

Suffering Saints- What They Can Teach Us

About Faithfully Weathering Life's Trials

by Lisa Socarras

(Article found at National Catholic Register)

By 1941, Karol Wojtyla had suffered the loss of all of his immediate family, including his mother, brother and father. His sister died before he was born.

“At 20, I had already lost all the people I loved,” the future Blessed Pope John Paul II was quoted as saying.

He was living in the midst of the Nazi German occupation of his native Poland, following his father’s death, when the call to the priesthood became increasingly clear. He began his studies at the underground seminary in Krakow, certain of God’s will for his life.

Our great heroes of faith, the saints, lived lives that inspire and motivate us to reach a deeper spiritual union with God. In reading through the pages of their biographies, a common theme seems to echo in their lives: They suffered.

Many suffered the loss of their mothers in childhood. In addition to John Paul II, there were Sts. Thérèse of Lisieux, Teresa of Avila, Philip Neri, Catherine Labouré, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Dymphna, Gemma Galgani, Gabriel of the Sorrows and Andre Bessette, who lost both parents by age 12.

At age 9, young Catherine Labouré put her arms around a statue of Our Lady and told her that she would be her mother. Fifteen years later, in 1830, Mary appeared to her in the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity in Rue de Bac in Paris and presented her with the Miraculous Medal.

In addition to suffering loss of beloved family, the saints often suffered health problems, disappointments, rejection and criticism by superiors. They carried the cross, and through the cross, they reached perfection. The cross was their path to true love, communion with God and abandonment of their own will to the will of the Father.

To share in redemptive suffering humbly allowed them the opportunity to totally rely on God, who never disappoints.

“The earmark of a saint is great suffering, along with great joy. They travel together. If you just suffer, how boring, if all you are is a suffering complainer,” explained Father Joseph Clark, of the Diocese of Arlington, Va., in residence at St. Michael’s Catholic Church in Annandale, Va.

“Some great saints have suffered greatly, and they didn’t complain to anyone. In fact, they sought greater suffering because they saw the supernatural use. Apart from the egoistic conclusion that suffering is done for the sake of the sufferer to have his communion with God, there is also the sense that when you have that communion with God through suffering, those acts and things you do in embracing your cross have a redemptive value for the community also.”

The saints recognize suffering's higher purpose.

"God is stimulating the human person to that communion with him through a condition which the inadequacy of life and the privations of life serve now as a catalyst toward a transcendent spiritual move to the divine," said Father Clark. "If you didn't suffer, you would think this was heaven on earth."

The great mystic St. John of the Cross wrote of the positive effects of suffering on the soul, which he experienced firsthand while imprisoned in Toledo, Spain, in 1577. From his 6-foot-by-10-foot cell, he overcame physical suffering and reached a higher level of union with God, through mystical illumination.

"Do not allow yourselves to be overly saddened by the unfortunate accidents of this world," he wrote. "You are not aware of the benefits they bring and by what secret judgment of God they are arranged for the eternal joy of the elect."

Pope John Paul II's 1984 apostolic letter, *Salvifici Doloris* (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering), addresses the mystery of human suffering.

"Suffering seems to belong to man's transcendence: It is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense 'destined' to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way," he stated.

"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. To this grace many saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius of Loyola and others, owe their profound conversion. A 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," Pope John Paul II wrote in the section titled "The Gospel of Suffering."

Would the saints have become such great saints without suffering? Father Clark said that we don't know; only their spiritual directors would know that answer. We do know that the rest of us need mortification to purify our hearts and to help us grow in holiness. Through our sufferings, we learn obedience to God and grow in virtues such as humility and fortitude.

"The Fathers of the Church say that man is given a *capax Dei*, a capacity for God, and this capacity for God is only fully animated when suffering is introduced into the life of the human person," said Father Clark.

He explained why suffering is dreaded by the world: "Anything that inhibits the greater maximizing of sensible fulfillments is the ultimate evil, and they dread suffering because they don't see that the ultimate good of the human soul is communion with God."

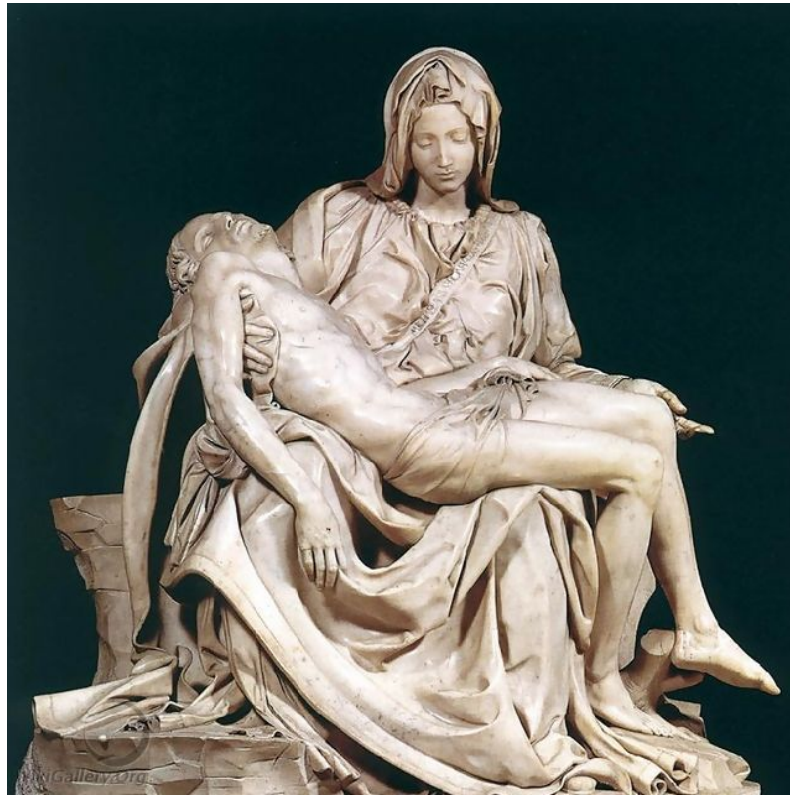
The Blessed Mother can be a source of strength and role model for us in our suffering through her example of heroic virtue and love.

"I think of the Pietà in our church," says Mary Lenaburg, wife and mother of two from Fairfax, Va. Her 19-year-old daughter Courtney has suffered daily seizures since she was an infant, leaving her profoundly disabled and unable to see, speak or walk.

"I hold my daughter like Mary held Jesus and say, 'I'm here,'" Lenaburg said. "At the lowest moments, you hit your knees and imagine the blessed Lady when you don't know if you can withstand it anymore."

She said that the gift of her joy-filled daughter, whose sole vocation is to love, has taught her family, friends, community and parish about what it means to follow Christ.

“We are here to know him, love him and serve him so that we can be with him in the next life, and we would not have any of that if we didn’t have her,” said Lenaburg. “That’s where you find the joy.”



BECOMING WHO WE ARE

BY FATHER DWIGHT LONGENECKER

(Article found at NCRegister.com)

In ministering as a Catholic priest, I sometimes get the impression that Catholics are more interested in the minimum than the maximum.

What I mean is that too many Catholics seem to have heard that what is required to be a good Catholic is to go to Mass once a week and confession once a year. That’s it.

Therefore, they do their duty. They check the boxes. They complete the test. They reckon they’ve done just enough to stay out of hell, that God will forgive them the rest, and they’ll coast into heaven having done what’s required.

They seem, to me, like the high-school kid who was told by his teacher that his term paper needed to be five pages long with footnotes, so he turns in a mediocre effort that is five pages of mush with a few footnotes.

This isn't what a term paper is for. The term paper is a set part of the coursework so the student will not just learn how to write a five-page paper, but also learn something in the process. The term paper was a means to an end. It was not an end in itself.

So it is with the practice of the Catholic faith. The rules and regulations of the Catholic faith — going to Mass each Sunday and confession once a year, the precepts of the Church and the Ten Commandments — these strictures and structures are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

They are the rules for the game of sainthood. They are the map for the journey.

The game and the journey are far greater. The destination of the journey and the goal of the game is sanctity. To put it plainly: All of us are supposed to become saints.

Our hearts should burn with the words of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: “You must be a whole saint or no saint at all!”

Once we have entered into the body of Christ through baptism, our destiny is total sanctity. In the Eastern Church, they call this theosis. It means becoming transformed into the full image of Christ.

In St. Paul's words to the Ephesians, it means “growing up into the full humanity of Jesus.” A saint is not simply a person who is more pious than anyone else. A saint is a person who has become more himself than anyone else.

A saint is an ordinary person who has been made complete and whole and has become the fully alive person God created him to be.

I get the feeling, however, that most Catholics find such an idea to be excessive or extreme. It is as if they are saying to God, “You know, I'm not such a great person. I'm not ambitious. I know you are preparing all those mansions in heaven. Well, I'll be content with a little shed down in the lower gardens. That's all right for me. Just as long as I squeeze through the pearly gates, I'll be fine.”

God has much greater things prepared for us than we can ever dare to hope or imagine. He wants nothing less than our total transformation. He created us to be shining stars in the heavens — brilliant examples of his complete, creative love. He wants us to enjoy the fullness of life in Christ, and many seem content with just getting by.

One of the reasons we celebrate All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day one day after the other is a reminder that all souls are called to be saints. We pray for the repose of the souls of our loved ones on All Souls' Day, but why do we do this?

Saying that we pray “for their repose” makes it sound passive. Are we simply praying that they will rest in peace? There is more to it than that. We are also praying that God will continue his work of grace in their lives and bring them to the full state of holiness and sanctity for which they were created.

Purgatory is not simply a place of rest. When we die, if we are not in mortal sin, we do not simply go to a retirement home in the sky. Purgatory is not a place of hammocks on the beach, where we can finally put up our feet and have a well-deserved rest.

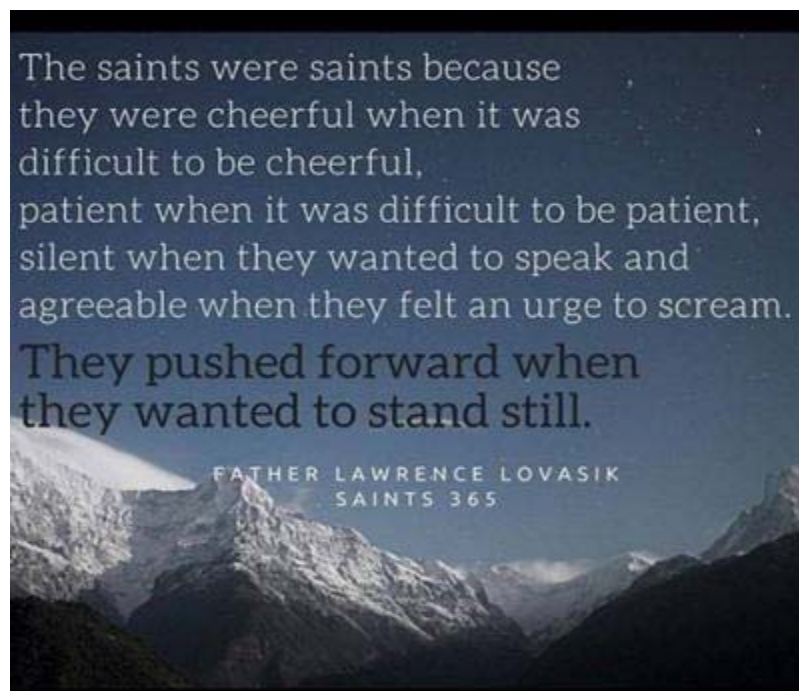
Purgatory is the place where we finish the work we have left undone on this earth. In purgatory, our remaining weakness, cowardice, lust, greed and selfishness are burned away. Purgatory is a place of progress, not simply a place of peace.

When we pray for our loved ones on All Souls' Day and throughout the month of November, we should be praying in an active way, not only that they will find peace, but that they will grow up into the full stature of Christ Jesus and rapidly rid themselves of every weight that holds them back — so they might become the radiant images of Christ they were created to be.

As for ourselves, there is a beautiful prayer in the funeral service: “That God might help us to use aright the time that is left to us here on earth.”

The work of becoming a saint is easier here than it is in purgatory. All of us still have plenty of work to do as we cooperate with God's grace in the great adventure of sanctity. This work requires a courageous and joyful spirit. It requires discipline and the spirit of the warrior.

Again, we hear the call of little St. Thérèse, who said to her novices, “Sanctity: It must be won at the point of a sword!”



CLOSING REFLECTION: LITANY OF THE SAINTS

Lord, have mercy on us. (Lord, have mercy on us.)
Christ, have mercy on us. (Christ, have mercy on us.)
Lord, have mercy on us. (Lord, have mercy on us.)

Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us.
Saint Michael, Pray for us.

Holy angels of God, Pray for us.
Saint Joseph, Pray for us.
Saint John the Baptist, Pray for us.
Saint Peter and Saint Paul, Pray for us.
Saint Andrew, Pray for us.
Saint John, Pray for us.
Saint Mary Magdalene, Pray for us.
Saint Stephen, Pray for us.
Saint Ignatius, Pray for us.
Saint Lawrence, Pray for us.
Saint Perpetua and Saint Felicity, Pray for us.
Saint Agnes, Pray for us.
Saint Gregory, Pray for us.
Saint Augustine, Pray for us.
Saint Athanasius, Pray for us.
Saint Basil, Pray for us.
Saint Martin, Pray for us.
Saint Benedict, Pray for us.
Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, Pray for us.
Saint Francis Xavier, Pray for us.
Saint John Vianney, Pray for us.
Saint Catherine, Pray for us.
Saint Theresa, Pray for us.
All you saints of God, Pray for us.

Lord, be merciful, Lord, save us.
From all harm, Lord, save us.
From every sin, Lord, save us.
From all temptations, Lord, save us.
From everlasting death, Lord, save us.
By Your coming among us, Lord, save us.
By Your death and rising to new life, Lord, save us.
By Your gift of the Holy Spirit, Lord, save us.

Be merciful to us sinners, Lord, hear our prayer.
Guide and protect Your Holy Church, Lord, hear our prayer.

Guide and protect your holy Church. Keep our Pope and all the clergy in faithful service to Your Church.
Preserve in holy religion the Pope, and all those in holy Orders. Humble the enemies of holy Church.
Give peace and unity to the whole Christian people,

R: Lord, hear our prayer.

Bring all people together in trust and peace. Bring back to the unity of the Church all those who are straying, and bring all unbelievers to the light of the Gospel. Strengthen and preserve us in your holy service. Raise our minds to desire the things of heaven,

R: Lord, hear our prayer.

Strengthen us in Your service. Deliver our souls from eternal damnation, and the souls of our brethren, relatives, and benefactors. Give and preserve the fruits of the earth. Grant eternal rest to all the faithful departed.

R: Lord, hear our prayer.

AMEN.

