

ACCEPTANCE OF SUFFERINGS

From the book 'The Great Redeemer'
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THE name of St. John Chrysostom, the most eminent orator in the history of the Catholic Church, is surely well known to you. This saintly bishop was great when he preached, great when he wrote, great when he ruled over his followers as bishop. But do you know when he was greatest of all? When he suffered.

By the unsearchable will of divine Providence, he received an exceedingly great measure of suffering. Empress Eudoxia, whose vanity he had offended, sent him into exile; and the world-famous aged bishop had to walk on foot in the most terrible heat through Bithynia, Persia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia, the whole long way to Cucusus. On the entire journey he was irregularly nourished and was tormented by headache, by a disorder of the stomach, and by fever. We can scarcely imagine how he must have suffered during the seventy days of that journey on foot, until he arrived at his place of exile.

Yet here a further trial awaited him. He found himself in a wretched mountain citadel, where he suffered untold misery from the winter cold. Later on robbers attacked the fort, and the inhabitants, in making their escape, dragged him with them to Arabissus. Thence a new imperial command ordered him still farther away, to a remote and desolate place, Pithyus lying at the foot of the Caucasus, on the northeast end of the Black Sea. Again a bitterly hard journey on foot was made with an escort of merciless soldiers. The burning sun caused the aged bishop torturing headache; in vain he asked to be allowed to rest a little in the shade. His body, weakened by fever, was drenched to the skin in pouring rain. But the soldiers drove him on without halting.

Then he knew the object they had in view. With unsurpassed heroism he dragged himself forward day by day, week by week. At last he could go no farther. He collapsed on the highway, his pulse became intermittent, his breath came in gasps. He was carried into a house. After a few weak breaths, he opened his eyes once more, lifted them to heaven, and spoke again, for the last time. These were his last words — and for their sake I have recounted the whole occurrence — "God be praised for everything." With these words, he died.

Let us picture the scene. Christianity's greatest orator, its illustrious bishop, its ecclesiastical writer, is exiled to a great distance in a foreign land because of his courageous defense of Christian morals. When, after months and years of cruel suffering, there among his enemies on a remote highway, forsaken by everyone, he collapses, these are his last words: "God be praised for everything." How far we are from that truly Christian frame of mind! We have not that holy conviction which sees, behind all the trouble and suffering which falls so heavily upon us, the face of the heavenly Father who loves us and enables us to say the words worthy of a Christian: "God be praised for everything."

Let us now turn our attention to the following questions: In what frame of mind should we accept suffering, and how can we acquire this frame of mind?

I

OUR FRAME OF MIND

A) Undoubtedly suffering is one of the most difficult problems of our earthly existence. Since the gates of Paradise closed behind sinful man, we have walked the thorny highway of suffering and have carried the heavy yoke which is upon the children of Adam.

a) No age, no sex, no position or power, no social class, is able to close its doors to suffering. It has access to poverty-stricken huts, and it steals its way into marble palaces. It is at home with primitive peoples, and it cannot be driven out by the most highly developed technology or culture.

From the lips of millions of groaning, weeping, struggling people comes the cry: Suffering, what do you want? Why do you not leave us in peace, us poor struggling human beings? There will always be suffering on this earth. However knowledge and technology progress, however we strive to make life more bearable by social measures, we shall always have with us trouble, illness, disaster, and death. And we, who bear the cross of earthly life, will always need the divine example of the great Cross-bearer.

b) A German proverb admonishes sufferers thus: "If you cannot avoid suffering, at least do not trouble about it." Yes, indeed. But try; and see whether this advice will succeed. Even if it does succeed, is this a reply worthy of man to our thousand and one tormenting griefs? In this way the question of suffering would remain forever unsolved, as it is an insoluble problem for all those who possess no Christ. But for those who possess Him, the life of Christ — a life in which suffering became of central significance — is reply and guide in the great labyrinths of suffering.

B) We have now arrived at the great question: What is the correct Christian behavior in face of suffering? We find the answer in the case of Simon of Cyrene.

a) Simon of Cyrene, a simple workingman, comes unsuspectingly along the road on his way home from the fields. Christ, condemned to death, comes toward him, bearing the cross. But He is able to carry it no farther. The soldiers call to Simon: "Help Him." Simon tries to escape from the cross. He protests. It is of no avail: they force him. Then what else can he do: he accepts the cross. When the cross is already do his shoulders, he protests no more, but carries it willingly, without complaining. He did not seek the cross: but when, during his daily work, he found himself confronted with it, he did not throw aside the burden forced upon him.

Do we need to seek suffering? No. Are we allowed to escape from suffering? May we avoid it, draw back from it? We may. But if the Lord God still sees fit to let affliction overtake us, then we must not rebel against it.

Consolation and instruction lie hidden for us in Simon's history. In God's sight it is meritorious for us to bear the affliction which we ourselves have not sought or welcomed, but which — even against our will — is brought upon us by illness and the various disturbing influences in human life. With resignation to God's will, let us accept what we cannot avoid.

We may note, in passing, that bodily recovery from disease is helped by this calm attitude. Today we see more and more plainly that the soul has a much greater influence over the body than was surmised in former times. The more docile the soul is toward God, the more docile is the body toward the soul.

It is no small consolation for us, that God recognizes as meritorious not only the heroic degree of sacrifice, suffering voluntarily undertaken, but also the sacrifices forced upon us by everyday life. Perhaps no one among us could imitate the Apostle St. Andrew, who did not try to escape the cross, but at his execution opened wide his arms and cried out: "O blessed cross, thou wast adorned with the body of Christ. O cross, for which I have yearned so long, which I love so eagerly, which I have sought ceaselessly, and for which my yearning soul is at last prepared." Who could imitate this? Or who would dare to say with St. Teresa: "Either to suffer, or to die"?

Such superhuman heroism really exists. But I am weak. I am frail. I draw back from suffering, as Simon of Cyrene did. Yet I can also be courageous, suffering can also bring merit to me, if I follow Christ's example. How well our Lord knew us, when He willed to suffer in this way! At first He, too, was afraid, and trembled: "He began to fear and to be heavy" (Mark 14: 33); in His fear He sweated blood and cried out: "My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from Me" (Matt. 26:39). "Let this chalice pass from Me." Then the Lord surely thought of us, of all of us, who are accustomed to say: "No, no, Lord, not this calamity. Spare me this."

We are permitted to ask God: "Let this chalice pass from me." If, however, the blow falls upon us, let us be able to bow our heads, kiss God's hand, and say: "Nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt (Matt. 26: 39); Thy will be done."

b) The scene of Simon carrying the cross is usually immortalized in works of art by representing Christ and Simon carrying the cross together. However, in the Passion Play at Oberammergau, Simon carries it alone.

Both ways of bearing the cross enter into our lives. Sometimes we feel that we are carrying life's cross together with Christ, and then we bear it happily and easily, because we know, we feel, that Christ is helping us, that half of the cross

presses upon His shoulder. Sometimes, however, dark night falls upon us, when it seems that Christ has left the cross entirely upon our shoulders; it almost crushes us on the starless pathway of grief. This is the most tormenting hour: when we bear the cross and do not feel its meritorious power.

c) "Yes, yes," you say, "Simon carried the cross gladly because, by doing so, he helped Christ in His suffering. I would also bear my troubles more happily if I knew that I was in this way soothing Christ's pain. But Christ is no longer here in this earthly life. He can suffer no longer. He shed tears at one time, but today in His heavenly glory He can no longer weep. How can it be for His consolation, what is it worth to Him, if today I accept suffering?"

What is it worth? It is worth just as much as if you had stood beside Simon and helped him carry the cross. Christ's sufferings were caused not only by the sins that men committed before His time; but He saw beforehand all the sins of coming generations. All these sins were there upon His shoulders; our sins were also there. In the same way Christ saw all our future self-discipline, our renunciations, and our sufferings borne in His name, and all this served as consolation and strength for Him. St. Paul describes Christ, in the realm of heaven, as showing in God's presence the wounds He took upon Himself to obtain the pardon of our sins. Certainly He kept not only the wounds but also the consolations, in which — because of His all-knowing foresight — He participated and which He received from us.

Therefore whoever bears his cross silently, without complaint, with generosity, truly lightens the burden of Christ's cross. And this is the very finest Christian way of thinking, this is true Christian behavior, this is a profound Christian frame of mind in face of the torturing problem of suffering:

We bear our own cross, that by so doing Christ's cross may be lighter.

II

HOW TO GAIN THIS FRAME OF MIND

We now come to the great question: How can we succeed in struggling up to such life-giving heights? Whence can we gain this frame of mind?

A) From nowhere except from the sacred cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. A few years ago a touching sketch was exhibited in Paris. In it the Basque artist, Maxime Real del Sarte, shows our Lord Jesus with the cross on His shoulder. The Savior is not faint, weary, harassed, as He is so often depicted, but carries His cross with head erect, with triumph; the arms of the cross seem to reach to the horizon. Behind the powerful figure of Christ carrying His cross so victoriously, in the shadow of the cross embracing the earth, an incalculable multitude advances, and each one offers his shoulder that he may help to ease the great Sufferer. Women and men, old people and young, children, priests and laymen, workers, soldiers, little girls, nuns: all offer their strong or feeble shoulders to Christ. And all — Christ and people, with one and the same courage, with one and the same confidence, with one and the same spirit — go toward Golgotha, toward the sacrifice.

What a magnificent, artistic representation of the thought we are now considering! That the heaviest trouble is not suffering, but the soul crushed by suffering; the blackest grief is not affliction, but the soul blinded in the darkness of affliction. To suffer has always been man's lot, and it remains so: not to perish or collapse under it, but on the contrary to use suffering as a ladder by which to attain spiritual heights, can be taught us only by Christ's cross.

Christ did not flee from suffering; He overcame it. He loved His cross with the flaming love of one who knows that from His whole gospel the cross will speak most eloquently to mankind. He was poor, but His poverty He overcame with a joyful soul. He fasted, but His fast was a sacrifice He voluntarily took upon Himself. He received wounds, but His wounds were the symbols of love. He carried a cross, but His Calvary was a *via triumphalis*. He died, but His death was a victory over death.

The words of a French poet come from the heart of universal experience:

Come to the God who also weeps, all you that weep in life.

All you that suffer, come to Him; for He knows suffering too.

All you that suffer, come to Him; and see Him smile on you.

You that are mortals, come to Him, who is eternal life.

B) Thus we understand why those are so strong who can cling to Christ in days of affliction. Of them St. Paul might say what he wrote of the heroes of the faith: "Others had trial of mockeries and stripes, moreover also of bands and prisons. They were stoned, they were cut asunder, they were tempted, . . . of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. II : 36-38).

a) They are strong, for to them Christ is an anchor, Christ is a rock, Christ is a chain, Christ is a pillar. Perhaps they tremble, strain, groan, and wail, but it is all the same: the anchor holds fast, the rock does not crack, the chain does not break, the pillar does not fall.

They are strong, for through Christ man has received a matchless privilege; that of being able to say in the face of suffering: I take it upon myself. Other living beings only endure, only gnash their teeth, only groan under it; the Christlike man can accept it. Since Christ's time we have been able to say what the famous General Radetzky wrote so beautifully in one of his letters: "What God wills, is my law."

The thought which Goethe expressed is valid not only for the race but also for the life of the individual: "The special, single, and most profound subject of universal and human history, to which all else is subordinate, is the clash between unbelief and belief. Every era in which faith dominates . . . is brilliant, uplifting, and productive for its contemporaries and for future generations" (Goethe, *Israel in der Wüste*, IV, 313). Truly, faith is capital which a man deposits in a savings bank; if rainy days come, he lives upon the interest.

b) "I believe in one God." How often we make this beautiful profession of faith! But to know and to acknowledge God wherever and however He manifests Himself — in the starless night as well as in the rays of the sun, in affliction as well as in happiness, in sickness as well as in health — this is a genuinely Christian conception of life.

Perhaps you say: "Well, I would be glad to bear suffering, if really God sent it to me; when I have to suffer so much because of man, because of wicked people, that is different. A woman lives next door who says everything bad about me; my husband's stubbornness; my wife's many whims; I have been cruelly deprived of my little fortune"; and so on.

Truly bitter complaints. But our blessed Lord taught that even in all these afflictions we must perceive God's plan, God's holy intention; we must perceive this, just as Christ perceived it. Who took Him captive on that Holy Thursday night? Wicked men. What did our Lord say when Peter impulsively drew his sword? "Put up thy sword into the scabbard. The chalice which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18: 11.)

Where shall we gain this strong spirit, which is able to face suffering, mankind's most torturing problem? In the school of Christ, of Christ who bore His cross triumphantly for our sakes.

If I believe in God, then I also trust in God. A blind person trusts himself to a little child's guiding hand, a sick person trusts himself to the doctor's knowledge; so I trust myself to the love of almighty God. For I know that He who directs the course of the clouds and the winds will also show me the path; and I know that heaven and earth will sooner be destroyed, than that anyone will be disappointed who trusts himself to God.

"As in the immeasurably many waters of the seas there is no drop which is not bitter, so there is no one among men in whom fear and pain are not to be found" (Pazmany). One struggles despairingly for his daily bread, another watches beside a sickbed or he himself struggles with illness, a third lives an unhappy family life, a fourth comes from the cemetery, from beside a newly sodded grave. All carry life's cross. At such times it is good to look up to the great Cross-bearer. It is good to know that our Lord trod the path of suffering before us.

In the Jesuit church at Landsberg an instructive picture is to be seen. St. Francis Xavier stands in the picture, while crosses fall from heaven upon him, but so many that he is almost buried beneath them. A picture of human life. It is not possible to hide from the cross. Whoever is a man, also suffers. The only difference is that one suffers with closed fists, with a face distorted by rage, not gaining any merit, thereby suffering senselessly; another suffers with eyes raised to Christ, with triumphant soul, not crushed and broken. Suffering cannot crush, when the cross stands before us, upon it the great Sufferer, our Lord Christ.

"God be praised for everything," were the last words of the dying St. John Chrysostom. If only we could repeat those words in hours of suffering. Or if each of us would learn to say from his heart this little prayer: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit (Luke 23: 46). Guide me in Thy ways even if they are rugged. Guide me according to Thy plans, even if they are hidden from me. Guide me from darkness, through Thy cross, into the realm of eternal light." Amen.

JOY IN SUFFERING

IN the tenth chapter of Exodus we read an interesting thing in connection with the plagues sent upon the Egyptians. The Lord God sent a black darkness upon the people of Egypt who opposed His laws. For three days such darkness fell upon them that, according to Holy Writ, "no man saw his brother nor moved himself out of the place where he was" (Ex. 10: 23). But at the same time the homes of the Israelites who trusted in God remained in the light, in light so brilliant that not even the Egyptian darkness could obscure it.

This Biblical scene illustrates the theme of my sermon today about the difficult problem of suffering. Believers and unbelievers, those who keep God's commandments and those who violate them, live in a great hurly-burly on the face of the earth; the disasters of life and its trials may fall alike upon each one of us. But, whereas unrelieved suffering envelops, in the hopeless gloom of a starless night, those who have no faith, an inner light glows, even in the darkest night of affliction, in the souls of those who believe in God. This light emanates from the cross of Christ. After the Savior's coming, man has been able to wrestle with the most terrible question, the problem of suffering.

It is interesting to note that the Gospel narrative records only one occasion when our Lord allowed Himself to be publicly feted, that was a few days before His agony, at the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. On every other occasion when the people wished to glorify Him — yes, even to proclaim Him King after one of His miracles — He withdrew from the enthusiastic multitude and hid Himself from them. But now, just before He suffers, He accepts the salutations, the hosannas of men.

Why was this so? Because now He wished to correct mankind's former view of suffering. The chorus of hosannas on Palm Sunday enabled our Lord to call the world's attention to His new teaching: that suffering is not empty torment, not a raised fist, not an aimless struggle, not merely a burden and tears, but also an olive branch, the waving of palm leaves, the source of profound mercies and blissful spiritual peace.

Then let us raise our eyes again to our blessed Lord suffering for our sakes, and let us ask Him what further guidance He wishes to give us by His suffering to help us bear our own. The reply will be: Follow Him in hours of suffering, thus through suffering we may draw nearer to God.

I

FOLLOWING IN OUR LORD'S STEPS

On one occasion St. Peter wrote of our Lord's sufferings as follows: "For this is thankworthy, if for conscience towards God, a man endure sorrows, suffering wrongfully. . . . For unto this are you called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example that you should follow His steps" (I Pet. 2: 119, 211). That is, our Lord went through the most torturing suffering, so that in hours of pain we might be able to walk in His footsteps.

A) Our Master truly went through the most agonizing moments of suffering. Do you know what the most agonizing moments of suffering are? When man suffers all alone, when from his lips bursts the lament that there is no one in this world to take pity on him, that it even seems as if God had forsaken him.

a) Have you ever been seriously ill, somewhere far away, in a strange place, in a foreign land? Have you felt that dreadful spiritual forsakenness, when you start up from a feverish sleep at night? You light the lamp; ah, it is not yet half past eleven, when will the dawn come? If only someone were here beside me. Only one good soul to whom I could say how greatly I suffer. Because to suffer all alone, means that we suffer doubly. And our Lord accepted this, too: He willed to suffer all alone.

To be alone in trouble — dreadful! Look at little children when they go along the road. Instinctively they take each other's hands: they feel that in this way they are not alone. Look at men and women. They shake hands many times in a day; the handshake means: Do not be afraid, you are not alone, you can count upon me.

b) But Christ remained alone at the moment of His death. His disciples and His friends forsook Him, the angels forsook Him; humanly speaking, even the Father forsook Him.

His disciples forsook Him. One of them swore that he had never known Him; another, when the Master was taken, cast off his garments and made his escape clad in a shirt; the others all fled in different directions.

His friends forsook Him. Where are the vast numbers of people whom He healed? Where are those whom He comforted, that now they may come to comfort Him? They cannot come: all their time is taken up by preparations for the Passover. Five thousand people were well cared for by Him in the wilderness; is there not one among the five thousand who could now be here? Not one. The paralyzed and lame to whom He gave renewed health, at least they could come. They cannot come: the weather is fine, they must work in the fields.

But where are the angels? At least they might comfort Him. When Peter cut off the servant's ear, with what self-confidence our Lord said: "Thinkest thou that I cannot ask My Father and He will give Me presently more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:53.) And now no legions of angels come, not even one angel comes.

Because — it is terrible even to say it — it is as if even the Father had forsaken Him. The Evangelist mentions that such a feeling of forsakenness came over the dying Christ on the cross, that He cried out to His Father. The Evangelist writes this in the original Aramaic language just as Christ truly uttered these words (perhaps that we may be able to repeat them with heartfelt piety until the end of the world): "Eloi, Eloi, lamma sabacthani?" "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34.) The dreadful cry dies away, and there is no response to it. Can we imagine a more grievous moment than this, dear brethren? Think in what annihilating loneliness our Lord bled to death.

B) But why, why? we ask. Why did our Lord will to suffer so very much alone? Quite certainly for us, for our sakes. Because of the lonely hours of pain which may come to us. To comfort our grieved hearts. That we may have Someone to whom to cleave in hours of suffering, that we may be able to follow in our Lord's footsteps, and by so doing learn the great secret: how to gain grace by suffering.

a) To suffer is the common lot of man. *But to gain grace by suffering is a Christian privilege.* The only unbearable suffering is that of a person who does not know the divine reason for suffering, who does not know what suffering is for. But if, through our suffering, our own or another's soul becomes better, our suffering is never unbearable.

When grievous, pain-filled night falls upon us, and there is no one, no one in this world, who would understand our trouble, then let us stand beside Christ, beside the suffering Christ. And if our pain is very great we may lament, if it burns very much we may weep, only let us cling closely with our bleeding hearts and wills to Christ. Then this will be meritorious suffering.

b) How often we hear people complain: "This life is unbearable. Have we a heavenly Father? If He is our Father, if He loves us, why does He not spare us so many afflictions? Why, why?" Who can give a satisfactory answer to this question? But who can say why He did not spare His only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, when, for instance, He allowed the Child who was hardly a few weeks old, to be taken in flight to a strange land? We do well to recall this often. Also to remember St. Joseph's frame of mind in accepting this command.

The Lord God gave St. Joseph a command: "Arise, and take the Child and His mother and fly into Egypt" (Matt. 2:13). Arise. When? In the dark night, without any preparation. Take the Child, the helpless little Infant. And fly. Whither? To Egypt, to a foreign country where you have no friend or acquaintance.

If we had come to such a fugitive state, perhaps we would have said indignantly: Why does God allow such a blow to fall on me? Has He not a thousand other means at His disposal? Why does not bloodthirsty Herod die? Why must the Lord take refuge in flight? St. Joseph did not think in this way. He found strength in this thought: It is God's will, therefore it is surely best. For He is my Father even when He allows me to suffer. This is the Christian way of thinking: God is our Father even when He allows us to suffer.

c) We often hear people say: "My life is sheer pain, sheer misery." Brethren, do not speak so thoughtlessly. I believe that you are greatly afflicted. I believe that many troubles have come to you. But has your whole life contained nothing but grief and trouble? It may be that there were dark months, years, yes, even decades in it. But surely it contained sunny hours, too, and happiness. It is marvelous, how easily we forget our joy, and how hard it is to forget our grief. Grief is heavy, joy is light. The stone of grief presses upon the soul like early morning mists upon the Alpine landscape; the sunbeam of joy, on the contrary, speedily steals away.

Do not weigh with false scales. You, who never cease to complain, just sit down at your table and write out a list of all the joy you have received from God. But write down every joy. Which joys? Well, a person breaks his leg, and only then does he know what he possessed when he still had sound legs. A person buys eyeglasses and only then appreciates what his sound eyes were to him. A person becomes ill, and only then perceives what an immense treasure health was to him. A person loses some members of the family, some relative or friend, and only then sees how many good people God had given him. And so on. Why must we fail to appreciate anything, until we have lost it? True, there is much grief in life, but there are also many little sunny joys which we are unwilling to see. Yet, if these could elicit such loud prayers of gratitude from our lips as the loud complaints which grief makes us utter, we would certainly bear the burden of life as easily as a certain laborer bore his knapsack with the little cricket in it.

The summer sun was setting when a laborer, tired with his day's work, took his knapsack on his shoulder and started out for home. At home there awaited him only a thin soup, many hungry children, care, and anxiety. Ill-humoredly the tired man dragged himself along. Life was so hard and bitter, with no joy in it. But all at once a little cricket began to chirp beside or behind him, somewhere. Where could it be? Strange: it was in his knapsack. It must have crept into it during the day, when the knapsack was lying on the ground; and now the whole way it cheerily sang its little song into the gloomy laborer's ears. And the farther the man went and the more he listened to the chirping little cricket in the empty knapsack, the lighter his heart became, the gentler his expression, perhaps he even smiled a little by the time he reached home with his merry guest.

Brethren, life's knapsack is burdensome on our shoulders. But let us listen to our faith singing in us: What you do for God's sake, what you bear with God, for all this God will be your reward. Blessed is the man, as he draws nearer to the twilight of his life, who hears the faith within his soul singing ... of what? Of the reward that awaits an earthly life spent according to God's will.

Thinking in this way, we are able to understand even the unpleasantness, the helplessness, the illness of old age. We can see God's fatherly hand in this. When He is preparing to call someone to Himself, usually He does not wish that this departure should be a sudden rending asunder, but that the many hardships and ailments of old age should slowly loosen our earthly ties, I would almost say, should take away our pleasure in earthly life, so that we might await the liberator death as a good friend.

II

SUFFERING BRINGS US NEARER TO GOD

Whoever has become accustomed to clinging thus to the cross of Christ the sufferer in hours of affliction, does not waver in his faith, or turn away from God through suffering; on the contrary, he is brought nearer to God by it.

A) While we are looking at the cross of Christ, our soul becomes more beautiful, nobler, stronger. An American commission decided to order 30,000 white marble crosses in Italy; the crosses were to be placed upon the graves of the 30,000 American soldiers who died in the World War. But the order depended upon an interesting condition, namely, that the men who carved the marble should not swear even once while they were working. The Italian workers made the necessary promise and they also kept their word. If it is not seemly to swear while carving a cross, then it is still less seemly to bear a cross and grow embittered beneath it, to bear a cross and spiritually collapse. On the contrary, bear your cross, and on Calvary come nearer to God.

a) On the days immediately following Christmas, we celebrate the feasts of holy martyrs. It is as though the Church were thus admonishing us that from the rocks of the Bethlehem cave the red flowers of martyrdom spring, or that following Christ means a self-sacrificing, disciplined life. Along the great highways leading to ancient Rome, tomb stood beside tomb; before a traveler reached the Eternal City, he had to pass long rows of these tombs of the dead. A highway of this sort leads to the eternal city of our God, a way lined with tombs: tombs covering the unruliness, the whims, and low instincts we have overcome.

b) Happy the man who, in the raging tempest of suffering, can hear the call of God's voice. Because suffering is in reality God's word, God's word calling us home. The German language conveys this thought most clearly when it calls a divinely permitted trial a Heimsuchung (a visitation).

Dore has painted an affecting picture, entitled: "The vale of tears." Human misery stands before us in this picture, painted with every tone of color. A multitude of weeping, afflicted, struggling people: great and small, crowned kings, chained prisoners, old men and young — misery, everywhere misery. But see, in the throng of sufferers stands a Man in a long white garment, a cross upon His shoulder, and He beckons to the multitude to follow Him. Everyone's eyes are fixed on the radiant cross and on the right side of the path to which our Lord calls the sufferers. At the end of the way, flowering meadows are seen, and vernal laughing life. Yes, if God were to leave us to suffer and did not help us to bear suffering by the example of the suffering Christ, then we could complain about it.

Since our Savior gave us the example, the cross is not only our grief, but also our salvation. The cross is not merely our affliction, but also our bliss.

B) Is all this nothing more than a flowery figure of speech, an elaborate fabrication? Is it possible that the millstone of suffering does not press down into the grave or into suicide, despair, or lack of faith, but that it raises up, ennobles, and purifies?

a) As answer, hear the following lines of a letter written by a refugee from Transylvania, a woman who at one time lived a distinguished social life. "Do not be surprised that poverty is so dreadful to me. To anyone who has enjoyed such a high standard of life as I — I had my country-house, my carriage, my automobile, my estate, and, at that time, many persons to respect me — poverty is much more difficult to bear than for one who has always been poor. In spite of this — joyfully I write it — now, here in this hut, I find more peace in my heart and in my soul than I did in the manor-house. Because my faith is greater. And if I look out from my little window upon the starry skies, I feel as if heaven were nearer to me than it was on my balcony. Quite certainly God is now nearer me, too."

When we see this living faith, which has become so bright through great suffering, we begin to have an inkling of God's plan with suffering. During a storm at sea, sailors have sometimes discovered an island which did not appear on any map. In the same way, in a spiritual storm many a man has discovered his own self, the previously unknown depths of his own soul.

b) If only we could sanctify all our sufferings in this way, and thus mount upward on pain's granite stairway! If only we could fill with Christ's spirit our every martyrdom — bodily and spiritual, small and great, extraordinary and commonplace alike! Much evil and suffering exists in the world. But if we were to sanctify every suffering with Christ's grace, *this would develop into such a quantity of reparation in God's sight, that it could conciliate Him for all man's wickedness.*

Then let us not only suffer — for I think we all have to do that — but let us gain grace by suffering. This is an art so few are able to acquire. Yet suffering which we do not sanctify with grace is a buried treasure, unprofitable capital.

Let us learn the great art of sanctifying suffering from the cross of Christ. Those two hard pieces of wood made into a cross. Two pieces of wood; the one horizontal, the other perpendicular: a symbol of human destiny. Life consists of daring, soaring desires, plans, and aims in perpendicular lines; and then comes a horizontal line that crosses through everything. It crosses through everything, and from all our plans only a cross remains.

What a difference between our Lord's cross and the cross of uncomprehending man! Uncomprehending man drags his cross, perhaps endures it, too; but Christ overcomes it. Man gnashes his teeth and rails against his cruel fate; but Christ

recognizes the Father's hand even in the horizontal line crossing through human plans, and He forces the evil intentions that spring up from the depths of human depravity, as well as the formidable powers of darkness, under His victorious footsteps.

"As we have to suffer, whether we want to or not, it is better to lighten the blows sent us by God, by patience and the hope of reward, than to make them heavier by angry impatience. The more a trapped wild animal turns and twists, the more firmly does it draw the noose round its neck; the more a netted bird struggles, the more does it entangle its wings: there is no hard yoke which is not borne with less harm, by calmness rather than by tossing and turning" (Pazmany).

Christ on the cross. This is the final solution of the terrible problem of suffering. A blessed example for afflicted man of how, even among the ruins of a broken earthly life, even in the bitterest disappointment and grief, he can still struggle up to the eternal world, to the peaks of a higher life, to nearness to God, and say: Whatever comes, whatever disappointment, affliction, grief, or suffering, I know that my Father has not abandoned me, and I will endure without complaining, as God wishes me to.

The Poles have a beautiful legend about the creation of the skylark. When the Lord God saw how bitterly the first two human beings, driven forth from Paradise, had to work, and with what sad hearts they bowed their heads while at work, He took a little clod of earth into His hand and tossed it up into the air. Behold, the clod thrown high by God's hand changed into a little feathered bird, into the first skylark, whose marvelous trilling lifted the tired man's head toward the sky, and since then its song has cheered the plowman at work.

The singing skylark of our earthly life is our faith, unwaveringly set in God. When our weary heads sink earthward, this faith lifts them up. When the waves of suffering almost break over us, this faith gives us courage. And when life's suffering nails us to the cross, again only this gives consolation and alleviation.

The legend continues. The little skylark wished to be grateful to God, and while Christ went His way through Palestine, teaching, it flew to the Virgin Mother's window every day, bringing her news of her divine Son. And when the Savior died on the cross, the little bird alighted upon His bleeding hands and tried to draw out the sharp nails with its tiny beak. It attempted to, but was unable to do so. It perched, therefore, beside the sorrowing Mother and, with its touching song, consoled her in her great grief.

Our faith fixed in God and our eyes raised to the afflicted Christ are not able to draw the nails out of our life's cross, it is true; but at least they speak consolingly of another life, of everlasting life, the door of which is opened for us by calmly borne suffering. And then, even though grief's night of Egyptian darkness should envelop us, upon our souls the consoling glow of eternal life will still shine. Amen.

SUFFERING AND ITS ETERNAL REWARD

A FEW years ago a great Hungarian nobleman, Prince Ladislaus Batthyany-Strattmann, died. He was a man of saintly life, whose religious home life, great love for mankind, and reputation as an oculist were well known in the land. God blessed the prince with ten children. This prince-physician, from his private fortune, maintained his own hospital and restored sight to thousands of persons.

This man, who lived such an exemplary life, for more than a year before his death lay in a Vienna sanatorium suffering from a most painful disease. In similar circumstances, many would have collapsed spiritually, they would have complained against God: "Have I deserved this, I who have been faithful to God all my life? I who have done so much good to others?"

But the afflicted prince did not entertain such thoughts. He acquiesced in God's will entirely and was able even to smile in his terrible pain, and he himself consoled his anxious family. As a doctor, he well knew the incurable nature of his illness. Yet those who came to his sick bed went away purified and elevated in soul. On the last day of his life, he finished his usual morning prayers. Then he fell into a coma. In the evening he recovered consciousness. He looked at his watch: a quarter past seven. Every day at this time the whole family was accustomed to pray the rosary together. An altar to the Blessed Virgin, decorated with flowers, stood at the side of his bed. Before it knelt his wife and children and,

together with the dying man's clearly audible prayer, they said the rosary. In this way the prince died: in his hand the rosary, his glazing eyes fixed upon the picture of the Mother of God among the lighted candles.

I recount this edifying story to you at the beginning of my sermon today because I wish to lead you to the well whence this superhuman power, triumphant even in death, gushes forth: to Christ's suffering. In three words I wish to join together those wells of strength which flow from the cross-bearing Christ toward humanity bleeding under the cross of suffering. These words are "faith" and "life everlasting." This is Christianity's final answer to the great problem of suffering. Fear not, only believe; believe in life everlasting.

I

TRUST IN GOD

A) For the final answer to the problem of suffering, an answer which will disperse all obscurity, we must turn to our Lord Jesus Christ. The final answer is given by the words that He spoke to Jairus. Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, had a twelve-year-old daughter who was lying seriously ill. Her father, falling on his knees, implored our Lord to come to his house and heal the child. While the Savior was on the way to the house, news was brought: It is too late. The girl is already dead. And what does our Lord say to the despairing man? "Fear not, believe only" (Luke 8: 50).

a) We often hear how much misery there is in the world, how many suffering, unemployed men in great privation, how many misunderstood persons, how many hundreds of thousands lying sick in hospitals and at home. But how many of these sufferers do what Jairus did in his anxiety for his little daughter? "He fell down at the feet of Jesus, beseeching Him that He would come into his house" (Luke 8:41).

Let us reply in our own hearts to the question: When some trouble comes to us, do we indeed seek God with it, do we fall at His feet? Is our first thought God, without whose knowledge not a hair of our head falls? "But why should my first thought in trouble be God?" you ask perhaps. "Shall I not try to help myself? Shall I not look for work? I am ill; shall I not call a doctor? Yes indeed. Look for work. Call a doctor. But believe in God, too. Believe that in trouble your heavenly Father is with you. Believe that man's exertions are useless if God's blessing is not added to them. Believe that the doctor's knowledge remains of no effect if God does not help. Believe what St. Paul teaches: "All things are yours ... the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come. For all are yours. And you are Christ's. And Christ is God's" (I Con 3: 22, 23). With this unconditional surrender believe in God.

Two little children were carrying wood with their father. One of them stretched out his feeble arms, and his father laid the cut wood upon them for him to carry it into the house. His brother stood looking on. When he thought there was enough wood on his little brother's arms, he said: "That will be enough, brother. You won't be able to carry more than that" The little brother, however, replied with a smile: "My father knows how much I can bear, and he will pile only that much on my arms."

Whoever believes thus in God, can be overtaken by suffering, he may also be shaken by it, upset by it, but he cannot be crushed by it. He cannot be crushed by it, for such a man is always able to say: "My Father knows how much I can bear."

B) Such faith takes us nearer to God even in suffering. A philosophy which does not know Christ, teaches that we must bear affliction with compressed lips in a manly way. It is easy to advise that suffering should be borne in a manly way; but if we do not know what object there is in our suffering? But the pain is assuaged at once if we can connect it with God's plans.

In Germany on the wall of a forest refuge lodge, some tourist, driven there by the storm, wrote an embittered poem against the bad weather. A later traveler, however, wrote under the complaining lines: "It is God's will; therefore be still." Those two lines are a power in the stormy days of life. "Thy will be done."

Suffering received in this spirit can take us close to Christ's cross, it can bind us firmly to the divine Sufferer. Even in moments of the greatest pain, it can beguile St. Paul's enthusiastic cry from the lips of a sick person: "I am filled with comfort; I exceedingly abound with joy in all our tribulation" (II Cor. 7:4).

Coppee, the famous French author, sought happiness apart from God. And when he had searched everywhere in vain and had been disappointed in everything, lying on his bed suffering from a painful illness, he again found the lost faith of his childhood and with it true happiness. We can believe him, who had tasted all the deceptive joys of life, when he says: "Life is an onion; when we cut it open, we begin to weep." Was it not this that the great composer, Chopin, also felt when, on his death-bed, he pressed the crucifix to his pale lips and said: "Now I am at the source of happiness."

The hour of illness may be a time of aimless complaining and worry; and with these the trouble is not mitigated. Or it may be an earnest and sacred hour, the recognition of God's visitation and of His plan, the hearing of God's knock asking for admittance. Whoever looks upon suffering in this way will find that often he can more easily bear bodily pain, and in every case the soul becomes more beautiful and noble. In the retirement of the sick bed we find time for ourselves at last. In the rush of modern life we seem to have time only for bread-winning, for pleasure, and for amusement; on a sick bed, at last there is time for the poor, neglected soul. "Be you humbled therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in the time of visitation" (I Pet. 5:6). Thus the sickroom will become a church, the sick bed will become an altar on which we offer our pain as a propitiatory sacrifice, and our souls as a complete sacrifice to God.

C) But who can thus cleave to God in trouble and in suffering, believe thus in Him, and pray thus to Him? He who is also accustomed in peaceful and happy days to converse with God.

I hardly know a more tormenting moment than when a man who has forgotten God, is forced by life's fearful events to turn to God. The poor soul does not know what to say to Him, because it has never been accustomed to speaking to God. Let us suppose some purse-proud father, who has been forgetful of his soul, has an only son lying seriously ill, his breathing becoming quicker and quicker and ever weaker, his hands limp and cold, his forehead bedewed with perspiration. Outside the anxious father questions the departing physician, but receives only an evasive answer. In those dreadful moments, many proud atheists have fallen to their knees, wringing their hands, and crying out in their misery to that great Someone, to that great Unknown. But they have been unable to speak to Him, because they have never developed the practice of doing so.

Brethren, let us accustom ourselves in calm and quiet days to conversing with God, to praying to Him with fervent souls, that in the suffering which befalls us we may know what to say to our heavenly Father, and among the flashes of pain we may also hear His encouraging reply: "Fear not, believe only."

II

ETERNAL REWARD

I feel, however, that I must offer a more exact explanation of this encouragement which our blessed Lord gives us. "Fear not, believe only," does not mean that our Lord will grant all our petitions at once and in the very manner we have requested. For example, I am without employment, and I pray to find work immediately; I am ill, and I pray to become well promptly; something hurts, and I beg that the pain cease. This is not the manner in which our Lord promises to answer our prayers. He means that He hears all our prayers, but in the way He sees to be best; that is, we must believe in His final administration of justice, in His final distribution of rewards: in His eternal realm.

Particularly when confronted by the mystery of suffering, we must say with St. Paul: "How incomprehensible are His judgments and how unsearchable His ways" (Rom. 11: 33). For I do not want to keep from you the fact that even after every explanation and all arguments, many incomprehensible features remain on suffering's face, to which no satisfactory explanation can be offered except the great thought of the world to come, the thought of eternity.

A) When Dante was in Verona during the last years of his exile, he overheard a very interesting conversation. Two women were passing him in the street, and one of them said to the other with a sigh: "Look, that is the man who went to hell and came back from there." At which the other added: "Well, that is certainly true. That is why his beard is bristly and his face dark. They became so from the devil's smoke."

Truly, anyone who has peered deeply into eternity finds — not that his face becomes dark from the smoke — but that in his soul, like some earnest strength, the breath of eternity becomes apparent. People jostle one another around him,

widows weep, young people amuse themselves, good people suffer, wicked people carouse, but his eyes have looked into eternity, and he sees that everything is hurrying toward the grave, toward eternity. And then? What will be then?

Seeing day by day the numerous and grave injustices in life, one is prompted to exclaim with the afflicted Job: "Why then do the wicked live, are they advanced and strengthened with riches? . . . Their children dance and play. . . . They spend their days in wealth. Who have said to God: Depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways. Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what doth it profit us if we pray to Him?" (Job. 21: 7-15.)

Where is the final answer to these questions? The answer is to be found in the doctrine of our holy faith concerning eternity. Here on earth we are but travelers; some of us enjoying the luxury and comforts of a Pullman chair-car, others traveling in a crowded day coach. But, after reaching the last station, we are all on the same platform. What will happen there, what will happen then, at the end of our journey?

That last hour, when our whole earthly lives pass before our spiritual eyes, will not be easy if our lives have been sheer enjoyment, well-being, and extravagance. If, on the other hand, we have borne life's crosses with eyes lifted to Christ, then in that last hour the words of Holy Writ will burst from our lips: "It is good for me that Thou hast humbled me" (Ps. 118:71).

To those who choose an upright and honorable life in poverty rather than a dishonorable life in wealth, I should like to send a message in the words of our Lord: "Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction" (Matt. 7: 13), but "narrow is the gate and strait is the way that leadeth to life" (Matt. 7: 14). And I should like to send them a consoling message of our faith: It is difficult to live as a Christian, but easy to die as one; death is difficult for them whose life has been easy.

B) Of course, that we may understand these thoughts and gain this frame of mind, we have need of X-ray eyes, of next-world faith which shines through all pain and disappointment, through all anxiety and earthly separation, and judges everything by the standards of eternal life. As the dark night becomes brilliant if illumined by arc lights, so every unsuccessful earthly life becomes bearable if illumined by the light of eternal life.

Whoever possesses this living faith will pave the way leading to eternal life with suffering's granite blocks. Whoever knows that for his soul in this life, besides earthly labor, there awaits him a task for the next world to which the earthly must be subordinated, to such a person all suffering will become a means of assistance toward the great goal.

Among all sufferings and afflictions life can be bearable, can be worth while. The only person unable to bear it is he who has no faith, he who has no God.

Hear what some modern unbelievers say, how they bear the ills of life. Says one of these pessimists: "To live means to suffer; the whole world is one vast hospital, and the physician in it is death" (Heine). Another says: "What eternal life is, I do not know; but I know that this earthly life is a malicious jest" (Voltaire). According to still another, "That person is the happiest, who dies in childhood" (Lenau). The backbone, the pillar, the support slips from life, if faith is lost.

On the other hand, whoever bears firmly in mind the thought of final divine justice and projects the light of life eternal upon the obscure paths of earthly life, will not be uncertain as to the way. Modern light-houses function in this manner in cloudy weather. They do not project their light forward, out onto the open sea, but upward, onto the dark clouds. And the clouds, which otherwise would envelop the horizon in darkness, thus reflect the lighthouse gleam for more than a hundred miles. Our faith, too, projects the glow of eternal life upon the clouds of our earthly paths, because it knows that otherwise suffering cannot be endured. It cannot be endured, except with the consolation given by the knowledge that this is not the final word in our lives.

Man was not created by God for affliction; he was created for happiness. Every particle of us longs for happiness. Mary Magdalen was great when she wept repentant tears at our Lord's feet, but this was not the final part of her journey, not the final word in her life. That moment of supreme bliss was when the risen Christ said to her: "Mary." The Blessed Virgin was great when, with grief-stricken soul, she stood under the cross of her divine Son. But the final halting-place of her journey could not be the *Stabat Mater*; it is the *Regina coeli, laetare*, "Rejoice, Queen of Heaven."

Dear brethren, I conclude with the edifying story of a certain count. For more than a year he had been sorely afflicted by some baffling illness. Eminent physicians had failed to ascertain the cause of the trouble. They nursed him, operated upon him again and again, whittled his bones. After eighteen months of suffering, he was still lying on his sick bed with his leg in a plaster cast.

To a priest who came to see him, he said: "See, father, there on the wall facing me is the crucifix. Before, when I was healthy at home, the crucifix was over the head of my bed. Now I have had it placed there, opposite me. Suffering is easier if the crucifix is opposite so that we can look upon the suffering Christ." These words suggest the strength and balm that suffering man gains from the suffering Christ.

Whenever suffering, our common human fate, overtakes me, O Lord, I beg Thee not to let me suffer complainingly. Do not send greater suffering upon me than I, clinging fast to Thy holy cross, can endure. I beg Thee, if it is right in Thy sight, to mitigate and shorten the days of pain. I beg Thee, if it is possible, to let this chalice pass from me: nevertheless let it not be as I wish, but as Thou wilt. Always, my Lord, in everything, may Thy blessed, holy will be done. Amen.

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