

SOME REFLECTIONS ON REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

The ministry associated with St. Vincent de Paul is vital to the life of the Church because it brings Christ's healing presence to our brothers and sisters who are enduring trauma and pain in the wake of personal crises and financial losses. But far more severe than their financial or personal reverses are the losses they endure from a spiritual perspective, which often accompanies financial burdens and amounts to a far greater tragedy. Often those afflicted with physical and financial reverses are spiritually traumatized as well. By far, these spiritual deficits should be our prime concern! As a result of prolonged periods of physical or financial deprivations, many are also left with feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, loss of self confidence, self esteem, and even despair; their faith shattered because God, if He exists to them at all, seems so distant, so disinterested! They often ask, "Am I being punished for my sins?"

A person whose family depends on him/her may lose a job. What was once a comfortable life, now becomes unbearable. Unable to pay essential bills, the mortgage, taxes and other necessities, he is now threatened with foreclosure and other court proceedings. As a result, his sense of self esteem becomes shattered. He can't find another job no matter how hard he tries. With disappointment after disappointment, he ceases to try - he feels utterly defeated, his confidence dashed! And they ask, "what if someone in the family were to get seriously ill, and where, in all of this, is God's help, His support, His love? As it happens so often, both he and his family lose soon their faith, feeling totally abandoned, terribly alone!

In addition to financial assistance, shouldn't we also offer some measure of spiritual support and emotional assistance to help them regain their confidence, to help them get back on their feet, to regain some measure of self confidence, to become spiritually restored. Doesn't our Lord wish to bring them to complete healing, spiritual as well as temporal through our ministries? You may be able to help them better understand the hidden meaning behind their trials, to help them cope and persevere with renewed strength from

God, to enable them to begin again, to go on, long after you've left.

Therefore, I thought to present some basic reflections on redemptive suffering to assist you in providing some measure of emotional support, and spiritual assistance to those enduring prolonged trauma and afflictions as follows:

In James 1:2-4 we read, "My brothers and sisters, count on it as a pure joy when you are involved in every sort of trial. Realize that when your faith is tested, this makes for endurance. Let endurance come to its perfection in you, so that you may be fully mature in faith and lacking in nothing."

We also read in the Book of Judith, "We should be grateful to the Lord for putting us to the test, as He did our forefathers. Recall how He dealt with Abraham, and how He tried Isaac. Not for vengeance did the Lord put them in a crucible to try their hearts, nor has He done so with us. It is by way of admonition that He chastises and disciplines, those who are very close to Him."

My mentor, the Bl. Cardinal John Henry Newman also admonishes us, "If we joyfully have received good things from God, shouldn't we also endure the bad things? We have only to point to the lessons learned from the inspired Book of Job. While Job outwardly experienced bodily agony and suffering, inwardly, in wisdom and faith he persevered knowing God's love for him. He thought that his afflictions must somehow be in his best interest because God has permitted them in his love, and God does not permit, what is not for our highest good. The good He sends us may be in the form of earthly or spiritual gifts, or on the other hand, afflictions resulting from the scourges of this present day. Outwardly, these scourges create pain and anguish in darkness. But inwardly, our minds are bolstered by light, for we are suffering in union with Christ in His continuing mission of redemption for all mankind."

At another time Newman wrote, "Always be assured of God's love. Be consoled by the fact that in times of tribulation, adversity, or illness we need only recall all the good things, the gifts we have received from the hands of God in the past. Overwhelming sorrow or suffering need not break us. So too, in times of prosperity, we should not forget our times of affliction, lest we become

self-sufficient and self-righteous. Both attitudes should always be united, so that one always supports the other. As in the beatitudes, poverty may be the source of great affliction, but it can also serve as the source of great holiness. For Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' Conversely, material success on earth may be a source of great joy and pleasure, but can also be a false god, leading to eternal death." And so we pray, Lord, give us strength in temptation, endurance in trial, and gratitude in prosperity.

So when we are discouraged in our weakness, may God give us the grace to acquire confidence and trust in His love. So often in our journey through life, we unknowingly take the direction which God has willed for us, by virtue of our mistakes, our trials, and earthly afflictions. St. Peter in his first letter cautions us, "You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials, but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendor of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness, lead to praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ appears. Rejoice with inexpressible joy touched with glory, because by your afflictions, you are achieving your faith's goal, your salvation!" Loving Father, the glory of your Son was best revealed, not in His wondrous deeds and miracles, but in the suffering He freely accepted. So too your glory often rests, not in your earthly achievements, but in your afflictions, which you are called to endure, in the crosses you are called to bear, in union with those of Christ, for the forgiveness of the sins of many. We should not evaluate our adversities from our own biased perspective, but from Almighty God's perspective!

So many people in today's world would prefer to enter into religious glory, without any cost or pain, without an trials or sorrows, and without self-denial or self-sacrifice! With this in mind, Cardinal Newman speaking of many Christians in his day, 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 only in what is beautiful, while casting aside what is severe." Commenting further on this issue, he wrote, "True religion is not meant to make an earthly person

feel good, or even secure in his station in life. On the contrary, true religion is meant 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 poverty." Now, redemptive suffering certainly represents the severe side of our faith. But in our case, suffering is given a whole new meaning and purpose, because we offer it in union with our Lord's own passion and death. 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 he surrendered his own will, to follow instead that Kindly light of truth, but most often, at great cost to himself!

In another homily about human suffering, he wrote, "When we are discouraged in our weakness, when we can't seem to see the reassuring 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, through prayer, have trust and confidence in God's love for us, then of necessity, we become better equipped to exercise our faith by persevering patiently. My point is that God often permits us to suffer trials and afflictions simply because they indeed serve as opportunities for us to exercise and practice our faith and trust in Him. They serve as opportunities for spiritual growth! When you are, therefore confronted with severe trials and misfortunes, doesn't that lead you to conclude the eventuality of some greater good, some higher purpose behind your sufferings?

Finally, our trials and sorrows, indeed the severe side of our

faith, which so distress us in their present moments, do ultimately have lasting significance for some greater good, or the realization of some higher purpose, surely the beautiful side of our 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 loving Spirit guiding us, prompting us to follow His Kindly Light of truth, along the narrow path He has chosen for each of us!

May Blessed Cardinal Newman intercede with Almighty God to grant to all of you complete healing, both body and spirit.

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