

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 13, 2009 B

DEALING WITH THE CROSSES OF LIFE

In today's Gospel, Mark 8:31 reads:

"Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man had to suffer much, be rejected...be put to death, and rise three days later."

The late Fr. Henri Nouwen once said: "Finding new life through suffering and death—that is the core of the good news."

If our Lord and Savior suffered, so must we his disciples. If Jesus' suffering led him to new life, so can our suffering lead us to a new and transformed life.

Types of suffering

The daily news give us examples of many types of suffering:

- Soldiers and innocent civilians killed or injured in roadside bombs or terrorists attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan
- Homes and property destroyed by fires, tornados and hurricanes
- Individuals killed or injured by a gunman
- Children kidnapped, molested and abused in their own homes
- Thousands of people dying of starvation and lack of clean water

Closer to home, we experience or hear about other forms of suffering such as:

- Parishioners afflicted with cancer or some other serious disease. In such situations, the family and caregiver/s of the sick suffer as well.
- Adults and children hurting from painful relationships
- Pain experienced by the "sandwich generation"—dealing with adult children who have lots of problems and aging parents who need much attention
- Anguish felt in the death of a loved one
- Distress at work due to difficult co-workers, bad working environment, etc.
- Torment of addiction
- Spiritual suffering—the feeling that God is distant or has abandoned us, or when we try to live a good spiritual life but are rejected or harassed by our own family and friends

What other types of sufferings did I miss?

Coping

When it comes to dealing with personal suffering and the suffering of loved ones, I believe some of the best wisdom

can be found in the short version of the Serenity Prayer.

Lord, grant me the grace to change what can be changed, to accept what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.

"To change what can be changed"

In the case of illness, this means seeking out the best medical help available to us.

In the case of the loss of a loved one, it means being open to joining a grief support group and becoming aware of the dynamics of the grieving process. (I have a very good four-page article on this, available through Maria at the parish office.)

In the case of poor relationships, it may entail changing our attitude towards the person we have a difficult time with. While we cannot change another person, we can always change ourselves. This may mean doing the difficult work of forgiveness. Or it may mean realizing that we may never have a good relationship with certain people and learning to live with that.

In the case of loss of work, it obviously compels us to find a job. It may also mean being open to using our time of unemployment to pray more and do volunteer work.

In the case of huge losses in the stock market, it is a big opportunity to reassess the role of money and material things in our lives. One woman told me that her big losses are helping her to become more detached from preoccupation with material things.

For couples who are experiencing difficulty in marriage, changing what can be changed is always a call to transform themselves rather than focus on what is wrong with the other. Perhaps it is a time to "lower *one's* expectations and raise *one's* performance." It is a time to die to self. It is also an opportunity to look into attending Marriage Encounter or a Retrouvaille weekend (the latter is for couples whose marriage is in serious trouble).

For people suffering from an addiction of some kind, changing what can be changed may mean being willing to join an AA group and to daily get down on our knees to pray for God's grace to say 'no' to our addiction for today. It is a time to believe more than ever that while "I can't, God can."

In general, changing what can be changed may mean:

- Reaching out for help. It is amazing how many people are too private or too proud or stubborn to reach out for help. When we are like that, we tie God's hands. Reaching out demands *humility*, the foundation virtue of the spiritual life.

It also demands a willingness to be *vulnerable*. Vulnerability and humility are wonderful virtues to develop.

- Changing what can be changed will often mean letting go of old ways of thinking that do not serve us well, e.g., I can deal with my problem on my own.

Recognizing that when it comes to suffering and bad things, God *always* wants to use them to bring about good

- in our lives; the devil wants to use them to destroy us and to make us bitter. God wants to use the bad to draw us closer to him; the devil wants to use them to distance us from God and the Church.

“To accept what cannot be changed now or never”

Some things can never be changed, e.g., a loved one who died will never return. Lots of other things *may* never be changed, e.g., a spouse with a particular negative attitude, a particular illness. In such situations, we are called to accept what cannot be changed or is not changing *now*. Sometimes we must work at *acceptance* even as we struggle to change what is not changing *now*. For example, I’m presently suffering from a particular illness. It may be cured in the future and I need to do all I can to facilitate that. But in the meantime, this illness is part of my reality and I must learn to live with it and even see if somehow I can grow through this situation. Needless to say, that can be a huge challenge in some situations. Most likely, people with a combative personality will have a more difficult challenge with acceptance than people with more of a tendency to resign themselves to what is. In all these situations, our spiritual resources, our psychological make-up and the presence of family and friends will determine to a huge degree how we respond to pain and suffering.

“The wisdom to know the difference”

How long does one keep fighting for a marriage? Many would say: “until death do us part.” But what if it is abusive and destructive to the lives of the spouses and kids? How long does one keep fighting to survive cancer?

When Teddy Kennedy was diagnosed with brain cancer, he did everything possible to find a cure. Through treatments, his life was extended. But at some point, he and his wife decided that he was not going to win this battle and came to accept that he had only a few more months or weeks to live. We need God’s wisdom to know when to keep fighting, to change what can be changed and to accept what cannot be changed.

Dealing with God

Some of us may never feel angry with God about the bad stuff in our lives. We just accept that sometimes bad things happen. We believe that God isn’t punishing us and that somehow we have to weather the storm through the help of prayer and friends. Others may experience a lot of anger toward God for the crappy situation in which they find themselves. They may fight it out with God like the psalmists did, or they may withdraw and quit praying. If we

are the fighting, confrontational type, we will, most likely, fight it out with God. If our general tendency in tense relational situations is to withdraw and become silent, we may also withdraw from God and quit praying and/or going to church. We may, consciously or unconsciously, give God the silent treatment. Obviously, the more desirable option is to stay relating to God even if we are mad with him. It shows that we care enough about the relationship to fight for it.

The interesting thing in all this is that God, whom we may see as the source of our problem, is also the one whom we most need to help us through our problem—just like being mad with our doctor who holds the key to our physical well-being. There is no easy way to handle all this emotional turmoil. Some people do it more effectively than others, usually because of their willingness to confront the issues and deal with them. Once again, many people, including myself, find it very helpful when we can talk through our thoughts and feelings with others who are willing to listen and offer us feedback if we ask for it. Sometimes all we need is a compassionate ear to vent into. If I can be such a person for you, do not hesitate to call me or someone on our pastoral team.

We should often pray for people who are going through hard times, that their tough experiences will not lead them to become bitter with life. I’ll close this piece with a prayer called *The Weaver*.

*My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me,
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Oftimes He weaveth sorrow,
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper
and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly
shall God enroll the canvas
and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver’s skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.*

Author unknown

Have a blessed week,

