

## **From the book ENDURING TRIALS by Fr. Jacques Philippe edited and adapted**

How can we face up to trials and suffering in our lives. To this question I obviously don't have any magic solution. But I would like to propose some very simple reflections, which can help provide guidelines.

First of all: don't be afraid. Let's not be afraid of life or difficulties or suffering. Obviously these things are not easy to face up to; they often leave us diminished and weakened. But they are part of life. We have to accept them, we have to "play the game," so to speak, full of trust. Remember, as St Paul teaches, "All things work for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose." (Rms 8:28) And as St. Theresa says, "Everything is grace."

We can encounter all sorts of different trials in our lives: unemployment, health problems, marriage crises, the death of someone close to us, failures. . . We can also go through depression, a dark night of the soul, crises in our relationship with God or in our vocation. There is a huge variety in this field. It's clear that different kinds of trials must be faced differently. Someone who suffers from depression is not in the same situation as someone who has lost a loved one. Each must be helped in a specific way, based on the nature and particular circumstances of his or her suffering.

That said, there are points common to all trials, and this is what I would like to look at now, because it may provide some light. **Every trial, no matter what its caused and characteristics are, is a trial of faith or of hope or of love.** All three aspects usually are involved, with particular stress on one or the other.

**Every trial is a trial of faith.** If I am a believer and I am going through a difficult time, I will unavoidably ask myself at some stage, "What is God doing in all of this? Does he really love me? Is he present in what I am living through?" No matter whether its sickness, unemployment, or something else, trust in God is put to the test, called into question; and to that question we always give, consciously or unconsciously, some answer. We may doubt God's love, we may accuse him of abandoning us we may rebel against him. These things often happen. However, it is possible—and this is beautiful and constructive—to see this time of trial as a call: a call to have a more determined, mature, and adult faith.

The specific question we are faced with—What is God doing? Is he really faithful? Can he draw good out of what is happening?—is simply a question of faith. We are invited to respond by deciding to have faith: "I believe! I continue to trust God! Even though I can't see, even though I don't feel anything, even though appearances are against it, I decide to believe. I will believe that God is faithful, that he will not let me fall, that he can draw something positive out of everything that is happening to me." Trials are painful and mysterious; they have many aspects that cause scandal or are inexplicable, but they can also be understood as calls to make an act of faith, which then takes on immense value. Faith, says Scripture, is more precious than gold purified in the fire.

**Every trial is also a trial of hope.** This is closely linked to what I've just said about faith, but there are some important points to add. When we are having a difficult time, one of the questions that comes up is this: In this painful experience, what do we rely on? What are we counting on? In what or in whom do we place our hope? How are we thinking of getting out of it? The answer

we're invited to give is: I'm counting on the Lord, I'm expecting help from him. That doesn't mean I'm not going to apply all the human resources available, but at the deepest level I abandon myself into God's hands, and it is in him that I hope.

Another way of putting the question of hope is this: What is our security based on? When we go through a time of trial we become fragile. We are impoverished, having lost certain things we'd relied on before, such as good physical health. Or perhaps someone who was a support for us, whom we depended on, disappears or lets us down. Suddenly something has gone missing from among the things we counted on—our human possibilities, money, friends, education, skills, qualifications, everything we normally depended on.

Finding ourselves poorer, we see more clearly the limitations of our human confidence. For instance, we may have been relying on a particular institution, and we find that it is defective. We had been idealizing our spouse or our community, and we realize that they are frail, that people are the same everywhere. Often in a trial this sense of fragility is especially painful. No longer do we know what to lean on, which saint to pray to. And the worst of it is that we can no longer rely on ourselves either, for we discover our own extreme fragility. We realize that we are more sinful than we thought, with less patience and less strength. We realize that we easily fall into anxiety, discouragement, and all the other negative feelings that can occur at such times.

The question therefore presents itself with particular urgency: Where have we placed our ultimate security? The answer we're invited to give is: My ultimate security is God. I rely on him alone.

Our only real security—and we have no other—is that God's mercy is unlimited. God is infinitely good and faithful. That is our only rock, to use the very concrete language of Scripture. All the rest—health, education, qualifications, friends, our own strength, our virtues—can leave us. We must be realistic! All those things are of course very good. A certain income, emotional security, faithful friends, a spiritual companion, good education, plenty of experience, a community we're happy to belong to, and so on: all those are valuable things. We should welcome them and seek them insofar as we can, but we should never make them our security. For God alone is absolute security. All the rest is relative. That is a fundamental point about trials of hope: we may experience a certain impoverishment, fragility in certain areas, precisely so that we learn to find our true security more fully in God. And God can never forsake us. Scripture says this endlessly: "*My steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, Who has compassion on you.*"

The sense of insecurity and fragility that we often experience in trials is admittedly very unpleasant and can produce a kind of panic, but it is also an opportunity: a call to become more firmly rooted in God. As an expression found so often in the Bible puts it: "He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, I shall not be shaken." That will give us true freedom in the end.

**Every trial is also a trial of love.** Perhaps our relationship with God is in crisis or perhaps our relationship with our neighbor, in our marriage, for instance. But often the difficulty also concerns our relationship with ourselves, our love for ourselves.

For example, sometimes we may lose a taste for prayer. What does that trial mean? It is a call to continue praying all the same, because we don't pray just because we enjoy it or experience satisfaction, but first and foremost to please God. When we find great pleasure in it, that's fine, but when prayer is difficult, we need to keep going just the same! That purifies our love for God,

which becomes freer, more disinterested, more genuine, and not just a selfish search for ourselves.

It's similar in what concerns our relationship with our neighbor. You loved your wife when she was young, pretty, well-behaved, pleasant, and answered all your expectations. Now you notice that she is sometimes bad tempered, that she has a few wrinkles; do you continue to love her? Do you love her for yourself or do you love her truly, with a love that consists of wanting her good, and not only seeking your own satisfaction? We are constantly faced with this kind of trial in which we confront the demands of loving another person as he or she is, loving them freely and disinterestedly, forgiving them, etc.

Sometimes our love for ourselves is called into question. You loved yourself when you were satisfied with yourself, when everything was going well, but now, seeing your inner poverty and sinfulness, you begin to hate yourself. No! Accept yourself in all your poverty and limitations.

I could cite endless examples showing that in every trial there is also a certain purification of love: love for God, love for ourselves, or love for our neighbor. It's not to destroy love, but so that love becomes deeper, truer, more evangelical and, basically, happier. We should not be afraid of crises. These days for instance, as soon as a married couple hits a crisis, they separate, and each looks for someone new. How sad! Perhaps that crisis was the very opportunity they needed to deepen their relationship and adjust things to make their love truer. Every crisis is a chance to grow, an invitation to undertake a certain kind of work on ourselves.

The conclusion of these reflections is that in every trial it is essential to ask oneself a question along these lines: What act of faith am I being invited to make in this situation? What attitude of hope am I being called to live by? And what conversion in relation to love, leading to a love that is truer and purer, am I being summoned to undertake? If we ask ourselves these questions honestly, we'll always find an answer. We'll discover some kind of call from God at the heart of our trial, and that will give it meaning.

What enables us to overcome a trial is not a magic wand that solves everything, but the discovery of what call it is that's being addressed to us, how we're being asked to grow. In understanding and responding to that call, we find new strength, enabling us to get through the trial and make something positive of it. Every trial can become a path of life, for Christ has risen from the dead and is present everywhere, sowing the seeds of new life in every situation. Even in those that seem most negative and most desperate, God is present.

### Part 3

On the basis of that principle, let's ask ourselves what is necessary in practice to "make it work," so to speak. What attitudes do we need to be able to move forward positively through a trial?

First, we must accept it. As long as we rebel, rejecting the situation in which we find ourselves, we won't be able to go forward. We need to say yes. That can take time, and it's normal that it should. Sometimes years are required to accept a death or a serious sickness. But we must set off on this path of acceptance, which isn't fatalism or resignation but an act of consent. Trusting God, I trust Life.

Next (even though there's no rigid chronological order that must be followed and all sorts of variations are possible), we need to ask ourselves the right questions.

In a time of trial, a thousand questions can arise. Why has this happened to me? What did I do wrong to deserve this? What mistake did I make? (Sometimes people say, "What did I do to God to deserve this suffering?") What's the explanation of it all? What's causing it? How long will it go on? What's the quickest way out? Is this the way it usually happens? For instance, is it normal for someone who's always been faithful to God to suffer from depression? One of the commonest questions is, Whose fault is it—my own or other people's? Who is to blame?

We ask ourselves huge numbers of questions, often with great pain and anguish. That's inevitable. But one must look carefully at one's attitude in all this questioning, especially when the question is, "Who is to blame for what's happening to me?"

Certain primary psychological mechanisms operate very quickly and quite dangerously. We dislike suffering, obviously, and it is normal that we want to end it. So first we try and identify its cause, easily persuading ourselves that when we've learned who is responsible, we can eliminate the suffering. Everyone who suffers seeks someone to blame and guilt.

We must be very watchful here. Although it's normal in suffering to look for causes and remedies, we must take care to keep our hearts pure. Making accusations and seeking scapegoats is a constant temptation in social life. Not finding a scapegoat, people invent one, as Hitler did in making the Jews scapegoats for all the problems of Germany. Don't be naïve; we're subject to the same temptations today. A society in crisis will always try to identify some group of people to blame for its problems.

We need to give this point close attention in regard to our personal lives. Vigilance is required to ensure that suffering doesn't turn into bitterness blame, and constant mutual recriminations. . People often go that route, but it doesn't solve anything.

The questions we ask in times of trial, including those I've mentioned, are perfectly justifiable. Sometimes there's even an answer. The cause of some suffering may be identified or the person responsible located, and the remedy discovered in this way.

But justifiable as the questions may be, there isn't always an answer. And it's very common for people to get irretrievably tangled up in them and end up going round and round in circles.

Take the question "Why?" Why is this happening to me? Most of the time there's no answer, or at least no immediate one. Perhaps we'll understand in ten or twenty years, but just now there's no answer, and we risk shutting ourselves up inside our need for one-forever demanding an explanation that doesn't exist. Not everything in life can be explained to human satisfaction. /And the more we demand an explanation without finding one, the more frustrated we become, the more bitter and filled with blame. You sometimes see people trap themselves in this way in a sort of vicious circle.

Similarly, we can also go round and round in an endless search for someone to blame for our misfortunes. Some painful situations are too complex and mixed-up for it to be possible to identify any one person as the one at fault. We need to have the wisdom to admit this.

Keep this clearly in mind, then: the questions we've been looking at are normal, but they don't always have clear answers and we can get fruitlessly bogged down in looking for these. When we realize that's happening—that we're going round and round and getting nowhere, that our questions aren't producing light but only bitterness and blame—we must have the courage to put

those questions aside and ask ourselves another. It's the only essential one, after all, and it will always be answered: What attitude does God want me to have toward this situation?

The point is to move from "Why?" to "How?" The real question isn't "Why is this happening to me?" but "How should I live through these things?" How am I called to face this situation? What call to growth is being made to me through this? That question will always get an answer.

#### Part 4

Allow me to underline what I'm saying. In difficult times we want all possible explanations for what's happening to us. But this search for explanations isn't always as pure as it may seem. Part of it is quite justifiable: seeking the truth, seeking solutions to problems, etc. But mixed up with this one very often finds other motives that aren't right. Sometimes we seek answers out of simple curiosity; sometimes to find people we can blame, on whom we can unload our share of the responsibility. Sometimes, too, we insist on having an answer in order to reassure ourselves or set our minds at rest. Our security depends on having answers that our minds can handle, that our capacity for understanding situations can take in. But this isn't the real basis of our security: that basis is God. Knowing and understanding everything can't save us. That's a very common illusion, but it isn't knowledge that saves: it is faith and trust.

It's right and necessary to ask questions, but sometimes we should also ask ourselves what our questions really mean! In this life it is sometimes absolutely necessary that we consent to go forward without understanding. The purification and refining of our minds and our perception of reality depends on this. There are times when we are called to believe, even if we don't understand. "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe!"<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the only real questions in our lives are those whose answer lead us to personal conversion, to progress in love. You can see that very clearly today when the media flood us with information. It sometimes seems as if the better informed people are, the less able they are to find answers to their real questions!

Let me offer some practical advice. When preoccupied with a question to which you can't find the answer, ask yourself: Do I absolutely need an answer to that question in order to know how I should live my life today? You'll realize that usually you don't. So you can set the question aside for the time being without any harm, and it will simplify your life. I'm firmly convinced that when we have a question to which we need to know the answer in order to do God's will today, he always responds.

Sometimes we go over and over our questions. Then we must have a "Copernican revolution," so to speak, and change our approach. Instead of insisting on answers to all our questions, we resolve to accept the partial darkness and ask ourselves the real question. We accept the situation as it is, without aiming to understand it entirely, and ask: What does God want of me here? What is the right way to live through this? Which part of the Gospel am I called by this situation to put into practice now? What acts of faith and hope, what progress in love, am I being asked to make today? What good can be accomplished in this situation that depends on me? Without fretting any more about what other people should do or should have done, we look to our own responsibilities: What good, depending on me, can I do today that nobody else can do?

All these are in fact the same question. And it always has an answer. Even in the worst situations, in face of the most traumatic injustices, we can discover a good to be accomplished, a step to be taken in our personal progress, and ultimately that's what counts. The light appears little by little, and a very important condition for that to happen is living in the present moment. We shouldn't demand a final answer for the long term, but accept that sometimes light is given to us "just for today" If we demand long-term answer, we won't always get them. We have to consent to live from day to day, take one step at a time, without necessarily knowing what the next will be.

The results are very beneficial. First, meaning is restored to what we are living through. Before, we felt everything was absurd and chaotic. Now we are aware of a call we can respond to—we can act, make choices, move forward. Things begin to make sense again. Perhaps it's only for now and not for the next fifty years, but that doesn't matter. Day by day, we understand which direction to go in, which call to answer. Our lives recover meaning and orientation, our peace of soul is restored, as well as a certain confidence in the future.

#### Part 5

Another very beneficial result of living in the present moment is that we drop the victim attitude and assume an attitude of responsibility. We stop looking for people to blame and accusing others, and shoulder our own lives again. And having assumed responsibility, we can do the good that depends on us.

At the same time, we recover interior strength. There are two reasons for that: a psychological one and a spiritual one. On the psychological level, we regain strength because we know where to focus our efforts. Before, we were troubled by a thousand questions, wearing ourselves out, not knowing what to concentrate on; but now we know what we should do and can focus on that. Above all—and this is the spiritual reason—every time we respond to a call from God, we receive grace and are interiorly strengthened. Because God is faithful: if he asks us to take this or that step forward, he comes to the aid of our weakness. We are still little and fragile, but we receive a certain courage that enables us to go forward. God supports our steps.

Plus we recover our self-respect and a certain self-confidence. Before, we spent time complaining or lamenting, but now we have again shouldered responsibility for our lives, and that reconciles us to ourselves. We must realize that nothing is more destructive of our self-confidence than seeing ourselves as permanent victims. Here of course, I'm talking about the false victim complex of people who entangle themselves in wailing and blame instead of shouldering their responsibilities. Some people really are victims of injustice, and it's entirely healthy for them to admit it. A child who has been sexually abused may feel guilty about it because he can't see where the real responsibility lies. He needs to be told: You aren't guilty, you're the victim. That liberates him, because it's the truth. But there are also many false ways in which people see themselves as victims.

The path that I have outlined—acceptance of the painful situation, changing the approach of our questions, consenting to take just one step at a time, and discovering the answer as it gradually appears—demands courage, but in the end it is very positive.

This process may take time; we may advance quickly or slowly, and we must be patient. We need patience toward other people and toward ourselves. When someone is suffering, you can't

just tell them, “You should do this” or “You must do that.” A lot of thought and care is needed to accompany them spiritually. Simply helping someone accept his or her situation can take a long time. We need to help the person work toward acceptance, knowing a plant can’t be made to grow by pulling it. We have to accompany this individual step by step, at the right pace. We must help him or her not to become closed up in their suffering, bitterness, fears, or false questions, by inviting the person to trust. But they are the ones who will know when he or she can truly say yes. We can’t say yes for that individual or compel him to say yes before the time is right and his heart is open to hope. That takes understanding and perceptiveness—allowing them time to express their emotions and calm down; we can’t try to go faster than the Holy Spirit. I hope what I’ve said offers pointers, first for ourselves and also in accompanying other people in facing trials.

In summary, when faced with trials we shouldn’t be afraid. We should accept things as they come, even if that isn’t how we expected our lives to unfurl. Let’s try to discern, within that trial what the lord is calling us to and the conversions He is suggesting. Then then we will find the grace to live through them. That is the attitude that turns hard events into something positive in the end and enables us to grow in all circumstances.

I’ve outlined some general principles. Each of us individually must see how to apply them in particular cases. Taking them into consideration may be a very liberating experience. This path isn’t magic. It demands a program of work on ourselves, but that’s how we can go forward.

I One final point. When God permits trials in our lives, I think it’s also to help us understand others better and find the best words to help them. Not with some theory we’ve invented, but by having the right attitude and words to support and console them. To really support and console others, we need to accept trials and difficulties ourselves, so that we can understand things from the inside and not just in the abstract. These are obviously complex questions whose proper discussion would take much more time. I hope anyway that what I’ve said may help someone.

In any case, let’s never lose trust. I said earlier that the right question to ask in a time of trial, the one that really helps us go forward, is: “What act of faith am I being called to make, what attitude of trust am I being called to adopt, what conversion to love am I being called to undertake? The order of the terms is important. We must begin with faith and trust. For if we set out with a disposition of faith and trust, we will also have the light to see what conversion we are called to with regard to love. As long as we walk in faith and trust, we will know the path. But if we lose trust and faith, everything goes dark—we lose clear vision and the capacity for discernment. So ultimately, the real battle is to persevere in faith and trust, or to recover them. Then we’ll also be able to see what progress is possible in love. We must take things in that order.

Finally, let's ask our Lord to help us have the courage to believe, and always to be able to look at ourselves, the world and the Church with hope. It is by keeping, or recovering, that hope-filled outlook that we will be able to help the people whom God places along our way. Let's also ask our Lord to purify our love, to make it truer, deeper, and ultimately happier.

What I am setting out for us all is a demanding path, a path of responsibility, one that requires us to be adults in the spiritual sphere. But it is the path of life and joy.

My life is but an instant, a passing hour.  
My life is but a day that escapes and flies away. O my God ! You know that to love you on earth  
I only have today !...

Oh, I love you, Jesus ! My soul yearns for you.  
For just one day remain my sweet support.  
Come reign in my heart, give me your smile  
Just for today !

Lord, what does it matter if the future is gloomy ?  
To pray for tomorrow, oh no, I cannot !...  
Keep my heart pure, cover me with your shadow  
Just for today.

If I think about tomorrow, I fear my fickleness.  
I feel sadness and worry rising up in my heart.  
But I'm willing, my God, to accept trial and suffering  
Just for today.

O Divine Pilot ! whose hand guides me,  
I'm soon to see you on the eternal shore.  
Guide my little boat over the stormy waves in peace  
Just for today.

Ah ! Lord, let me hide in your Face.  
There I'll no longer hear the world's vain noise.  
Give me your love, keep me in your grace  
Just for today.

Near your divine Heart, I forget all passing things.  
I no longer dread the fears of the night.



Ah ! Jesus, give me a place in your Heart  
Just for today.

Living Bread, Bread of Heaven, divine Eucharist,  
O sacred Mystery ! that Love has brought forth...  
Come live in my heart, Jesus, my white Host,  
Just for today.

Deign to unite me to you, Holy and sacred Vine,  
And my weak branch will give you its fruit, And I'll be able to offer you a cluster of golden  
grapes  
Lord, from today on.

I've just this fleeting day to form  
This cluster of love, whose seeds are souls.  
Ah ! give me, Jesus, the fire of an Apostle  
Just for today.

O Immaculate Virgin ! You are my Sweet Star  
Giving Jesus to me and uniting me to Him.  
O Mother ! Let me rest under your veil  
Just for today.

My Holy Guardian Angel, cover me with your wing.  
With your fire light the road that I'm taking.  
Come direct my steps... help me, I call upon you  
Just for today.

Lord, I want to see you without veils, without clouds,  
But still exiled, far from you, I languish ?  
May your lovable face not be hidden from me  
Just for today.

Soon I'll fly away to speak your praises  
When the day without sunset will dawn on my soul.  
Then I'll sing on the Angels' lyre  
The Eternal Today !...