

## **The Mystery of Human Suffering**

*By Michelle Bauman \**

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” (Mt. 16:24)

Last August, Hurricane Katrina raged through New Orleans, bringing despair and desolation to thousands. Now, six months later, the city is still struggling to rebuild. This hurricane season has been one of the worst in history, with 27 named storms, including the devastating Hurricanes Katrina, Dennis, Rita, and Wilma. Experts are already predicting that next year will bring another record-setting hurricane season. Other deadly natural disasters in the past few years include dozens of horrific earthquakes and a huge, deadly tsunami that killed thousands in Southeast Asia in late 2004. Looking at all the destruction and despair caused by these tragedies leads one to wonder how God could possibly permit such terrible things to happen. If He really loves us, why does He allow us to suffer so greatly? Why do these people have to suffer? What did they do?

One of the great paradoxes of our faith is that God allows us to suffer because of His love for us, not in spite of it. In Biblical times, suffering was thought to be directly related to one's actions. If someone was wealthy, it was a reward for his righteousness, but if someone suffered, it was a punishment for his evil deeds. The story of Job tells us that this idea is not true. Job was an upright man who suffered greatly, and according to the book of Job, he did not deserve to suffer. Suffering is not a punishment that each person receives in direct proportion to his own sins; but rather, it is a result of original sin, something that affects all of humanity without exception.

In His merciful love, God allows this unpleasant part of life, inevitable after Man's fall, to bring about a greater good. He uses suffering as a tool to bring us closer to His love. We often forget that there is great value in suffering. It strengthens us and purifies us. It makes us realize our place in the universe, and shows us our dependency on God, and how helpless we really are on our own. It reminds us of God and draws us closer to Him. The sad truth is that we often turn to God only when we are in need of something. We ask Him for help in times of trial and pain, but forget about Him when life is good. If there was no suffering in life to bring us back to God, we would drift farther and farther from His loving presence.

Suffering often seems to be distributed unevenly - some suffer greatly, almost unbearably, while others seem to lead lives almost entirely free of all suffering. But suffering is part of the universal human experience, something we all experience in some form. We don't know why God chooses to allow some people to suffer in certain ways, but we do know that He will never put us up against something we cannot handle. God will give us the grace and strength to overcome whatever trials He sets before us, and if we rely on His love, we will succeed.

In the New Testament, we can see Christ transforming suffering. It is through His suffering and death that we are saved from sin and death, and by His suffering, He sanctifies and transforms suffering into something holy. Suffering becomes no longer something to be dreaded, but something to be embraced, something that can heal and purify us. We can join our sufferings to Christ's and help participate in His saving work. Many of the saints understood this, and it helped them overcome indescribable obstacles and trials. Towards the end of her life, St. Therese of Lisieux's desire to suffer for Christ became so strong that she described it by saying, “I have come to the point where I cannot suffer, because all suffering has become sweet to me.”

As Catholics, we too should try to welcome the suffering in our own lives. This does not mean that we should be masochists, seeking pain for its own sake, but rather, that we should embrace the crosses that God gives us to carry, seeing suffering as a gift rather than a burden, an opportunity rather than an obligation. We should see suffering as a way to help us on the road to heaven and a chance to follow

Christ, as we are reminded by St. Peter, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps." (1 Pt. 2:21)

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