



**Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord A**  
**April 5, 2020**

**Where there is pain, there is God**  
**Palm Sunday reflections by**  
**Fr. Denis McBride, C.SsR**

The following interview with Father Robin Ryan by U.S. Catholic editors appeared in the March 2016 issue of *U.S. Catholic Magazine*.

We all know what it is to feel pain and loss. Whether from the loss of a loved one, a cancer diagnosis, or a natural disaster, everyone experiences suffering.

According to Robin Ryan, an associate professor of systematic theology at Catholic Theological Union and a Passionist priest, the presence of suffering is the one thing that most challenges our faith. “Suffering isn’t an elective course,” he says. “It’s not optional. Even if a person lives in a mansion and has a great job, suffering touches everybody and affects everybody’s faith.”

Because suffering is so common and yet so difficult to talk about, Ryan says that it’s easy to rely on platitudes like “It’s all part of God’s plan” or “God never gives you a bigger cross than you can endure.” The problem with these, Ryan says, is “they sound like God is busy doling out crosses in people’s lives. That can turn people off.”

For Ryan, the solution is for Catholics to articulate their personal beliefs about suffering through ongoing conversation with others. As such, his book, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering: A Theological Conversation Across the Ages*, offers no definitive answer to the questions of suffering, but instead shares the wisdom of thinkers ranging from Thomas Aquinas to Elizabeth Johnson. The goal is for readers to refine and enrich their own personal views on suffering and God’s presence in the midst of pain.

**You titled your book *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering*. What’s so mysterious about suffering?**

There are two mysteries there—the mystery of God and the mystery of human suffering. You can’t completely wrap your mind around either one. Even the best

rational explanations of why suffering exists and how it fits into the whole order of things fall short.

A problem is something that’s solvable, at least eventually, but a mystery is not something you can solve. It’s something you encounter that you have to grapple with and learn to live with and try to make sense of the best you can, but there is no overarching explanation that can put a mystery into some nice, rational box.

You know suffering when you see or feel it, but it’s hard to define. The dictionary definition says something like, “the bearing of affliction and pain and loss,” but suffering is more multilayered.

Phil Zylla, a Canadian theologian, talks about the different dimensions of suffering: the physical, the psychological, the social, and the spiritual. The physical refers to the bearing of pain, while psychological is a sense of loss or, sometimes, trauma. Social suffering refers to becoming a social outcast, social degradation, or shame. Finally, spiritual suffering can lead to despondency. The more of those elements that are part of an experience of suffering, the deeper it is.

I was at the dentist last week for a procedure, not my favorite experience. Is that suffering? I suppose I suffered physical pain a little bit. But I knew my dentist was trying to help me, and everything was going to work out fine.

That’s different from losing your spouse or the experience of the people in Paris who were attacked by those gunmen. That suffering encompasses the spiritual, the mental, and the social.

**Can you rank types of suffering?**

Suffering, in most cases, is incommensurate, because it’s so personal. You can’t really say, “My suffering is worse than yours.” An experience of depression may be something very deep and debilitating. Someone may have cancer and also suffer, but deal with it very positively.

There are kinds of suffering that crush the soul, that crush humans in spirit. There is long torture or terrible trauma that people can't grapple with. That kind of suffering is maybe worse, in some sense, than others.

Sometimes psychologists talk about social comparison: "I was in a car wreck, but it could be worse. . . I could be like the people in Paris who got killed," as if somehow, that makes you feel better.

I suppose that's valid. It helps you withstand something when you realize that there are other people going through the same thing or something even worse. But generally speaking, I don't think you should rank suffering, because it's so personal.

### **If God is all-powerful and all-good, why do bad things happen?**

That question is the basis of what is known as "theodicy," or the rational attempt to explain how God can be omnipotent and all-good and yet allow suffering and evil to exist. Again, we're standing before mystery. There is no way to wrap your mind around suffering and no explanation that will leave the mind at rest.

Theologians today say that suffering is a scandal. And we have to allow ourselves to be scandalized by it again and again.

Jürgen Moltmann is a German theologian who was a POW after World War II. He was conscripted as a teenager into the German Nazi Air Force and almost died in the bombing of Hamburg. Afterward, at 18 or 19 years old, he was put into a POW camp for three years.

In the camp, an American chaplain gave him a Bible. He came across the psalms of lament first, and then Mark's account of Jesus' passion. He said something along the lines of, "When I read Jesus' death cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' I realized this is someone who understands me, and I came to understand him."

Moltmann says the "why" question that theodicy tries to answer is like an open wound that you have to learn to live with. It's one of the most important questions of human history, and yet it exists like an open wound that you can't cure. But sometimes faith enables you to live with that open wound.

So rather than trying to answer the question of *why*, theologians today say that the more important question for us is *where*: "Where do I find God in suffering?" And it's here that the Christian story of the cross and resurrection has something to say.

### **What can suffering people learn from the cross and resurrection?**

Well, the cross has been used in many ways for suffering people. Sometimes these ways are helpful, sometimes not. The cross has been used to say, "Well, Jesus suffered so you should suffer, too," almost conveying that the more we suffer, the closer we are to God.

But the incarnation tells us that God chose to save us by punching into this world—with all of its beauty and its tragedy—to save from within, rather than sending heavenly armies marching in. In Christ, God knew exactly what suffering was: Christ truly entered into suffering. God, in some ways, is forever different because of humanity.

This isn't an answer to any question about suffering, but it's an assurance of God's compassion and God's presence with the suffering person. The resurrection assures us that God can be found in the one who is suffering, even when it seems like a Godless situation.

### **Does God suffer with us?**

Does God suffer? The traditional answer is no, because God is immutable and impassible, and to suffer is to change or to be changed.

Because of the incarnation, the Son of God suffered on the cross, though in his human nature, not God's divine nature. So even though the person of God suffered in a way, that suffering was kept separate from God's divine nature. Traditional theology brought suffering as close as possible to God, but didn't quite let it touch God.

But modern theologians, including feminist theologians, say that God is impinged upon by our sufferings. And this isn't a bad thing. The ability to freely enter into the suffering of another is an excellence, not an imperfection.

The best analogy we have for God's love is the love between two adults. That love always involves a sense of mutuality, reciprocity, of being vulnerable to the hurts of the other.

If that's the case, if that's the most perfect kind of love we can think of (even though we realize it's limited), don't we want to ascribe that to God?

It so much depends on how you understand perfection. If you understand perfection in a way that includes the ability to make oneself vulnerable to another out of love, then many theologians today would say we want to ascribe that to God, even though we don't know exactly what it means for God to suffer.

### **Did Jesus have to suffer on the cross to save humanity?**

Some modern theologians have criticized the Christian tradition for glorifying the cross in a way that didn't acknowledge the terrible thing that it was—a cruel form of execution. It's important to see Jesus' death on the cross as the outcome of his public ministry. If you just isolate the cross and say, "Jesus came to die for us," it sounds like what he did before his crucifixion was just a prelude or something not really important.

But Jesus came to offer salvation and to proclaim the nearness of God's kingdom. He made that reign of God present in his words and his deeds: touching the leper, dining with sinners, etc. His suffering was a result of living that ministry in a world where people reject God's visitations. The suffering needs to be seen as an outcome; he got himself in trouble by the way he lived.

We do believe that Christ's suffering on the cross is redemptive. But it's redemptive because it's full of love, not because it's full of pain. Do these big theological ideas help us with our own concrete experiences of suffering?

Author and Shoah survivor Elie Wiesel writes about the hanging of a young boy while he's in the concentration camp. Two men and a boy are arrested. All the prisoners are forced to watch them be hanged. The young boy hangs on longer because he's so light. It takes him a long time to die. Someone beside Wiesel says, "Where is God? Where is God now?" Eventually, Wiesel says, "I

heard a voice inside of me saying, 'There he is. He's hanging there on the gallows.' "

Wiesel never really explains what he means by that passage, but I think a Christian can read that and understand that God is in the suffering one. That's where we find God—not in some figure who's behind the scenes and directing the script or something.

Seeing God in the suffering means you approach them with reverence. They aren't always attractive. Sometimes you'd rather not be around them. Sometimes we get frustrated with people who are suffering, because we think they're not helping themselves enough, or they could do more to help themselves. But you have to realize that this is especially sacred ground. You have to tread lightly.

### **Does the church ever fall short when it comes to caring for suffering people?**

Pastoral workers, whether priests or lay people, are human beings. Sometimes pastors want to have quick answers for people, rather than sit with them.

Even in preaching, we want to sound convincing and like we know something. Otherwise, why are we up there? But sometimes you have to let your own vulnerability come out, whether at a funeral or where a child is dying. It's harder to say "this was a terrible tragedy and I don't have an explanation."

But we fall short when we resort to prefabricated packaged answers, bumper sticker slogans that we use in our encounters with other people, or even in preaching. We need to reflect on what our words convey about who God is. What kind of image of God is underneath what I am saying? Take, for example, the old adage we tell people after a child dies that says something like, "God wanted another angel in heaven." It makes God into a celestial kidnapper.

Or take what we say about someone's death or another tragedy being "God's plan." When people use this language, I think they're trying to express that God is at work in our lives, that God guides us and is present to us and is leading us along the way.

Unfortunately, this language can also make it seem like God is the master chess player who's looking down on the chess board, moving all the pieces around, knocking a few over in the process. Or that God is a master software programmer. He knows all the on and off switches and exactly what circuits to use. It makes it sound like God gives you this suffering as part of your trip through the maze to get home.

How do you say the Shoah fits into God's plan or what happened in Paris or 9/11? Can you really label all of those things as part of God's master plan?

### **What is your pastoral response to people who are suffering?**

I encourage people to cry out to God, echoing the psalms of lament. It's okay to be angry at God; people should speak as honestly as they can. When it's appropriate, I encourage those to whom I minister to trust that God is with them and to hold on to God's hand through the suffering.

If someone asks me "Why did this happen?" I just say I don't know why. I don't have any answers.

I believe God is present with us and works to bring some good out of pain, and I believe that it's still important for people to hear that. But I don't tell people that right away. I let people pour out their pain first.

### **Does your response to a huge tragedy—like terrorist attacks or a natural disaster—differ from your response to personal suffering?**

In either situation—personal suffering or a huge tragedy—what I try to do as a pastor and a Passionist is to be present. Job's friends came from afar. When they saw him, they could hardly recognize him. They sat with him for seven days and didn't say anything. It's when they started talking that the problems came and they got themselves in trouble.

I think the best thing is to try to be Christ to that person. Don't just come up with answers but be Christ's presence. That's the best thing you can give someone in that situation.

In the case of larger tragedies like the terrorist attack on Paris, we find ways to express solidarity. Whether it's a

prayer service here at our own church or in Paris. Or when thinking about those suffering from famine in Africa, for example, we can try to reach out with spiritual and material assistance.

*Solidarity* can be a cheap word. There's a superficial feeling of, "Well, I feel bad about those people." But there are other ways to express your solidarity that are deeper and stronger, and that's the most important thing.

### **Can we learn anything from suffering?**

In 2008 I ended up driving Gustavo Gutiérrez back and forth from Catholic Theological Union (CTU) to DePaul when he was here for a conference. He has a limp because he had osteomyelitis as a teenager; it's pretty painful. He has a special shoe. He had to have a couple of difficult surgeries when he was a teenager.

When we were in the car together, Gutiérrez talked about how that experience and the love of his family really helped him develop a sensitivity to pain. It also helped him realize that those who are suffering cling to hope, even when they're among the world's most poor. So that experience as a teenager helped him later in his concern for the poor.

When you're talking about suffering, you draw on your own experience, no matter how academic you may be. So by listening to a lot of voices at the table, you gain more wisdom than if you just listen to one set of them or one person.

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Have a blessed week,

*Fr. Ryan*

