

Essay

"PLEASE CARDINAL NEWMAN - HELP ME TO WALK!" (Talk)

My dear friends, we cannot grow and mature in our faith unless we first practice it amidst anguish and sorrows! For none of us living in this world can escape the prospect of trials, sorrows, and afflictions, for they are indeed an essential part of our life's experiences. But if we persevere in faith amidst our sorrows and afflictions, always trusting in God's loving providence for us, then some greater good will always result, some higher purpose will always be achieved.

We see this mystery of redemptive suffering most vividly portrayed in the life of Christ. His life was marked by a life of betrayal, suffering, and death. The true image of the Man who brought us forgiveness and redemption was not the God-Man who worked wonders and miracles, but the Man of sorrows, the Man of the cross! Indeed, the fulfillment of Christ's messianic mission could only come from the perspective of the Cross. And His Cross truly represents the fulfillment of His intense love for us, surely a fitting emblem of our faith!

We also see this mystery of redemptive suffering, faithfully born in the Motherhood of our Church. And our holy and enduring Church lives on and is constantly renewed, in a very special way, by those called by God as His servants, to inspire and revitalize Her. One such a person, called for this purpose was Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman. He seized upon every opportunity to exercise and perfect his faith, always trusting in God's loving providence, especially during times of persistent trials and sorrows.

So many people in Newman's time, indeed, so many of us today would prefer to enter into religious glory, without any cost or pain, without any trials or sorrows, and without self denial or self sacrifice! With this in mind, Cardinal Newman once wrote, "True religion has two sides to it, a beautiful side and a severe side. And we all will surely stray from the narrow path that leads to life,

if we indulge ourselves in what is beautiful, while casting aside what is severe." Commenting further on this issue, Cardinal Newman once wrote, "Religion is not meant to make an earthly person feel good, or secure in his station in life. On the contrary, true religion is to touch our hearts and souls, to incline us to seek to do the will of God. And it promises to transform us into Christ's own likeness, but most often at the expense of worldly suffering and poverty."

Now, redemptive suffering certainly represents the severe side of our religion. But in our case, suffering is given new meaning and purpose, because we offer it in union with our Lord's own passion and death for the forgiveness of sins and salvation of sinners. Jesus couldn't have experienced His Resurrection to glory, without first having experienced His terrible passion and death! So, what is beautiful usually flows from what is severe.

In Sermon 16 of Newman's "Parochial and Plain Sermons," he assures us that our compassionate Father will always act in our best interest, and for our greater good, especially when our hearts are immersed in sorrows. He says, "The spirits of the just are made perfect through suffering, and are thereby encouraged to follow Christ." With this in mind, Newman wrote his celebrated poem, "Lead me on, kindly light of Truth, amidst the encircling gloom...I ask not to see the distant scene, one step is enough for me." And so Cardinal Newman surrendered his own will, to follow instead that kindly light of truth, but frequently at great cost to himself.

In Newman's examination of the virtue of faith he explained, "It is a practical perception of the unseen world. It is to understand that this world is not enough for our happiness. We must look beyond this world to realize His Presence, to serve Him, to do His will, and to surrender oneself totally to God, who is the sovereign Giver of all good."

Cardinal Newman once said in a homily about suffering, "When

we are discouraged in our weakness, when we can't seem to see the light at the end of the tunnel, may God give us confidence in His love." So often we feel the great weight of our sorrows and are tempted to give in, and abandon our faith in despair. But if we have trust and confidence in God's love for us, then of necessity, we are better equipped to exercise our faith by persevering patiently. The point is God permits us to suffer trials and tribulations simply because they indeed serve as opportunities for us to exercise our faith and trust in Him! They serve as opportunities for spiritual growth! Thus, we should always meditate on Christ's own cruel passion and death, when confronted with our trials and sorrows. Doesn't this then lead us to conclude the eventuality of some greater good, some higher purpose behind our suffering? In His case it was His resurrection to glory, and in ours, growth in faith!

Therefore, our trials and sorrows, indeed the severe side of religion, which so distress us in their present moment, do ultimately have lasting significance for some greater good, or the realization of some higher purpose, surely the beautiful side of religion! In fact, we can't enjoy the beautiful side without first persevering through what is severe! And in our perseverance, we begin to discern God's Spirit guiding us, prompting us, to follow "His kindly light of truth," along the narrow path He has chosen for each one of us.

And so it was with me on June 6, 2000, when I began a rather wondrous and mysterious journey, from horrific pain and suffering to the unfathomable reaches of the communion of saints in heaven. All by means of a simple prayer, uttered from the lips of a simple man! You see, I awoke that morning to excruciating and debilitating pain in both legs. Rushed to a local hospital, the physician in the ER ordered a CAT scan of my back. It revealed a serious succession of lumbar disc and vertebrae deformities protruding inward and literally squeezing the life out of my spinal spinal cord and femoral nerves, causing severe stenosis in both legs. The doctor advised that I should seek immediate treatment from a spinal specialist in Boston, as it appeared likely that all of my lower

functions would soon shut down, resulting in permanent paralysis.

The problem was that it was now mid June, and it would take months to make appointments with spinal surgeons, to say nothing of the time required for treatment and rehabilitation! And as time went on I became increasingly gripped by tension and anxiety, because I was also scheduled to begin my third year of studies in the diaconate formation program in Boston on September 5, 2000. You see, I had just completed the second year of a four year formation program, leading to my ordination as a permanent deacon. I loved this beautiful program, and had my heart set on being ordained!

In mid July of 2000, I met with the chief of spinal surgery at one of the major hospitals in Boston. After reviewing the films he stated, "without question, yours is the worst back I've seen in 17 years of performing spinal surgery!" He warned me that I should forget my plans for diaconate formation because I needed immediate surgery; otherwise, I would likely end up paralyzed! Because of the very high risk of paralysis, he immediately scheduled my surgery for the same time my classes were to begin in September! Naturally I had to choose surgery over my returning to classes.

I returned home after this tragic news, totally distraught and turned on the TV to the EWTN channel for some consolation. The program featured Fr. John McCloskey interviewing an English Newman scholar, Fr. Ian Ker. They spoke of Newman's uniquely difficult life, the crisis in his vocation, as well as the ongoing efforts at his beatification. A miracle was needed, for which they had been waiting 120 years. At the end of the program the viewing audience was asked to report details of any divine favors received after praying to Cardinal Newman, by posting the address of the Birmingham Oratory on the screen. In view of this request, I prayed to Newman with all my heart, "Please Cardinal Newman, help me to walk so that I can return to classes and be ordained." I didn't pray for complete healing, as I thought it would be too much to ask - merely to grant me that small favor, which was at that time, so urgent! That somehow,

somehow I might return to my classes! Then I went to bed.

To my utter amazement, I woke up the following morning virtually pain free! I could walk normally with strength in both legs, whereas the day before and for months prior, I was all hunched over in complete agony! Although pain free, still the reality was that I was scheduled for surgery in five weeks!

Because of these obvious inconsistent medical realities, I was then directed to Dr. Robert Banco, renowned as one of the foremost spinal surgeons in the U.S. He first examined me, noting my ability to walk upright without pain and with strength in my legs. Then he viewed the MRI and myelogram, noting my physical condition hadn't changed at all; but yet, I was completely pain free! He was totally mystified, admitting that something uniquely remarkable was happening! As a result, he stated that he personally wouldn't recommend such delicate surgery without any symptoms such as pain or disfigurement. He suggested that I should cancel the surgery and return to my classes! He promised he would stay with my case, for "this situation can't possibly last very long!"

In fact, it lasted for nine months! Then the pain unexplainably returned in full fury, immediately after my last class in April of 2001! But my prayer to Cardinal Newman was answered! Remarkably, I had just completed my third year, when previously it had been medically impossible to do so! Dr. Banco later remarked that "there was no scientific or medical explanation why you were totally pain free and for so long, given the medical fact that the physical condition of your spinal cord hadn't changed at all!"

But now with the return of the intense pain I definitely needed the surgery. Dr. Banco was booked through October, but remarkably, he scheduled my surgery for August 9, 2001! The surgery, however, was more difficult than anticipated, as he unfortunately encountered serious complications. My dura mater or protective lining housing the spinal fluids, surrounding the spinal cord was very badly torn.

Apparently it had been that way for several months. For days after the surgery I was still suffering incredible pain with no relief in sight. If I were lucky, and if I recovered, my recovery would now take many months, definitely preventing me from returning to my last year of classes, scheduled to begin in only three weeks! Four days after my surgery I was completely devastated when again I was told I couldn't return to classes, so I felt compelled to pray to Cardinal Newman as I did the year before! I felt compelled to try to get out of my hospital bed, and at least attempt to walk! But the pain was so agonizing that it took more than ten minutes merely to slide to the edge of my bed, and with a nurse's help, put my feet onto the floor, leaning on my bed for support. I was completely helpless and the situation now seemed hopeless! It was again this severe moment, this moment of desolation, that led me to prayer! The exact same prayer I made the year before, and under the same circumstances! I called upon my special intercessor and faithful friend, "Please Cardinal Newman, help me to walk, so I can return to classes and be ordained." By this prayer, heart was certainly speaking to heart!

Suddenly I felt a tremendous sensation of intense heat all over, and a strong tingling feeling throughout my body, both of which lasted for a long time! I also felt an indescribable sense of joy and peace, as though in the presence of God, and a strong sense of confidence and determination that finally, I could walk! When this beautiful occurrence subsided, I realized I was standing upright, and I immediately exclaimed to the nurse, "I have no more pain," whereas minutes before, I was bent over in complete agony! During these precious moments, I was totally captivated, totally consumed by God's loving presence! I had utterly no will power of my own, completely unaware of my surroundings and caught up, as I was in these ecstatic and mysterious moments! Then I realized that now I could walk, when I couldn't for months! I could walk upright! I could walk with strength in my back and legs! You see, the date of my healing, I later realized was August 15, 2001, the Feast of our Lady's Assumption into heaven! And my healing became remarkably and unexplainably

accelerated in one mysterious moment, rather than many months as previously anticipated! I was discharged that same day with no need for rehabilitation and to everyone's astonishment, I returned to my classes on time!

Dr. Banco in a recent filmed interview before the BBC stated, "The spine is usually the size of a quarter, but in Jack's case it was compressed to the circumference of a pea. He should have been paralyzed long before! And after the surgery, it would normally take months for the compressed nerves in his spinal cord to decompress to its normal size, and with excruciating pain and severe headaches. He had none! Recovery from spinal surgery ranges from weeks to months depending on its severity. Jack's condition was the worst I've ever seen and surgically the most difficult! But, in Jack's case there was no period of recovery whatsoever! You see, after his prayer to Cardinal Newman, his condition was as if he never had a spinal problem or even surgery, for that matter! There is absolutely no medical or scientific explanation for what happened to Jack. It was truly a miracle! In all my years before Jack's surgery or since, I've never seen anything like it!"

One year later on September 14, 2002, the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, I was ordained a permanent deacon! And without knowing the date of my ordination, the Actor for Newman's cause notified me, on that very same day, that the Fathers at the Birmingham Oratory had voted to formally initiate The process for the beatification of their founder, the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman, and to take my case to Rome.

Was this notification a providential sign from God that my prayer to Cardinal Newman was miraculously answered or merely another coincidence? I don't know. But what I do know is that it was a beautiful sign, affirming not only that my remarkable healing came from God at Cardinal Newman's intercession, but also by persevering in faith through my suffering some greater good, some higher purpose

might be achieved. That Cardinal Newman would soon be counted as one of the Blessed in Heaven!

God bless you all

Deacon Jack

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