

THE ENIGMA OF HUMAN PAIN

You and I have our moments of pain. Life has its twists and turns, ups and downs, bright spots and dark side. Whatever we do in life, we shall all stumble upon the cross. Who does not have his share of affliction in this world? The rich? The powerful? The learned? Nobody wants to suffer yet nobody can escape trouble all the time. It is enough to be human to be liable to pain.

Pain and suffering are among the most profound human enigmas. We seek an answer to the *why* of sorrow? We watch with awe and dread people whose happy lives are suddenly cut short by a mishap or violence. Perhaps we picture out the scene of a cancer patient writhing in agony in the hospital. We deeply feel sorry for those born with congenital deformities, and shudder at the thought of their bleak future. The daily reports of violence, wars, and catastrophes that claim innocent lives by the thousands are a perpetual reminder that the human person coexists with pain.

When we are the ones directly involved, when it is our turn to endure a trial, we touch the depths of the human spirit. The pangs of life allow us to think, to reflect on the meaning of human existence. Suffering opens our eyes to our vocation to transcendence. It brings us in contact with God, if only because we tend to ignore Him in moments of prosperity. It is in the face of stark limitations that we reach out to the infinite, turning our gaze to that which goes beyond the material world. Pain allows us to appreciate the importance of our soul and discover her needs. The cross, in other words, introduces us to the ways of Christ.

The cross is intimately connected to human salvation. To embrace it is to discover the Truth, the redeeming Truth. The cross is our doorway to eternity. If you've watched Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), there's a very moving scene in the film that has left many people teary-eyed: Mary, the mother of Jesus, dashed to give him comfort when he tripped over the third time as he labored his way up Mt. Calvary. There's a flashback to the early days of Jesus when, as a boy, he fell while playing in the dusty streets of Nazareth and Mary ran for him. Now, pressed to the ground by the weight of the Cross and covered with bruises, Jesus looked at his mother and said, "Behold, I make all things new (Rev 21:5)."

When we suffer a setback, it does not mean we are all a failure. We often make a mountain out of a molehill. We are afraid to face the future because of something we cannot get over with. We have to burn our bridges. "Millions of men and women today lead what has been called 'lives of quiet desperation.' They are panicky, worried, neurotic, fearful, and above all, frustrated souls," so says Fulton Sheen. "And frustration results from failure – either a failure that has already occurred or a failure in prospect."

We want to unravel the mystery of pain even as we do all we can to ease our suffering, if not get rid of it. As we acquire greater scientific knowledge, we try to soothe every conceivable form of human affliction, even pushing to the limit the frontier of natural life. We concoct medicine to defy ageing; we transplant vital organs to postpone death; and we even dream of discovering an "immortality pill." That's how far our illusion can go.

Thanks to a personal tragedy, some people recover their faith. It is finding the Truth the hard way. I met a fellow who had lived a rather comfortable and loose life. One day as he was driving his sports car out of the garage into the road, a speeding van smashed into him. That was the bad news. The good news was that he only had a broken spine, leaving him alive to search for the meaning of life. When I talked with him the first time he was already a man of God. "Thanks to that near-death accident," he said, "I found what's most essential in life."

Do not dread suffering. It is your rendezvous with Christ. In him, you will learn to savor the bitter chalice life has to offer. The cross is a school of virtues, especially patience and

fortitude. It strengthens your weak character. It gives you interior strength. It makes you steadfast amidst severe trials. Turn your habitual complaints into silent sacrifices. Just learn to love and you will realize that God's "yoke is easy" and his "burden is light" (Mt 11:30).

The ultimate suffering is death. We leave this world after having shared in its joys and sorrows, triumphs and defeats, laughter and tears. We leave it bearing the scars of sin and human miseries. We leave it worn out from many long and laborious battles. But if we have toiled with, in and for God, we leave the world with a total peace of soul.