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The Sacrament of Suffering

Jesus glorified the Father on behalf of the whole human race. By His life, death and resurrection, He offered to the Father the adoration, the obedience, the trust, the praise and thanksgiving, and the glory which are due to Him from the whole creation.

But what Jesus did on our behalf, He now communicates to us. He empowers us to glorify the Father in Him so that the glory He gave to the Father is now ours. In this way, we can give the Father the glory we owe Him, and in us, the glory due to God is completed. Each of us must ratify what Jesus did and make it our own, by ourselves adoring, obeying, praising and thanking the Father in union with Jesus. By the grace of Jesus, we have to enter into our Savior's attitudes and sentiments and make them our own. Only thus is the glory due to the Father completed.

In a special way, all of this is true of Jesus in His sufferings. Jesus suffered on behalf of every suffering person in the human race, everyone who ever has suffered, everyone who is suffering now, and everyone who ever will suffer. In His suffering, Jesus offered not only His personal suffering, but also all the suffering of the whole human race for the Father's glory. Thus He gave a redemptive value to all human suffering.

When He Himself was faced with His cruel sufferings, He accepted them, saying *"Father, glorify thy name!" (Jn 12:28)* In enduring His sufferings to the bitter end, He said, *"Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit." (Lk 23:46)* He glorified the Father by trusting Him and entrusting Himself to Him.

By His suffering with us and for us, Jesus empowers every sufferer to say with Him in accepting sufferings, *"Father, glorify your name," (Jn 12:28)* and in enduring them to the end, *"Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit." (Lk 23:46)*

Because Jesus accepted as His own the sufferings of us all, and offered them to the Father in His personal suffering, a special grace is contained in all human suffering.

Pope John Paul II writes, "In suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly to Christ, a special grace. To this grace, many saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and others, owe their profound conversion." (Salvific Doloris, 1984, #26)

All suffering thus contains an offer of God's grace. **In all human suffering, the power of Christ is concealed.** Pope John Paul II explains this presence of Christ in human suffering saying, "It is He Himself who acts at the heart of human suffering through His spirit of truth, through the consoling Spirit… and Christ through His own salvific sufferings is very much present in every human suffering, and can act from within that suffering by the powers of His Spirit of truth, His consoling Spirit." (#26, p. 31, 32) Is this not because Christ has taken to Himself all suffering as His own to give it value? He has a right to be present in this way in all our troubles, for He has suffered His passion for us.

By this power of the suffering Christ present in human suffering, this grace concealed in suffering, Jesus "draws a person interiorly close to Himself…. It is He who transforms in a certain sense the very substance of the spiritual life, indicating for the person who suffers a

place close to Himself." (26, 2, 3) Thus He makes of the suffering one "a completely new person." (#26, 2)

In suffering, a person becomes his or her true self as son or daughter of God in Christ, *"heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him." (Rom 8:17)* **In suffering, a person achieves his or her true nobility and spiritual greatness.**

All this requires "cooperation with the grace of the crucified Redeemer." (#26, 3) One must respond to the grace offered in every suffering.

Hence the call of Jesus Christ, "Follow me! Come; take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world." (#26, 6) *"Whoever does not take up his cross is not worthy of me." (Matt 10:38)*

It is only in suffering with Christ that one experiences the answer to the question, "Why?" which people typically cry out from the midst of their sufferings. In answer, Jesus does not give a long theological explanation of the meaning of suffering. He simply says, *"Follow me!" (Lk 9:59)* The answer to the question is experienced, appreciated, and understood only through actual suffering in union with Christ.

The Sacrament of Suffering

Because Christ, "through His own salvific sufferings, is very much present in every human suffering, and can act from within that suffering by the power of His Spirit of truth, His consoling Spirit," we can say that sufferings are almost like a sacrament. They are a sign of the presence of the suffering Christ, and contain an offer of His redeeming grace. "It is He Himself who acts at the heart of human suffering."

When a suffering person cooperates with this grace and accepts suffering with Christ, by His power concealed in the suffering Jesus draws that person interiorly to Himself; He unites that person's suffering with His own.

This suffering with Christ, in turn, becomes like a sacrament of grace for others, for Christ's power and grace flows forth from the suffering person to others. *"Death is at work in us, life in you!" (2 Cor 4:12)*

Pope John Paul II speaks of these things, saying, "The Church sees in all Christ's suffering brothers and sisters, as it were, a multiple subject of His supernatural power, "a presence of the redeeming Christ who suffers in them!" In other words, His redeeming and sanctifying power is present and active in these suffering ones, and flows from them to others, for Christ suffers in them, making their sufferings His own, communicating to them His redeeming power! "The springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human weakness. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle of the infinite treasure of the world's redemption, and can share this treasure with others." (#27, 2)

Isn't this why the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians? "The Church feels the need to have recourse to the value of human suffering for the salvation of the world." In the horrible human misery of our times, will not the presence of Christ in so many suffering hearts win a marvelous outpouring of divine mercy on the world? **The redeeming Cross of Christ must be made present to the world today in the sufferings of those who suffer with Christ.**

"It is precisely to them [Christ's suffering brothers and sisters] that the pastors of the Church appeal, and precisely from them that they seek help and support!" (#27, 2)

"Suffering, more than anything else makes present in the history of humanity the powers of the redemption." (#27, 1)

Can we not say, then, that suffering with Christ is like a sacrament, a source of grace for others? Let us repeat the words of Pope John Paul II: "Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle of the infinite treasure of the world's redemption, and can share this treasure with others." (#27, 2) "The suffering person *'completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.' (Col 1:24)* He or she is serving, like Christ, the salvation of his or her brothers and sisters." Suffering more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity the powers of the redemption." (#27, 1)

That is why suffering with Christ is like a sacrament. It brings Christ's grace to others.

For those who have not yet lovingly united their sufferings to those of Christ, sufferings that come into their lives are like a sacramental, that is, a sign pointing to the suffering Christ, a reminder that He suffered for us and calls us to unite our sufferings to His. Thus our sufferings contain an offer of grace of suffering with Him. Each suffering alerts us to the redeeming presence and power of Christ in human sufferings. Let us hear again the words of John Paul II on this: "Christ, through His own salvific sufferings, is very much present in every human suffering…. **In suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly to Christ, a special grace."** (#26)

That is why suffering is like a sacramental, a sign pointing to the suffering Christ and offering a grace to suffer with Him. Suffering is like a call to us from Christ, saying, *"Follow me! (Lk 9: 59)* Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering, through my Cross." (#26, 6)

"The divine Redeemer wishes to penetrate the soul of every sufferer through the heart of His holy Mother." (#26, 4, p. 32) Upon her, who shared in His sufferings on the Cross, Jesus has conferred a spiritual motherhood, a universal motherhood, toward all human beings, so that every individual, during the pilgrimage of faith, might remain together with her closely united to Him unto the Cross, and so that every form of suffering, given fresh life by the power of His Cross, should become, no longer the weakness of man, but the power of God." (#26, 4, p. 32) **This is the power of Christ which is concealed in all human suffering, to transform it from an evil into a blessing!**

This echoes words of St. Paul. When he was begging for relief from certain sufferings, the Lord said to St. Paul, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12: 9)* Paul therefore says, *"I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (ibid)*

Paul adds, a little later, *"Christ was crucified out of weakness, but lives by the power of God." (2 Cor 13:4)*

Pope John Paul II writes in his letter, "The weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's Cross." (#23, 2) In the last two sentences of his letter, Pope John Paul II appeals to all who suffer: "We ask you who are weak to become a source of strength for the Church and for humanity. In the terrible battle between the forces of good and evil revealed to our eyes by our modern world, may your suffering in union with the Cross of Christ be victorious!" (#31, 8)