



## **“If This Is The Way You Treat Your Friends...”** **by Joe Sixpack**

St. Teresa of Avila, the Carmelite Doctor of the Church, was once crossing a shallow ford in the river on her donkey. Suddenly, the donkey bucked and she fell into the water, along with all her belongings. Sitting in the river, the saintly mystic looked toward heaven and quipped, "If this is the way You treat Your friends, I can understand why You have so few."

Being a saint does not mean you are drab, humorless, and have an ideal life. Quite the contrary, none of the saints in the church's history have been sad or lacking in the sense of humor. Indeed, the saints have always been souls other people were attracted to and enjoyed being around. However, that does not mean they have idyllic lives.

St. John Bosco was under constant threat of death from the Masons, having made numerous attempts on his life. St. Anthony of Padua and St. Francis of Assisi both died young men after long and painful illnesses. Saint Bernadette died at a young age from exceedingly painful tuberculosis of the bone. Saint John Paul II survived several attempts on his life (more than just the assassination attempt in St. Peter's Square), and suffered Parkinson's disease throughout the last half of his pontificate.

So what does all this mean? Well, it means that if you are trying to become a saint (which is one of our two major obligations as Catholics) you will find yourself suffering. The question is, why does someone striving for sanctity have to suffer? It all boils down to perfection.

In life, every action has a consequence. Our parents have told us this since we were old enough to understand. Anything we do, good or bad, has consequences. Every sin, no matter how minor, requires payment to the one being offended, who is God. So you can count on it, everything from using God's name carelessly and telling a "white lie" to the commission of every mortal sin, is something we will have to pay for. The problem with being human is that we are so prone to sin that we'd never have a moment's peace if we paid for everything in this life. So we have to pay for our sins in purgatory. The problem with purgatory, though, is that it is incredibly painful and even though the duration may or may not be short, it is incredibly intense. The reason for the intensity is, there is no grace in purgatory. Therefore, those who are striving for holiness are being rewarded with infinite love from God.

Yes, suffering really is God showing infinite love. We are being shown love and mercy in purgatory, despite the pain; without purgatory we would all by necessity end up in hell. But suffering in this life is earning grace and is sort of like being paid triple or quadruple time by our Employer—getting 3 or 4 times the “pay” for the same work. Suffering in this life isn't nearly as hard as purgatory, but it's still very difficult and painful. But you see, suffering has great value in the scheme of things, because “nothing unclean shall enter heaven” (Rev. 21:27), and an unpaid debt for previous actions (whether forgiven and unforgiven venial sin or forgiven mortal sin) makes us “unclean,” so unworthy to enter heaven. So by suffering in this life we, and offering that suffering back to God as a gift in reparation for our sins and the sins of the world, we purify ourselves to be made worthy of heaven. In other words, if we accept our suffering as a

gift from God, offer it back to Him as a gift, avoiding grumbling about the suffering, then we can go straight to heaven without a stop-off in purgatory. And believe you me, suffering in this life beats purgatory by a thousand miles! Try reading the book *Purgatory* by Fr. F.X. Schouppe (available from TAN Books). I read that book almost thirty years ago, and it had such an impact on me that I've never forgotten a bit of it.

So what constitutes a suffering that we can offer up to God? Well, since suffering in this life earns grace, any sort of suffering will do nicely. Got a cold? Offer it up! Had to pay for an unexpected car repair? Offer it up! Anything, whether big or small, extraordinary or mundane, can and should be offered up to God as a gift in reparation for your sins and the sins of the world. Since the reality is that we don't ordinarily shoot straight to heaven when we die, offering up your sufferings—big and small—will lessen your time in purgatory.

Let's get back to sanctity. If you're striving for holiness—i.e., becoming a saint (and I hope you are)—then suffering slips into a higher gear. The only person's experience I can credibly talk about is my own, so let's examine my life.

Ordinarily, when we ask God to make us a saint, we actually look for things to offer up in reparation for our sins. That's why we traditionally give up something during Lent—an act of penance for our sins. People seeking sanctity usually look for lots of Lenten sacrifices all year long. But I'm one of those weak souls who doesn't do well with voluntary penances. I can't seem to maintain the resolve to keep them. Well, for folks like me, God has a remedy for that. Does the name Job come to mind?

Since I'm weak and don't do voluntary penances well, God permits me to be treated a lot like Job. The severity of my sufferings aren't quite as strong as Job's, but they sure seem like it at the time. The last two years, for example, have been a real wild ride. First, one of my sons returned from his second tour in Iraq a virtual mental vegetable—he doesn't even know me, so for all intents and purposes I've lost him. Second, a trusted friend and advisor stole our identities and all our money, placing us in financial ruin. Next, another of my sons suddenly died, the result of his naval service about 15 years before finally catching up with him. And just when you think things can't get worse (never say that, because I will tell you they can), I suffered a stroke that nearly killed me and left me handicapped.

What will happen next? I don't know. I only cringe and wait, but the fact that I cringe shows you how weak I am. If I weren't weak, I'd face these things with long-suffering and fortitude. But at the end of the day, I know all of this is in the permissive will of God for my sanctification—a gift of infinite love!

So what's my point? The point is, it really doesn't matter what you do, you're going to suffer for your sins—forgiven or unforgiven, in this life or the next. There is no escaping God's justice! If you die free of mortal sin, and if you don't make reparation in this life, you will do so in purgatory. The only difference between purgatory and hell is that purgatory eventually gets easier, and it doesn't last forever. According to Our Lady of Fatima and countless mystics and saints, many of us will stay in purgatory until the end of time. I suspect that I'm one who would end up there until the end of time, if not for offering up my sufferings now. What about you?

So make up your mind to do penance in this life, set your sites on heaven and not purgatory, and give God His due... before He decides to collect in the afterlife where reparation is a lot worse. That's What We Believe... Why We Believe It.

Got a question about this or something else about the faith? Go to [JoeSixpackAnswers.com](http://JoeSixpackAnswers.com) to ask.