

A.M.D.G.

Our Lady of Sorrows, Sept. 15th, 2017

Have you noticed how we celebrate suffering in the Catholic tradition? The feast today, Our Lady of Sorrows, and yesterday's, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, are examples in point. We even put up crosses of Jesus on the walls everywhere. We celebrate boldly the torturous death of our leader. Don't you think that is strange? Who rejoices in suffering? What products are marketed with the catch phrase: come, suffer with this item? I don't think that you would get many buyers.

Someone should have told St. Paul and the early Christians, and the Church down the centuries, to lay off talk of Jesus on the cross. Yet what we see is the exact opposite. St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, *"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."* (1Cor. 2:2) What?

Yet, there is something profound here that we must understand. We celebrate suffering for a reason. Paradoxically, suffering can be our liberation. How many of you here have gone through a period of suffering? Now, I am not talking about physical pain. I broke my ankle once, on the first game of the season. A big, fat kid fell on me. That was painful. It looked like I had two plums embedded in my skin. But watching the team from the sidelines for ten weeks with a cast on my leg was suffering. Suffering is something spiritual, not physical. The death of a loved one, the estrangement from a family member, rejection, humiliation, failure, betrayal, injustice; that is suffering. Who here has suffered such things? Jesus suffered them on the cross. The physical pain was extreme, of course, but the rejection and humiliation and betrayal and injustice were the deeper wounds. Mary, his mother, stood and watched as he endured all of these things, and her heart was shattered to pieces as he cried out in his agony. That is what we celebrate today. Why do we remember such things? Because Christ conquered through it all, and in that victory he transformed the meaning of suffering. No longer was it merely destructive and menacing to the soul. Suffering became an instrument of our redemption, a path to liberation, if we unite ourselves with Him.

Now, it is not magic. Jesus does not miraculously take away our suffering. Everybody has to suffer in life. The critical point is how we deal with it. We can let the suffering crush us. We can

wallow in it and let it eat our insides. We can try to run away from it by seeking pleasure or some other medication. We can turn bitter and become angry men, hateful towards others and towards ourselves. All of those are options. Or, we can suffer with Christ, as Mary did. That means we first face the suffering, and then accept it, and then endure patiently through it, and then offer it all up to the Father for our sins and the sins of others. It is not easy. But we are not alone. We will have Christ with us, and that is a strength that cannot be contained. As we pass through it all we will arrive on the other side, liberated from the suffering and from our imperfections. In the Scriptures there is an image that is often used, that of gold purified in the fire. When gold is mined it is full of imperfections, other metal and rock. But as it heats up in the furnace, the imperfections slowly melt away, burned up and destroyed in the intense heat, until all that is left is pure gold.

So, yes, we celebrate suffering because in Christ it is the path to our liberation and new life. That is our proclamation to the world.