

The Anointing of the Sick and Suffering



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The Art of Suffering

It's Not a Matter of Killing Pain, But of Using It Right

By Father Kenneth E. Myers

Probably the last way most of us would choose to classify suffering would be as an "art." Yet I am more and more convinced that suffering well is the mark of a gracious – that is, grace-filled – person. It really is an art.

In the hospital where I work, I see quite a lot of suffering. An incredible number of people suffer physically and intensely, despite the great advances in medical technology. You might be surprised, for example, at the number of people who still have to undergo amputations. Amputation has always been frightening to me. So what does one say to comfort people like this? And how would I face it if I were the patient? Still, I can think of people I visited after such a terrible operation, and they received me graciously, with a smile, expressing confidence in the merciful providence of a loving God. Their courage, more than their suffering, leaves me without words.

Quite often there is another kind of suffering, which may embrace and even surpass the physical sort. It is the anguish of the heart: a pain that underlies anything the body can produce. Sometimes this suffering expresses itself in fear when a patient is facing illness, an operation or even death. Sometimes it is the fear of the patient's family, who must see their loved one in a condition of weakness that reveals their own profound inability to do anything to alleviate the pain. How difficult it was for me to see my strong father lying in bed for weeks, breathing through a ventilator, his arm and leg muscles losing strength, sometimes his eyes wild with frustration at his helplessness. And I could do nothing but see him, watch him suffer, hold his hand, sit with him and pray.

There is a third kind of suffering, the suffering of the soul: the pain of parents who see their children abandon the practice of their faith; the pain of believers who see their shepherds in a scandal; the pain of one who must remain silent in the face of accusation because words of self-defense fall short of proving one's innocence. It is the pain of not understanding, or of not being understood.

In a church near my home, there is a statue of the Pietà – the Mother of Christ holding the dead body of her Son – but not the traditional statue we know so well, where Mary looks down at the body of Jesus. This statue shows her looking up to heaven, as if to ask the question, "Why?" Someone once insisted to me that Our Lady would never ask such a question of God. Certainly it is true that we can rebel against God's will, shucking from our shoulder the cross that we have

been given, but that is not the nature of Mary's "Why?" No, there comes a moment in the life of any faithful Christian when we ask the question "Why?" in order to more carefully fulfill the will of God. "How can this be since I know not man?" was Mary's first, "Why?" It was immediately followed by, "Let it be done unto me according to your word." And then, didn't Jesus himself say from the cross, "My God, my God, why ...?" And His own response was worded so beautifully in Gethsemane: "Father, not My will, but Yours be done."

The art of suffering requires the Christian virtue of courage, that gift of the Holy Spirit we call fortitude. Courage means to "take heart," to hold on, not to give up, to persevere in the face of overwhelming odds. Christian courage means to take to oneself the Heart of the Savior, to hold on to His hand, not to give up the good fight of faith, to persevere as Mary did throughout her life, indeed all the way up the path to Calvary.

In his apostolic letter on suffering, Pope John Paul II points out that Jesus Christ, by His own suffering and death as our Redeemer, has conquered suffering in our lives. His own love – the love of God for us – has given an answer to the question "Why?" that no one could ever have imagined on his own. Christ's victory over suffering, indeed over death itself, gives us hope, it lights a fire in the midst of darkness, it promises eternal life. Perhaps this promise the Pope makes seems like a platitude to some. But Jesus not only suffered, He suffered in innocence. He, in His own Body, answered the often repeated "Why?" about the good suffering when they don't deserve it.

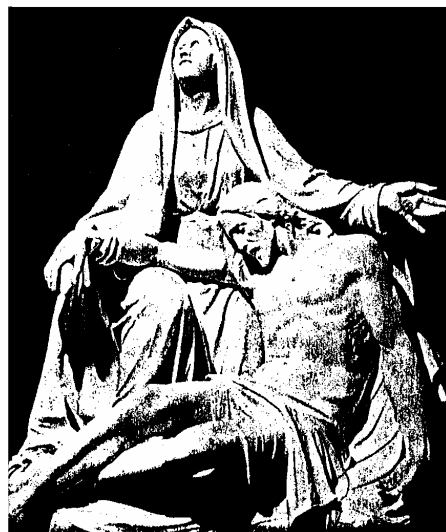
There is no platitude here. Jesus deserves to be believed because He has gone through suffering in a way more profound than we could ever know. And Jesus has gone so far as to invite us to join Him in suffering on behalf of others. Remember how He said, "Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me," or "Take up your cross and follow in my footsteps." It is true, as the spiritual masters point out, that suffering with courage, in faith, holds within it a power to unite us interiorly with Christ in a most intimate manner. I am convinced this is why so often I will come upon people in my hospital ministry who hunger for the eucharistic Christ so intensely, or even for some simple sacramental as a reminder of the Lord.

This is an art of suffering well – with faith in Christ and with courage that embraces God's will and His love for us. God himself is the Artist of this grace in the life of the believer. When suffering lurks just out of sight, when fear presses hard upon us, when the heart is weighed down with burdens that no one should have to bear, then there is no one who can answer the question "Why?" except Jesus Christ himself, the Suffering One, the Risen One.

5 Ways You Can Suffer Well

1. **Keep a crucifix.** The cross with the broken Body is a powerful reminder that our God is a God of the suffering. Carry a crucifix in your pocket (the one on your Rosary will do) and by all means have one in a prominent place in your home as a center for personal (and family) prayer.
2. **Offer it up.** This counsel has become an unfavorable platitude for some, but it can be a powerful reminder to unite our sufferings to the almighty redemptive sufferings of the Savior on the cross. Every pang, every ache, every hurt in body or in heart, can be a call to give our lives to Christ.
3. **Intercede.** Pray daily and often for those who suffer, and for those who suffer more than you do. Unite your prayer with Mary at the foot of the cross. Pope John Paul says Mary's heart holds within it the "Gospel of Suffering."
4. **Know the Scriptures.** The Bible is a gold mine of practical lessons about the reasons for and the meaning of suffering in our lives. St. Paul said he rejoiced in his suffering for the sake of the Church. The Scriptures can teach you how to do this, too.
5. **Volunteer.** Look down the street, in your local school or hospital – you'll find so many people suffering who need you: hospice, Big Brothers and Sisters, volunteer programs in hospitals. Even if you're suffering, someone suffering more needs your help.

Father Myers is a chaplain at Beaver Valley Medical Center, Beaver, PA.



SUFFERING

How to Make the Greatest Evil in Our Lives Our Greatest Happiness

By Father Paul O'Sullivan, O.P.

Suffering is the great problem of human life. We all have to suffer. Sometimes small sorrows, sometimes greater ones fall to our share. We shall now tell our readers how to avoid much of this suffering, how to lessen all suffering and how to derive great benefits from every suffering we may have to bear.

The reason why suffering appears so hard is that, first of all, we are not taught what suffering is. Secondly, we are not taught how to bear it. Thirdly, we are not taught the priceless value of suffering.

This is due to the incomprehensible neglect on the part of our teachers.

It is surprising how easily some people bear great sufferings; whereas, others get excited at even the smallest trouble.

The simple reason is that some have been taught all about suffering; others have not.

SUFFERING IS NOT THE EVIL WE THINK IT IS

First of all, then, suffering is not simply an evil, for no one suffered more than the Son of God Himself, more than His Blessed Mother or more than the Saints. Every suffering comes from God. It may appear to come to us by chance or accident or from someone else, but in reality, every suffering comes to us from God. Nothing happens to us without His wish or permission. Not even a hair falls from our heads without His consent.

Why does God allow us to suffer? Simply because He is asking us to take a little share in His Passion. What appears to come by chance or from someone else always comes because God allows it.

Every act in Our Lord's life was a lesson for us. The greatest act in His life was His Passion. This, then, is the greatest lesson for us. It teaches us that we too must suffer.

God suffered all the dreadful pains of His Passion for each one of us. How can we refuse to suffer a little for love of Him?

SUFFERING IS THE GOLD IN OUR LIVES

Secondly, if we accept the sufferings He sends us and offer them in union with His sufferings, we receive the greatest rewards. Five minutes' suffering borne for love of Jesus is of greater value to us than years and years of pleasure and joy. The Saints tell us that if we patiently bear our sufferings, we merit the crown of martyrdom.

Moreover, suffering borne patiently brings out all that is good in us. Those who have suffered are usually the most charming people.

If we bear these facts clearly in mind, it certainly becomes much easier to suffer.

GOD ALWAYS GIVES STRENGTH TO BEAR OUR SUFFERINGS

Thirdly, when God gives us any suffering, He always gives us strength to bear it, if we only ask Him. Many, instead of asking for His help, get excited and revolt. It is this excitement and impatience that really make suffering hard to bear.

Consider that we are now speaking of all suffering, even the most trifling ones. All of us have little troubles, pains, disappointments, every day of our lives. All these, if borne for love of God, obtain for us, as we have said, the greatest rewards.

HOW TO BEAR SUFFERING

Even the greater sufferings that may fall to our share from time to time become easy to bear if we accept them with serenity and patience. What really makes suffering difficult to bear is our own impatience, our *revolt*, our *refusal* to accept it. This irritation increases our sufferings a hundredfold and, besides, robs us of all the merit we could have gained thereby.

We see some people pass through a tempest of suffering with the greatest calm and serenity; whereas, others get irritated at the slightest annoyance or disappointment. We can all learn this calm and patience. It is the secret of happiness.

An eminent physician, in a conference which he gave to distinguished scientists and fellow doctors, told them that he owed all his great success in life to the simple fact that he had corrected his habit of impatience and annoyance, which had been destroying all his energy and activity.

Everyone, we repeat, without exception, can learn this calm and serenity.

PENANCE

We must all do penance for our sins. If we do not, we shall have long years of suffering in the awful fires of Purgatory. This fire is just the same as the fire of Hell.

Now, if we offer our sufferings – the very little ones as well as the greater ones – in union with the sufferings of Jesus Christ, we are doing the easiest and best penance we can perform. We may thus deliver ourselves entirely from Purgatory, while at the same time gaining the greatest graces and blessings.

Let us remember clearly that:

1. Sufferings come from God for our benefit.
2. When we are in the state of grace, we derive immense merit from every suffering borne patiently, even the little sufferings of our daily lives.
3. God will give us abundant strength to bear our sufferings if we only ask Him.
4. If we bear our sufferings patiently, they lose their sting and bitterness.
5. Above all, every suffering is a share in the Passion of Our Lord.
6. By our sufferings, we can free ourselves in great part, or entirely, from the pains of Purgatory.
7. By bearing our sufferings patiently, we win the glorious crown of martyrdom.

Of course, we may do all in our power to avoid or lessen our sufferings, but we cannot avoid all suffering. Therefore, it is clearly necessary for us to learn how to bear them.

In the Lord, we must understand clearly that if we remain calm, serene and patient, suffering loses all its sting, but the moment we get excited, the smallest suffering increases a hundredfold.

It is just as if we had a sore arm or leg and rubbed it violently; it would become irritated and painful; whereas, if we touch it gently, we soothe the irritation.

We suffer from ill-health, from pains, headaches, rheumatism, arthritis, from accidents, from enemies. We may have financial difficulties. Some suffer for weeks in their homes, some in hospitals or nursing homes. In a word, we are in a vale of tears. Almighty God could have saved us from all suffering, but He did not do so because He knows in His infinite goodness that suffering is good for us.

PRAYER

We have a great, great remedy in our hands, that is, prayer. We should pray earnestly and constantly, asking God to help us to suffer, to console us, or if it pleases Him, to deliver us from suffering. This is all, all important.

A very eminent doctor, in an able article he recently published in the secular press, says that "*Prayer* is the greatest power in the world."

He says, "I and my colleagues frequently see that many of our patients, whom we have failed to cure or whose pains we have failed to alleviate, have cured themselves by prayer. I speak now not of the prayers of holy people, but the prayers of ordinary Christians."

We should above all pray to Our Lady of Sorrows in all our troubles. We should ask her, by the oceans of sorrow she felt during the Passion of Our Lord, to help us.

God gave her all the immense graces necessary to make her the perfect Mother of God, but He also gave her all the graces, the tenderness, the love necessary to be our most perfect and loving Mother. No mother on earth ever loved a child as Our Blessed Lady loves us. Therefore, in all our troubles and sorrows, let us go to Our Blessed Lady with unbounded confidence.

THE MEMORARE

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession was left unaided. Inspired with this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother. To thee do I come, before thee I kneel, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer them. Amen.

Cum permissu superiorum.

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