

Fr. Robert Altier – World Day of the Sick
February 11, 2018

So the topic I was asked to cover this morning is redemptive suffering. That may sound foreign to many because suffering, as Americans, is an evil that we recognize as something to be avoided at all cost. Well, even when it cannot be avoided, medical professionals, of course, are trained, and properly so, to strive to alleviate the sufferings of their patients. So, we can see then that, if suffering is considered an evil, it is something to be rejected, and so how can we talk about it as being something that's good?

Well, we have to start by asking a question. Is there a difference between the suffering of a person with no faith compared to the suffering of a Christian person? And the answer to that question actually depends upon the disposition of the Christian person. Without prayer and the light of faith, there ultimately is no difference between either of these two people. However, if the Christian person approaches his suffering with a proper disposition, then the suffering takes on an entirely new dimension, for the Christian person's suffering can actually have real meaning. Look back on your life, and even without faith you can think of some times that were particularly difficult and painful for you, and oftentimes these are things that we learn some of the most important lessons in life out of. We might not ever wish them on anybody else to happen, but we wouldn't trade them in either.

But, as I mentioned, one doesn't even have to be Christian to be able to see that some good can come from suffering. We can have new insights into our own self. We can find out, for instance, who our real friends are, because the fair weather friends are going to abandon us rather quickly. We can begin to really learn what is truly important in life, as opposed to some of the things that we used to think are important and now we've realized through the suffering they really aren't.

So, suffering can be a school of profound learning about one's own self, as well as about the human condition in general. But now we have to ask a deeper question. What if your suffering can be good for someone else? Imagine suffering having a value beyond all of those lessons that we just mentioned that we can learn through our difficulties? Imagine your suffering bringing about the redemption and the salvation of other people. Imagine people converting from a bad way of life to a holy way of life because you suffered for them. Our faith is based on the fact that that's exactly what Jesus did for us. We cannot save ourselves. We are not responsible for our own conversion to Christ, and we are not able even to redeem our own souls. All of this was done for us. While it certainly is true that we had to cooperate with the grace that God offered to us, our cooperation in this way is actually the only thing that we can say that we did in the process of conversion, redemption, and the salvation of our own souls. But thanks be to God for His Son, Jesus Christ, Who knew no sin but became sin for us, Who took our sins and nailed them to the Cross, Who was innocent but suffered for the guilty, Who died so that we could live.

Now, we can all understand this to some degree, because after all, of course, Jesus is God, and we needed an Infinite Person to be able to take away the infinite effects of our sins. So, He

became one of us, so that human sins could be washed away in human blood and the fullness of our person could be saved by the death of His person. In other words, his suffering could be applied to us because He is God, but also because He took to Himself, or participated in, our human nature. So, now we come then to ourselves. We who have been redeemed and saved by the suffering and death of the Cross of the Son of God and the Son of Mary, have also had something happen to us. There is a change. On the day that you were baptized, you became a member of Jesus Christ. As a member of the Son of God, you have become a son or a daughter of God yourself, and as a child of God then you have been given a share in the divine nature and in divine life.

So, if Jesus could redeem us because He is a Divine Person, with both a divine and a human nature, so also then you can participate in His work of redemption because, as a baptized person, that means that you, a human person with a human nature, also now have been given a participation in the divine nature. St. Peter tells us that we have become partakers of the divine nature. This means that, as Jesus being God was able then to act in a human manner because He took a human nature to Himself, so you, as a human person, are now able to act in a divine manner because you participate in the divine nature. More importantly for our considerations, it means that you are able to participate in the work of Jesus by offering your suffering for the conversion, the redemption, and the salvation of others.

Let me first quote St. Paul's letter to the Colossians to be able to understand this before going deeper into it. In the 24th verse of the 1st chapter of Colossians, St. Paul says, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His Body, that is, the Church." So, did St. Paul really say that there was something lacking in the suffering of Jesus? Well, that's what he said. So, does that mean that we're really not saved or that somehow there is something lacking in our salvation? No. St. Paul did say that there was indeed something lacking in the suffering of Christ, but there is nothing lacking in our salvation. The reason is because, when we consider the suffering of Jesus for the salvation of the human race, we have to consider the suffering of the entire person of Jesus, that is, both the historical person of Christ and the mystical person of Christ. He is the Head; we are the members. It is the suffering of both – the whole Christ – that constitutes the fullness of His suffering. Therefore, in His Passion, Jesus took on everything necessary for salvation, with the exception of the suffering that would be accepted and offered in love by all of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ throughout the history of the Church. He knew exactly how much we were all combined willing to take on and He accepted everything else, which means we probably do about 1% and He did 99%, but nonetheless ... and by that 1%, I mean all of us combined and not just any one of us.

Anyway, while His suffering was certainly sufficient to save every person who ever had or ever would live, in His mercy – and we have to understand it that way – in His mercy, He allows the work of redemption to continue through us, because people today continue to have a need to be converted, to be redeemed, and to be saved. All of us know people in situations that need prayer. While we certainly could look back and say, "Oh, Jesus did it all for you," it would not have nearly the meaning to us as it will if we actively participate in the prayers and the suffering that are required to bring about salvation. We see this in St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews, where he says that Jesus suffered once for all; in fact, he says that four times in that letter, and

we have to understand what exactly he is saying, because it oftentimes gets misunderstood. Most people read that and they say, “Oh, Jesus suffered once for all people.” That’s not what St. Paul is saying. Jesus suffered once for all time. That’s what we need to understand. So, His sacrifice will endure until the end of time.

That said, then we must understand that now Jesus is not suffering. He is not suffering in heaven, and He does not suffer in the Eucharist, which is the continuation of His sacrifice. So, if His sacrifice is going to continue, the suffering has to continue somehow because suffering and sacrifice cannot be separated. So, at Mass Jesus is not being sacrificed again; He is being sacrificed still. It is a continuation. It is the exact same sacrifice that is being continued and has been continued for 2000 years. But since His sacrifice is now being offered mystically, the suffering then is offered through the Mystical Body. It is a mystical sacrifice in the Eucharist. It was a physical sacrifice on the Cross, and now at Mass it is a mystical sacrifice; therefore, the suffering that is united to the sacrifice is offered through the Mystical Body of Christ.

So, Our Lord clearly identifies Himself with His Mystical Body. Remember when, at the conversion of St. Paul, Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Jesus was already in heaven. Saul was persecuting the Church, rounding up all the believers to put them into prison. He wasn’t persecuting Jesus per se; he was persecuting the Mystical Christ. Jesus clearly made Himself one. Again, He tells us Himself in the Gospel, “Whatever you do for the least of My brothers, you do for Me.” So, it is for Him when we do for whomever, the least of our brothers or sisters.

So, if Jesus identifies Himself with His Mystical Body, then the sufferings of the Mystical Body must also be identified with Christ. Indeed, as we have seen, anyone who is baptized has been raised to a supernatural level of acting and being and, if that’s the case, then we as children of God can act in a divine manner as children of God. So that means that our suffering becomes His. What appears then to be worthless at best and evil at worst – that is, human suffering – takes on a new meaning, with a depth and a breadth that has no limits, because it becomes His. It therefore can be infinite, so that again it becomes His suffering. So, for this suffering to become divine, it must be born out of love and it must be offered to the Lord. Again, go back, as I said, without the right disposition, the suffering of a Christian person and the suffering of a pagan – there’s no difference. It’s just human suffering; it’s not Christian suffering.

So, we’ve all been taught over the years – our moms all taught us – “offer it up.” That’s great advice. How many of us actually do it? That’s the issue. And so, we also all know that when there is a purpose for something, that purpose makes things seem easier. You’ve got a reason for doing something, and so if something is done out of love, no matter how difficult it is, that love makes it not only doable, but it makes it easy.

Young lovers can understand that. I mean, it’s amazing to see what young people are willing to do to try and impress the other one, and they don’t see this at all as a problem. Ask them to do the same thing for their brother or sister. Oh, no, it would be way too difficult, but you know they’re willing to do that for somebody else though. When you look at what parents are willing to do for their children, it’s the same thing. They are willing to lay out everything and they don’t count the cost, because they love that child so much they don’t see it as a burden. So, we

then can offer up our sufferings to Jesus and Mary, and we can do it for them and we can do it with them. We can give them to Jesus and Mary to do with whatever they want, or we can offer it specifically for some particular purpose or an individual. We all know people who need prayers. You can say, "Lord, I'll give you this for Joe Blow," or you can just say, "Blessed Mother, I'll give you this and you know who needs it the most. Give it to whomever you want."

So, what's great about this, especially for those of you who are the health care workers, is that you can also help your patients to do the same thing, although I was just assigned as the chaplain, I guess, at North Memorial, and I was rather horrified. I went in there to learn their computer system and they no longer call them patients; they call them customers. It's like, "What?" But that's literally what they're calling them, so if you go to North Memorial Hospital you are a customer. Isn't that nice to know? Anyway, that's beside the point. If you need to be anointed, I'm happy with that, but you won't be a customer because I won't charge you. Anyway, that's beside the point. The hospital unfortunately will, but ...

So, anyway, I was saying what's great about this is you can help your patients to do the same thing. Once you can understand the value of suffering and how to make something good out of it and have a purpose for it, now you can help other people to do the same. And since the professionals here are working with people who obviously have some problems or they wouldn't be coming to you in the first place, you can help them to look beyond themselves. Archbishop Fulton Sheen always counseled to never waste suffering, and I realize that, of course, it's part of your job to alleviate the suffering of your patients, but even with the pain being managed, being in a hospital or having chronic illness, or even for some people just going to a doctor's office, can be a real suffering.

And beyond the medical issues, there are family problems, relational difficulties, rejections, misunderstandings, past traumas, psychological and emotional difficulties – you name it . We all have a variety of sufferings in our lives, and many of you know that for a lot of the people that come to see you, beyond what they might need medically, what they really need is somebody to listen to them, so that they can talk to somebody about what is on their heart – the suffering that is in their lives. So again, we all have that opportunity to be able to point people beyond ourselves to the Lord. So, when you're working with those who are struggling then, you can actually help these people, not just medically, but spiritually, emotionally, and so on. And as they do this, that is, as they are willing to offer themselves, they will also then be meriting a great deal of grace for their charity. God will never be outdone in generosity, so if they are willing to offer their sufferings God is going to bless them abundantly.

So, you might know a person or a situation, as I mentioned earlier, that you can ask somebody to pray for, or you can ask them if they know anybody who needs prayers or any particular thing that they could offer their suffering for. What intentions do they have? So, there again, we live in a world that is a mess right now. There are lots of things that need some suffering. So prayer united with penance is exceedingly powerful, and that's exactly what we can do. So, not only then do we not want to waste these sufferings, but we actually want to make the most of them. So, learning the lessons for oneself is certainly good, but love for God and love for neighbor is of far greater value than learning the lessons that we might learn from the suffering.

Uniting our suffering with the suffering of Jesus is something that has kind of been forgotten by many people these days. We all have sufferings of various kinds in our lives, and as health care professionals you are working every day with people who are suffering. All of us – every one of us – are called to take up our Cross to follow Jesus, so our example in that can inspire others as we encourage them to find meaning and fulfillment where the world has completely vacated those things. The world doesn't find meaning or fulfillment in suffering. Only a Christian person can, and this can only be done then with faith, with charity, and with prayer. Uniting ourselves with the suffering of Christ for the good of others and sharing in the ongoing work of conversion, redemption, and the salvation of souls is the privilege that God is giving to each one of us.

So, in conclusion, there are just a few points that follow from what has been said about this approach to suffering that I would like all of us to take to heart. First, understand this is a truly Christian approach to suffering. Only Christians have an ability to make meaning out of suffering, to bring good out of that evil, because other religions don't recognize that. Only Christians can, because only we can look to the Cross and see what God has done with suffering. So, this is not only a Christian approach, it is the only truly Christian approach to suffering. Secondly, this approach not only gives meaning to our suffering, but it provides motive or purpose. So, it's one thing to have a meaning to something, but to have a motive for why we're doing it - again, that's what helps us to be able to overcome our own self and be able to do this for another purpose. Third, it allows us to act in accordance with our dignity as Christian persons, to understand that this is not a violation of our dignity, it's a fulfillment of our dignity. To be able to accept and unite ourselves with Jesus and to be raised up and act in a divine manner – that is the fullness of our dignity, not just as persons made in the image of God, but as persons baptized into Jesus, raised to a divine level, and being sons and daughters of God, so that we can act in that divine manner. Fourth, suffering born out of love and united with the suffering of Jesus becomes sacrifice. It's the sacrifice of Jesus that brings about our salvation, but understand the word "sacrifice" comes from two Latin words, "sacer facere," and that means to make holy. It is making suffering holy. That's what this is doing. It is also making the person holy; it's to make you a saint. That's what Jesus is trying to do. So, the Christian life, then, has as its end and its purpose to be conformed to Jesus Christ, to be united with Jesus Christ. So, truly Christian suffering, then, is Christlike because it is divine. It's being done out of love for God and neighbor, it continues the suffering and sacrifice of Our Lord, and it contributes to and gives us a participation in the work of redemption and the salvation of souls.

So, Christian suffering, then, is not merely the suffering of a Christian person. It is a participation in the suffering of Christ, and therefore it truly is redemptive suffering.