



The Impact of Suffering:

The impact of suffering and its meaning for St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales; Fr. Walter Ciszek, SJ and Victor Frankl a Jewish Psychiatrist.

by Sister Mary Francis

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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Jesus – the Beginning and End of our faith from conception to glory. Suffering is part of this journey. To suffer without faith in Jesus is like walking through a tunnel with no light and no end. Now is the time not to lose faith in God though Godless is how it may feel. Suffering exists as an objective reality inseparable from our earthly existence. Within this last century alone, the human race has amassed an incomparable accumulation of sufferings. “WHY? Why is there suffering in the world? Is there meaning in suffering?” This question is put to God with all the emotion of the heart and with a mind full of dismay and anxiety. God expects the question and listens to it. There must be an answer. In 1984, the Holy Year of the Redemption, Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, composed an apostolic letter in which he sounds the depths of this mystery in the light of our redemption accomplished by Jesus on the cross in THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF HUMAN SUFFERING.

“Love is the richest source of the meaning of suffering, which always remains a mystery. Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the ‘why’ of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love.”

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to share with you some of his teaching as well as reflections from St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales and from two men who were in prison camps during World War II, a Jesuit priest, Fr. Walter Ciszek and a psychiatrist, Victor Frankl. Suffering is not foreign or alien to God, for if God’s gaze holds the world in being, it holds it all in being, including its pain. The suffering of the Son of God, wrecked, mocked, deserted and Godforsaken offers a home for everyone’s sorrow. Whatever a person may be suffering, Jesus has touched and sanctified that abyss. He may not have shared the pain in kind – he did not know what it was to grow old, to lose a child, or to sin, but He has searched out every pain in intensity. Jesus entered into the question of human suffering and irrevocably gave it a definitive answer through the absurdity of the cross. In the passion of Christ, human suffering has reached its culmination. It has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order because it has been linked to love.

The Son of God drew close to the world of human suffering by taking this suffering to Himself. During His public activity, Jesus experienced not only fatigue, homelessness, misunderstanding even on the part of those closest to Him, but more than anything, He became progressively more and more isolated and encircled by hostility and the preparation for putting Him to death. Jesus



embraced the cross voluntarily and innocently, taking upon Himself the sufferings of all people, because He took upon Himself the sins of all. All human sin in its breadth and depth became the true cause of the Redeemer's suffering. Jesus accepted sin with that love for the Father which overcomes the evil of every sin. He suffered with an incomparable depth and intensity of suffering because, while being inseparably united with God the Father, He experienced in His human nature the horrible weight of the "entire" evil of the turning away from God which is contained in sin – He, the only begotten Son of God, the sinless one. Through the divine depth of His filial union with the Father, Jesus perceived in a humanly inexpressible way this suffering which is the separation, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God. From this excruciating abyss, Jesus cried out in anguish beyond human comprehension, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Psalm 22). Precisely through this suffering He accomplished the Redemption, and could breathe His last saying: "It is finished."

If, in fact, the cross was to human eyes Christ's emptying of Himself, at the same time it was in the eyes of God His being lifted up. On the cross, Christ attained and fully accomplished His mission: by fulfilling the will of the Father, He at the same time fully realized Himself. In weakness He manifested His power, and in humiliation He manifested all His messianic greatness. There is a God-content in our suffering, too, which has power to unlock us at the point we cannot unlock ourselves. The emptying feels like hanging in mid-air, unable to breathe, while from within God is filling the space. He shapes us from within the heart-wrenching pain and gradually transforms us, lifts us up. We may be kicking and screaming in protest, but after we've had it out with God and all our human efforts to resist are depleted, we come to the point of surrender. Free from ourselves, free for God to fill our emptiness, to open locked doors and to gift us with His peace that nothing will shake. It's the cross that, once embraced, leads to resurrection. How alive is our faith in the power of the cross of Christ?

God does not ordain pain in the sense of wanting pain as pain, or of working to create it. In modern parlance, God does not "micro-manage" our world. In a Christian view, God respects the laws of nature, entrusts the world to human freedom, and works through secondary causes more than miracles. St. John of the Cross challenges us to view 'all the struggles and difficulties' of life as 'coming from the hand of God, for the person's good.' He goes on.

'When you are burdened, you are joined to God. He is your strength, and he is with people who suffer. When there is no burden, you are just with yourself, your own weakness. It is in the difficulties which test our patience that the virtue and strength of the soul is increased and affirmed.'

Christ did not conceal from His disciples and followers the need for suffering. The witnesses of the cross and resurrection of Jesus down through the centuries have experienced a particular power in suffering that draws a person interiorly close to Christ. One discovers the salvific meaning of suffering and becomes a completely new person. There exists a spiritual greatness which surpasses the body in a way that is completely beyond compare. There was one disciple of Jesus, an American



Jesuit priest, Walter J. Cizek, whose experience of the cross inspires us. Fr. Cizek was captured by the Russian army during World War II and convicted of being a “Vatican spy.” He spent twenty-three agonizing years in Soviet prisons and the labor camps of Siberia. He “had learned much during those years of hardship and suffering that could be of help to others in their lives.” In the course of his book, *HE LEADTH ME*, Fr. Cizek shares his meditation on Jesus’ struggle in the Garden of Olives; it was his saving grace when he had lost the last shreds of faith in God. After countless scrutinies and interrogations, he finally succumbed to signing a false dossier of crimes he never committed. This crime condemned him to fifteen years of hard labor which he could have forgone had he “cooperated” with the prison officials by working for them. It was when he reached a point of total bankruptcy of his own powers that he recalled the God he had forgotten, the God of his heart, his only hope. He turned immediately to prayer. In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that this chalice might pass.

“Jesus knew the feeling of fear and weakness in his human nature as he faced suffering and death. Not once, but three times he asked to have his ordeal removed or somehow modified. Yet each time he concluded with an act of total abandonment and submission to the Father’s will. It was not just conformity to the will of God; it was total surrender, a stripping away of all human fears, of all doubts about his own abilities to withstand the passion, of every last shred of self including self-doubt.”

Jesus went toward His own suffering, aware of its saving power; He went forward in obedience to the Father, but primarily He was united to the Father in this love with which He loved the world and every human being in the world.

Strengthened by this meditation, Fr. Cizek discovered that the will of God was not hidden somewhere “out there.” The situations in which he found himself were God’s will for him. He wanted to accept them as coming from God’s hands, to let go of control and place himself at God’s disposal. In faith, he made a deliberate choice to abandon himself to God’s will, to let go of every last reservation. With this decision he crossed the boundary of no return. Fear gave way to liberation; danger and despair to a fresh new wave of confidence and happiness. There was but a single vision, God, who was all in all. Nothing could separate him from God because He was in all things. “The future, hidden as it was, was hidden in His will and therefore acceptable to me no matter what it might bring.”

We know that people react to suffering in different ways. This was strikingly evident among those imprisoned in the Nazi death camps where Victor Frankl, an internationally renowned Austrian psychiatrist, shared the same struggle for survival as did his fellow prisoners. In his famous book, *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING*, published in 1946, he tells the story about his experiences as an ordinary prisoner (for although he was a psychiatrist, he was not employed as one). The despairing people would huddle around him to receive hope and encouragement.



“The purpose of my words was to find a full meaning in our life, then and there, in that hut and in that practically hopeless situation.”

Whoever was still alive had reason to hope. Since they were unable to change their situation, they had to change themselves. They had to have a reason for which to live if they were to survive the brutality of the camp. He quoted Nietzsche: “That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.”

The moral greatness of every person was being sorely tested. He writes:

“If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. The way in which a man accepts fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether the person is worthy of his sufferings or not. It is often just such an exceptionally difficult external situation which gives man the opportunity to grow spiritually beyond himself. Instead of taking the camp’s difficulties as a test of their inner strength, some prisoners did not take their life seriously and despised it as something of no consequence. They preferred to close their eyes and to live in the past. Life for such people became meaningless. Yet, in reality, there was an opportunity and a challenge. One could make a victory of those experiences turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of prisoners.”

He told them that “in some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.” Nietzsche once wrote:

“He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.”

Whatever they had gone through could still be an asset to them in the future.

St. Francis de Sales, in his *TREATISE ON THE LOVE OF GOD* (Book 5, Chapter 12), says:

“Our heart is never so unquiet as when the movement whereby it constantly opens and closes is interfered with; it is never so tranquil as when its movements are left free. Its tranquility is in its movements.”

Our hearts are free when we follow the “Lord of the Dance;” we’re out of step when we want to dance to a different rhythm. It is the deepest desire of God’s loving heart to be in communion with His creation, to be one with us. This is the reason for our existence -to be in love with God, to be one with God – one heart, one will with God in all the exigencies of our life.



Full of opportunity and challenge, life is a journey from today to eternity, a leap from faith to vision, and you know, it's only a breath away. Now is the time not to lose faith in God though Godless is how it may feel. A thousand times a day let us lift our hearts to God in prayer united to all who suffer in any way, for prayer sets us at the heart of the world's sufferings offering gifts of empathy, compassion and comfort. May Jesus live in us the mystery of His Incarnation in all its simplicity and depth, then will we be able to own the words of St. Paul:

"I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake." (Galatians 2:19-20)

SOURCES:

The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, 1984

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He Leadeth Me, Walter J. Ciszek, SJ.