

ENCOURAGEMENT ENCOURAGEMENT

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Suffering and Forgiveness

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They say that the true calibre of a person emerges when trials and suffering come. There are very few people who have not experienced some form of suffering in their lives. This may be ill health, bereavement, loss of job, family break up and disagreements and a host of other things. We hear much about mental health these days and again suffering of this type comes in many forms and sometimes carrying some stigma with it, leading to exclusion. The number of suicides increases worldwide as do the problems associated with loneliness and inability to keep up with the pace of life, in the case of young people, peer group pressure to conform to the expectations or desires of others.

Much suffering comes through the unexpected such as natural disasters, like the recent earthquake in Turkey or Syria and there is no doubt that climatic changes have revealed disasters of epic proportions and these seem to increase. As one young person said to me recently ‘we live in a very uncertain world and it is all a little scary.’ Uncertainty and fear of the future looms large in people’s lives for whatever the reason.

While it is natural to want to escape suffering and at least try to remove it is not always easy to do. Many great saints suffered much but did not run toward it in general but tried to avoid it. We also are called to alleviate the suffering of others and this is not easy to do either. In some cases, living with the pain of others can cause as much pain as it if was happening to us directly. Many mothers in particular feel the pain ‘for’ and of their children, especially the illness and the loss of a child. Whatever the cause, we are as Christians, bound to help when we can even in the smallest of ways according to our means, understanding or ability and certainly with prayer and intercession.

However, the problem and questions remain.



FORGIVENESS
doesn't excuse
their actions.
FORGIVENESS
stops their actions
from destroying
your heart.

Frequently people ask why do we suffer and is it necessary?

This is a centuries old question and often associated with those who would blame God for it, or who use it as a means of negating the presence of God altogether. ‘After all, they say, if God is good why does he allow suffering at all? These are question that we should not dodge even if the answer must be sometimes, that we do not really know completely. It is easy to give answers that enable us to deal with it but there is a danger that we trot out easy replies, such as that ‘we do not know’. Frequent response to the question of suffering is to say that that we will never understand but the answers will be revealed in the fullness of time. Another answer is to say that God is not responsible for this, but that we bring this suffering upon ourselves, which can make the person who had no part in the cause, feel guilty and unhelped. Nor does it help to explain the causation when it seems to be climatic and natural. Clearly some of these answers have a partial truth or an insight but while they may or may not satisfy a non-believer in God, they leave the believer in a quandary as to how to answer those who are genuinely searching for an explanation.

As we are in Lent we are often bidden to offer up our sufferings for others. I wonder how many people ask themselves why and how this works? We also hear of the suffering of others that has brought them Joy, Peace and Surrender. Why? When in doubt a simple explanation is that we are called to follow the Master. Can there be any doubt that Jesus chose to suffer for us all and that He did so out of love. He could have refused the Father’s request but didn’t do so even though he felt the dread of it in the Garden of Olives. Neither did he run away from it during the many times when he was mocked and rejected. If he did not have to suffer then why did he do so?

“Only in this way can we defeat evil, as Jesus did on the tree of the Cross, by taking it upon Himself transforming it by His love.” Pope Francis I, Congo. 2023.

Here is an important aspect of His life. Did He accept because it was His Father's will for Him or also because He was teaching us that the final victory is going to be ours as it was His, as He rose from the dead. Just a little point here that we tend to forget and that is that life is short and that all suffering will end (save for those who have chosen evil for all eternity). He also promised to help us in our suffering.

In Pope Francis' recent visit to the Congo and South Sudan with the theme of reconciliation, peace and forgiveness in areas of bloodshed and conflict the suffering of people was made manifest. One part of his visit took him to the war-torn areas of the Congo, mostly forgotten about globally. In a simple prayerful event attended by those who had been brutalised and their supporters, priests and bishops, testimony was given which went deeper into the area of suffering and maybe in a mystical way offered some explanation for some of the issues above. Seated on a chair with a large Crucifix next to him one after another the mostly young people laid down the instruments of torture that had been used on them. Machetes, knives, sticks, mats and clothing used by the attacker at the foot of the Cross. The stories, related with such dignity and courage brought tears to many in the small group and certainly to myself.

As each story unfolded either read by the victim or a friend (the main language is French, but many speak the local Swahili) the horror of their experiences were palpable. In some cases, major mutilations of body, but even more moving, the mutilation of Spirit and soul. A young mother related how she had been raped repeated over many months and force to live with the attacker, finally escaping but pregnant with twin girls whom she carried tenderly. A young man (16) could barely relate, his silences filled with emotion, that he saw his family and father torn to pieces and does not know where his mother is, but was now looking after his little brother and sister. Another young woman could not give the details of her abuses as they were too shocking. A grandfather spoke of the loss of his entire family....

After each witness they laid down the weapons that had been used against them and knelt for a blessing. Their dignity was manifest...

Without exception they said that they FORGAVE their attacker from their heart. One young woman begged for forgiveness if she had judged the attacker which seemed almost unbelievable. All, while still living in the camps which offered little shelter, were grateful for the support they had received from the church and that they were alive. How was this possible..? The answer lies in the mystery of Suffering and Forgiveness and goodness always overcoming evil. Their testimony, courage and humility will take me through Lent. The Our Father contains all their thoughts and prayer and the Singing of the Hail Mary showed Joy. May both take us through Lent.

Halina Holman

Pope Francis

The prophetic voice of Christianity, means responding to evil with good, to hatred with love, to division with reconciliation." All these things, "are more powerful than evil ... because they transform reality from within, instead of destroying it from without."

Eastern Provinces, Congo, (DRC) 1.2.23



Witness' Prayer

"I place before the Cross of Christ the Victor the same knife as the one that killed all the members of my family," Léonie Matumaini from Mbau School told the Pope on Feb. 1st 2023.

Feast Days in March

1st St. David, Patron of Wales

3rd St. Katherine Drexel

4th St. Casimir

5th **Second Sunday of Lent**

7th Ss. Perpetua & Felicity

8th St. John of God

9th S. Frances of Rome

12th **Third Sunday of Lent**

17th **St. Patrick, Apostle of Ireland**

18th **St. Joseph, Husband of Mary**

19th **Fourth Sunday of Lent**

20th St. Cuthbert

25th **The Annunciation of the Lord**

26th **Fifth Sunday of Lent**

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