

## **The Mystery and Necessity of Redemptive Suffering**

*Reflections from Scripture and Tradition - What shall we do when we suffer?*

### **We all must face suffering**

“God is infinitely good and all his works are good. Yet no one can escape the experience of suffering or the evils in nature which seem to be linked to the limitations proper to creatures: and above all to the question of moral evil. Where does evil come from? "I sought whence evil comes and there was no solution", said St. Augustine, and his own painful quest would only be resolved by his conversion to the living God.” CCC (Catechism of the Catholic church) 385

“Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.” CCC 1500-1501

**Suffering in the Bible is sometimes viewed as punishment, discipline or testing.  
But it is not always clear. We usually do not know why we suffer.**

The story of Job introduced the idea that one might suffer bitterly, even if one has been faithful to God. This suffering cannot be understood unless we can fully understand the mind of God - which is beyond us. Jesus reiterates this idea that suffering is not merely to be seen as a punishment from God, but he also leaves open the possibility that our sin can bring suffering upon us.

*“And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”* Lk 13: 2-3

*"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him.”* Heb 12:5

*“The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.”* 2 Pet 2:9

While we do bring suffering upon ourselves through our own sinfulness, other suffering seems to be unrelated to our sins. Both the good and the bad experience suffering. Suffering is unavoidable, and Jesus promised it would be a necessary part of the Christian life.

Jesus gave us the example of the suffering servant and invites us to take up our crosses. Jesus calls his followers to embrace and offer up unavoidable suffering as he embraced his cross. The New Testament states at least 10 times that it was necessary for Jesus to suffer... Jesus instructed his disciples that they would also share in his cup of suffering:

*“But Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?’ They said to him, ‘We are able.’ He said to them, “You will drink my cup...”* Mat 20: 22-23

*“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.”* Jn 15:20

We are called to unite ourselves with Jesus, to walk in his footsteps and unite ourselves and our suffering to his sufferings, to die to ourselves so that we may share in his glory in heaven.

“Christ unites us with his Passover: all his members must strive to resemble him, ‘until Christ be formed’ in them. “For this reason we . . . are taken up into the mysteries of his life, . . . associated with his sufferings as the body with its head, suffering with him, that with him we may be glorified.” CCC 793

“...Jesus desires to associate with his redeeming sacrifice those who were to be its first beneficiaries. This is achieved supremely in the case of his mother, who was associated more intimately than any other person in the mystery of his redemptive suffering.” CCC 618

But it is not easy. If it was difficult for Jesus to suffer, we should not expect it will be easy for us:

*“Then he said to them, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.’ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.’”* Mat 26: 38-39

### **The Necessity of the Cross**

*“... he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”* Mt 10: 38-39

*“Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?”* Mat 16:24-26  
*“And he said to all, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”* Lk 9:23

*“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”* Lk 14:27

“Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one's cross each day and following Jesus is the surest way of penance.” CCC 1435

*“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* 1Cor 1: 18

*“But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”* Gal 6:14

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”* Phil 2: 5-8

### **The Painful Discipline of Sons**

*“And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons? -- ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. 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? If you are left*

*without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.” Heb 12: 5-8*

*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.” Heb 12:11*

*“Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself.” Wis 3: 5*

### **Testing**

“... Even though enlightened by him in whom it believes, faith is often lived in darkness and can be put to the test. The world we live in often seems very far from the one promised us by faith. Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it.” CCC 164

“...*God tested Abraham...*” Gen 22:1

“*Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?*” 1 Mac 2: 52

*“In spite of everything let us give thanks to the Lord our God, who is putting us to the test as he did our forefathers. Remember what he did with Abraham, and how he tested Isaac, and what happened to Jacob in Mesopotamia in Syria, while he was keeping the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother.” Jdth 8: 25-26*

“...*the LORD your God ... that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not.*” Deut. 8: 2

“...*that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end.*” Deut 8: 16

“...*the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*” Deut 13: 3

“*They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their fathers by Moses.*” Judges 3: 4

“*The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked...*” Ps 11: 5

“*For thou, O God, hast tested us; thou hast tried us as silver is tried.*” Ps 66: 10

“*Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Behold, I will refine them and test them, for what else can I do, because of my people?’” Jer 9: 7*

“*And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’” Zech 13: 9*

“*For gold is tested in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation.*” Sir 2: 5

“*My son, test your soul while you live; see what is bad for it and do not give it that.*” Sir 37: 27

*“for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” Jas 1: 3*

*“Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.” Jas 1: 12*

*“In this 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*

### **Sharing in His Redemptive Suffering**

(Jesus speaking about Paul) *“I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Acts 9:16*

*“...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance...” Rom 5:3*

*“...it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Rom 8: 16-18*

*“...we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings...” 2 Cor 1: 5*

*“...as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.” 1 Cor 1: 7*

*“...I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you...” Eph 3: 13*

***“For it 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***

*“Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ... Brethren, join in imitating me... For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ.” Phil; 3: 8,10,17-18*

*“Now I rejoice in my sufferings 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*

*“For when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction; just as it has come to pass” 1Thes 3: 4*

*“You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, ... Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” 2 Tim 2: 1,3*

*“As for you, always be steady, endure suffering...” 2 Tim 4: 5*

*“But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.” Heb 2: 9-10*

*“Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.”* Heb 2: 18

*“Although he [Jesus] was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;”* Heb 5: 8

*“For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. ... if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because **Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**”* 2 Pet 2: 19-21

*“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin”* 1 Pet 4: 1

*“But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”* 1 Pet 4: 13

*“Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.”* 1 Pet 4: 19

*“ [be] firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you.”* 1 Pet 5: 9-10

*“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. ... Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* Rev 2: 10

*“The prophet [Isaiah] intuitively that suffering can also have a redemptive meaning for the sins of others.”* CCC 1502

### **The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick**

*“Union with the passion of Christ. By the grace of this sacrament the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion: in a certain way he is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior's redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.”* CCC 1521

### **Wisdom is gained through discipline and suffering**

*“Wisdom exalts her sons and gives help to those who seek her. ... If he has faith in her he will obtain her... For at first she will walk with him on tortuous paths, she will bring fear and cowardice upon him, and will torment him by her discipline until she trusts him, and she will test him with her ordinances. Then she will come straight back to him and gladden him, and will reveal her secrets to him. If he goes astray she will forsake him, and hand him over to his ruin.”* Sir 4: 17-19

### **Friends test one another before growing in trust**

Does God sometimes test our love for him, letting our love be purified through trial as he entrusts more of his mind set to us and strips us of our attachment to this world? Do we not do the same thing in our everyday relationships? Scripture says: *“When you gain a friend, gain him through testing, and do not trust him hastily.”* Sir 6: 7

### A Prayer

One prisoner of war who suffered torture at the hands of his captors, found comfort in this prayer:  
*Sacred Heart of Jesus, I give my life to you.*

### Summary

In order to share in the resurrection and glory of Jesus, we must enter into the suffering and death of Jesus.

Some reflections:

- ❖ Suffering is a mystery, but one we must all face at some point or another.
- ❖ Suffering can be a blessing.
- ❖ Jesus is with us when we suffer.
- ❖ What we lose in this life, God gives us many times over in the next, if we are faithful.
- ❖ Our purpose in this life is to prepare for the next life.
- ❖ We can experience spiritual healing even in the midst of physical suffering.
- ❖ In trusting and surrendering to God, we can receive the gift of peace.

Suffering endured for Christ and his kingdom can be redemptive in the following ways:

- ❖ To test, prove and purify our faith.
- ❖ To teach us humble obedience to God our Father.
- ❖ To prove our friendship with God and our faithfulness to him.
- ❖ To help us to die to ourselves and live only for God.
- ❖ The self-denial involved in offering up our suffering can strengthen our willpower, and thus make it easier to turn from sin.
- ❖ It can clarify that our happiness is not found primarily in this life, but in the next.
- ❖ It can teach us wisdom that we would not otherwise gain.
- ❖ Sometimes it is the mercy of God, which allows us to suffer so that we may attain a greater good.
- ❖ Suffering can unite us to the redemptive sufferings of Christ.
- ❖ Prayers united to the redemptive suffering of Christ can accomplish great good for others.

There is no Easter without Good Friday.  
 But there is no Good Friday without Easter!

*Jesus I trust in you!*

### Discussion Questions on Suffering

- 1) Have you ever experienced good that resulted from suffering? Explain.
- 2) What does it mean to “offer up” our trials or suffering to God? What is the best way to do this?
- 3) In what ways do you think that suffering can be “redemptive” or result in something good?