

The Purpose of Suffering

Address for the Society of Patricians, June 13, 2005

by Louis Bosco

God did not create man to suffer. He made Adam and Eve, our first parents, impervious to pain and death. Suffering was invited into the world, though, when they turned their back on God (cf. Gen. 3:16 ff.; Rom. 5:19). It may be said, then, that suffering is the creation not of God but of man. Because of the separation from God caused by Adam and Eve's disobedience, they and all people after them have had to endure suffering. While we may accept this truth as an article of faith, it does not make it any easier to deal with the suffering in our own lives. Faced with suffering, we may find ourselves tempted to question God's goodness and even His very existence. Yet the truth of the matter is that God is good by nature and, therefore, incapable of causing evil. He does *permit* evil to occur, but always in order to bring about a greater good (cf. Rom. 8:28). This is the case in the Fall of Man: God permitted us to lose the earthly joy of Eden only to make available to us, through the Sacrifice of His Son, the superior splendor of Heaven.

Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of His arrest, the Lord Jesus gave us the perfect example of how we are to react when suffering comes to us. First beseeching the Father to take the pain from Him, He then added, "[N]ot my will, but thine, be done" (Lk. 22:42). To pray this prayer requires great trust in God's goodness: that He desires our happiness even more than we do and that He truly knows what is best for us. For us to determine, to the contrary, that God is unloving for allowing suffering is to judge Him from our limited human intellect. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" He might inquire of us. "Tell me, if you have understanding" (Job 38:4). We simply cannot see all that God sees. We cannot comprehend all the hidden ways by which He uses adverse circumstances to steer the hearts of His children towards repentance and to achieve in us spiritual perfection. While we tend to err in seeing this life as our ultimate good, God sees the broader picture, the *eternal* picture. He rightly understands our ultimate good to be the purpose for which He created us: to live and be happy with Him forever in Heaven.

To come into God's presence in Heaven requires that we be transformed: that our fallen human nature be made holy; for Scripture says, "[N]othing unclean shall enter [Heaven]" (Rev. 21:27). This sanctification process involves suffering. "[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies," says Jesus, "it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn. 12:24-25). It is painful to sever our undue attachments to the things of this world, but the reward that awaits us in the world to come is worth the cost. The unborn child certainly would prefer to remain in the dark familiarity of his mother's womb. He has lived there for nine months; it is the only reality he knows. To be taken from this comfortable place and brought into the light of the world is painful. Yet which of us regrets, or even remembers, the pain of his birth, his entry into this world? So much less will our earthly pain matter to us once we have entered into the reality of Heaven. Regardless of what sufferings we may be enduring now, or may endure in the future, we are comforted to know that the pains of this life are only temporary—they will one day pass—and that the joy of Heaven is complete and everlasting. *The Book of Revelation* says, "[God] shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying in pain, for the former things have passed away" (21:4). And this is how God is able to withstand seeing us, His beloved children, suffer here for a time on earth. For from His perspective, our earthly sufferings pass in the blink of an eye, while our lives with Him in Heaven, our happiness, will be without end.

The Christian Faith is set apart from all other religions in that it alone teaches that God became a man, became one of us, to suffer and die for our sins. "[H]e was wounded for our transgressions," says the Prophet Isaiah, "he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). The human race was redeemed through the Passion of Jesus Christ. His suffering on our behalf, though, has not removed all the pain from our lives. To the contrary, as the Apostle Paul declares, "[I]t has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake ..." (Phil. 1:29). Through our trials we are brought ever closer to Christ and come even to share in His glory (cf. 2 Cor. 1:5). So closely does Our Lord identify with the one who suffers that the sufferer becomes a living image of Him. Mother Teresa spoke often of seeing in the faces of those wretched souls, whom she retrieved from the gutters of Calcutta, the very face of Jesus.

Christ's Passion has not taken away our own personal suffering, but transformed it. "In the Cross of Christ," wrote Pope John Paul the Great, "not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also *human suffering itself has been redeemed*" (*Salvifici Doloris* 19). The sufferings which God allows to come into our lives, when offered in union with the sufferings of Christ on the Cross, take on a redemptive quality and may be offered to God for the salvation of souls. For us, then, suffering is not devoid of purpose; remarkably, it is a means of obtaining God's grace. Pain is an instrument through which God may effect our sanctification, a way of spiritual pruning one might say. *The Letter to the Hebrews* tells us Jesus Himself "learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8). And the letter continues:

For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ... [The Father] disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (12:6-7, 10-11).

Grasping the concept of redemptive suffering, Saint Paul confessed, "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). This does not imply, of course, that Christ's Passion was in any way insufficient. His Sacrifice on our behalf is in itself perfectly complete and efficacious. Yet, in view of His Passion, Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow Him; to intercede for one another, in imitation of Him, through prayer and suffering (cf. Lk. 9:23; 1 Tim. 2:1-3). "By this we know love," argues Saint John, "that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn. 3:16). "[H]e who believes in me will also do the works that I do," says the Lord; "and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (Jn. 14:12). Jesus desires our participation in the work of redemption not out of necessity but out of love, similar to how an earthly father looks to include his son in his activities. Our intercession for one another, moreover, draws upon Christ's unique and solitary mediation with God (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5). All that we do depends upon what He has done and would be impossible apart from it. "I am the vine, you are the branches," says Jesus. "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). It is our own willingness to suffer for Him and with Him that is "lacking," to use Paul's term, in the sufferings of Christ. The invitation to participate in Christ's redemptive work, by uniting our sufferings to His for our salvation and the salvation of others, is indeed a marvelous consolation. Saint Therese of Lisieux wrote:

In the world, on awakening in the morning I used to think over what would probably occur either pleasing or vexatious during the day; and if I foresaw only trying events I arose dispirited. Now it is quite the other way: I think of the difficulties and the suffering that await me, and I rise more joyous and full of courage the more I foresee opportunities of proving my love for Jesus Then I kiss my crucifix and lay it tenderly on the pillow while I dress, and I say to him: "My Jesus, thou hast worked enough and wept enough during the three-and-thirty years of thy life on this poor earth. Take now thy rest. ... My turn it is to suffer and to fight" (*Counsels and Reminiscences*).

While suffering in union with the Lord Jesus is hopeful, suffering apart from Him is bitter and empty. Thus, finding no value in suffering, the world runs from it, seeking to avoid it at all costs. This fear of suffering may be evidenced even in religious circles, such as in Protestantism's rejection of the crucifix, the image of the suffering Jesus, or in the teachings of the so-called "Health and Wealth Gospel" propagated by the Word of Faith movement in Evangelicalism. Seeing pain and want as punishments meted out by God upon the faithless, the proponents of Health and Wealth believe the followers of Christ have a divine right to health and material riches. Catholic apologist Paul Thigpen, a convert from Pentecostalism, recounts the story of how Christians of this persuasion had made his father feel that his suffering and eventual death from lung cancer were brought on by a personal lack of faith ("Jesus Wore Designer Underwear" [2001]; available at www.paulthigpen.com). Kenneth Copeland, a prominent preacher of this heresy, wrote, "God intends for every believer to live completely free from sickness and disease. It is up to you to decide whether or not you will" (*Welcome to the Family*, p. 25; Thigpen). Another preacher, Robert Tilton, remarked, "Being poor is a sin when God promises prosperity!" (Success-N-Life TV broadcast [December, 27, 1990]; Thigpen).

The Bible, of course, refutes the teachings of this movement outright. "Blessed are you poor ...," said Jesus. "[W]oe to you that are rich ..." (Lk. 6:20, 24; cf. Mt. 6:19-21; Jas. 2:5). Job, whom the Bible describes as "a blameless and upright man" (Job 2:3), suffered illness, the death of loved ones, and the loss of his possessions. The Virgin Mary, whom the Lord preserved from the stain of Original Sin (cf. Gen. 3:15; Lk. 1:28), suffered rejection, homelessness,

persecution, and the loss of Her Son—“a sword shall pierce your own soul also,” Simeon had revealed to her (Lk. 2:35). John the Baptist, the Precursor of Jesus, “wore a garment of camel’s hair” and ate “locusts and wild honey” (Mt. 3:4). Timothy suffered from chronic stomach ailments (see 1 Tim. 5:23); and Paul had to leave his co-worker, Trophimus, behind due to illness (see 2 Tim. 4:20).

When the Apostle Peter tempted Our Lord to forgo the Passion, Jesus responded, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men” (Mt. 16:23). In truth, any attempt to obtain glory while bypassing the Cross is demonic in nature (see Tim Staples, quoting Fulton J. Sheen, “Catholic Answers Live” radio program [February 24, 2004]; available at www.catholic.com). Saint John Bosco said once that he had learned to walk a tightrope by disciplining himself to look neither to the left nor to the right, neither up nor down, but only straight ahead. By way of analogy, he said the secret to resisting the temptations of this life was to keep one’s gaze fixed ever on the Cross.

Near the end of his life, the same Peter, who had once been rebuked by Jesus for wanting Him to avoid suffering, declared to the faithful, “In this [heavenly inheritance] you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6-7). “I consider that the sufferings of this present time,” commented Paul, “are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). We must never lose sight of the prize: that one day, by the grace of God, each of us here will see the Lord Jesus Christ in His Kingdom; behold His luminous face; hear His angelic voice; and kiss His sacred hands and feet, wounded for our sake. Till that day, let us proclaim unceasingly, “We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You, because by Your Holy Cross You have redeemed the world. Amen” (Saint Francis of Assisi, *The Way of the Cross*).