



UP TO THE SOURCE

MONTHLY WORDS

November: *Suffering*

The “Keep-Fit Pope”

Karol Wojtyla was born in 1920. He was the third of three siblings but he never got to see his elder sister Olga who died before he was born. His mom, Emilia, passed away of a heart attack when he was eight years old, and his brother Edmund, to whom he was very close, died as well of scarlet fever. His father, also named Karol, was the only family he had left while still a boy. When Karol was 20 years old, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, his father died of a heart attack leaving Karol completely alone. At that early age he already had experienced deeply a great amount of spiritual suffering. His health, on the other hand, was great. As pope, he would hike in the mountains, jog in the Vatican gardens, swim, and even lift weights as part of his workout routine. He was called by some the “Keep-Fit Pope.”



But physical suffering was not spared to him. From the assassination attempt that nearly killed him and very much damaged his colon and stomach, to his Parkinson’s disease and his osteoarthritis in his late years, he really tasted the weight of the cross on his flesh. And yet, he didn’t throw in the towel, he did not abandon the cross. The humiliation of appearing on the media in such a state was the last spiritual suffering that conformed him with his best

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friend and Lord. It is impossible not to think that he found a meaning to his suffering that helped him to sublimate it.

“Salvifici Doloris”: a Redemptive Suffering

It is a universal truth that everyone wants to be happy just as much as it is true that no one wants to suffer. And yet, it is impossible to avoid suffering, for it is part of our wounded nature after the Fall. It seems that suffering is the main obstacle for our happiness. Indeed it is, unless we find an explanation for it, a meaning or a purpose. We would be right if we considered suffering as an evil but we would be wrong if we thought that it was an evil created by God. Because the Creator is good and all his creation is good as well, evil can only be understood as a lack of goodness. The further we find ourselves from God, the more we suffer.



However, John Paul II gave us an explanation about suffering that completely changes the idea we have about it. In his Apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*, the Pope explains that in the Cross, through his sacrifice of Love, Jesus transformed the meaning of suffering. He defeated the power of sin and death and opened for us the way of salvation. On the Cross,

suffering was defeated by love and two dimensions were added to suffering from that moment on: redemption and love. Jesus not only redeemed us with his death, but he also redeemed suffering itself. That means that he gave our suffering, when freely accepted, the power to redeem the world, to “complete in our body what it lacks to Jesus’ redemption” (Col. 1:24). Jesus’ love transformed suffering from an evil into a good –the good of redemption– that the Church venerates.

But He did more than that. He gave suffering not only a meaning but a purpose. JP II says in his letter: “suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbors, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a ‘civilization of love’.

Elements for a Spirituality of Suffering (“Salvifici Doloris”)

- “At any rate, Christ drew close above all to the world of human suffering through the fact of having taken *this suffering upon his very self.*” From that moment on, there is not suffering in the world that is not included in Christ’s sufferings
- Human suffering has reached its culmination in the Passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: *it has been linked to love*, to that love of which Christ spoke to Nicodemus, to that love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering [...] The Cross of Christ has become a source from which flow rivers of living water.”

- God has confirmed his desire to act especially through suffering, which is man's weakness and emptying of self, and he wishes to make his power known precisely in this weakness and emptying of self.
- Suffering, in fact, is always a *trial*—at times a very hard one—to which humanity is subjected. It contains a special call to the virtue which man must exercise on his own part. And this is the virtue of perseverance in bearing whatever disturbs and causes harm. In doing this, the individual unleashes hope, which maintains in him the conviction that suffering will not get the better of him, that it will not deprive him of his dignity as a human being.
- Christ retains in his risen body the marks of the wounds of the Cross in his hands, feet and side. Through the Resurrection, he manifests the *victorious power of suffering*, and he wishes to imbue with the conviction of this power the hearts of those whom he chose as Apostles and those whom he continually chooses and sends forth.
- Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that in suffering there is *concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ*, a special grace [which brings about a conversion]. The result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of *his entire life and vocation*.
- For it is above all a call. It is a vocation. Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: "Follow me!" Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy.
- We could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order *to unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one's "I" on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for, so



to speak, another world: the world of human love.

Practical ideas to embrace your cross

1. Do you already have a crucifix in those places you spend most of your time? If you don't, get one...or two. When you look at it, don't focus on the pain but on the love and remember that He knows exactly what you are going through.
2. Stop thinking that when you suffer it means that God has abandoned

you. On the contrary, He is giving you the opportunity to share His cross and thus to be as close to Him as you can be.

3. Your suffering is redemptive. It will change you, it will make you holier, it will renew your heart. And if you offer it as Jesus did, it will help other people to change and to convert.

4. Suffering is going to happen. Start the day telling Jesus that you are ready to embrace whatever the day will bring and ask Him to help you not to complain but to understand what is at stake.

Bible Readings

- Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (the Canticle of the Suffering Servant)
- Philippians 2:5–11
- The Passion according to John: John 18–19
- Psalm 22

To know more

Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering” (1984)

Prayer

Together with Mary, Mother of Christ, who stood beneath the Cross, we pause beside all the crosses of contemporary man.

We invoke all the Saints, who down the centuries in a special way shared in the suffering of Christ. We ask them to support us.

We ask all who suffer to support us. We ask especially you who are weak to become a source of strength for the Church and humanity. In the terrible battle between the forces of good and evil, revealed to our eyes by our modern world, may your suffering in union with the Cross of Christ be victorious!

(*Salvifici Doloris*, Pope John Paul II, 1984).



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