

Suffering in the life of a priest

Failure is the stock-in-trade of a priest. We are always dealing with unfinished business. It is our privilege to be invited into the most intimate areas of people's lives where we witness miracles of grace daily, but where we also come up against the ugliest aspects of human behaviour. We cannot live other people's lives. We cannot carry their burdens or solve their problems. Of course we feel helpless. We are comforted by the memory of Jesus' words about the widow. She gave more than anyone else because 'out of her poverty she put in everything she had, all she had to live on'(Mark 12:44).

1

We think, too, of the miracle of the loaves. If we take our inadequate resources and place them in the hands of Jesus he can work miracles with them. If it is his will he can use our gifts to feed the hungry (Mark 6:42). God is loving those to whom we minister. What he asks of us is that we offer them the love which he gives us for them – no less, but no more. Thoughts like these can save us from thinking that we are the saviours and from any other unrealistic expectation we might have of ourselves or of our ministry. The fact is that we cannot avoid suffering, involved as we are with people's pain, disappointment and failure.

2

Then there are the failures of the Church to live up to the promise of Vatican II: failures to engage the world with a lively faith. Bruised by the sin of the world much of the Church seems to be retreating to the trenches. There are Church leaders who denounce the sins of society without awareness of how we have failed the world and without any real engagement or real love. That there are notable exceptions is some consolation but leaves a profound disappointment.

3

There are the sins of members of the Church, especially of our brother priests that necessarily tarnish an image that we once enjoyed. All is not lost. Most people know not to generalise. Respect can be earned, but it has to be earned: it is no longer taken for granted. Tony Philpot speaks of another failure that hurts: 'My generation of clergy is the first one to fail so significantly to attract or inspire young people. It is a failure on a massive scale'(page 93). Few are interested in becoming priests. We all know the physical and psychological strain which this entails.

4

Finally, and most significantly, there is our own personal failures to follow Jesus faithfully along a road which brings much joy, but much suffering as well. Some of these failures are public and bring shame. Others are known only to us and involve their own private suffering. Jesus chose imperfect people to be his disciples. There are no others. If we are not to give up the struggle and throw in the towel we have to die to our perfectionism, while trusting in his mercy and thanking him for using such unworthy instruments to be vehicles of his compassionate love to others who, like us, are struggling to find meaning and to live loving lives.

5

It is natural to find suffering hard to accept. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, however, it is possible to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. There is the basic human need to develop and to respect the unique person that we are. In one sense this journey never ceases, for we are always discovering depths of mystery in our person that continue to surprise us.

6

This journey of self-discovery and acquiring self-esteem is not always an easy one, but it does have the support of a natural instinct. We experience a natural urge motivating us to become a person who is worthwhile. We desire to be of value in our own eyes and, since we are social beings, we experience the need and the urge to be recognised and respected also by others.

7

However, we have another even more basic need. The need which is at the very core of being human is to be entirely reliant upon God, the giver and sustainer of our being. The problem is that we do not experience a correspondingly natural urge to rely on God. Even the experiences which we recognise as religious tend to be drawn into and understood in terms of our natural urge to be someone in our own right.

8

So it requires a grace from God that is above and beyond our natural gifts (a 'supernatural' grace) to make us aware of our need for complete dependence on God and to motivate us to do whatever is needed to attain this transcendent good. Again and again Jesus reminds us: 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it'(Luke 17:33). Ultimately we discover ourselves only in God's love and to enjoy God's love we must transcend our own ego; we must let go of our natural tendency to focus on ourselves; we must learn to love.

9

It is here that suffering plays its irreplaceable role, for suffering forces us to recognise the basic flaw in our thinking that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment except in dependence upon and communion with God. Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in a situation that works, that feels comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed.

10

Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body.

11

We may choose simply to hold on, to stay put, and to defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered us in and through the suffering. We are free to choose to avoid the pain of letting go our self-centredness, or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to undergo what feels like a kind of dying, believing that God will raise us up.

12

Keegan: Commentary of The Way of Perfection by St. Teresa

‘We may wonder how any sin can be hidden from the one who commits it. There is, indeed, a mystery here and the solution lies somewhere in the depths of human pride which stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the dimensions of evil ...

One of the benefits of suffering is that it penetrates our spirit and reveals the areas where this basic rebellion lies. It uncovers the very roots of sin. It makes us aware of our helplessness and dependence upon God and can effectively overcome our pride, if it is patiently and willingly accepted.

13

Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are ‘dyings’: the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people’s limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes, dreams and expectations. The pain of ‘dying’ can sometimes be in proportion to the success and duration of the adaptation we have made to whatever it is that is being threatened.

15

Keegan (continued)

Humbled by pain we turn to God who mercifully enables us to bear it and gently shows us the hidden depths of selfishness which prevent Him from pouring our His love upon us ...

It is not then the obvious evils and temptations which we need to fear but those we do not easily recognise and may even imagine to be virtues ...

To discover this and to remedy it is the work of prayer. Not just the occasional superficial prayer, but prayer in depth.’

14

To be human means to be finite, to be dependent, to receive all we are and have as a gift. As human beings, we are not immortal. Once life has been given to us as a gift, the only life we ever know comes through dying. The whole process of maturing is one of accepting the ‘dyings’ that the human condition and our own and other people’s sinful decisions inflict upon us. This certainly does not mean submitting inactively to injustice. But it does mean that even when a ‘dying’ is laid on us unjustly, we must come to an acceptance of the reality of the dying if we are to find a deeper life through it.

16

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons. But each acceptance of the offer requires a new dying. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been burned away (purified) by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love.

17

The truths contained in the above have been communicated by God to human beings in every culture and in every generation, for everyone in every situation is graced. However, the lesson is difficult to learn and God chose that his Word would become flesh in Jesus to show us the pattern.

By sharing his Spirit with us, Jesus encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of loving through suffering.

18

By contemplating Jesus in his suffering. He gives us an example, and by sharing his Spirit with us, he encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of loving through suffering. By keeping our eyes on Jesus, especially on his way of responding to suffering, it is possible for us to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. In our weakness and suffering, we experience a strength that is not our own.

19

2Corinthians 12:9-10

'The Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.'

20

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on.

21

If, however, we can bear suffering in love; if we can continue to offer love ('offer the other cheek'); if, while working against injustice, and while working to alleviate suffering, we are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because of Jesus — then indeed we are blessed, for the suffering stops with us. What is more, it exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

22

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we love outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. This was Paul's experience. He wanted to know and live Jesus' life, even, and perhaps especially, when he experienced suffering.

23

'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me'(Galatians 2:19-20).

'May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world'(Galatians 6:14).

24

‘If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his’(Romans 6:5).

‘We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us’(Romans 8:17-18).

25

It seems true that to experience Christ as exalted we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God’s redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies.

27

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Jesus’ followers to find joy in their sufferings:

‘I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church’(Colossians 1:24).

‘Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed’(1Peter 4:13).

26

The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering borne in love, is immeasurable. Both Paul and James consider such suffering a privilege:

‘God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well’(Philippians 1:29).

‘My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy’(James 1:2).

There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

28

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives. At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by it, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer.

29

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection:

‘In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’(2Peter 3:13).

‘I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’(Philippians 3:10).

31

Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

‘I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink ... I was sick and you took care of me’(Matthew 25:35-36).

30

While we strive, in response to God’s grace and call, to be God’s faithful servants in bringing about the reign of God here on earth, we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in the love-communion with God which we call ‘heaven’:

‘Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself’(Philippians 3:20-21).

32

In a future life we are assured of being finally and totally drawn into God's own love-communion, the communion enjoyed by the risen Christ:

33

'For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh ... We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence ...

35

2Corinthians 4:6 - 5:4 (3 slides)

'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

34

'So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling ... so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.'

36

When we recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God's will is that we love and be faithful to love; when we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, we see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent, without letting it deter us from loving faithfully.

37

When we experience suffering ourselves or experience others suffering, we will not automatically assume that it is God's will. Rather, we will trust that God is present to all who are suffering, loving us to draw closer to God through our suffering, whatever its cause. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

38

Jesus was willing to lay down his life, not to die but to continue in the intimate life of love which he had with his Father. He laid down his life willingly 'in order to take it up again'(John 10:17), and he is encouraging his disciples to do the same, for he has come not that we might die but that we may 'have life and have it abundantly'(John 10:10). Sharing his life we 'will not die'(John 6:50). 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes'(John 5:21). The power that makes possible the victory of life over death is the power of love which, like everything else, he has from the Father (see John 5:26).

39

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. Ultimately this will happen when we share glory with God's Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love. If we continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving.

40

Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our purification and redemption. Suffering is part of every life. Let suffering be a cross for us who are disciples of Jesus, for then we can embrace him who died there, knowing that he is embracing us.