have kept their mouth shut. Well, it's because I did not yet have an understanding of how Jesus has transformed the meaning of the cross. But before we are ready to appreciate that, it's good to take a step back and recognize the Catholic church does teach that suffering is an evil, that suffering and pain in and of itself, it still remains an evil. It's not good to desire it in itself.

It's very appropriate for us to try to avoid suffering and pain, try to protect ourselves, protect our loved ones, seek medical attention, or psychological help. And it's very good for us to pray in the name of Jesus for healing. If we are not healed when we pray for it, it's very okay to keep praying for it. And as long as the suffering remains upon us, well rather than resorting to sin to try to get rid of it, there are several points of Catholic understanding that can help us pass through the suffering with faith and possibly even great joy.

God Does Not Will For Us To Suffer

First consideration is that God does not will anyone to suffer. He does not directly will, want, or desire anyone to suffer. He did create us without suffering in the beginning. How did suffering get introduced into this world? We, as the human family, invited it in through sin. And we might rebel against that saying, oh, no, that's not fair. That was Adam and Eve. It's not fair. I should have to suffer because of their sin. Well, it does make some reasonable sense when we remember that we exist as members of the human family. None of us exist as an isolated individual. We exist in relationship. Saint Mother Teresa said that we belong to each other. And so our choices, our decisions, they affect each other.

Others, perhaps generations down the road. Sin exists or suffering exists because of free will, because of the choice to sin. God gives us free will so we can choose to love, but so long as there are people in the world who choose against love and abuse their free will, then they will invite suffering on themselves and others. Every single sin that we commit introduces disorder into the universe. It's proper for us as creatures to obey the creator. So when we disobey Him, we introduce disorder. And that invites damage and suffering on all our relationships.

First, our relationship with God. Adam and Eve hid from Him in fear and mistrust. Second, our relationship with ourselves. They are now ashamed to be naked because there are movements, inclinations, disorder that were not there before. Three, our relationship with others, Adam blames Eve, God warns that there's going to be domination. We also experience manipulation and a tendency to use each other. And four, our relationship with creation. Cursed is the ground because of you. Natural disasters that kill thousands of people, those

people would not die through natural disasters if it was not for sin. Now the Book of Job makes clear that not every instance of human suffering is tied to a specific sin. But nevertheless, it is true to say that if there were never human sin, then there would never have been human suffering. This is good to remember when there's that temptation to get angry at God for all the suffering in the world. We recognize, we as a human family broke the world. With that, we are in a much better position to appreciate everything God does to carry us through suffering.

God Is Not Indifferent To Our Suffering

Second point is that God is not indifferent to our suffering. He does not stand back and have the attitude, oh, well, that's what you wanted, that's what you get. A lot of suffering on this earth. And after that, a lot of suffering, even worse than hell for all eternity. No, He doesn't act like that. He works to lessen our suffering. He sends us Jesus Christ to save us from sin, so at least our suffering will not have to be forever. This is something to be very grateful for, that if we respond to Jesus in faith, we repent of our sin, we cling to Him, there will be a point when we will suffer no more. Even if there's a lot of time in purgatory, eventually, we get to a point we will never suffer again. Thank you, Jesus.

But as awesome as that is, it's even more amazing that God has entered into human suffering, that He is freely taking it on Himself. A mother out of empathy might wish to take on some of the pain of her child, to lessen the pain of her child. Well, God does that. And Jesus takes upon Himself the worst of our suffering. And by choosing to redeem us in this way, He has transformed suffering. He has turned it into a source of great, good, and blessing. How so? Well, first consideration of how we can draw profit from the cross is glory. Jesus has turned it into a means of glory.

Turned Into A Source of Great Good

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that one human soul, one immortal soul made in the image and likeness of God is worth more than the whole created material universe. And so to save one soul, to cooperate in the salvation of a single soul, that's the most glorious work, even greater than creation. And God has tied this most glorious work, the salvation of souls to the cross, to suffering. This is why Jesus longed for the hour of His passion as the hour of His glory. He speaks of His death saying, "Father, glorify your name." And the Father's voice is heard saying, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." Philippians 2 sings of this glory. Christ became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted Him, meaning lifted him up in glory, and bestowed on Him the name above every other name.

Jesus says, was it not necessary that the Son of Man should suffer these things and so enter into His glory? So yes, He saw it as His hour of glory and He invites us to share in His glory. When we suffer as baptized members of the body of Christ, we have sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit, then it's not just our suffering. God the Father accepts that suffering as that of His Son Jesus. And it makes sense. If somebody accidentally closes a door on my hand, it's not just the suffering of that member, my hand. The whole Father Ricardo is in agony. Well, when we suffer in union with Jesus, then our suffering acquires value for the redemption of souls.

An Invitation to Great Sanctity

This is why St. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:24 "I now rejoice in my sufferings and I make up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His body that is the church." Now we might hear that and think, what's he talking about lacking in the afflictions or sufferings of Christ? There's nothing lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Well, nothing lacking in the sufferings of Jesus as the head of the mystical body. But what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is what is left for us to suffer as His members, to unite our suffering to Jesus for souls. And God seeks generous souls, those who will accept a greater share in the cross.

Our blessed mother at Fatima asked those three shepherd children, Jacinta, Francisco, Lucia, "Are you willing to offer yourselves to God and bear all the sufferings that He wills to send you as an act of reparation for the sins by which He is offended and for the conversion of sinners?" And they said enthusiastically, "We are willing." May we be able to respond the same.

If we offer our sufferings in union with those of Christ for souls, then when we get to heaven, there will be people who come up to us and say, thank you. And we're like, for what? I never even knew you during our life on earth. And they'll say, you offered your suffering for souls in need. I was at the end of my rope. I was about to take my own life, but there you were uniting your sufferings to Jesus, and God applied the value of your sufferings to my soul. And I was granted faith and conversion. And now I'm here in heaven with you. What a beautiful thought. And with this, if we understand that and we believe it, then we can recognize great suffering even as a call, an invitation to great sanctity, great glory.

There was a couple one time, a married couple, when I was serving in some parishes, my first few years as a priest. The wife had contracted this extremely rare disease and it crippled her mobility. She was in great pain. And I was at their house to anoint her when she was coming near death. And I remember the husband in tears just expressing his confusion. "Father, I don't understand. Why her? Why would she get this rare disease? She was so good to me. She has been such a good wife. Even after the war, when I was drowning in alcohol, and I was horrible to her, she stood by me, she stuck with me.

Father, what did she ever do to deserve this?" And I tried to help him see things from a supernatural perspective. I said, "You know, in heaven, not everyone is going to have the same degree of glory. There are going to be some souls that shine with much greater glory than others. And we're going to look at those souls and wonder, wow, what did they ever do to deserve such glory? And part of the answer will be, they carried a greater share of the cross. They accepted a greater share in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of souls. And so rather than see it as possibly a punishment on your wife, the supernatural point of view is that it would be a mark of His love to invite her to greater glory and sanctity in heaven." And thanks be to God, he was greatly consoled by that.

And we could imagine the case even of perhaps someone mistreated from childhood for years. But if by the grace of God, they are later able to forgive those who caused them so much pain, then that would be heroic virtue, like that of the saints, that would be heroic mercy. And they would reach a very high level of holiness. Saint Josephine Bakhita was

kidnapped at a young age. She was sold and resold as a slave, horribly mistreated, eventually bought by someone who did not mistreat her. And through that eventually discovered Christianity. Years later when she was asked, "What would you do if you were able to meet those who first kidnapped and enslaved you?" She said, "I would embrace them because if it were not for them, I might never have eventually discovered Jesus and Christianity." Yes, that's the trust we want to have in God's providence.

An Invitation For Intimacy

Our final point of consideration of the possible value of suffering is that of intimacy with Jesus. I didn't understand for years that Jesus was offering James and John something much better than a good seat in the kingdom to sit at His right and left, to be physically close to Him. He was offering them deeper intimacy, a greater friendship, deeper closeness by a share in His cross. When we love something, when something is dear to us, then we are happy to share it with those who are close to us. Well, our Lord Jesus, because He loves us so much, His cross, even with all the suffering, was dear to Him.

Yes, His human nature shrunk from it, and that's expressed in the agony in the garden, asking the childish to be taken away. But in His divine will, He longed for that moment when He would manifest His divine love to us, triumph over Satan, save us from sin, and win for us the grace and power to live as sons and daughters of God. So this that is so dear to Him, His cross, He offers a greater share to those who are closest to Him.

St. Teresa of Avila one time was traveling to found a new convent. And at one point she ended up landing in the mud and hurting her ankle. And she looked up to heaven thinking, "Why Lord? I'm doing a work." And the response was, "Teresa, that's how I treat my friends." And she playfully responded, "Then no wonder you have so few of them." Saint Mother Teresa would refer to great suffering as the kiss of Jesus. She would tell people, "You must be so close to Jesus, you are suffering greatly. You must be so close to Him on the cross, you can feel His thorns, Jesus must be kissing you." One person responded, "Then please tell Jesus to stop kissing me." That's the natural response to suffering again. But we don't want to do that. We want to kiss Jesus back by embracing the cross with love.

Saint Faustina wrote that if the angels could envy us, they would envy us for two things, one is holy communion, the other is suffering. What? The angels would envy us for suffering? What, why? Because the angels, they see God in all of His infinite glory, beauty, majesty, and overwhelmed being in awe in His presence. They recognize He is so worth suffering for. And they don't have bodies. So they can't suffer in bodies. They cannot suffer in bodies like us. When we get to heaven and we see God in all of His infinite beauty and glory, then we will want to be able to offer Him some suffering out of love and we won't be able to anymore.

And so in heaven, we will even thank God for the sufferings He allowed us on earth that we can then offer Him for all eternity as part of our return of love. I know it sounds crazy, the thought of thanking God for our sufferings, but this is the mentality of the saints, that no, it's not that God's punishing me, but He's inviting me to greater intimacy, greater love.

So if one day we're being tortured and martyred for the faith, then may our reaction be, I didn't know God loved me that much. St. Paul writes in Romans 8:18, "I consider that the sufferings of this present life are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed in us." Yes.

St. Padre Pio, he carried the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus and the pain for 50 years. What did he say about suffering? "If souls only knew the value of suffering, they would ask for nothing else. If souls only knew the value of suffering, they would ask for nothing else."

A Response To The Lies of The Devil

And so we have a response to those lies of the evil one. When the evil one is saying that God has let you down, that God has failed you, that He has allowed you so much harm. No. Now we can make a distinction between hurting someone, allowing them pain and suffering, and causing them harm.

To harm someone is to act against their wellbeing. And while a doctor performing surgery might cut us, might allow us to suffer pain, or they're not acting against our wellbeing, they're not harming us, they're acting for our wellbeing. And so we can renounce those lies saying, God has never let me down. God has never failed me. God never brings us harm. And He won't allow our pain to cause lasting harm. We harm ourselves by our choice to sin, but God is ready to transform even that when we repent of those sins and we bring them to Him. He makes it possible for us to profit from our suffering.

When people say, where was God? Where was your God? Maybe they don't believe Him anymore. When I was suffering this, or when my loved one was suffering this, when this happened, where was your God? My favorite answer to that is, God was on the cross. God was on the cross. Not in the sense that He was pinned down, powerless, unable to do anything, no, He was acting even more wondrously than He would if He just prevented our suffering. He was acting more wondrously by winning for us the grace and power to profit from our suffering. To share in greater glory, greater holiness greater intimacy with Jesus. So let us believe this.

Let us have the attitude of St. Josemaria Escriva who wrote, "The Great Christian Revolution has been to convert pain into fruitful suffering. And so transform something bad into something good. We have deprived the devil of this weapon. And with it, we can conquer eternity." Mary, mother of sorrows who stood at the foot of the cross of your son and shared in His suffering more than anyone, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

It has been my joy to share this reflection with you. I'm praying for you. Please pray for me. And hopefully, you'll join me for another reflection during this Pray More Healing Retreat.