

The Experience of Suffering

Saint Josemaría's experience of suffering in his own family was a very practical way of attaining the maturity that others reach only after many years.

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Even though pain is one of the most common experiences in life, it always surprises and it continually requires us to learn and to adjust. Nobody can consider himself or herself an expert on pain, because

pain always has a dimension of originality: in the way it manifests itself, in its causes, and in the way we react to it.

Sometimes we unexpectedly find ourselves suffering deeply for reasons and in ways that we never expected. The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, writes: “Human suffering evokes *compassion*; it also evokes *respect*, and in its own way *it intimidates*. For in suffering is contained the greatness of a specific mystery [...] man, in his suffering, remains an intangible mystery” ^{1>}.

The main peculiarity of human pain is that it poses an existential query. “Within each form of suffering endured by man, and at the same time at the basis of the whole world of suffering, there inevitably arises *the question: why?* It is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of

suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning”². As a matter of fact, when seeking the meaning of pain the human being is questioning the meaning of his or her very existence and is trying to clarify the extent and limitations of, his or her own freedom. “Can I reject pain? Can I try to distance myself from it, remove it, eliminate it? Pain gives a sense of ephemerality to life”³.

This human experience moves us to seek the help of other people, and to offer it in turn. The experience of pain teaches us to pay more attention to other human beings⁴. Pain marks the difference between a mature and well-balanced person, who is able to cope with obstacles and difficult situations, and one who is withdrawn and absorbed in his or her own emotions and sensations.

The mutual interaction of sorrow and love

“Don’t forget that Sorrow is the touchstone of Love”⁵. This deep and incisive statement by Saint Josemaría Escrivá touches on the very different reactions to pain. There is a relation between the way each person deals with pain and the way he or she loves, because only when one makes love the meaning of sorrow does it become acceptable. Only then can one actually reach the point of exclaiming: “Let us bless pain. Love pain. Sanctify pain [...] Glorify pain”⁶. In Saint Josemaría Escrivá’s writings the mystery of pain is a constant touchstone; it becomes an occasion for a face-to-face encounter with the God who became Man in order to teach us to live as men. In choosing to become Man, Jesus Christ wanted to suffer all that was humanly possible to suffer in order to teach us that love can overcome every kind of suffering. In one of the points in *The Way*, Saint Josemaría Escrivá writes: “A whole programme

for a good course in the ‘subject’ of suffering is given to us by the Apostle: *spe gaudentes*- rejoicing in hope, *in tribulatione patientes* - patient in troubles, *orationi instantes*- persevering in prayer” ⁷.

Pain is a meeting point between the joy of hope and the need of prayer. Christians accept pain hoping for a future joy. They are well aware of their own limits, and rely on the help that God will grant them, requesting it through prayer. This is not the conceit of believing that one can cope alone with the difficulties, nor is it the deeply pessimistic position of one who thinks that suffering is the last and unavoidable station on the road of life. “If you realise that those sufferings -of body or soul- mean purification and merit, bless them” ⁸.

Suffering is a crossroads, a passageway, but never a landing place. Thus prayer becomes the

important moment during which suffering finds its meaning, and through God's grace, becomes joy⁹. The cathartic effect of prayer becomes real, because each time man prays, he experiences God's mercy and shares his troubles and worries, receiving an almost tangible sign of His love: "My God, teach me how to love. My God, teach me how to pray"¹⁰.

The relationship between sorrow and love is a very strong one. Those who love, and who are "forged in the fire of sorrow", find joy¹¹. "Love is also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering"¹². Saint Josemaría Escrivá used to say: "I want you to be happy on earth. And you will not be happy if you don't lose that fear of suffering. For, as long as we are 'wayfarers', it is precisely in suffering that our happiness lies"¹³. This statement, blunt as it is, marks

out the way to happiness, man's ultimate objective. Nevertheless, there are moments on this way when the experience of pain will forge man's life. It is no longer a question of accepting or rejecting pain but of learning to consider suffering as part of our very existence and as part of God's plan for us.

“Suffering is also an invitation to manifest the moral greatness of man, his *spiritual maturity*”¹⁴. Thankfully, with his freedom and rationality, man can cope successfully with painful events. To be able to do this he has to reach a higher level of personal maturity which does not occur passively and cannot be taken for granted. It is necessary to gather one's spiritual resources and to adopt an appropriate attitude. According to Victor E. Frankl, the ability to suffer is part of self-education; it is an important phase of inward growth, and of self-organisation as well¹⁵.

Nowadays the inability to cope with pain and suffering, physical or spiritual, arises precisely from the lack of a culture that understands suffering. To begin with, parents are afraid of having their children come face-to-face with sacrifice.

Consequently, they are tempted to give them everything and to give it to them immediately. They think there will always be time for suffering later or they harbour the illusion that this time will never come for them ¹⁶. It is difficult to understand how anyone can possibly endure the sudden onset of serious pain without some prior experience. In fact, such people are at high risk of nervous breakdowns and depression.

Saint Josemaría Escrivá's experience of suffering in his own family was a very practical way of attaining the maturity that others reach only after many years. He was very seriously ill as a child; he experienced the deaths

of three of his sisters; he saw his father suffering the consequences of bankruptcy; they had to move to another town, with, obviously, a considerable change of lifestyle. Then there was his experience in the seminary during which he matured spiritually with many hours spent praying before the Blessed Sacrament; the many internal as well as external trials the Lord sent him which required a spirit of sacrifice; up to the persecution he suffered during the foundation of Opus Dei. He also had diabetes which left him exhausted for many years. In a way, we could say that he was spared nothing. Saint Josemaría was always able to understand other people's pain and suffering because of his personal experience, and not simply in theory. He coped with suffering with faith and courage, and with a lot of human and supernatural patience.

The sick are a treasure

“The witnesses of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ have handed on to the Church and to mankind a specific Gospel of suffering. The Redeemer himself wrote this Gospel, above all by his own suffering accepted in love, so that man ‘should not perish but have eternal life’. This suffering, together with the living word of his teaching, became a rich source for all those who shared in Jesus’ sufferings among the first generation of his disciples and confessors and among those who have come after them down the centuries” ¹⁷.

Pope John Paul II believed that those who suffer are privileged protagonists of the Gospel of Suffering, which Jesus Himself began to write with His own pain. Each person who suffers brings this Gospel to life with his or her own personal pain. It is a living Gospel, which we will never finish writing,

and which truly enables us to recognise God Himself in each of those suffering. In His prophecy of the Last Judgement Our Lord said: “Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was [...] sick and you cared for me [...].’ They will ask, ‘Lord, when did we see you sick or in prison, and visit you?’ And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me’”¹⁸. Well aware of the identification between Christ and the sick, Saint Josemaría always tried to pass on to those close to him, a special love for the sick. He constantly repeated that he loved both God and other people with the same heart. He knew how to love others through God and they in turn drew him closer to God.

The sick had a special place in Saint Josemaría's heart, because in each of them he saw the image of the suffering Christ. For this reason each of them attracted him mysteriously and forcefully in the co-redemption. In his prayer he imagined himself as one of the Apostles, wishing to make amends for his flight from the Cross. To make amends for the desertions that had increased Jesus' sufferings so much, he wanted the sick to be loved just as an especially tender mother loves her child, and never to be left alone. "As always, when a son of mine is sick, I say to those around him that they should look after him so well that he does not even recall that his mother is far away, and that in such moments we have to be as a mother for this son of mine and provide the care that his mother would have given him.' And he said elsewhere, 'Even though we may be poor, we should never spare any effort for our sick brothers. If

necessary we will steal a piece of heaven for them, and the Lord will forgive us”¹⁹.

“Children. The Sick. — As you write these words, don’t you feel tempted to use capitals? The reason is that in children and in the sick a soul in love sees Him”²⁰. The sick are a treasure, he used to say, because by practicing a smiling asceticism, which was so dear to Saint Josemaría, they can turn their illness into prayer. They become a treasure for others as well, because in taking care of the sick we practice charity and become richer inasmuch as the care we are offering is the best we can give. Sickness is a treasure for the Church because each sick person participates in Our Lord’s Passion on the Cross²¹. The sick, the seriously ill, when they are getting nearer to their personal meeting with God, go to Him in a special way and this meeting has a dramatically cleansing and, at the same time,

peaceful effect. “‘This man is dying. There is nothing more to be done...’ It happened years ago in a hospital in Madrid. After his confession, when the priest gave him his crucifix to kiss, that gypsy started to shout, and no one could stop him: ‘I can’t kiss Our Lord with this filthy mouth of mine!’ ‘But listen, very soon you are going to embrace him and give him a big kiss, in heaven!’ [...] Have you ever seen a more startlingly beautiful way of expressing contrition?”²².

This episode in the Founder’s life aptly summarizes his attitude towards death and pain. The cleansing value of the gypsy’s suffering acquires a limitless dimension and, together with the grace of the sacrament of Penance, death loses its aura of fear. It instead becomes the opportunity that every man of faith awaits: that of being able to contemplate God face to face,

not as a Judge, but as a loving Father who is waiting for us to embrace us.

Professionals who have daily contact with pain and suffering

It is not easy to face people in pain day after day and maintain a keen interest in their problems and sorrows at the same time. There is a risk of dealing with pain in an anonymous way, trying to falsely lighten the atmosphere in which these professionals constantly live.

It is not unusual to find very competent nurses who are no longer deeply moved by pain. Rather than seeing the patient as a human being in the totality of his needs, they center their concern on what is necessary to answer clinical nursing needs. Physicians, as well, are often in danger of considering patients solely from a pragmatic point of view, limiting their attention to diagnosis and choice of therapy.

Apart from contact with the sick person during the activities of diagnosis and treatment planning, physicians are often otherwise invisible, absorbed as they are by a myriad of activities involving paperwork, courses, consulting with colleagues, and conferences.

The words of the Founder of Opus Dei to an orthopedic surgeon are notable. The doctor asked him how it was possible to avoid routine in his profession: "Live in the presence of God, as surely you already do.

Yesterday I visited a sick person whom I love with all of my fatherly heart, and I understand the great priestly work that you physicians do. But do not pride yourself on this, because everyone has a priestly soul! You need to put this priesthood into practice! When you wash your hands, when you put on your white coat, when you put on your gloves, think about God and about this royal

priesthood, to which St Peter refers. Only then you will avoid doing your work like a routine. You will do good to the body and to the soul as well”²³.

The work of doctors and nurses is an uninterrupted and tangible realization of what Our Lord did in His life. Each of His miracles shows it: the blind saw, the dumb spoke, the deaf heard, the crippled walked. He cured epileptics and lepers, and he even raised the dead. A doctor cannot read the Gospel and not see the deep compassion that Jesus showed when He drew near the sick, taking the initiative Himself to meet them, and never ignoring their pleas. He did however set one condition: to have faith, a human and supernatural faith in Him.

When the Apostles asked why they had not been able to cure a father's lunatic son, Jesus answered that it was due to their lack of faith ²⁴.

Doctors nowadays often forget the fundamental need to establish a real relationship of trust with their patients. Patients seem to be expected to put their faith in medication rather than in the person who administers it. Inappropriate bureaucratization in medical practice can effectively destroy the practitioner-patient relationship and reduce it to a mere exchange of information and prescriptions, where statistics take the place of interpersonal communication.

Saint Josemaría Escrivá reminded doctors of the unique dimension of their personal relationship with each patient, and encouraged them to avoid falling into routine in their work. He asked physicians to have their hearts in tune in with that of God. This was not sentimentalism, but a strong conviction that one cannot enter the medical profession as if it were just like any other

profession, not even for the love of science alone.

When asked by nurses how they could improve their work, he answered: “We need many Christian nurses. Your work is a priesthood, much more than the doctor’s work. I say much more because you have the gentleness, the immediacy of always being near the patient [...] I believe that to be a nurse one needs a true Christian vocation. To perfect this vocation you need to be scientifically well prepared and have great gentleness” ²⁵.

On another occasion he explained this idea further: “May God bless you! Think that you are taking care of the Holy Family of Nazareth and that the sick person is Jesus [...] Or think it’s His Mother. Treat them with love, with care, with gentleness. Make sure they are not wanting in anything, especially spiritual help

[...]. I pray for you because I think of the good or harm that you can do. A person who is spiritually well prepared can be told about the state of his health frankly. But if this is not the case, then you need to take advantage of every opportunity to help them to go to confession and receive Holy Communion, and then to receive them again. And the moment will come in which this person, who is sick, wants to be told that he is going to heaven. I myself know of some beautiful examples” ²⁶.

More than once Saint Josemaría emphasised the priestly dimension of this work: “I become moved when they tell me something many of you already know. Doctors have to do what good confessors do, but in the material sphere. Doctors must not only worry about the physical side but about the soul as well” ²⁷.

Professional prestige: a way of glorifying God

Saint Josemaría Escrivá knew how to apply the universal call to holiness to the medical profession. To seek holiness in our work we must also seek to carry out that work perfectly, with professional competence.

“There is no excuse for those who could be scholars and are not” ²⁸.

“Sanctity is made up of heroic acts. Therefore, in our work we are asked for the heroism of finishing properly the tasks committed to us, day after day, even though they are the same tasks. If we don’t, then we do not want to be saints” ²⁹. The Founder of Opus Dei also often referred to the need for the physician to have a priestly soul. “You say that you are now beginning to understand what a priestly soul means. Don’t be annoyed with me if I tell you that the facts show that you only realise it in theory. Every day the same thing

happens to you: at night time, during the examination, it is all desire and resolutions; during the morning and afternoon at work, it is all objections and excuses. Are you in this way living a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ?” ³⁰.

He also understood the connection between holiness and the interests of the human intellect: “If you are to serve God with your mind, to study is a grave obligation for you” ³¹, and “Add a supernatural motive to your ordinary work and you will have sanctified it” ³².

And again talking to doctors, Saint Josemaría said: “Imitate Him; in this way you will become more refined, more Christian each day; not only more knowledgeable, not only more of an expert, but more like one of Christ’s disciples” ³³.

Saint Josemaría often helped doctors and nurses to compare their work to that of a priest. He spoke of their work as a sacred mission, because they are so near to suffering people, images of Christ on the Cross. Their affection and care remind us of the compassionate love Jesus had for the sick during His earthly life. For these reasons, Saint Josemaría Escrivá spoke very clearly of the need to pursue the medical or nursing vocation with a truly professional attitude: with scientific expertise, the loving care of a mother, and human and supernatural hope.

After doctors and nurses came patients. It was their turn to be spoken to about God's love, which Saint Josemaría Escrivá was able to bring to the sick. It is difficult to truly understand an illness if one has not, at least once, experienced its hardship and those moments of temptation to anger or rejection.

Saint Josemaría Escrivá was able to speak so clearly and lovingly of pain and suffering because he had experienced them in his own life. He coped with them due to his faith, because he believed in God's love. He trusted God with the confidence that a small child has in his Father. He conveyed this attitude clearly in his preaching, and his actions spoke as eloquently as his words. Anyone turning to Saint Josemaría to confide their pain and sorrow will learn to entrust their sufferings to God.

Notes

1. JOHN PAUL II, Apost. *Letter Salvifici Doloris*, 4.

2. *Ibidem*, 9.

3. Cf. C.S. LEWIS, *A Grief Observed*, London (as N. W. Clerk) 1961.

4. Cf. *The Forge*, 987.

5. *The Way*, 439.
6. *Ibidem*, 208.
7. *Ibidem*, 209.
8. *Ibidem*, 219.
9. Cf. *Salvifici Doloris*, 18.
10. *The Forge*, 66.
11. *Ibidem*, 816.
12. *Salvifici Doloris*, 13.
13. *The Way*, 217.
14. *Salvifici Doloris*, 22.
- 15 . V. FRANKL, *Homo Patiens*, Brezzo di Boderò 1979, p. 98 (my translation).
16. A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame 1984, pp. 18-19.
17. *Salvifici Doloris*, 25.

18. Mt 25:34-41.

19. Cf. G. HERRANZ, *Sin miedo a la vida y sin miedo a la muerte. Palabras de Monseñor Josemaría*

Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás a médicos y enfermos, in DEL PORTILLO, PONZ et al., *En Memoria de Mons. Josemaría*

Escrivá de Balaguer, Pamplona 1976, p. 164 (my translation).

20. *The Way*, 419.

21. P. URBANO, *El hombre de Villa Tevere*, Barcelona 1994, p. 235 (my translation).

22. *The Way of the Cross*, 3, 4.

23. Cf. G. HERRANZ, *Sin miedo a la vida...*, op. cit., pp. 158-159 (my translation).

24. Cf. Mt 17:14-20.

25. Cf. G. HERRANZ, *Sin miedo a la vida...*, p. 159 (my translation).

26 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 161.

27 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 159.

28 *The Way*, 332.

29 *Furrow*, 529.

30 *Ibidem*, 499.

31 *The Way*, 336.

32 *Ibidem*, 359.

33 Cf. G. HERRANZ, *Sin miedo a la vida...*, p. 160 (my translation).

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P. Binetti

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