

SUFFERING LOVE

I know that this too is part of life, and somewhere there is something inside me that will never desert me again. — Etty Hillesum [1]

In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner dispels a common myth about suffering and helps us see our way through intense pain:

The conventional explanation, that God sends us the burden because [God] knows that we are strong enough to handle it, has it all wrong. Fate, not God, sends us the problem. When we try to deal with it, we find out that we are not strong. We are weak; we get tired, we get angry, overwhelmed. . . . But when we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, something unexpected happens. We find reinforcement coming from a source outside of ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is on our side, we manage to go on. . .

Like Jacob in the Bible [Genesis 32], like every one of us at one time or another, you faced a scary situation, prayed for help, and found out that you were a lot stronger, and a lot better able to handle it, than you ever would have thought you were. In your desperation, you opened your heart in prayer, and what happened? You didn't get a miracle to avert a tragedy. But you discovered people around you, and God beside you, and strength within you to help you survive the tragedy. I offer that as an example of a prayer being answered. [2]

Many people rightly question how there can be a good God or a just God in the presence of so much evil and suffering in the world—about which God appears to do nothing. Exactly *how* is God loving and sustaining what God created? That is our dilemma.

I believe—if I am to believe Jesus—that God *is* suffering love. If we are created in God's image, and if there is so much suffering in the world, then God must also be suffering. How else can we understand the revelation of the cross? Why else would the central Christian logo be a naked, bleeding, suffering divine-human being?

Many of the happiest and most peaceful people I know love "a crucified God" who walks with crucified people, and thus *reveals and redeems their plight as God's own*. For them, Jesus is not observing human suffering from a distance; he is somehow *at the center* of human suffering, with us and for us. He includes our suffering in the co-redemption of the world, as "all creation groans in one great act of giving birth" (Romans 8:22). Is this possible? Could it be true that we "make up in our own bodies all that still has to be undergone for the sake of the Whole Body" (Colossians 1:24)? Are we somehow partners with the Divine? At our best, we surely must be. But our rational minds will never fully surrender to this mystery until our minds are led by our soul and our spirit.

Richard Rohr, OFM

PRAYER BEYOND WORDS

The two paths of knowing and not-knowing are primarily taught through prayer itself! No wonder all spiritual teachers emphasize prayer so much.

In Jesus' teaching and example, we may first notice the prayer of words in the Our Father and his encouragement to "ask" and "knock" (Matthew 7:7). From these and Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper, Christians have developed various forms of social, public, and liturgical prayer, often centering around intercession, gratitude, and worship.

But Jesus also taught prayer beyond words: "praying in secret" (Matthew 6:5-6), "not babbling on as the Gentiles do" (Matthew 6:7), or his predawn, lonely prayer (Mark 1:35), because "your Father knows what you need even before you ask" (Matthew 6:8). These all point toward what many today call contemplation—openness to and union with God's presence; resting in God more than actively seeking to fully know or understand.

Given Jesus' clear model and instruction, it seems strange that wordy prayer took over in the monastic Office, in the Eucharistic liturgy, and in formulaic prayer like the Catholic rosary and Protestant memorizations. It's all the more important that these be balanced by prayer beyond words.

In the Christian tradition this "Word became flesh" (John 1:14), but we didn't want flesh. We didn't want an embodied relationship with God. Instead we wanted words with which we could proclaim certainties and answers. The price the three "religions of the book" have paid for a certain idolatry of words is that they became the least tolerant of the world's religions. Both Buddhism and Hinduism tend to be much more accepting of others than we are.

At their lower levels, the three monotheistic religions insist on absolute truth claims *in forms of words*, whereas Jesus' truth claim was his person (John 14:6), his presence (John 6:35), his ability to participate in God's perfect love (John 17:21-22). Emphasizing perfect agreement on words and forms (which is never going to happen anyway!), instead of inviting people into an experience of the Formless Presence, has caused much of the violence of human history. Jesus gives us *his risen presence* as "the way, the truth, and the life." At that level, there is not much to fight about, and in fact fighting becomes uninteresting and counter-productive to the message. Presence is known by presence from the other side. It is always *subject to subject knowing*, never subject to object. *Richard Rohr, OFM*

A new heart I will give you, and a

NEW SPIRIT

I will put within you. Ezr. 36:26a



TIME TO TALK

Over the past several months, the media has reported often on the issues confronting the church. From the issue of sexual abuse by priests, cover-up of abuse by bishops, resignation of a cardinal because of his abuse spanning many decades, bickering and politicking within the hierarchy, movements to "impeach" Pope Francis—the list goes on—it is sometimes wearying to even think of continuing within this institution. However, I believe that we need to look beyond the institutional structure with all its current malaise and reflect on who we are as a faith community in communion with a body that spans our globe.

Henri Nouwen has a series of reflections on Church which I find helpful. Here is what he says in one reflection:

The Church is the people of God. The Latin word for "church," ecclesia, comes from the Greek ek, which means "out," and kaleo, which means "to call." The Church is the people of God called out of slavery to freedom, sin to salvation, despair to hope, darkness to light, an existence centered on death to an existence focused on life.

When we think of Church we have to think of a body of people, travelling together. We have to envision women, men, and children of all ages, races, and societies supporting one another on their long and often tiresome journeys to their final home.

Using his reflections and the "Constitution on the Church" from Vatican II, I'm inviting members of our community to gather for a series of evenings to reflect and talk about what it means for us to be part of the church and how we navigate these difficult times.

TIME TO TALK

November 1, 8, 15, 22

7-8:30 pm

Main Floor Meeting Room

Each evening will start with a short presentation—a reflection from Nouwen, quotes from the "Constitution on the Church"—followed by an open discussion.

If there is sufficient interest from those who find it difficult to get out in the evening, we will also schedule some daytime sessions.

Richard Beaudette, OMI

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WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

“Just who the #*!! do they think they are?!” That is how I imagine Mark would have quoted the 10 angry disciples in today’s Gospel if he had been able to do it in the style of Sarge, a character from the “Beetle Bailey” comic strip. Mark says that the 10 disciples were “indignant” when they heard James and John request the most honorable places in Jesus’ glory. By asking who the “#*!!” the brothers thought they were, the incensed majority was unpredictably close to what Jesus wanted to teach them. More precisely, the question of the moment was, “Just who did they think Jesus was?” That would then explain who they thought they were as disciples.

Even though they sought a singular distinction, James and John were no further off the mark than the rest of the gang. They had all carefully cultivated a chronic hearing impediment when it came to listening to Jesus explain his mission, and they were blissfully blind to what it entailed for them. When the two of them asked for first places, the rest were probably fuming because they had not thought of it first.

Mark makes it easy to critique their ambition and attention deficit when it came to Jesus’ explanation of his mission. But we should not be too quick to judge. Mark wrote his Gospel with the intention of holding a giant mirror before his readers. He is also pointing at all of us who think of ourselves as disciples today.

Today’s readings focus on our image of God and discipleship. Isaiah’s oracles or songs of the “Servant of the Lord” make Job’s life look like a rose garden as they explain that God’s servant will be crushed in infirmity as God’s will is accomplished through him. This is no call to self-inflicted pain or an invitation to offer oneself for martyrdom. Isaiah’s servant suffers precisely because, like so many punished prophets, he faithfully represents the God rejected by people in power. His offering for sin consists in accepting solidarity with the rejected God rather than yielding to violent attempts to obliterate his witness.

The selection from the Letter to the Hebrews focuses on Jesus as the Son of God who knows exactly what it feels like to be human, to be tempted, to be afraid. The author of Hebrews wants us to know that as the human face of God, there is nothing in our experience that Jesus does not comprehend from the inside out. In fact, says the author, Jesus feels with us so profoundly that his response is a continual offer of the graces of solidarity and the strength to share in his victory over the powers of death.

If all of that sounds like too much for us, we are in fine

company. Today’s Gospel paints a picture of Jesus’ closest disciples as Olympic champions of denial and self-serving misinterpretation. No matter how much Jesus talked about the first being last and his upcoming suffering, the disciples could not or would not move beyond their own glorious expectations for a messiah and his victory.

Last week we celebrated the canonization of St. Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador who was martyred in 1980 while he was celebrating the Eucharist in the chapel of a sisters’ hospital for terminal cancer patients. Early in his time as archbishop, Romero went to the town of Aguilares where Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande had been martyred. There he preached a sermon in which he told the people whose church had been desecrated: “You are an image of the wronged Divinity ... but if you

suffer this pain with faith, then you will give your suffering a redemptive meaning and the people of Aguilares will sing a joyful hymn of liberation.”

Romero was calling his people to assume the cost of discipleship that **s a c r i l e g i o u s** circumstances were holding out before them. He was telling the people of Aguilares that they had the grace and thus the ability to be Isaiah’s contemporary servants of the Lord. In recent months, Pope Francis has given a renewed focus to what St. Oscar Romero told his people in the 1980s. In the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (#20, 101), Francis calls us to unite ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way. For some like Romero that may entail death. For others it calls forth the holiness of solidarity with people who are outcast: the innocent unborn, the poor and abandoned, the vulnerable elderly and the victims of human trafficking. It takes very little time for solidarity with such as these to engender the ire that led Isaiah’s servant to suffer and Jesus to be put to death.

Today’s readings beg the question: “Disciple, just who do you think you are?” The true answer comes from knowing what we seek and the company we keep.

Sr. Mary McGlone, CSJ, Celebration Publications



THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

[The altar at Holy Rosary, my home parish in Albuquerque, lies at the very center of the worship space, surrounded by rows of gradually elevated pews for the community of faith. At the outer ring is an ambulatory with niches shrines

housing images of regional and universal saints sculpted in wood by local artists. On this walkabout, one encounters a rich variety of holy women and men, including Niño de Atocha, patron of refugees and captives, and Elizabeth Ann Seton; Our Lady of Guadalupe and Vincent de Paul; Kateri Tekakwitha and Norbert (the parish is staffed by Norbertines); Mary Magdalene and Martin de Porres; Teresa of Ávila and Thérèse of Lisieux. In the stadium-like design, these saints are experienced as part of “the great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) that surrounds us not merely as spectators of the main event but as dynamic witness-bearers and prayerful participants, who because they have been intimately drawn into the heart of Christ now, draw us deeply into our eucharistic and life celebration.

Prayer, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church suggests, involves layers of participation in the age-old covenant relationship with God, which through Jesus has been up-leveled not only into the mutuality of friendship (John 15:14-15) but into the realm of communion (#2562-65). In any real relationship, something of the other rubs off, like long-married couples who increasingly look and act alike. So, too, each of the saints has lived, prayed and ministered in their own unique way across the ages, differing in gender, race, nationality, gifts and life callings. Yet, as diverse as the saints are, they all developed a deep and strong connection with Christ that makes them Christlike, allowing Christ to be transparent in them with a power to change their lives and the lives of those around them, including ours. Just as the deepest

relationships seek a certain oneness of being, our participation in the communion of saints serves to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), ultimately ushering us into the dynamic mystery of the mutually self-giving relationship of love present in the Holy Trinity.

In God’s gracious care, we are all given to share in the communion of saints. On one level, each of us is entrusted with a circle of saintly role models with whom we are particularly aligned — connecting us across time and space.

For example, a recent RCIA baptismal candidate who is a medical doctor was enriched by exploring the lives of

holy physician-healers like Luke, Joseph Moscati and Martin de Porres; and another candidate, who is committed to speaking truth to power, was profoundly inspired by Catherine of Siena. Personally, my namesake patron, the apostle Thomas, encourages me to probe passionately the now-glorious wounds of Christ, and in the midst of learning, teaching and writing, I have felt the presence of Thomas Aquinas. I also know a core resonance with the contemplative charism of Mary, Norbert, Teresa of Ávila and Thomas Merton and with the solidary care expressed in saints like Mother Teresa.

This resonant cluster of patron saints takes place on a parish as well as personal level. As a pastoral associate at Saint Thérèse Catholic Community in Kansas City, Missouri, I was graced to be part of our pastoral council’s process of discerning the parish’s primary charisms. Besides exploring the needs and gifts of individual parishioners, we studied the parish’s history and the reasons precipitating its founding and, most significantly, we pondered the life and charism of our patron saint, Thérèse of Lisieux. Her “little way” quickly became central in our parish consciousness, and her childlike spirit of doing small things with great love significantly shaped our spirituality. Her deathbed promise to “spend (her) heaven doing good on earth” was tangibly perceived parish-wide, and the desolation she underwent during her dying process, and her resulting patronage of those who suffer greatly, infused our parish’s vital pastoral care ministry. Thérèse’s presence was further felt in the parish charism of caring for the poor — particularly through her strong influence on both Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa, who inspired a lively St. Vincent de Paul food pantry ministry. Similarly, Faustina’s deep relationship with Thérèse, which helped ignite her Divine Mercy devotion, also informed the parish charism.

These personal and parish examples of cultivating vital relationships with saints who have gone before us point toward the church’s larger understanding of the communion of saints as a spiritual solidarity which binds together heaven’s saints with pilgrims on earth and those continuing to be purified in purgatory. This relational web of the mystical body of Christ immerses us in Christ’s mission of solidarity with all humanity.

In all our diversity, we are drawn into an organic unity with family, friends, refugees, enemies and all our “other selves.” This sacred dynamic originates, is driven and ultimately connects us fully with the divine love that animates all of creation, including the saints, living and dead. Tom Skorupa writes, facilitates adult faith formation, and provides spiritual direction/friendship and mentoring in Albuquerque, New Mexico