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ON SUFFERING

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Ever since the commission of original sin by our first parents and as one of the consequences of that sin, suffering has always been and will always be the lot of every human being born into this world. Be it physical pain or sadness or misfortune or anxiety, everyone suffers in one form or another. Some experience more difficult trials than others; some live lives of more or less continual affliction — but suffering is a fact of life for all.

Since suffering, then, is a reality of human existence, what should be our attitude towards it? For multitudes, of course, suffering of whatever kind is an evil to be avoided if at all possible and, if unavoidable, to be reluctantly borne for its duration. If it be a serious and prolonged affliction, such a negative attitude towards suffering breeds frustration, bitterness, even suicidal tendencies. Individuals who react in such fashion are more likely to be irreligious people who live solely for this world and its pleasures and for whom God and morality and heaven and hell mean little or nothing. And so their feelings and reactions towards suffering of any kind are understandably negative and resentful.

In the theological sense of the term, there is but one evil and that is the moral evil which is sin. The only real evil in the world is that which is offensive to God and a violation of His eternal law. If suffering were evil, would Christ have suffered for us, would the saints and martyrs have suffered, would holy men and women throughout the Christian centuries have sought and willingly endured trials and tribulations of all kinds to give glory to God and to atone for sin? If suffering were evil, would Christ have preached the necessity of penance and sacrifice for those who desire or claim to be His followers?

Nor must we fail to note as a major cause of anxiety and concern (and, hence, of suffering) for all honorable and conscientious men and women the rampant immorality destroying our nation and also, for us traditional Roman Catholics, the woeful human condition of our beloved church. How much very real suffering these have caused to countless individuals, God alone knows — but it is considerable indeed.

(One can only wonder how long more the avenging hand of God will be restrained, how long more before the wrath of God will be released upon our perverse generation. Surely the Almighty will not permit His eternal law to be endlessly scorned and mocked. As distressful as the thought may be, is it not conceivable that the wrath of God is now beginning to manifest itself in the form of the horrendous AIDS disease? It is estimated on very good authority that — if no cure for it is discovered and if the present rate of increase of the disease continues — by 1991, four years from now, 484,000 people in this country alone will be dying from AIDS and some five to ten million will be infected with the AIDS virus. Could this be the ultimate punishment of an all-just God upon the human race for its worldwide rejection of Him and His moral law?)

But what should be the attitude of the true Christian towards suffering and how should he respond to it? Well, he should certainly view it and react towards it in a spiritual, supernatural manner as befits one who is truly a follower of the Son of God. He should realize that whatever trials, tribulations, afflictions he may have are either willed or permitted by God. He should strive to offer up his sufferings in union with those of Christ and from supernatural motives such as out of love for God and for His honor and glory, in atonement for sin, for the salvation of souls, etc. He should endeavor to look upon suffering with the mind and spirit of Christ and to be resigned to the will of God. ("Not My will but Thine be done.") Whatever sentiments of bitterness and resentment may come his way should be banished at once for they are not of God and, if permitted to remain, would but negate the supernatural value of his suffering.

But it's one thing to undergo affliction and to suffer adversity with patience and submission to the will of God. It's something else to be joyful in such circumstances, especially if one's sufferings are severe and prolonged. But are not the concepts of joy and suffering incompatible? Not in this context because the joy to which we refer here is an interior, spiritual, supernatural happiness which is completely independent of human sorrow and pain and misery and wretchedness. Sacred Scripture tells us that the disciples *rejoiced* that they were accounted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. Do we not read in Church history that the martyrs (just as human as you and I) joyfully suffered the most cruel persecutions out of love for Christ and in testimony to the faith? No, joy, true Christian joy, and suffering are not at all incompatible.

Certainly, then, any truly traditional Roman Catholic who strives to live his faith to the fullest has every reason to be joyful even under the most trying conditions and most arduous of sufferings. This short life is but a period of probation and trial in which we prove our love for God — and the eternal happiness of the glorious Kingdom of Heaven awaits all who remain faithful unto the end. And how consoling and encouraging are the words of the martyr Saint Paul that "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come..." (Rom. 8, 18) †