



LIVING, SUFFERING AND DYING...

what for?

“The enigma of pain and death, which outside the Gospel crushes us, is illuminated through Christ and in Christ.”

- Pope John Paul II

As Pope John Paul II said, human suffering is a mystery. Sooner or later, all families experience it in the midst of life. It is either physical, psychological or spiritual. It always restrains our activities, it often limits our autonomy, and it sometimes seems to diminish our dignity. When it lasts too long and intensifies, some would think of ending life, which can

appear to be a mere burden. Suicide, euthanasia and assisted suicide can then become attractive exit doors.

Yet Christians still maintain that life – daily life, with its joys and its sorrows – is a gift from God, given with love and kindness...

Towards the end of his life and already weakened by illness, Paul-Émile Cardinal Léger,

former Archbishop of Montreal, exclaimed while talking about nursing homes for the elderly: "So much unused suffering!"

Useless?

No. *Unused...*

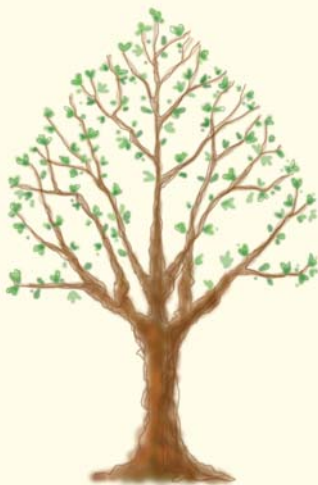
Can suffering be useful? The discovery that it can be allows men and women to face suffering with courage and perseverance, knowing that they are achieving something for the Kingdom of God.

Where to find happiness

Since suffering and illness appear in the normal course of every human life, the question of their significance comes up in thinking about the meaning of life. Inevitably, the day comes when each person wonders:

"Where do I come from? What is the purpose of my life? Why am I suffering? Where am I going? What is there after death?"

Christians find answers to these questions in the Gospel. It is there that they understand they are not the masters, but the stewards of their life. It is there that Christ nourishes their hope in the Resurrection and eternal life. This hope we must urgently share again with our families,



*"On this mountain
the LORD of hosts...
will destroy the veil
that veils all peoples,
The web that is woven
over all nations;
he will destroy
death forever."
(Is. 25:7-8)*

friends and work colleagues, because all, more or less consciously, are searching for a purpose in their life. They seek happiness. No doubt about it: all of humanity needs Christ and his message of love, even if the world often seems indifferent to him.

Loving for all eternity

We must go far back in time, back to the creation of the world, to really start to understand the passionate love of God for each of his children on earth. Yes, God's work is a work of love: He wants to share his life with every human person, and for all eternity. Every time He creates, in cooperation with a man and a woman, a new human being in His image

and His likeness, He says: "With age-old love I have loved you" (Jer. 31:3), and "Upon the palms of my hands I have written your name" (Is. 49,16).

From the beginning, God wanted to establish a relationship of friendship with humanity. He allows each person to decide freely whether to work with Him to give life and transform the world. But man and woman refu-

sed and rejected the Creator's plan, preferring instead to be like gods during their stay on earth. Their choice allowed death to enter the history of humanity.

Yet God could not bear to be separated from his children for eternity and conceived of the inconceivable: the Creator of the universe took on our human nature! He chose to become one of us, to establish a new Covenant between Himself and humanity. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to live the life of a man to teach us how to love as God loves. Jesus demonstrated that God will go as far as dying on a cross, to offer his forgiveness and friendship to each of us: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Each person is invited to freely accept this reconciliation.

With his whole life – his years of humble work as a carpenter in Nazareth, his years of preaching and his public life, his Passion, his Death and his Resurrection – Christ freed us from the evil that prevents us from concretely responding to God's love. He saved us from the greatest possible evil: eternal death, that is, eternal separation from God. For we, who are created by God who is Love, are made for Love.



Simply living for God

Each human being is offered the possibility of living with God and for God. That is where we find our happiness and the fulfillment of our lives: rising each morning to live in His presence and to work together with Him in building a world that is more just and more humane.

Very simply, to live with God in our everyday work and family life, in our leisure and social activities, is to talk with God and offer him everything: our efforts, our joys, our disappointments, our enthusiasm, our sufferings, our projects, our errors, our successes, our failures, our dreams and our hopes.

Everything in our ordinary life can become an occasion for an extraordinary encounter. It is there that God awaits us patiently, wishing to share with us each moment of our lives, and to give it a divine meaning. Indeed, Christ offers us the possibility of saving the world with him, of being co-redeemers! "If anyone would come after me, he must...take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23). This may be the cross of a smile offered when we're tired, the cross of work achieved with difficulty, the cross of a job-loss greeted with confidence, the cross of a sickness endured with patience...

We are the Body of Christ

Each day, the innumerable crosses that people encounter and offer to God with love are gathered at the altar. It is at Mass that these crosses receive their meaning. Each time the words of consecration are said — “This is my body, which will be given up for you...this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting Covenant, it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven” — it is Christ in his entirety who offers himself to save the world, to bring it back to his Father. Christ with his Head and his Body: he is the Head, and we are the members of his Body that is the Church.

When we place our lives on the paten together with the bread, and in the chalice together with the wine, they are taken up by Christ, who offers them up together with his life. Thus, our lives and our suffering also help to save the world. Can there be a greater dignity?

“Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: ‘Follow me! Come! Take part through



*“Whoever eats
my flesh and
drinks my blood
has eternal life,
and I will
raise him
on the last day.”
(Jn 6:54)*

your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! Through my Cross!’ Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ... (he) finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy. ...A source of joy is found in the overcoming of the sense of the uselessness of suffering, a feeling that is sometimes very strongly rooted in human suffering.”¹

A call to solidarity

Only God could invent such a response to the mystery of evil. Only God could transform into good the enormous suffering that threatens to destroy us. It is his “love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering...”² God stands by our side, helping us to face the illness that knocks at our door and to face even death, which will one day mark our passing into eternal life. God’s grace and the strength He gives us are always proportional to the challenges that arise in our lives. All we need to do is welcome His help. We are never alone. The conqueror of all evil, the Risen Christ, is always

at our side – especially in the Eucharist.

Sometimes Christ also presents himself to us in a parent, a child, a friend, or a caregiver who consoles, encourages, and comforts. Throughout his or her life, each baptised person is called to be another Christ – Christ the Servant who walks with his friends and helps them to rise to their challenges, supporting them at the time of their suffering so that they remain courageous until the natural end of their lives. For Christians, this is the real meaning of “aid in dying”: it is aid in living until the day when God invites his child to come home.

This call to compassion, to responsibility, to fraternity and to solidarity is also always a call to serve the suffering Christ. Christ who is recognized and loved in each ill person who is afraid, who feels alone, impoverished, diminished, overwhelmed, anguished, abandoned... “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40)... Thus, to allow oneself to be loved and accompanied by another is to provide the other with the occasion and the privilege of serving and loving Christ.



*“Come to me,
all you who labor
and are burdened,
and I will
give you rest.”
(Mt. 11:28)*

One of the most beautiful human responses to suffering is indisputably that of palliative care, which never seeks to hasten death. By associating sophisticated treatment of physical pain with a personal accompaniment that is marked by attentiveness, tenderness and compassion, so many health professionals and volunteers who work in the palliative care units and homes confirm the dignity of the terminally ill.

These admirable and model teams of human solidarity consider all the needs (physical, psychological, social and spiritual) of the people who have arrived at the end of their earthly journey. They invite the

dying to continue to share the precious pearls of wisdom gleaned from their life experience, and help them to understand the meaning of their last weeks and their last days, until they arrive naturally at the most important moment of their life: their passage into eternity and their face to face encounter with God.

Open door to eternity

No, suffering is not useless. And it does not diminish human dignity. Hanging on the wood of the cross, disfigured, unrecognizable, Christ

was not undignified. At the time of our own suffering and death, we do not lose our dignity. Human dignity depends neither on the quality of our lives nor on our autonomy. It finds its source in God, who created us in his image and likeness and who calls each of us to live and die in the manner of Christ – to bring the world back to Him.



When we unite our lives and our sufferings to those of Christ through love, they become a prayer offering. We thus give ourselves the opportunity to bring those we love closer to God; in turn they may welcome his love and give their lives for others, walking in the footsteps of Christ, who is the Way to eternal life: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6).

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick offers special strength to the seriously ill. It bestows the following graces: “the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church; the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age; the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance; the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul; (and) the preparation for passing over to eternal life.”
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1511 and 1532)

1 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *On the Christian Meaning of Suffering (Salvifici doloris)*, 1984, no. 26, 27.

2 *Id.*, 18.



**Catholic Organization
for Life and Family**

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