

## Talk 1: Fr. Jim Livingston

Thank you, Dianne, for those generous comments. It reminds me of riding in a bus on a pilgrimage far away from home, where I would lead the meditations of the rosary for people and lead the rosary, and between each of the decades I would kind of do a spontaneous meditation, only to find out that towards the end of it I looked back and everyone had their mouths open and they were snoring. I said, "Well, okay, this is no longer a meditation rosary; it's a medication rosary." So, if you need any medication at 3 in the morning and all those locked drawers are closed, you can just turn it on."

Well, the material is good, okay? It's good because I lifted it from John Paul II and his work on suffering, *Salvifici Doloris*, if I'm pronouncing that correctly. What I'd like to do is just draw in - most of the thoughts are going to be from that document, along with a few other, I think, relevant thoughts from other sources, but what I noticed as I was reviewing the material is that John Paul II didn't approach it the way perhaps St. Thomas Aquinas would approach it in one step after another in a logical sequence. What I thought was happening, as I read it and reviewed the material, is that John Paul II, as a playwright, as a poet, and as an artist really, he approached it as you would approach a play, and if you can imagine different scenes and different acts within a play, you have the action, you ponder it, the curtain closes, you pause to think and reflect and take in, and then the curtain opens again. There is another scene, another act, another dimension of the whole story, and you're drawn into that for a moment and then it concludes, the curtain is drawn, you pause, the curtain opens again, and then you're there again. Altogether, with the total picture, like a play or like a symphony in different moments, you gather the whole from different aspects, from different moments, from different points of view, and I think that's what John Paul was doing when he reflected on God's love in the midst of suffering, and as people in the health care profession I think that's what we reflect on as well. We experience suffering in sickness; we are drawn to it; we are involved with it, and it's not something that makes us afraid, because we are part of it. It is part of our lives. So, John Paul II teaches us and gives us glasses with which to see, through which to see suffering through the eyes of God, through the eyes of Christ, which is also typical of the beautiful insight that he gives to us.

At this point, I'll just begin, because at one and the same time Christ has taught us to do good by the suffering that we experience and to do good to those who suffer. It's a double aspect that he completely reveals the meaning of suffering for us. Suffering is truly a supernatural thing and it's truly a human thing. It's supernatural because it's rooted in the divine mystery of the redemption of the world and it's deeply human because in it the human person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, and his own mission. That's a lot right there. That's kind of the summary statement of where John Paul II goes with this idea.

Let's look at it. Let's open the curtain and look at suffering as something that is a very deeply human reality. Suffering, as we know, changes us. We reflect on the suffering of the patients whom we serve. We reflect on the suffering that we

ourselves experience as human beings. Suffering changes us. Suffering passes - we know that it's a temporary thing. Let's say we get sick, or we go through financial difficulty, or we go through difficulty in marriage or in the family. The time of suffering is temporary, but that we have suffered will never pass, because it changes us. It leaves its mark; it leaves a mark for all of eternity. You can think of it this way. God holds in his hands a little silver tray, and the silver tray is filled with our life. Our life is a series of piles of sand - little piles of sand in the silver tray, and some of those piles of sand are the joyful times of life, the happiness, the laughter, the times of life that give spice and refreshment and vim and vigor to our lives. Those are the wonderful piles of sand that we like to remember. We take snapshots of them and we put them in our memory books, but there are other times of life that are filled with sorrow and tears and suffering, and those are parts of our lives too. We may be afraid of remembering them and we may not want to remember them, but that's part of our life.

So, what does God do with this little silver tray containing our life? He begins to sift it; He sifts it ever so gently; He sifts it until all the piles are just one level of sand, and those moments of suffering have been integrated into the whole of who we are. Those times of suffering are the times that change us; those are the times that have really changed the direction of our lives. They have made us deeper. They have gone in and taken root, and we all know that those are the times that transform us. That's the nature of it. Suffering has a power to it, and for that very reason suffering has a mystery to it, and you might even say it has a dignity to it, because through the experience of suffering it is something that opens our eyes to eternity. It opens our eyes, our minds and our hearts to the dignity of our humanity. It gives us a perspective and it reveals to us who we are. Joy, for all of its attractiveness, does not have the power to reveal to us who we are, but suffering tests us. Suffering opens the door to our true nature, if you will, and that is a deep form of suffering, but it's also a very deep grace.

You might think of it this way. There was a precious and beautiful day when God took each of us by the hand. He brought us into this life, into this world of family, of work - a life of laughter and tears, a life of many things - of accomplishing, of friendships. We build, we reproduce, we have families, and we have all manner of experiences, because God took us by the hand and brought us into this world of the living, this land of the living. But there is also a day when God takes us by the hand - it is really a precious and beautiful day - He takes us by the hand and He leads us into the land of suffering. We begin to lose the things that we cherished, the health that we have expected, family members. Maybe it's a gradual thing. We lose our hair, right? I've done that. And you say, "What happened to you, Father? I haven't seen you for five years. You look different." And I say, "Well, we all fill out. I don't know." We lose our hearing, right? We lose our eyesight, we lose our vim and vigor, we lose our shape, or perhaps it's unexpected and more hurtful than that. We experience some kind of abandonment or rejection. We experience some kind of failure. Maybe somebody fails us. Maybe we ourselves are tested and fall, but we realize and we experience

suffering in different ways. Somebody hits us on the highway. A loved one goes off to war and doesn't come back. Somebody that we love falls from cancer.

There are so many ways that we experience suffering. But God has us by the hand in this, and through this experience of suffering it is then that we learn to love; it is then that we learn to hope; it is only then that we learn to believe. How can we truly believe unless we are tested and we have nothing to hold onto but what is promised us and what is told to us. How can we learn to trust when we are so filled with security - things that make us secure. How can we truly trust and hope, and how can we truly love until that time when we have to love without feeling being loved back in return? Suffering produces something within us, so it isn't until God takes us by the hand and leads us into this land of suffering that He is able to take us by the hand and lead us into the land of love, into the land of true faith and hope and trust.

You see, suffering is a deeply human thing, and it's something that transforms us and changes us. What is it, after all? John Paul II notes that suffering is just a human response to an evil. There are privations; there are things that are taken away, losses that we face. One of the definitions of evil is the privation, the absence of some good that is supposed to be there, and suffering is really an appropriate human response to that privation. In that sense, it is also a good, because far better that we suffer in the face of a privation or in the face of an evil than that we be happy about it. It would be awful if we had been hit by a car and somebody comes up and starts laughing at us, you know? Far better that someone sheds tears over the pain that another person experiences. St. Peter says that it is better to suffer for doing good and be persecuted than to suffer in punishment for doing evil. So, it's an appropriate human response to the absence of a good, to a privation, but as deeply real for us as human beings as it is, suffering finds its greatest and deepest meaning as something that is supernatural. We can't really understand suffering without reference to God, because we are made in God's image and likeness, and in order to understand the experience of suffering, we must turn to God.

That's where John Paul tells us to behold the Cross of Jesus Christ, because Christ suffered deeply; He suffered greatly. When John Paul II looks at Jesus, he reflects that the mystery of the redemption of the world is in an amazing way rooted in suffering, and the suffering of Jesus finds in the mystery of the redemption its surest point of reference. So, redemption and suffering - they seem to go together. Look what Jesus did. He overcame sin by his obedience unto death; He overcame death by his Resurrection. In His suffering, Christ undid the ultimate privation - our eternal separation from God. Through His suffering, Christ accomplished the work of salvation, the redemption of the world. Think of it. Our redemption took place in the context of suffering, and that's what John Paul II is - you can just see him pondering the mystery of the cross. He is standing beneath the cross with Mary and with the beloved disciple, John, and he is simply witnessing this mystery, and he's accepting it, and he's pondering it, and the understanding of it comes gradually. You know, why is it that, as we stand beneath the cross with Mary and John and those disciples who remained, how is it that suffering redeems us? Why is it? And yet, it truly is.

Then we go. As the curtain closes and the curtain opens again, we realize that the next scene tells us in a deeper way who we are and who God is, in the midst of suffering - suffering and love. Christ satisfies God the Father's eternal love. Christ satisfies the Father's thirst for love. God so loved the world - He so loved you and I - He so loved mankind, that He sent his Son, Jesus, into the world, out of love for sinful man. God the Father thirsts for love; He thirsts for love for His creatures, for His children, and Christ satisfies the Father's thirst for love, because Christ has a burning love for us - for you and I. In faithfulness and fidelity to that love, He condescends to enter into our humanity, into a humanity that is wounded by suffering, into a humanity that is burdened by suffering, by sin, by death and by separation from God, and out of love Christ allows Himself to be deprived of good - in other words, to suffer - in order to restore us to friendship with God. What did God's love for mankind meet? God's love for man met rejection. God's love was rejected. God's Word was rejected, God's Son was rejected, God's love was rejected, and that made Christ suffer. Christ suffers the absence of love within every human heart, from every human sin. That's what made Christ suffer. He thirsted so much with God's love for mankind, and that love was rejected; it was not accepted, and that was the privation of good that made Christ suffer.

Then John Paul goes on to reflect that we suffer in many ways. We have very many different kinds of privations. We have physical privations - the lack of our health. We have mental, emotional, spiritual and relational privations. All of these experiences of goods that are not part of us that should be there, and through the absence of these goods we experience suffering. And out of His love for us, Christ makes it possible for us to share the sufferings that we experience. All of our sufferings we are able to share with Christ's, and because Christ's suffering was redemptive for the world, therefore through the suffering that we experience, when we share it with Christ, we share in the work of redemption. Let's say that again. We share our sufferings with the sufferings of Christ and, because Christ's suffering was redemptive, therefore the suffering that we experience, shared with Christ, is also part of the work of redemption. We are able to be co-redeemers with Christ, because Christ in His goodness and in His love for us gives us that dignity. In this way, all our human suffering touches the divine. Our human suffering becomes something supernatural, the privation that we experience, the lack of good that we experience, our human response to it in particular - our human response, our internal response to the lack of good, our suffering - it doesn't matter what it is. It doesn't matter the source; it doesn't matter the specific kind of it. The fact is, in our hearts we feel the absence of the good and we unite that experience of our hearts to that of Christ. We take this mystery of suffering and we simply hand it over to Christ, who places it within His heart and the mystery of His suffering, which is redemptive, makes our suffering co-redemptive with His.

Then we stand at the foot of the cross and we ponder this mystery, that in some way, because of God's generosity, our suffering is now placed in His heart and our suffering is part of that mystery of Christ's cross. So much does He love us that even suffering is

a way that draws us into the mystery of God; it is redemptive for us. That's how our suffering draws us to God, but what about the mystery of drawing us to one another. Let's close the curtain, let's pause, let's open it again and look at this mystery from still another point of view. How does suffering unite us to one another? Suffering, says John Paul II, enables man to unleash love, love reaching out to help a suffering person is called mercy. For a moment, think back to the last act, how God Himself is mercy. When we are merciful to someone else who is suffering, we are sharing in the life of God. We are doing what God would do, by looking at suffering not so much in our own hearts, but finding it in someone else's heart. What is our response? We are drawn to that person. Love is drawn out of us. The response of our heart, when we see suffering in another person, is to reach out to that person in love and mercy, in merciful love, in compassionate love, and the beautiful thing about it is this: It is that merciful love is not a one-way street.

This is classic John Paul the Great. Merciful love is never unilateral, because the one who gives mercy is always receiving mercy himself. In being merciful to another person, man is restored to his original dignity. We become more fully human, and man receives the gift of mercy from those to whom he is directing his acts of mercy. The giver and the receiver are united in a spirit of mutual brotherhood, and John Paul II says this - that unless the person who gives mercy to another realizes and understands that he is truly receiving mercy from the one that he gives mercy to (I split my infinitives, but that's the best I can do right then), then he said he cannot truly be acting in a merciful way.

How can we say this in another way? If I give, then I will truly receive. If I give, then it will be given back to me, poured into the chalice, running over. It will return to me. If I love my neighbor with a merciful love, then I will - oh, how about this? Okay. You know how the apostles gave. When they distributed the bread and the fish on the hillside, it came back to them - twelve baskets full, or seven baskets full, a basket for each of the apostles, a basket for each of the disciples who contributed to the distribution - it all came back to them. You see? If you are merciful, then someone will have mercy on you. That's the give and take of the gospel of the economy of salvation, and if I give - if I'm poured out - then I will be filled up. It's not until I'm poured out that I will be filled up. That's the supernatural mystery of it, but what it means is this - that I do not stand on a pedestal because I give love and mercy to the one who is suffering; rather, I am standing in the bread line myself. I am hoping to receive, and that's really the only way that I will receive, because the one to whom I give mercy is really the one who is having mercy on me. I **MUST** give mercy to others, if I hope to have mercy given to me. He is doing me a favor by my going to his bedside. That one on the operating table, that one in the sick room, that one in the hospital room is giving me my life. That one is placed there by God so that I can find my salvation, because unless I go to that room, unless I go to that patient, unless I reach out to him, I will be forever isolated; I will be forever alone. I cannot not go to that person. I must. Whoa be to me if I don't, because that is my path of salvation, that is my path of redemption, and that is my path of mercy.

Close the curtain, and now it opens - the last curtain, by the way. I need for meaning. We have many needs - physical, emotional, intellectual, relationship, spiritual, and as we said, we can suffer through privation in all of these areas - emotional, mental health - and we cannot remain insensitive or indifferent to the suffering caused by these evils. The greatest need in man is for meaning and purpose. We are made in God's image and we cannot fulfill our purpose without reference to God. When we experience suffering in ourselves or in others, we must know it is at that point, at that moment and through that suffering, that God is closest to us, for in His love God Himself suffers, and God seeks out to love those who suffer, and in experiencing suffering in our own lives and in responding to suffering in others, we learn to love, we discover ourselves, and we discover God. The curtain closes, the lights go on, and all withdraw. The end of the play; that's it.

So, take another look at that beautiful document by John Paul II and reflect on that, and I think that, as health care professionals, it is good for us to have a holy perspective on what we experience in our own hearts and what we experience in the lives of others and what we do as we approach it from that point of view of being fully human and also a divine mystery that is part of it. It is a much different perspective than seeing it strictly in medical terms or strictly in terms of the utilitarian part of our lives - you know, what we can do and what we can't do because of our suffering. It gives meaning to us; it gives meaning to those that we serve. It can't get better than that.