

“That I, Paul, might not become too elated, because of the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me....” **A thorn in the flesh.** It’s an unforgettable image for Christians. The Apostle tells us that even he, the great St. Paul – for all his mystical experiences and mighty deeds – was still flesh and bone. But Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” is a mystery, *because he never tells us what it was!* [Theories range from physical ailments, to a speech impediment, to wrestling with habitual sin. It’s all speculation – we simply don’t know what Paul’s thorn was.]

Not knowing is no problem, though, because it speaks to the reality of what the Church calls: **Redemptive Suffering**. Pain entered the world as punishment for sin. But now that Christ has overcome sin and death through His Passion, cross, and Resurrection, *now* even suffering is changed. When Christ responds to Paul’s pleas for relief the Lord instructs him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” In the Age of the Church we can participate in Jesus’ redemption of the world through our suffering, perseverance, and temptation.

We find this notion paralleled in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, in which he states, “Now I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and *in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ* on behalf of his body” (1:24). This is astonishing – that there can be anything *lacking* in Christ’s sacrifice! Well, let’s think of how this works; how do we fill up Christ’s Cross? It’s like a small child making a cake with her mother. She might say: “I made diss!” But did the child really make the cake? Nah! She may’ve cracked some eggs and stirred the batter a bit, but let’s get real: Mom made the cake! And yet, the child in her trifles did contribute to the creation of the finished product, right?

That's how Redemptive Suffering works. We offer up our sacrifice to Christ who can take that trifle and further the salvation of the world.

All of this flies in the face of our culture. What is our culture? It's a culture of *comfort*. Even we who prize hard work want an ibuprofen, a beer, and a Lay-Z-boy at the end of the day. Everything about our consumer culture tells us we *need* this. And not only do we *need* this, but we in fact *deserve* this. A culture of comfort becomes a culture of **entitlement** that excuses even sinful behavior! "I know I shouldn't gossip," we admit, "but my co-workers have been so spiteful I'm *entitled* to vent." "I know I shouldn't drink this much," we say, "but I've been driving my kids to this activity and that ball game, and I'm *entitled* to cut loose!" Food, fellowship, and leisure are all good, but they're not absolute. We should not only ask what we deserve, but what *Jesus deserves* from us! [St. Francis de Sales writes: "Are you conscious of having ever given up anything you liked, or of renouncing anything for God's Sake? For it is a good sign when we deprive ourselves of something we care for on behalf of those we love."] Most of us without knowing it fall in love with the mirror – *and we like what we see!* The Cross, on the other hand, makes us look away. When we turn to it, however, we're forced to accept a love that died for the sake of all.

[It's important that we learn to unite suffering to Christ because we're inevitably going to feel pain. Is not the opioid epidemic because we try to avoid it? No, we must transform it in Christ. Physical suffering is probably the most effective way God transforms our weakness because it's so humbling – to the point that as we age we feel like we're useless. That thought, however, is from Satan. St. Therese of Lisieux, as she

lay bedridden dying from tuberculosis, was reflecting on how the nuns of her convent made up the Body of Christ. She was depressed because she thought this sister was such a beautiful singer and she was the mouth of Christ, and this one who healed the sick was the hands of Christ. Yet she couldn't think of what she was. Then she realized: I am the *wounds* of Christ. Where would we be without those saving wounds?]

Bodily pain is inevitable, but so is temptation to sin. I think most of us can look at the Ten Commandments and say, “Hey, avoiding eight outta ten ain't bad, right?” We each likely have a persistent temptation: anger, lust, judgment. Why does this happen? “That I might not become too elated,” Paul says. Jesus identified with sinners but was perfect. He wants redeemed sinners to be righteous but not *self-righteous*. We'd be intolerable without weakness. But that doesn't mean that we must sin. Being *tempted* to sin is not the same as *giving in* to sin; *loving sinners* and *hating sin* are different. Nowadays we're tempted to forget this.

About a week ago I was dismayed to see a former seminarian I mentored came out as gay on Facebook. And as I read the comments I saw a lot of the same: *You're so brave*. And I think: “Really?? In this day and age, is it really that brave?” Now, I don't know what it's like to suffer from same-sex attraction so maybe I'm unaware of residual cruelty in a permissive, PC nation. Still, amid the praise chorus this young man was hearing – with a fair amount of well-meaning but misplaced scorn from some Catholic peers – I wanted to say to him: You know what I think would be brave? To acknowledge that you find yourself with a persistent temptation that through no apparent fault of your own is what it is, and despite that, you choose to live chaste celibacy. *That* would be truly brave. I know this man, I know what he's already overcome. After all that, you *now* want

to give in to a life of sin?! That's not brave. And it's even the temptation of a shepherd like me to look at this child of God struggling and want to tell him to lay down his cross. But the fact is Christ says only by taking up our crosses leads to glory (cf. Lk 9:23). And we as Church have a duty to support one another with our crosses and make them light. But we can never say to lay them down.

[Maybe we don't know someone wrestling with same-sex attraction, but we probably know someone who's divorced and civilly remarried for whom we think it's impossible for them to live as brother and sister. Or just that we've got an Irish temper or German stubbornness and everyone must suffer, we can't control it. Well, we've accepted weakness but not grace!] Christ is *amazed* at the lack of faith in His hometown and is unable to perform miracles there. Do we treat Jesus that way? When we won't allow the power of grace to transform weakness then we limit the work of redemption. **Redemptive suffering** is our belief that at least one person whom we may never meet in this world will get to heaven because of what we united to Christ's Cross. As we bring gifts to be transformed on this altar, we place our whole lives – most especially our thorns in the flesh – for Christ's power to perfect.