

03. Suffering in the life of a priest





‘We carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body’(2Corinthians 4:10).

‘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).

Joy and suffering n.6

‘Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress:

“My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is... But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; every morning they are renewed. Great is your faithfulness... It is good to wait in silence for the Lord to save.” (*Lamentation* 3:17, 21-23, 26).

‘Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people’(n. 270).



‘From the Heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary, I see a new world coming forth – a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy: a world which the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth.’(Jules Chevalier: *The Sacred Heart* 1900)

John 19:32-37



‘I live now in faith, the faith of the Son of God
loving me and giving himself for me.
I cannot give up God’s gift.’(Galatians 2:21)



‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am, and that I do nothing on my own. I speak these things as the Father instructs me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him’(John 8:28-29).

The unjust act of crucifying Jesus was against God's will

‘The owner of the vineyard still had one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘Surely they will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard’(Mark 12:6-8).



‘Jesus prayed: Abba, Father,
for you all things are
possible; remove this cup
from me;

yet, not my will, but Yours
be done’(Mark 14:35-36)

‘Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks [eucharisteô], he broke it and gave it to them saying: This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’(Luke 22:19).





If when we ‘look upon the one we have pierced’, we come to see that the power of God is not in the sphere of control, but of love; if we see that God respects human freedom even when we behave as atrociously as people behaved in crucifying Jesus; if we see that Jesus’ faith in God was not destroyed by the pain, degradation and humiliation of the cross, we might dare to live the freedom offered us.



Knowing our capacity to abuse freedom, in our need and poverty we will humbly cry out, as Jesus did in his agony, knowing that God will grace us with his love.

Purified by love and sensitive to the presence and action of God's loving Spirit in our lives, we will dare to express love in the kind of creative self-giving that we see in Jesus on the cross.

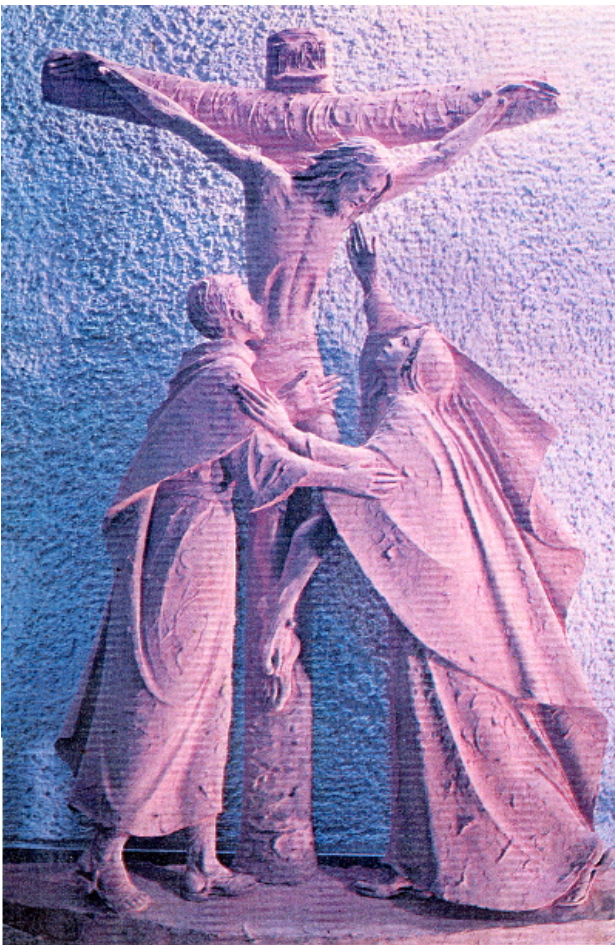
Jesus' example : 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12)

When it is said that Jesus *must* suffer are we being told that we needed to see him love in the darkest place to shake us out of our lethargy and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life in a desperate search for freedom in all the wrong places.

We do not seek suffering, but if the only way to avoid suffering is to avoid loving, we have Jesus' example to encourage us to love.

His gift of the Spirit makes us able to follow him.

The sacrifice of the cross



On the cross Jesus offered his life, his love, his very self to God and to us in order to draw us into communion with God.

To be in communion with God =
to be made holy : *sacrum facere*
sacrifice

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 for others and for ourselves 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).

We are burdened also by 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 some in the Church are tempted to retreat 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.

“Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling... Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way... to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth”(UR 6; quoted n.26)

Hardest of all is the memory of our own sins.

Life keeps opening up for us the limits of our love

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 carry out our mission.

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.

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.

It is painful to experience something in ourselves 'dying'. Each time we embrace the suffering that comes with loving, 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.

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.



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.

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.’

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.

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.



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.

'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).

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. I am completing what is lacking in my flesh of 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).

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.

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.

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).

2Corinthians 4:6 - 5:4 (2 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.

‘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 ...

‘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.’

Let us pray that suffering 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.



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‘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).



A Friend broken