

The Sacred Heart AND OUR DIFFICULTIES

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

Several years ago as we were driving on a very busy thoroughfare on route to visit two of our sisters in a health care facility outside of Baltimore, one of our sisters casually remarked that she wondered what was going through the minds of all the drivers on the highway. The comment made me wonder too as I looked out the window at lines of traffic that seemed to be racing to unnamed locations. Were these people conscious of the deeper dimensions of life? Did they reach their destinations with a sense of God's presence in their hearts? Did they even care to?

St. John of the Cross does not mince words when he speaks about the attainment of spiritual realities. He says quite plainly: "Would that we might come at last to see that it is quite impossible to reach the thicket of the riches and wisdom of God except by first entering the thicket of much suffering, in such a way that the soul finds there its consolation and desire. The soul that longs for divine wisdom chooses first, and in truth, to enter the thicket of the cross." Do we find ourselves drawing back when hearing these words? I do. It is our natural tendency to be frightened of added suffering in our lives. Only when we stop and consider deeply and carefully and spiritually do we begin to open our hearts to the truth of what God is telling us, of where God might be directing us. If we are truly ready to be still and listen, then that is a sure beginning. And if we join to this listening a loving, receptive attentiveness, and a sincere detachment from seeing, hearing, knowing, feeling, or controlling, then we are giving God center stage in our lives.

This was a lesson that was brought home to me through two different experiences some years ago. The first happened in our Wilmington monastery when I tried to grapple with a personal dilemma. I really wanted to have a divine answer to a problem and began praying feverishly that one would be given to me. I determined I would pound on heaven's door every chance I could and that my earnestness would wrest from God some measure of light to see clearly the solution to my trouble. And so the siege began, but to my utter frustration, nothing came only dryness, emptiness, darkness. I visited our cemetery whenever possible and prayed for our deceased sister's intercession. One day not too long afterward as I was doing this, a hint of something passed through some part of me which said, "You are not getting any light." I repeated what I thought I heard to myself, "I am not going to get any light." What a strange response! As I walked away I pondered what this heavenly refusal could mean.

It was a few hours later at our weekly Holy Hour that I was graced with some insight. Pulling out of my choir drawer the little book entitled *They Speak in Silences* (written by a Carthusian monk), I opened at random and was surprised to read the caption "Darkness Becomes Light." My heart skipped a beat as I immediately felt that an answer was coming to clarify my day's experience. I read with awe the words: "It is not in the light of words that we must seek the light. The light of a word is still something created, ephemeral - part of our nothingness. If we become attached to that light, we are halting on the way; we shall never reach the goal. That is why God bestows on souls whom He loves the grace of refusing them this light. He leaves them in darkness, and it is that darkness that becomes light: *And night shall be my light in my pleasures.* The true light shines in the darkness, but one must get accustomed to finding it there. At first one is terrified: light is such a lovely and necessary thing. But little by little, the day begins to dawn, and one sees that the light we miss is an interior light, whilst that which is growing is much purer." Now I was beginning to put the pieces of this puzzle together and understand the message in a more spiritual sense. And what did I learn? That the best direction we can pursue in search of light is down the path of faith. God does not always give us a ready answer because ready answers leave us too much in control. God is the one who is in control and to know this and live by it one must place one's feet squarely on the cloud of faith! In our worship of God, there is simply the 'foundational' embrace of faith.

The other experience I would like to share also happened in our Wilmington monastery. A good friend of mine whom I had met while working as a dorm counsellor before entering the monastery came to visit. We sat in our downstairs visiting parlor with the enclosure grille between us. Born in Ireland, my friend had a very charming personality. I loved her “county Cork lilt” and had often used her remarkably logical mind to help me untangle difficult assignments in my studies. She came from a solid Catholic family, her father being principal of a Christian Brothers School. Coming to the United States for higher studies she became disenchanted with her faith and turned instead to the teachings of a popular guru. Our meeting that day eventually turned to spiritual topics and she explained to me how similar she believed our spiritual approaches seemed to be. Afterwards I pondered her words and could only notice that her calmness and confidence were convincing, for she seemed to be totally at ease and even joyful. However, it struck me that she made almost no references to God or Christ in her conversation, but mostly to “techniques” that proved spiritually fruitful in her meditation practices. I came to the conclusion from our meeting that we were on totally different paths, and that transformation in Christ was infinitely more precious to me.

In one of his first homilies as pope, our holy father Francis made this illuminating statement:

We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not confess Jesus Christ, nothing will avail. We will become a pitiful NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of Christ. When one does not build on solid rocks, what happens? What happens is what happens to children on the beach when they make sandcastles: everything collapses, it is without consistency. When one does not profess Jesus Christ - I recall the phrase of Leon Bloy - ‘Whoever does not pray to God, prays to the devil.’ When one does not profess Jesus Christ, one professes the worldliness of the devil.

We learn from the lives of the saints that it is Christ himself who is the foundation upon which to build. Saint Francis de Sales gently reminded his directees, “Do not seek the consolations of God, but seek the God of consolations.” We for our part must wait in readiness. It is this spirit of faith-filled readiness that the Gospels assure us can move mountains. For despite human mistakes along the way, we know that God does convert everything to good for those who love him (Romans 8 : 28). In the words of an unknown author: “For silence is not God, nor speaking is not God; fasting is not God nor eating is not God; loneliness is not God nor company is not God...God is hid between them, and may not be found by any work (or technique) of thy soul but only by love of thine heart.”

Recently I’ve read a very good piece of advice from the inimitable Mother Angelica. A question came to her from one of her TV viewers: “If you feel like you are being called to do something, how do you know this is coming from God and not from some other source?” Mother answered directly, “ If you feel you are being called to do something, just begin, sweetheart. If this is from God, the doors will then begin to open for you to continue.” No big techniques here, only the simple faith of an innocent child. And yet how Gospel oriented. In our everyday dilemmas and difficulties perhaps we can take up the sheer simplicity of those who, though not unwilling to examine their interiors, yet turn their attention ever more to the merciful presence of God in their midst, counting on Him and what He can do and will do to bring us to his Sacred Heart.

I think it was from the life of St. Therese of Lisieux that the story is told of an old nun’s insightful remarks to the young Carmelite. She imparted these words of wisdom to the future saint: “The closer one gets to God, the simpler one becomes.” In our Christian tradition, our final perseverance does not consist in having all the pieces of the puzzle in good order, but in knowing that there is “Someone” who does and that our utter trust in his mysterious providence will etch out the details of our days, if we allow Him that freedom. Consider what the Lord’s Divine Mercy revealed to St. Faustina:

The graces of My Mercy are drawn by means of one vessel only, and that is - trust.
The more a soul trusts, the more it will receive. Souls that trust boundlessly are a great comfort to Me, because I pour all the treasures of My graces into them.
I rejoice that they ask for much, because it is My desire to give much, very much.
On the other hand, I am sad when souls ask for little, when they narrow their hearts.

Thus we should count on the reassurance of the words from Jesus’ Heart: “I will be with you.” And perhaps a word or two from St. Margaret Mary will also add encouragement. “Cling to the Sacred Heart,” she says, and with added emphasis she notes, “The Sacred Heart is a hidden and infinite treasure desiring to manifest Itself, to be poured out and distributed, so as to *relieve our distress.*” How wonderful to know that the human-divine heart of Jesus knows that our woes are not meant to do us in, but to make our hearts like unto His, and to impart to us a hope and courage to continue our spiritual journey, keeping our eyes ever fixed on Him. Herein lies the key to our sanctification: to run the race, to fight the good fight, and to receive the crown of glory that awaits us as faithful lovers of his most Sacred Heart. +

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on June 5th, 2016. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, August 7th, 2016 at 4:00 p.m.

THE POWER of PAIN

OFFERING OUR SUFFERINGS TO THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Raised in a Catholic family of Polish ancestry, as a child I quickly learned the meaning of the familiar adage, “Offer it up.” Anything that required a sacrifice or that went against my youthful self-determination or that caused physical suffering was to be “offered up” to the good Lord. Perhaps this was an easy excuse on the part of my parents, especially my mother, to avoid any lengthy philosophical explanations on why I couldn’t have my own way. Truly, it was effective in getting me and my twin sister to stop whining and transcend to a higher plane. A particular incident that still lingers in my memory is a good illustration of this. I was riding my bicycle in the schoolyard behind the elementary school across from our house. A sizable branch had come down from a tree, and I got it into my head that it would be fun to ride over it. Well, I didn’t make it. Down I went with my knees grinding into the gravel surface and embedding in them a good amount of grit, now mixed with blood. I painfully picked myself up and limped the short distance back to our house. My dear mother, an expert on fixing her venturesome kids’ boo-boos, got to work cleaning me up. I whimpered and hissed as the hydrogen peroxide and tincture of iodine did its work in my wounds, while my mother gently exhorted me to be strong and “Offer it up.” That simple reminder ingrained in me since childhood, was a good preparation for all the usual and unusual sacrifices that have come my way in secular and religious life.

We all have to encounter pain in one way or another as we go through our life’s journey here on earth. God has allowed each of us born into this mortal life to experience pain—physical, mental or spiritual. There is no getting away from it. Disciples of a crucified Lord, we are called by Jesus to imitate him. He says to us, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross...” (Mt 16:24). This means we cannot live our lives on a perpetual pleasure trip, always trying to get our own way or to avoid pain at all costs. Being true followers of Jesus, being disciples of his Sacred Heart, being faithful to Gospel values will entail for each of us certain sacrifices.

In the liturgy for the Feast of the Sacred Heart (*Year A*), the Church incorporates from Matthew’s Gospel (11:28) the verse that has Jesus saying: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” This invitation from Jesus’ Heart beckons us to step forward and entrust our cares, anxieties, pains and even our agonies to him. In other words, he wants us to give these things to Him—to offer them to His Heart. When we do, when we pour our heartaches into the Sacred Heart, he can use them to purify and sanctify us and so many other needy souls. With these sacrificial offerings from our heart to the Heart of Jesus, the Lord can effect his mysterious works of saving souls and converting hearts.

For many, many people today, suffering is an enigma, something to be avoided at all costs. As Catholics, we know that suffering should not be purposely inflicted on others or on ourselves. We do not perpetrate wrongs against others, nor do we mutilate our God-given bodies. But when suffering does come our way, we are encouraged by Church teaching to unite our pains with the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul points out in his writings, “We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). Suffering well—in *union with Christ*—is the spiritual currency that pays tremendous supernatural and natural dividends for us and for others. Years ago I read a story that I often reflect upon. It was of a soldier who had received life-threatening wounds and was dying alone on the battlefield. No one attended him. He knew his time was short and being a Christian, consciously made an attempt to place his wounds into the sacred wounds of the Lord. After his death, one of his family members received the following enlightenment in prayer: that their beloved soldier went straight to heaven because his final action touched the Heart of the Lord who accepted his noble offering in uniting his sufferings with that of Christ.

Besides the supreme example of Jesus, the saints are our models on how to suffer, for there is no such thing as a saint who did not suffer well. From the life of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque we can learn much about suffering according to the mind of Christ. This scenario from her *Autobiography* gives us a glimpse into how God works:

There was the time my only Love appeared to me and held out two pictures, one in each hand. One of them portrayed a life of happiness greater than a religious could dream of—complete peace, inward and outward consolations, perfect health, together with human approval or esteem and similar naturally pleasing things. The other portrait showed a life of poverty and abasement—a constant crucifixion by means of every kind of humiliation, frustration and contempt, with continuous sufferings in body and mind. ‘Choose, my child!’ he said, putting them in front of me. ‘Choose the one you would like to have. The same graces will follow whichever one you choose.’ Throwing myself at his feet in adoration, I replied: ‘Lord, you are all I want; I leave the choice to you.’ As he still went on pressing me to choose, I repeated my protests: ‘My God, you are all I need to make me happy. You choose the one that will bring you the greater glory, and don’t consider my likes or feelings at all. Please yourself, and I shall be satisfied.’ He told me then that, like Mary Magdalen, I had chosen the best part of all, which would never be taken away from me, since it was to be my portion forever. ‘There you are!’ he said, offering me the crucifixion picture. ‘That’s my choice for you, that’s what I like best—it will fulfil my plans and it will also make you more like me. The other picture is of the life of bliss reserved for heaven; it leaves no opportunity for merit.’

Although we may not be as spiritually advanced as St. Margaret Mary, our everyday miseries can be transformed into goldmines when we consciously choose to offer them to the Sacred Heart. This is the concept of redemptive suffering—a part of Catholic doctrine that makes no sense to the worldly who live for the here and now. People who espouse the practice of euthanasia or are totally immersed in the view that “quality of life” is the only thing that matters, will find this teaching absurd, slinging at it vile ridicule and insults. Yet, we are on solid ground when we believe in the supernatural value of our sufferings offered to the Lord. In Pope Pius XI’s encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* which confirms the Church’s position with respect to the visions of Jesus Christ reported by Saint Margaret Mary, he specifically tells us: “Although the copious Redemption operated by Our Lord has superabundantly forgiven all sins, yet... there must be completed in us what is missing in Christ’s suffering on behalf of his Body, that is, his Church (Col. 1-24). We can and must add to the homage and satisfaction (expiatory suffering) that Christ renders to God, our own homage and satisfaction on behalf of sinners.”

You may recall that St. John Paul II, no stranger to suffering, was the author of the apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* (1984) which deals with the Christian meaning of human suffering. In it he explains that our Redeemer suffered in place of every man and woman but that we all have our own share in Christ’s redemption. This apostolic letter, I believe, emerged from the depths of his own personal experience of suffering—the loss of his mother, father and only brother when he was a young man and of all that he had to go through living under a Communist regime. Suffering was part and parcel of his upbringing. No wonder the story is told of a priest who approached him who had tremendous pain in his knee and needed surgery. He approached the Pope and said, “Holy Father, please pray for my knee.” John Paul lightly smacked him across the face, saying to him, “Don’t waste your sufferings,” meaning we can use them to work for salvation—our own, others and for the Kingdom of God.

One of the hardest things in life is to suffer patiently. Thinking back to the times when we have really suffered (or perhaps are suffering now), we may have become extremely anxious and fearful of what would happen. At this stage, we need a huge dose of a spiritual tranquilizer. Perhaps that is not the right word to describe what we really need, which is true peace of heart that assures us all will be well. This, of course, comes from “on high.” It is a grace we receive when we turn with confidence to the compassionate Heart of Christ. The Lord explained this so well when he told one of his suffering friends, Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa (1904-1955), a Portuguese mystic and victim soul: “My daughter, suffering is the key to heaven. I have endured so much to open heaven to all mankind, but for many it was in vain. They say, ‘I want to enjoy life, I have come into the world only for enjoyment.’ They say, ‘Hell does not exist.’ I have died for them and they say they did not ask me to do so... Happy the soul who understands the value of suffering! My cross is sweet if carried for love of me. I chose you from your mother’s womb. I watch over you in your great difficulties. It was I who chose them for you, that I might have a victim to offer me much reparation. *Lean on my Sacred Heart and find therein strength to suffer everything.*”

In our lives we may have come across individuals who have been real inspirations as they have gone through horrendous situations and have emerged better and stronger persons. I can think of a Sister in our Wilmington community whose family suffered a heart-rending loss when one of its members tragically died. The situation was extremely painful and caused the Sister ultimately to leave our community to help her family. She eventually entered an active religious congregation, got her Ph.D. in counseling and is now helping many people with her expertise and lived-experience as they mourn losses in their own lives. She has a great love of the Sacred Heart, and I know that her inner strength to deal with all she went through came from her deep prayer life and trust in that Heart that never fails us.

Our experiences of pain—when lifted up to the Heart of Jesus—can instill in us a spiritual prowess and wisdom. God is never outdone in generosity. Examples like the modern-day mystic Marthe Robin (+1981) who was completely paralyzed by the age of 28, prove that suffering offered to the Lord bears much fruit. In this case, Robin was given the gift of reading people’s souls, enabling her to give excellent spiritual advice. And we are all familiar with the extraordinary charisms of St. Padre Pio whose sufferings and prayers helped countless souls. When we suffer valiantly, uniting our sufferings with the Lord’s, he gives us in return supernatural gifts that make us his special envoys to assist others in need and bring them closer to his Sacred Heart. +

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