

Maronite Monks of Adoration

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"It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls."

"Precisely because the family is under attack. The Pope has to be attacked, the Pope has to suffer, so that every family and the world may see that there is ... a higher Gospel: the Gospel of suffering by which the future is prepared, the third millennium of families, of every family and of all families."

— Pope John Paul II



"The deepest happiness is found in those who suffer for Jesus Christ."

"You cannot separate suffering and Joy."

— Fr. John Hardon

The Fruits of Suffering

Suffering is perhaps the chief objection to Christianity being "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). John Paul II in his Encyclical letter *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, states "that almost always the individual enters suffering with a typically human protest and with the question 'why'." Conversely, the saints, those closest in union with God, universally treasured suffering. St. Teresa of Avila repeatedly said, "Let me suffer or let me die." St. Thérèse of Lisieux says, "I have found happiness and joy on earth, but solely in suffering. For I've suffered very much here below: You must make it known to souls." Some even questioned whether Thérèse really suffered. She responded with "This doesn't mean that we must not feel the pain, the suffering; where would the merit be if we didn't feel it?" She added, "It's very easy to write beautiful things about suffering, but writing is nothing. Nothing! One must suffer in order to know." In this article, we'll examine the reasons the saints sought suffering, that is, the fruits of suffering.

St. Paul asserts, "Now I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and, in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). Pope John Paul II explains: "It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls... The Church feels the need to have recourse to the value of human sufferings for the salvation of the world."

A striking example of the pre-eminent

power of redemptive suffering is the Missionaries of Charity. From its inception, Mother Teresa established a link of suffering souls to pray for the missionaries, one for each sister in her order. During an age of shrinking vocations worldwide, the Missionaries of Charity, fueled by the prayer of suffering souls, became one of the fastest growing and most fruitful orders in the history of Christianity.

Suffering souls are often lonely and treated as useless members of society. However, Jesus states unequivocally, "the one who humbles himself will be exalted" and "the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest" (Mt 18:14, Luke 9:48). St. Catherine of Sienna was told by God the Father that our love for each other in Heaven will be primarily in proportion as we helped each other grow in holiness. Suffering souls, those who co-redeem "more than anyone else" will be especially loved by those members of the heavenly society who benefited from their patient suffering.

There is a direct connection between what and how one suffers and the depth of one's spiritual growth. Suffering with much love and in union with Christ has the power to interiorly transform souls. Renowned author and spiritual director Fr. Thomas Dubay asserts, "I cannot recall a single case where a directee has reached a lofty infused prayer without having suffered much and well ... Unfortunately, however, what we call worthy suffering is not common, and this is the principal reason why advanced prayer is not common even though all are called to it."

The link between suffering and sanctity is as follows. God communicates most to that soul that has progressed farthest in love,

"Everyone and anyone who wishes to become a Missionary of Charity is welcome. But I want especially the paralyzed, the crippled, the incurables to join for I know they will bring to the feet of Jesus many souls."

— Mother Teresa

namely, that has its will in closest conformity to the will of God. Since sanctity is our sole purpose in life, every action willed by God is ordained for that end. *"This is the will of God, your sanctification."* (1 Thess 4:3). Intense suffering is a powerful opportunity to grow in holiness because of the difficulty of practicing virtue while suffering. St. Thomas tells us *"Each time the creature...performs an action with all the fervor of charity, which its actual spiritual condition allows of, it makes a step forward in the process of sanctification"* (See the Parable of the Talents: Mt. 25:14-30). Now, most people are so riveted by their sufferings that they express little or no concern about the interests and needs of others. Herein lies the difficulty of practicing virtue, but also the opportunity of more meritorious actions.

Pope John Paul II concurs, *"Suffering is an invitation to manifest the moral greatness of man."* The saints also testify that selflessness in adversity is a distinguishing mark of sanctity. *"It is characteristic of holy men that their own painful trials do not make them lose their concern for the well being of others"* says St. Gregory the Great. *"There is no surer way"*, says St. Aloysius Gonzaga, *"to know that one is a saint than to see him lead a holy life and yet suffer desolation, trials, and tribulations."* St. Teresa of Avila sums it up: *"Love is the measure of our ability to bear crosses."* We even have an advantage over the Holy Angels in this respect. The Eternal Father explained this to St. Mary Magdalene De Pazzi, *"So it is that certain creatures know better than do the Angels themselves the Divine Essence...and that is in recompense for their virtue, which surpasses that of the angels, for the latter do not have to suffer to preserve grace, while the creature is not preserved in grace except at the cost of suffering and labor. It is just, therefore, that the creature should receive the greater reward."*

St. John of the Cross declares that God ordains adversities *"for the everlasting joy of the elect."* and mysteriously *"piercing pain embrace with love for the crucified plunges one into the thicket of divine wisdom."* Now, God is a spirit and union with a spirit can only be attained through knowledge and love. Joy, being of the mind and heart, is a direct effect of a deeper knowledge and love of God (Charity) Divinely infused for suffering well. St. Teresa explains, *"I cannot describe what is felt when the Lord gives me an understanding of his secrets and grandeurs. The delight so surpasses those knowable here on earth; indeed, it rightly makes you abhor the delights of this life."* Mother Teresa of Calcutta received so many joyful and eloquent testimonials from her sick and suffering co-workers confirming her conviction that *"suffering begets life in the soul"* that in 1983 she sought to publish them. Paradoxical as this is, it forms one piece

with St. Paul's idea that for those who love God everything works together for their good (Rom 8:28).

Many people don't think they'll be able to cope with suffering. St Paul refutes this notion with: *"I can do all things in him who strengthens me"* (Phil 4:13). St. John of the Cross tells us, *"Suffering with Jesus brings joy because he so immensely loves us that he cannot long endure the sufferings of his beloved without responding to them."* Dying of tuberculosis, not permitted any pain killers, St. Thérèse tells us, *"God gives me courage in proportion to my sufferings. I feel at this moment I couldn't suffer any more, but I'm not afraid. Since if they increase, he will increase my courage at the same time."* Remember, *"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it"* (1 Cor 10:13).

The Church especially calls everyone to do penance every Friday, during Advent and Lent. In the Latin Rite, one Lenten preface states *"This great season of grace is your gift to your family to renew us in spirit. You give us strength to purify our hearts, to control our desires and to serve you in freedom"* and in another preface Lent is referred to as *"This joyful season."* From these prayers, the Church teaches us that during Lent, God provides special graces for spiritual growth through self-sacrifice. Holy Mother Church is also confirming that joy is a fruit of suffering well. Mother Angelica said there are special graces available during Lent that are not available at any other time. If Lent is spent properly, it can be to some degree bittersweet. The pain from self-denial is real, but so is the consolation.

The Holy Father cautions those who are suffering: *"It often begins with great difficulty...and it often takes time, even a long time, for this answer to be perceived...Man hears Christ's saving answer as he gradually becomes a sharer in the suffering of Christ."* This corresponds exactly with St. Thérèse's experience of suffering, *"Since my first communion...I had a perpetual desire to suffer. I wasn't thinking, however, of making my suffering my joy; this is a grace that was given me later on."*

Suffering is a hard trial, but it's not tragic. The only real tragedy is to die estranged from God forever, for everyone else will eventually be happy beyond imagination. Our Lady of Fatima told us, *"Pray, Pray very much and make sacrifices for sinners; for many go to Hell, because there are none to sacrifice themselves and to pray for them."* The Holy Father, keenly aware of the value of redemptive suffering has repeatedly appealed for help from those who are on the cross. John Paul II is currently lifted high upon the cross; suffering intensely, but silently. Please offer your trials for souls and know that God will not be outdone in generosity. ❖