



Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord C April 7, 2019

- ◆ The Mystery of Suffering
- ◆ A Priest's Reflection
- ◆ 13 Readers Share Their Thoughts

As we all know, there is really no great or even good answer to the age-old question as to why our good and all-powerful God allows so much pain and suffering in our world. The best answer we can hope for may be discerned through helpful reflections and insights. I hope the following article from *US Catholic* magazine will be a good guide for us.

In my book on prayer, I deal with the issue of getting angry with God. In this article, you will find several examples of that.

In the beginning of the article, the author, Fr. Michael Henchal, speaks about an eleven-year old girl called Renee, who died unexpectedly of a rare disease. Renee's family, friends, and indeed a whole community were suddenly faced with the challenge of dealing with her dying and death. They could not comprehend why God would allow a lovely girl to die so young? Could God not have prevented such a tragedy? The inevitable question is: Why doesn't God intervene in our suffering and adversity?

The following are excerpts from Fr. Henchal's article and some letters from *US Catholic* readers.

Often beneath the surface of the words of condolence offered by friends and relatives were implied attempts to solve this mystery. We heard people say, "God knows better than we do"; "God has his reasons"; we even heard someone say that Renee's death at such a young age is proof that he loved her dearly. Thankfully we did not hear, as I have heard in other cases of unexpected death, the idea expressed that the tragedy was punishment for some sin.

The unspoken presupposition in all these attempts to make sense of tragic death is that it has happened for a reason; that it is reasonable, purposeful, just, and ultimately, that God is its cause. When I examine these unspoken presuppositions, however, I find that they are absurd, if not blasphemous.

...But God didn't do it. Don't dare to say or even imply that God took this girl or that it was his will. It isn't true. Death is God's irreconcilable enemy. Recall how in the world God created and intended humankind to live in. In Eden, there was no death or sickness or suffering or sin. Where was human freedom, however? Adam and Eve freely chose sin, and with sin came all the other evils.

All of the Bible can be seen as a centuries-long dialogue on the meaning of human suffering. Many attempts can be found to deal with the problem, culminating in Saint Paul's discussion of the matter in his letter to the Romans. Saint Paul explains that death is part of a whole complex of evil which includes sickness, suffering, pain, and sin. Renee's death, then, like all the tragedies of human life, was not sent by God; death is the result of the evil let loose in the world through not only the sin of Adam and Eve, but the sin confirmed in each adult life. A particular death cannot be linked to the sin of a particular individual but to the sins of all.

Could God have prevented Adam and Eve's sin? Only if God had created them without freedom; thereby, in effect, forcing them to be good. But what kind of goodness is that, when there is no choice?

Is God, then, powerless to prevent evil? Could God have prevented Renee's death? In one sense he certainly could have. In the same sense, he could have prevented his own Son's death. (After all, his child, too, died in this war against sin and death.) God is still all powerful. But ultimately it isn't a question of power. Power wins no victories in this struggle against the whole complex of evil, suffering, pain, death, and sin. Evil is not defeated by shows of force and miraculous interventions. It isn't that simple. God could intervene and prevent this death or that death, this suffering or that suffering, this tragedy or that tragedy. But that would only be treating symptoms; the disease would still be there. The disease is the irrational and cruel evil set loose in the world as the result of sin, bringing sickness, suffering, and death.

Don't try to find reasons for death or suffering or make excuses for them. Death is no more reasonable, fair, or just than the sinfulness each person is guilty of. It is only human to try to make sense of it, but ultimately that's impossible. Death cannot be explained away or made to fit neatly in a good and ordered world.

Death shall be defeated, though. Life is stronger than death. God is stronger than death. It will be defeated along with all suffering and sin. Saint Paul explains that God will do away with all these enemies “and the last of the enemies to be done away with is death” (1Cor. 15:26). So death can be finally done away with only when sin has been done away with. That’s why the question of God’s power is irrelevant.

Sin is not prevented by power, by decree, but by faith and love, gaining the cooperation of human freedom. The final victory is no less certain, but it will take longer to achieve than any of us would like.

For proof I offer the resurrection of Jesus, who was seemingly defeated by death only to rise again. I offer as well a certain intangible witness that Renee, too, has refused to be defeated by death. Her lively spirit is too irrepressible, too uncontrollable, too spontaneous, too alive to be held down by the grave. Her parents, especially, still feel her presence with them. Her spirit has refused to slip quietly away. She has refused to stay dead. And on the Resurrection Day, when God finally defeats all the enemies and death forever, even her body will rise again from that futile, defeated grave; and all will live together the fullness of life where there will be no more mourning or sickness or sadness or death. That is God’s will; not sin, suffering, and death.

US Catholic readers’ responses to five questions on God and suffering:

1. *When I’m grieving over a loved one’s death, I think God suffers right along with me.*

75% agree
17% disagree
8% other

2. *I think it’s more fitting to say that God “allows” suffering to happen rather than that God “intends” it to happen.*

91% agree
4% disagree
5% other

3. *I think God sometimes wants to teach me something by sending suffering into my life.*

46% agree
45% disagree
9% other

4. *I’ve sometimes felt very angry with God for permitting a particular death or suffering.*

45% agree
54% disagree
1% other

5. *I more often ask for strength to bear suffering or grief than for God to take away the cause of that suffering or grief.*

84% agree
12% disagree
4% other

Readers’ comments

The following are thirteen comments made by US Catholic readers after they had read Fr. Henchal’s article.

1. ***After an 11-year old daughter’s death***, I found I went through all the traditional steps of grieving and vividly included God in each. I recall pounding a pillow daily for one period and yelling, “If you don’t help me with this pain I can’t keep functioning. Do something!”

And God did. Gradually my expression became more peaceful and my prayers more often were of gratitude. God did not bring my daughter back or ever “replace” her; he truly changed my heart.

2. ***When my son was murdered***, I simply told God that he would have to take over since I needed someone to share my suffering. My faith was my strength; it’s what made me able to keep going, including my daily duties and being there for my daughter.

Sharing your joyful moments with God means much more if you’ve shared your sorrow with him.

3. ***My mother was dying in the intensive-care unit***. My prayer was simple, “God help me to let go.” As I stood in that room, holding her hand, a deep calm came upon me. It was as though God was letting me know that even though I wouldn’t be able to hold her hand much longer, he would; and that death isn’t the end of life, love goes beyond death. With this I was able to accept death itself with peace.

4. ***During the worst suffering of my life*** I cried, I kicked, I yelled, screamed, and cursed—and somewhere found in my faith not only a loving, forgiving God; but also that God was big enough and tough enough to take it. And God didn’t yell back.

5. ***I can’t talk to God when I am suffering the worst***. I am too stunned, too immobilized. As the shock subsides, I most often ask for help in accepting the suffering and for faith that I will be able to accept it. Then I’m likely to ask for understanding of what happened.

6. **Initially I scream “Why?” at God.** I want reasons. I want to make sense out of the senseless. Typically recognition dawns; and my question becomes: “Okay, God, how are we going to endure this time?” Once my monologue of anger, rage, disbelief, and resistance becomes a dialogue with my God, the question changes. How do I make it through the day? What options do I have? How can I accept my powerlessness? Will you grant me the strength and patience to embrace this sliver of the cross?

By uniting my suffering with the suffering of Jesus and the suffering throughout the world, I have realized I was experiencing the first stage of the Paschal Mystery. The fullness of that mystery—the Resurrection and life—has been the hope I cling to.

7. **Having suffered much grief through the death of my mother when I was 11, I too, put the blame on God.** Or in the case of many other children when affected by a close death, I believed that I was the cause of it because of those moments when we say in anger, “I wish you were dead!”

There are still times when I would be tempted to say, “Why did you let her die?!” When people have come to me for advice or counseling and ask me why God let so-and-so die, I don’t attempt to answer for God. I only say that, like sin and the other necessary evils of the world, these experiences of death and grieving must happen so that we can learn from them. What we are to learn is up to God; being open and receptive to his word and letting him be a part of our lives will only make his teaching us easier—and our learning more profound.

8. **When my 20-year-old son died as a result of an auto accident last year, it was my faith that kept me sane: faith that God did not will this death. God did not put him in the car, or send the animal into his path. God does not, as a rule, interfere with the natural laws he put into effect.**

But, oh, I was angry—angry that the animal was allowed to run free, angry that my David tried to miss it; but most, I was angry at the “dear soul” who tried to explain it as “God’s will.”

9. **The worst suffering faced by my husband and me has been that of being the parents of a profoundly retarded son. Our prayers have only been for strength to bear this cross; and we truly believe that this strength is as much a miracle as his recovery could have been.**

An equal suffering has been another son who left the church during the Vietnam War because a chaplain during a service declared how pleased God was that Americans should be killing Communists.

If I were grieving over the death of a loved one, would I find it comforting if someone said to me, “It was God’s will”? No! I am in full sympathy with the nurse-nun who was attending a woman whose difficult labor ended in a dead baby. A priest tried to comfort the woman with that fatuous remark. The nun exploded, “Father, get the hell out of here!” (A true story from personal experiences in Catholic social work.)

10. **I used to assume that God could—and probably should—prevent evil and suffering.** I brought fear and anger and blame to God’s doorstep, but especially blame. It slowly began to dawn on me that God had accepted all that expression; not because it is accurate, but because that is how friends listen to one another. I finally came away with a fuller understanding of the friendliness of God. I thought of Job and of how he grew willing to allow mystery to remain mysterious. Pretty soon, the great mystery for me was not the suffering or the evil, but the friendliness of God. Now I no longer volunteer to be consulted about the shaping of life’s mysteries: I have a steadfast friend I didn’t used to know about.

11. **During the worst suffering of my life I stopped talking to God—turned my back, walked out on the Catholic faith, and didn’t glance back.** Fortunately for me, God stuck with me and ever so slowly, over a period of fifteen years, he brought me back. There’s been more suffering along the way recently, almost as disastrous as all those years ago. The difference today is knowing God is there for me—that I can tell him about the pain, that I can even tell him he’s been too hard on me (even though I don’t truly believe God is sending the pain).

12. **I know that, as a parent, my answers and decisions are not always what my children want to hear. And I look at my heavenly father as just that: my father! I have to trust that my best interest are what he is concerned about.**

13. **When I experienced my worst suffering, I knelt in front of a statue of the Sacred Heart (just for a point of reference; to “converse” more easily) and cried.**

I asked “Why?” and asked to be shown where I was supposed to go and what I was supposed to do. That gave me peace and calm. Then I prayed that I would just keep my wits about me and follow the clues that God would send me in the next week. God did send clues, and the great void that was there was filled with God’s caring and my own peace and good health. That was over 25 years ago; I’m still conscious of God’s looking out for me every day.

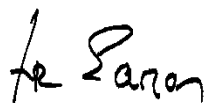
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Reflection questions

- What spoke to you most in the above article?
- What would you add if you were writing a letter to the editor?
- What helps you to deal with suffering and pain?

If you would like to share your thoughts with me, I would love to hear them. Also, please contact Fr. Martin, the Deacons or myself to listen and pray with you.

Have a blessed and prayerful week,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fr. Martin". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.