

HUMAN SUFFERING, PRAYER AND COMPASSION
(J.F.M.H. 2.6.2016)

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (St. Paul, Col. 1. 24)

Prayer is sometimes defined as 'the raising up of the mind and heart to God' However, a rather more descriptive, and perhaps more accurate way of defining it, is to describe it as the raising up of the heart, through the mind, to God. This is because knowledge precedes love. It is also true that the opposite statement is equally valid, for we cannot love anyone without, at least, having 'sympathy', an ingredient of love for them. In the case of Christ who died, such a painful death on the Cross, for us, 'sympathy' quickly turns to 'compassion' within His loving disciples. There is a difference between the two words that is worth noting. The passive word 'Sympathy' comes from the Greek which meaning 'fellow feeling'. To be offered sympathy is kind, but it doesn't really do much for us in practical terms. Compassion on the other hand comes from the Latin word 'compassio', the root of which mean 'to suffer with'. Compassion involves a willingness to share pain, and is a positive way of loving.

Sharing is a hallmark of God's love. The relationship within the Holy Trinity is one of infinite love between the Almighty Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We learnt from St. John that "God is Love" "Ho Theos agape estin"(Gk). "It is not the same as saying "God loves". Of course both statements are true, but the first implies that the very nature of God is love and the second records the result of that nature. This love is of a special kind, called by St. John "Agape", which the writer C.S. Lewis renders as "gift-love", it's a "Sharing-Love". G.K. Chesterton comments on this in his book 'The Everlasting Man' by referring it back to the Blessed Trinity where the Three Persons are united and equal by a mutual, and infinitely intimate and uncreated sharing-love. Human beings are created by God in His image and likeness, and given the gifts of freewill and the hallmark of love, the urge to share in our Creator's 'agape', so that they can reach the destination He not only designed for them, but created them to achieve.

The love is the family likeness between God and ourselves, not our brains, not our self-awareness, not our conscience, just our love. This sharing love of God for human beings after the Fall, is most deeply shown in the Death of Christ our Redeemer on the Cross. Because the Church is the Body of Christ, that Body shares in the sufferings of Christ Himself. As St. Paul says, we "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His Body, the Church." This means that man's suffering is joined with the Paschal mystery. The suffering Christ endured is by no means incomplete or insufficient, but *our* participation in it, as His Body, is what must be completed. Christ leaves this redemptive suffering open so that it can be completed in us. Christ's Body, the Church, lives this redemptive suffering throughout its history. In 1984 Pope St John Paul 11 issued an Apostolic Letter 'Salvific Doloris' on the Christian meaning of Human Suffering. In it he wrote about our part in the redemption suffering of Christ. "The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ."

In 2013 Pope Francis, issued an Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium" (The Joy of the Gospel) which dwelt on the practical way, of sharing the love of Christ in the modern world. In it he describes the first proclamation of the Church's kerygma (i.e. The preaching/proclaiming of the gospel of Christ, especially in the manner of the early church). "On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you." This first proclamation is called "first" not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal

proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment.” There is a connection between suffering and love that is apparent in the experience of us all. We recognise it most strongly when we look at any lover, who for any length of time is deprived of their loved one, or any mother and father who sees their child in pain or going down a dangerous path in life. There is no love without sacrifice, no gift of self without self-forgetfulness. So we find that it cannot be separated from the Cross. This type of love was shown when Christ died for us sinners who so often show but little love for Him.

The Cross is at the heart of the Christian Mystery because it is a mystery of love, of redemptive love. Each day the Christian must bear his own cross. Indeed taking up our cross and following Christ is the way we are recognized as His disciples. Before Saul was given his vocation to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, Ananias was told in a vision what he was to do for the blinded Saul. He was sent by the Lord to lay hands on him, restore his sight, and baptise him, filling him with the Holy Spirit. This was because Saul (now Paul) was to be, "My chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9.15) An all-powerful God could have sent Paul off to do His work with the Gentiles, without requiring any great suffering. However, God is all knowing and all wise and in His love for both Paul and His Church, knows the importance of the suffering of Paul's share in the mystery of the Cross, and that it was required by a cynical and worldly people for them to accept this holy and loving work. Today how different would be the behaviour of any worldly-wise king in sending out his ambassador to a foreign country. Suffering done with love is a means of sanctification, not just any means which we may or may not use, which we may choose or discard for another, but a necessary, essential means. There is no sanctification apart from sharing in the mystery of the Cross. Apart from sacrifice, which alone can deepen our love of God by providing the opportunity to exert our love more entirely, more sincerely and with self-giving. Thus any tendency to minimize the role of the Cross, and the redemptive character of grace must be viewed with the utmost reserve. According to St. Paul, suffering without love, even to the point of submitting to death, is useless.

If one thinks about this work for others offered to God by the members of Christ's Mystical body, through Christ their Head, we can recognise the vocation of a victim soul of substitution in action. Since Christ saved and redeemed us by His Passion and Death on the Cross, it follows that our own sufferings are especially powerful when born patiently and offered to God through Jesus. By all our pains, however slight and unnoticed by others, perhaps it is best like this, we share deeply in Christ's work, and our pains are taken up to the Father as a compensation and expiation for the sins of the world. As, in Old Testament times, the innocent blood of a lamb served to appease God and sanctify the people of Israel, so too now, God forgives and restores sinful men and women for the sake of suffering victims, drawn from all ranks of society, and from all parts of the Church. This call to victimhood of course is given to each of us in our own unique way, a secret between Him and us. Because the Church is the Body of Christ, that Body shares in the sufferings of Christ Himself. As St. Paul says, we "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His Body, the Church." This means that man's suffering is joined with the Paschal mystery. The suffering Christ endured is by no means incomplete or insufficient, but our participation in it, as His Body, is what must be completed. Christ leaves this redemptive suffering open so that it can be completed in us. Christ's Body, the Church, lives this redemptive suffering throughout its history. In this way the Gospel of Suffering, is also written by those who suffer with Christ, uniting their sufferings with His. ('Salvific Doloris' – 1984 Pope St. J.P. II)

O most merciful Redeemer,
Friend, and Brother
May I know you more clearly. Love you more dearly,
And follow you more nearly.

(*St Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)*)

