

The Christian Paradox of the Beauty of Suffering

Before his death in 1983 due to lymphoma, the saintly Terence Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop of New York, gave us an incredible insight into the beauty of suffering and death, when he wrote that human life, God's precious gift, is no less beautiful when it is accompanied by sickness or suffering, disease or illness, hunger or poverty, mental or physical handicaps, loneliness or old age. Indeed, at these times, he wrote, life takes on extra splendor, as it reveals God's power shining through our human weakness. "It is in and through the weakest of human vessels that God continues to reveal the power of His love." All of us know the experience of suffering in its many forms, or we have come very close to that reality through the experience of family and friends and those for whom we care. These are privileged moments which invite us as individuals and as a community of faith to enter into a mystery which is a paradox, namely, that suffering and death are actually something beautiful. The question naturally arises, "How can that be?" or a natural response, "That doesn't make any sense!" While space here doesn't permit us to tackle the classic philosophical "Problem of Evil," I propose that we can draw strength and confidence from our Faith in light of our divine Lord's experience when we care for the sick and poor as members of the Order of Malta.

When Jesus took up his Cross and walked the way to Calvary, already the world saw an impending death, a tragic end to a beautiful life. Naturally, we tend to be attracted by the pleasurable (masked as beautiful) and repulsed by the painful (masked as ugly). It's no wonder that the world has never adequately answered the philosophical "Problem of Good and Evil" because it views these two principles as opposed rather than integrated into a wholistic experience. In other words, rather than separate the good of pleasure from the evil of pain (which is the natural view), the Christian understands and experiences the paradox of the beautiful in and through the ugly. In this sense, the natural evil of pain and suffering and eventual death is something good. What? Yes, while mysterious, it is imbued with meaning and purpose as our means to purification, a greater trust in God, and a participation in His own experience which becomes our own. In other words, people who embrace this paradoxical experience through faith often will say things like the following: "Through this disease, I have closer to God." "Through her illness, our family has come together in ways we never thought possible." "I feel healing when I know that He knows my pain and suffering." "I have hope now. I am beginning to live for the first time in my life. I am really in love with God and my family."

Christian faith, then, offers some "sense" to the apparent "non-sense" of sickness and suffering and death as something beautiful through the distinctive Faith we embrace in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the only God-Man ever in the history of religion to embrace human life in its entirety from conception to death. When we look at our divine Lord on the Cross, then, the natural sense is that His pain is not something which attracts but, rather, is to all outward sense entirely hideous, tragic, ugly, and that death has once again seemingly robbed Him of His beauty and life. Paradoxically (through the lens of faith), however, His suffering and death brought salvation to the world. His death is our ransom from death, we say, and "By His stripes, we have been healed," among so many familiar Easter antiphons and prayers we announce these 50 days of paschal celebration.

What is true for Christ, is also true for those who suffer. So, when we look at others who are suffering, God's love at work in and through them. They become God's incredible instruments of love, just as Jesus was the perfect instrument of God's passionate and compassionate healing love for us all. In and through that natural weakness, pain and suffering – even death itself – come even greater love and charity, trust in God, inner healing at every level. For us who care for the Lord's sick and poor, we see our loving Savior inviting us to draw close to Him through the most beautiful act of suffering and love. - **Rev. Msgr. James D. Watkins, Magistral Chaplain, Federal Association; Assistant Chaplain, Subpriory of Our Lady of Lourdes**