

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Recently I read this story of a couple of missionaries serving in a far and remote place in Africa. They have a four-year-old son with them. The son enjoys a beautiful and trusting relationship with his parents. One day it was discovered that the boy had a nasty tumor growing on his body. He developed a fever and infection started spreading through his whole body. His life is threatened by all this infection. Finally, a doctor from a distant town visits the mission compound, examines the boy, and tells the parents that the child needs immediate surgery or he will die. The only problem is that there is no anesthetic available to alleviate the pain of the surgery.

The father knows the surgery has to take place for his son to live. So, he gathers the boy into his arms and says to him, “Son, there is a tumor in you that is making you sick. It’s not your fault, you did nothing wrong, but the tumor has to be taken out. You will feel great pain. But, I want you to know, even while you are feeling the pain, I am with you; I love you; and I will always love you. So, be brave, my Son, and no matter how terrible the pain, I will be with you through it all.

The child is then strapped to a table. As the surgeon’s knife cuts into the flesh of the little boy, he screams blood-curdling screams that get more and more intense as the tumor is excised. He looks through his tears to his father and mother standing nearby, seeking comfort from those whom he has trusted and loved his whole life. The parents seeing their child’s terrible pain, feeling terribly helpless, turn away. They cannot bear to watch.

Imagine, if you will, the loneliness that little boy is experiencing, the emptiness, the trauma.

That, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, was the experience of Christ on the Cross. And that was the experience of His Father who had to watch it all.

Why so much suffering? Why so much pain?

The past couple of weeks I have felt much like those helpless parents, like God Himself watching the suffering of His Son on the Cross.

The pain and suffering of Katie Fiore; the death of Horace Marsh and the grief of his family; the dying of Florence Laffey with the attendant helplessness of Elmer, and the grief of their family; the pain and sickness of Joanne Cardine and her struggle to be brave for all of us; Joan Halter, smiling as she endures the pain of recent surgery, trying to comfort and put at ease all of her family; yesterday anointing Florence Karmielowicz who has been gradually slipping away in the fog of Alzheimer’s disease and now slipping away from life, as Norman, her husband of sixty years, quietly holds her hand, still not wanting to let go; and today surprised to be called to anoint Joe Chupein, rather suddenly dying of cancer, as his wife, Bernadette, faithfully and lovingly stands by his side in a sterile hospital room.

Why so much suffering? Why so much pain?

For myself, I have found an inkling of an answer in our second reading from Hebrews, which says: “In the days when Christ was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son, though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”.

Jesus didn’t want to suffer or die any more than the rest of us do. In the Garden, he prayed, “Father, would that this cup could pass me by.” Feeling the loneliness, the emptiness, the trauma of the Cross, like the little boy in the story, he cried out, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me.” Yet in his fear and torment He also prayed, “Not my will, but yours be done”. Still, feeling abandoned and alone He trusted, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

According to the Sacred Writer of Hebrews, his suffering perfected him so that he became the source of eternal salvation for all.

As I’ve told you before my favorite image of God is found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah in Chapter 64:7, “Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.” This same image is picked up by the Prophet Jeremiah, in Chapter 18:3-6, “I went down to the potter’s house and there he was, working at the wheel. Whenever the vessel of clay he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making another vessel of whatever sort he pleased. Then the word of the Lord came to me: ‘Can I not do to you, my people, as the potter has done...Indeed, like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in my hands.’”

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, the stuff of our lives—the good, the bad, and the ugly—is the clay which God is patiently forming into the perfect vessel which He created us to be. Apparently suffering is part of that work of perfecting. But it is not suffering in and of itself, it is suffering united to that of Christ on the Cross of Calvary; it is suffering that becomes the source of eternal salvation, not just for ourselves, but for all.

Therefore, as long as there continues to be a need for the work of salvation in the world, and God knows, we live in a sin-sick world, God’s work, which is the salvation of the whole world, the perfecting work of human suffering will continue.

So, it is that Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy will be done—on earth, as it is in heaven.”

To do the will of God, then, it appears that we must embrace the Cross of Christ, uniting all of our suffering to his, until the work of God, the salvation of the whole world is

achieved. Thus it is that we always pray under the sign of the Cross—In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.