

A woman lies dying in the hospital. She is in great physical pain. Each breath is a struggle. But she maintains an unusual sense of serenity. Her suffering is redemptive. She is in pain, but others are being healed as she suffers. Relationships estranged for decades are being rebuilt. She is helping Jesus to carry His cross to Calvary for her suffering, united to the suffering of Jesus is redemptive. She understands Jesus when he says, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt 16:24). She also understands him when he rebukes Peter by saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do" (16:23).

Down through the centuries ... it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace. To this grace many saints, ... Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Ignatius of Loyola and others, owe their profound conversion. ... Not only [does] the individual discover the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that, he becomes a completely new person... When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal (Salvifici Doloris 26)

Suffering is usually accompanied by human protest. We ask God, Why? Why must I suffer? Why must I see my loved ones suffer? Why have you allowed this to happen? Jesus suffered for us on the cross and it is from the cross, "the heart of his own suffering," that Jesus tries to answer our questions. It takes time for us to understand. Gradually, interiorly, we hear Christ as we share in his sufferings and come to understand his infinite love for each one of us (Salvifici Doloris 26).

A mother is diagnosed with cancer. The news is devastating. Her world is turned upside down and she undergoes suffering like never before. Treatment is difficult, lengthy, and exhausting. Eventually, it works, and life returns to normal. In pondering the cross of suffering she bore, she realizes that cancer woke her up. Through her experience of suffering, she grows closer to God and closer to her family. She lives life with a greater joy. Each new day is a gift from God.

So much good comes from accepting our crosses in life. This is what Peter does not understand. Jesus rebukes him. "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me" (Matt 16:23). In 1984 Pope John Paul II, wrote a beautiful teaching letter on the meaning of human suffering. In *Salvifici Doloris* he explains:

Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation. By his suffering on the Cross, Christ reached the very roots of evil, of sin and death. He conquered the author of evil, Satan, and his permanent rebellion against the Creator (26).

Amidst our current pandemic, everyone is touched in one way or another by the virus and we see firsthand how difficult illness and suffering are to deal with. The Catechism of the Catholic Church highlights the good and the bad:

In serious illness, we may even get a glimpse of death. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping one discern in life what is not essential so that we can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him (CCC 1500-1501).

We need not be ill to search for God. Saint Paul teaches us, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). Every choice we make in life can be a choice for God. The more we exercise our will for doing His, the more we are ready to rely on Christ to help us take up our cross and follow him.

Therese of Lisieux is the Patron Saint of our Diocese. As a young woman in her teens and early twenties, she tried to please God in all of the little things. The Little Way of Therese begins quite simply with a love of God and a desire to please him. Instead of doing things her way, she sought to do what would be pleasing to Jesus Christ. Therese found her joy in loving God rather than seeking the approval of others. In a convent full of religious, Therese found sisters that she got along with easily and others that annoyed her to no end. God’s love is not so stingy. He loves all of us to the point of dying for our sins. So out of love, Therese sought to please God and sacrifice in a little way by loving the one sister who most annoyed her. It was a little thing, but in sacrificing her will to the will of God, Therese grew in holiness. The more she conformed her will to the will of God, the more she received.

Therese’s love grew to the point where she asked to suffer for Christ and with Christ as a martyr. Like millions of others around the world, she suffered from tuberculosis, a disease that science had not yet learned to tame. Love of God compelled her forward amidst a very painful disease that eventually took her life. United in a holy love, there was nothing she would refuse Him.

Therese understood that such a heroic virtue requires a total reliance on God. It is not by our strength that we succeed but by the strength of God. In recognizing our limitations and powerlessness, we rely on the strength of God to lift us up. “May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten the eyes of our hearts, that we may know what is the hope that belongs to our call” (Eph 1:17-18).