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The Mystery of Suffering

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The Mystery of Suffering



T. JANE FRANCES DE CHANTAL tells of St. Francis de Sales sorrowing over the corpse of his mother: "He wept over his good mother more tears, as he told me, than he had shed since he had been a priest, but not tears of bitterness, 'for,' he added, 'it was a calm sorrow though a sharp one. I said to God like David: "I was dumb, and I opened not my mouth, because Thou hast done it" (Ps. xxxviii. 10). If it had not been for that, doubtless I should have broken out into passionate lamentations; but I dared not cry out under the blows of that Fatherly hand'" (From St. Chantal's testimony for St. Francis de Sales' canonization). A mark of sainthood is keen-sightedness in finding the hand of God in the vicissitudes of life. The place of suffering in religion, in repentance, in perfection, is not commonly enough known. The least known of all wisdom is the philosophy of suffering, a wisdom purely religious. Nothing is so hard to learn as the lesson of Calvary. "And calling the multitude together with His disciples, He said to them: If any man will follow Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark viii. 34).

This stern test of fellowship with Christ is expressed by Father Thomas of Jesus, as follows: "Thus Christ has declared in His Gospel that He will acknowledge

none for His disciples but crucified men" (*Sufferings of Jesus*, xlii., 2).

St. Luke tells us that when our Lord prophesied to His followers the fate that was before Him, "they understood none of these things, and this word was hid from them, and they understood not the things that were said" (Luke xviii. 31-34). This is a triple statement of a thrice-dyed ignorance of the divine reason of suffering. Involuntary suffering they might have understood; but that He should be "offered because He willed it" (Is. liii. 7)—a rebellious *no* was cast back at Him with triple emphasis.

The value of knowing the reason of suffering is that it mitigates the pain; it justifies St. Francis de Sales in his calmness of sorrow; it is an incentive to assume pain for the divine reason of Calvary, and to praise it and to propagate it. Ignorance of the source of evil is almost an excuse for falling into it; if any excuse avails for flight in battle it is: We were ambushed.

The most complete misery is that which I cannot explain; it is like the fright from ghostly apparitions. A fit of causeless depression of spirits is often worse agony than anguish at a friend's deathbed. Reason demands a cause everywhere and of everything; the mind cannot work without material to work on; otherwise it acts like an engine spinning its wheels on slippery rails. The miseries of this life are insupportable only to one who will not perceive their origin and cause—the hand of God balancing sin with justice. This is not stoicism. "It is not," says Tauler, "that a man is inaccessible to all external emotion. No; certainly not. To be truly patient is to hold for certain that no man can do us wrong"—so brightly conscious are we of our deservings.

If the Apostles, on the occasion referred to, had risen to the resignation of faith, and believed, on their Master's word, that He must enter His glory only by suffering these awful things (Luke xxiv. 26), they would have obeyed Him intelligently, exactly; they would not have fled away ignominiously; Peter would not have denied Him; John would not have been their solitary representative on Calvary; their eyes would not have been bandaged by triple folds of misgivings, even after the Resurrection; Thomas would not have earned the ignoble distinction of being the doubting Apostle.

How different the case of Mary, who for her acceptance of the mystery of suffering is crowned with the high title of Mother of Sorrows. She said nothing, but she believed all; listened and looked and believed; and then she suffered, indescribably, efficaciously, "That out of many hearts, thoughts might be revealed" (Luke ii. 35).

That much we can do, each in his place and measure, if we shall but learn the mystery of suffering, which is naught else than the bridge between sin and atonement. Then our abandonment to divine Providence (in all the meanings of submission to God's good pleasure) would be a flow of sweet water from the deeper springs of consolation. And our love of Jesus Crucified would be perfect, for it would be sympathetic. The cause of sorrow is God's purpose to remit sin by an adequate atonement in which each of us shall have a share: "Wherefore Jesus, also, that He might sanctify the people by His own Blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth, therefore, to Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. xiii. 12, 13). The reason of the alliance of sanctification with suffering is sin, and the decree that "with-

out the shedding of blood there shall be no remission" (Heb. ix. 22). The religious definition of suffering is this: It is the means of the sanctification of our souls by the painful mingling of Christ's Blood with our own. Herein is the secret of the mystery of suffering, both now and in purgatory, nay it is the secret of heaven's joy. St. Catherine of Genoa suffered acute physical pain in the latter part of her life. And it was said that her friends "beheld heaven in her soul, and purgatory in her agonized body" (*Life*, ch. xxxviii.).

We have an inkling of our relation to pain when we realize that sin is a hurt to nature; the terms abnormal, deordinate, disintegrating, are all descriptive no less of sin than of sadness. Know sin and you know suffering in its roots. Whatsoever is not known in its cause is not well known in its effects, is hardly known at all. Sin partly known is a violation of law and order; fully known it is a personal insult to the Deity, a breach of friendship with the Eternal Father, meaning deordination, indeed, but principally bitter woe to the sinner.

The effect on an heroic soul of knowing this clearly is shown in the case of St. Catherine of Genoa. In her *Spiritual Dialogue*, she thus makes the soul address the body and self-love: "My brothers, I have come to know that God is about to do a work of love in my behalf, and therefore I shall take no more heed of you, your needs or your words. Under the appearance of good and necessity, you have well nigh led me to the death of sin. Now I intend to do to you what you have wished to do to me, and I shall hold you in no more respect than if you were my deadly enemies. Never expect to be on good terms with me again—give up all hopes of it. Yet I shall do all things in such manner that the necessities of each

shall be satisfied. You led me to do what I ought not, in order to satisfy your appetites; and I will now lead you to do what you wish not, in order to satisfy the spirit. I will not spare you, even if you are worn out, even as you spared me not in so enslaving me that you did with me wholly as you pleased. I hope to bring you into such subjection to myself as to change your natures" (ch. ix.).

St. Thomas teaches that suffering is the absence of a necessary good or the impending loss of it; or it is the intrusion of evil or the impending coming of it. Now there is no human being at any time of his life in whom the co-existence of this cause and effect is not either established, or recently established, or impending. For in Adam, our nature's fountain head, "all have sinned and do need the glory of God" (Rom. iii. 23); all the innocent are liable to sin and dread it, all the penitent lament it: "And if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John i. 8). The whole race constantly suffers from the absence, real or possible, of its supreme need, the love of God: "For we know that every creature groaneth, and travaileth in pain, until now. And not only it, but ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption of the sons of God, the redemption of our body" (Rom. viii. 22). Mark the Apostle's last words, laying down sinfulness as the root of the body's pain. It is notorious that most men spend their whole life in seeking pleasure and shunning pain, never with full success, often with aggravation of their misery. How high a condition is that, in which happiness is not dependent on pleasure. "I used to say to Satan," relates

St. Teresa, "when he suggested to me that I was ruining my health [by my austerities], that my death was of no consequence; when he suggested rest, I replied that I did not want rest but the cross" (*Life*, ch. xiii.). Until one feels thus about dying and resting he will make no great progress.

What then is our joy? It is the joy of penance. St. Peter of Alcantara appeared in a vision to St. Teresa after his death, all resplendent with glory and he said to her: "O blessed penance, which has won for me so great a joy!" It is our only solid joy. Our joy is a sick man's joy in his medicine. We once heard a soldier of the Civil War boast joyfully of his left arm, which had been dreadfully fractured by a gunshot wound, and had been saved by a skillful surgeon extracting a section of the shattered and splintered bones between the wrist and elbow; he was proudly exhibiting and thankfully boasting of a boneless and almost nerveless arm and hand. But it was an arm, nevertheless, a real limb of flesh and blood, and infinitely better than none at all. A wounded man's joy is in the sharpness of the surgeon's knife, and a Christian's joy is in the sharp knife of sorrow for sin, that pain of contrition which cuts deep and true to his heart's core. "To my hearing," cries the royal penitent, "Thou shalt give joy and gladness, and the bones that have been humbled shall rejoice" (Ps. 1. 10). Believe in that joy; crave that joy of God; accustom yourself to the joy of mending your thoughts by painful efforts; of thinking of sin and of suffering and atonement as unified under the cross; of sympathizing with the Redeemer; of bearing the pain of submission to the divine will as the counter-pain of mental or bodily suffering. Do all this and go on doing it by reasoning and by method

and by habit, till at last you can do it by instinct. One must systematically use spiritual means and measures until he becomes simply saturated with this doctrine of the correlation of sin, pain or joy, if he would go on smoothly towards perfection, which is "justice, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. xiv. 17).

Fail not to use the same plan for bodily joy, which, if rational and Christian, must square with that of St. Paul: "I now rejoice in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell within me" (2 Cor. xii. 9). We find joy in the soul's sores by curing them with the salve of the commandments, adding the unction of the counsels of perfection for the period of convalescence and to secure entire recovery. Consider this: if one persists in sin, he suffers as a mere penalty; if he repents, he yet suffers, but joyfully as an atonement.

Joseph was the name of a Christian priest who suffered martyrdom under Sapor, King of Persia, in the fourth century. Being fearfully scourged, and seeing himself covered with his own blood, he lifted his eyes to heaven and joyfully exclaimed, "I return Thee the greatest thanks in my power, O Christ my Lord, for granting me this favor, washing me in my own blood by a second baptism and cleansing me again from my sins" (See *Butler's Lives*, March 14). It was a favorite saying of Father Hecker, that the spirit of the martyrs was needed in our day and country for the spread of the true faith, for that alone, he insisted, forms the missionary type of character.

Love is the source of all joy. Suffering in atonement for sin is suffering for love. Love is just, and so by suffering makes up to the Beloved His losses by sin. And this form of love takes rank before other

forms. Be just before generous; pay your debts before you give to the poor; be penitent before you are heroic. The head of our race is Christ, and His office is as personal to each as it is universal for all: "I would have you to know that the head of every man is Christ" (1 Cor. xi. 3). Now the trysting place of each and all of His members is Calvary: "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all things to Myself" (John xii. 32). Suffering has lifted Him up and enthroned Him; we must know suffering in order to range ourselves beside Him. What love equals that of Christ on the cross! What love is so sorrowful, what sorrow is so lovely! What joy is so quickly got and so surely held as that of the loving sorrow of the cross? "For the love of Christ presseth us: judging this, that if one died for all, then all were dead. And Christ died for all; that they also that live may not now live themselves, but to Him that died for them and rose again" (2 Cor. v. 14, 15). Is not this a joyful solution of the problem of suffering?

What man does to God when he commits sin is one thing; what he causes God to do is another: the Crucifixion of His Only-begotten Son. By sin God is by His very nature compelled to remove love from the throne of joy and place it on the throne of pain, for justice demands this. By sin man does this to God: he seeks joy without love, therefore a sensual joy, an avaricious joy, the joy of hate, of sloth, the joy of pride, disobedience and rebellion, the joy of the beast or the demon which feeds the love of the degenerate child of God. But this joy of the wicked shall perish, and it will be followed by the reaction of sadness, just as is the case with the joy of the drunkard. Conscience rises like the stern prophet before the sinful king of Israel, and stands and points

and threatens, and pronounces awful words of doom. Then follows doubt, dread, shame, rage, foreboding: pain in its worst form. This form of suffering is without God in the world and without hope. The other form is the suffering of the penitent: "And David said to Nathan: I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Kings xii. 13), and forthwith "his tears became his bread day and night" (Ps. xli. 4), till the prophet's message of pardon: "Thy sin is forgiven thee," had penetrated to his deepest soul with its message of joy.

Our consolation is, therefore a product of courageous suffering. Perfect joy we cannot have here below, and yet a good meed of repose of mind is sure to come by the postponement of unmixed joy till we enjoy it with Christ in the next life. "If He," says St. Augustine, "Who came into this world without sin, did not depart hence without scourges, how shall they who have lived here in sin not be deserving of scourges?"

A very sweet joy is that which submerges all carnal, all rebellious joys, and is content to rejoice in the more spiritual faculties, with a pleasure perceptible only in the finer sensibilities. Of a devout penitent of his St. Vincent de Paul said: "It is nothing to see her in health; you ought to see her in sickness if you would learn her soul's quality."

This love of suffering is unknown to the worlding, for whom suicide is so often the besetting temptation under incurable disease. And yet men often sneer at the Christian's exercises of self-subjugation as self-torture, as inhuman, morbid, gloomy. But what of the self-torture of the man who practices vice, or of one less guilty, but not less foolish, who wears away his life in the pursuit of money or of power? Not self-torture alone but self-

destruction it should be called, the destruction of the good self by the bad self. The self-chosen suffering of the Christian is just the reverse; it is the painful inner process of the enslavement by the good self of the bad self, done in union with Christ Crucified. This is the surest joy of a rational existence, the only outlet for the noble longing of the spirit towards perfect bliss. St. Teresa says that the only remedy for the tedium of a long life, is to suffer for Christ's sake. "What medicine hast Thou, O God, for such misery? There is none, save to suffer for Thy sake" (Exclamation xiv.).

"The thought possessed me that in order to obtain heaven it was necessary to give up the earth"—the testimony of St. Bernard, and a very simple truth. It is the main truth, after all, of our divine doctrine, as far as that doctrine tells of means to an end. But not for obtaining heaven alone is abandonment to holy pain efficacious, for it bestows on its adepts the mastery of the earth. During the many years that that same St. Bernard's life, attenuated by years of religious asceticism, hung by a thread, he chained to God's will whole nations of men.

He was a marvelous combination of both the contemplative and the active spirit, showing how both work together unto joy. For the contemplative saint provides himself with food and sleep and clothes and shelter only sufficient to ward off death; because the nearer he is to expiring the closer is his view of God, his only joy. The saint of the active life makes barely sufficient provision of necessary bodily helps to ward off the collapse of his physical powers—the nearer he is to fainting the better does he enjoy the consolation of his labors for souls. One can see how easily the two types may blend into

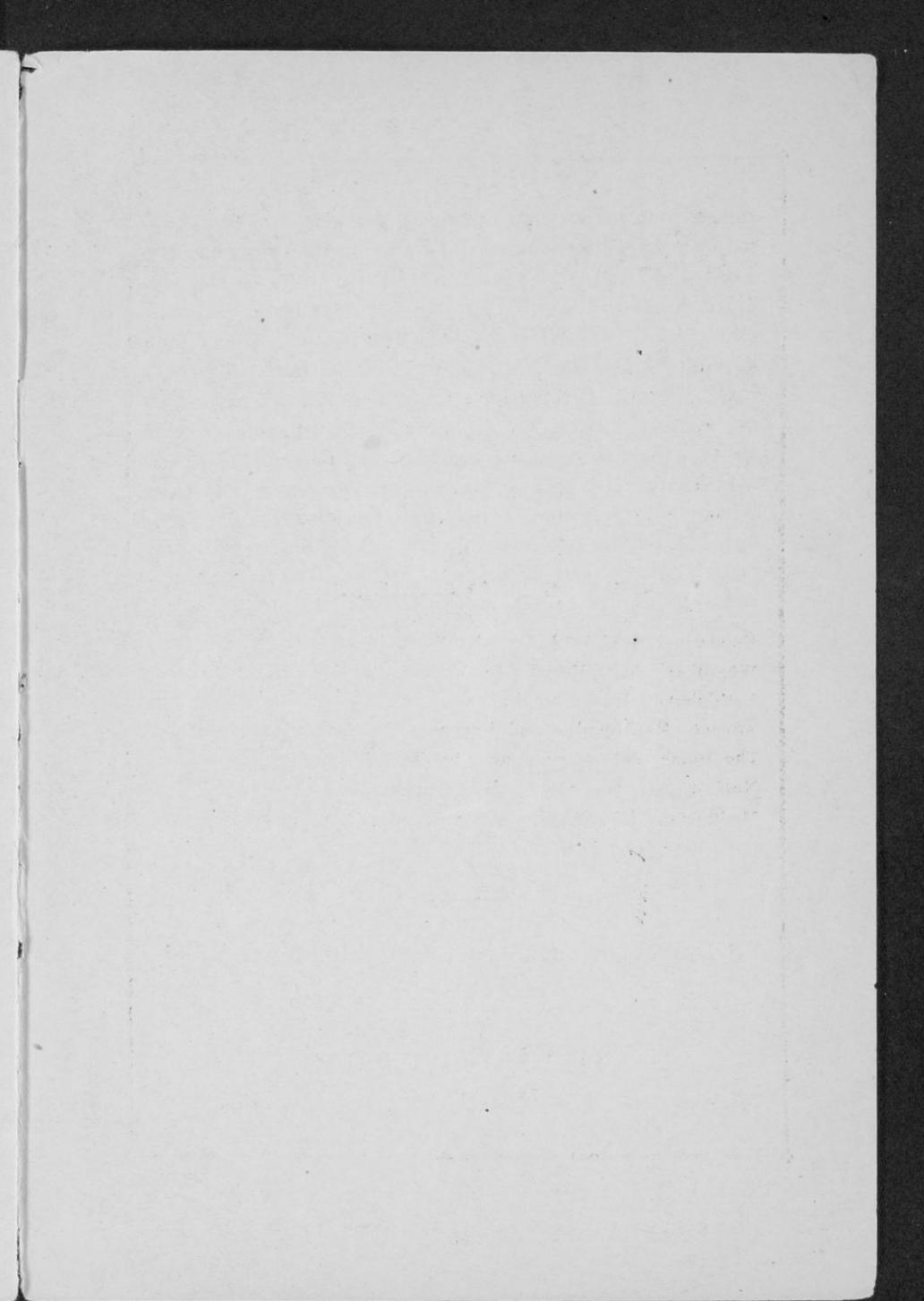
one. The ordinary good Christian barely keeps within the Church's penal laws of fasting and abstinence; and even he has no small sweetness of devotion; for the motives of all true Christians are identically those of Calvary.

"A soul that is full," says the Wise Man, "shall tread on the honeycomb; but a soul that is hungry shall take even bitter for sweet" (Prov. xxvii. 7). How accurate a statement of the two conditions. When sated with an over-plenty of every good thing this world can offer, the soul disregards the heavenly banquet of the Holy Spirit. When dry and hungry, the least thought of God tastes sweet. Even the anger of God is a boon to a soul that is angry with itself, for it is the anger of a father; it bestows first filial fear and then joyful love.

What, then, shall I do about joy and suffering? The answer depends on your attitude of mind about sin and its divine Victim. What think you of Calvary, whose joy is there? What think you of Christ Crucified, what joy is His? In seeking for joy place yourself face to face with the God-man injured by your sins, and realize that the penalty is measured by the *lex talionis*, a life for a life. But in paying this penalty, bear in mind that you instantly recover your own life enriched and ennobled by Christ's.

Let us conclude these thoughts on the mystery of sorrow and joy by Newman's profession of faith in the Catholic principle of asceticism: "O my Lord Jesus, I believe, and by Thy grace will ever believe and hold, and I know that it is true, and will be true to the end of the world, that nothing great is done without suffering, without humiliation, and all things are possible by means of it. I believe, O my God, that poverty is better than

riches, pain better than pleasure, obscurity and contempt than name, and ignominy and reproach than honor. My Lord, I do not ask Thee to bring these trials on me, for I know not if I could face them; but at least, O Lord, whether I be in prosperity or adversity, I will believe that it is as I have said. I will never have faith in riches, rank, power, or reputation. I will never set my heart on worldly success or on worldly advantages. I will never wish for what men call the prizes of life. I will ever, with Thy grace, make much of those who are despised or neglected, honor the poor, revere the suffering, and admire and venerate Thy saints and confessors, and take my part with them in spite of the world" (*Meditations*).



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