



The Authentic Transformation Of “Useless” Human Suffering

“God permits our sufferings, offered up, to make an indelible mark in His work of Salvation. This transformation of the ‘uselessness’ of our suffering into something profoundly meaningful serves as a source of spiritual joy to those who enter into it.”



Human beings naturally recoil at the prospect of pain and suffering. When a sharp object pokes us, we instinctively pull away. When the unpleasant neighbor comes up on caller ID, we recoil from answering the phone. Our initial response is to avoid noxious stimuli and pain, similar to most animals.

Yet when dealing with painful or unpleasant situations, we can also respond deliberately and in ways that radically differentiate us from the rest of the animal kingdom.

We can choose, for example, to confront and endure our pain for higher reasons. We know that a needle will hurt, but we decide to hold our arm still when getting an injection because our powers of reason tell us it will improve our health. We know the pain of talking to our difficult neighbor, but we figure that we should rise to the challenge and do it anyway, attempting to build peace in the neighborhood.

We can also approach our pain and suffering in unreasonable ways, driven by worry and fear. When we suffer from a difficult relationship, we can turn to drugs, alcohol or binge-eating. When we suffer from the thought of continuing a pregnancy, we can terminate it by taking the life of our son or daughter by

abortion. When we suffer from the pain of cancer, we can short-circuit everything by physician-assisted suicide.

How we decide to respond to suffering, whether rationally or irrationally, is one of the most important human choices we make. For many in our society, suffering has become a singular evil to be avoided at all costs, leading to many irrational and destructive decisions.

While physical pain is widespread in the animal world, the real difference for human beings is that we know we are suffering and we wonder why; and we suffer in an even deeper way if we fail to find a satisfactory answer. We need to know whether our suffering has meaning. From our hospital bed or wheelchair, we can hardly avoid the piercing question of “why,” as grave sickness and weakness make us feel useless and even burdensome to others. In the final analysis, however, no suffering is “useless,” though a great deal of suffering is lost or wasted because it is rejected by us, and we fail to accept its deeper meaning. Pope John Paul II often remarked that the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering has been given by God to man in the Cross

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of Jesus Christ.

In the field of Catholic healthcare, the question of suffering arises with regularity, and while the dedicated practice of medicine strives to lessen suffering and pain, it can never completely eliminate it. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in an important document called the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, reminds us that “patients experiencing suffering that cannot be alleviated should be helped to appreciate the Christian understanding of redemptive suffering.”

The very concept of “redemptive suffering” suggests that there is much more to human suffering than meets the eye, and that it is not simply an unmitigated evil from which we should instinctively flee. Rather, it is a mysterious force that can mold us in important ways and mature us, a force we ought to learn to work with and accept as part of our human journey and destiny.

Each of us, in our pain and suffering, can become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ. As children, we may have been taught those famous three words by our parents when pain and suffering would come our way: “Offer it up!” Those simple words served to remind

us how our sufferings can benefit not only ourselves, but those around us in the mystery of our human communion with them. When we are immobilized in our hospital bed, we become like Christ, immobilized on the wood of the Cross, and powerful redemptive moments open before us, if we accept and embrace our own situation in union with Him.

Because of the personal love of the Lord towards us, we can in fact make a very real addition to His plan of salvation by uniting our sufferings to His saving Cross, just as a little child can make a very real addition to the construction of her mother's cake when she lovingly allows her to add the eggs, flour, and salt. While the mother could do it all unaided, the child's addition is real and meaningful, as the love of the mother meets the cooperation of the child to create something new and wonderful. In the same way, God permits our sufferings, offered up, to make an indelible mark in His work of Salvation. This transformation of the “uselessness” of our suffering into something profoundly meaningful serves as a source of spiritual joy to those who enter into it. For those who are in Christ, suffering and death represent the birth pangs of a new and redeemed

creation. Our sufferings, while never desirable in themselves, always point towards transcendent possibilities when we do not flee from them in fear.

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