

Suffering and the Teachings of Jesus Christ

Rev. Donald J. Rooney
President of the Catholic Association of Diocesan
Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers

In the time that we have together today, I hope to introduce the mystery of human suffering as it is revealed and understood through the teachings of Jesus Christ, in his words and his deeds. The four Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus in our sacred scriptures are filled with examples of Jesus' love in the face of suffering, his exercise of humility and charity seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, and his transcendence of the limits of the self to manifest healing, wholeness, and new life.

As a Catholic pastor, I see this love of God in the eyes of the people I serve every day. It is a mystery that is hard to put into words: the love of a parent who will never give up on their child, no matter how serious the wrongs; a mother who will suffer whatever

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is necessary to overcome obstacles threatening the survival of her family; so many men and women in the military and public service who selflessly risk their lives every day for their brothers and sisters, friends, and even those they do not know. We know people whose lives give testimony to the struggle of ending racism and discrimination and who are willing to cross social and cultural lines that have divided people for generations. This willingness to suffer for another is not a self-emptying that eliminates the self, but rather a love that is its greatest act, its realization. The self is never so strong as when, in its willingness to suffer for another, it has offered itself.

Too often, though, we see conflict test the boundaries of human emotion. What do we do with relationships that are broken? It is almost as though, when we aren't looking, betrayal, infidelity, indifference, selfishness, neglect, or jealousy enter and, like a cancer, eat relationships from within. "Broken" is really a good word: it describes too often today the relationship between races, generations, people of faith, nations, even the relationship between us and our environment. These are instances of the mystery of suffering where it is hard to grasp onto love, because love is no longer the motive for action.

Jesus confronted this absence of love with a new way. He taught us to love our enemies,¹ to step outside the cultural discriminations of his day by not judging² and not excluding those who were

1. "I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." (Mt 5:44–5)

2. "Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and gifts will be given to you." (Lk 6:37–8)

considered “sinful” or “unclean,”³ and to forgive and be reconciled to all. He sought to make his healing and love available to all without favoritism, a universal ministry to save all people.⁴

God is Love

Mysteries are daunting topics. Many people mistakenly dismiss Mysteries as things that cannot be understood when, in fact, in the Christian context, they are things that can be known, but not fully in time. Each time we come close to a Mystery we understand it a bit more, and all the more we realize how much deeper is the Mystery than we had previously thought. To glimpse the reality of suffering from the perspective of Catholic faith, we must first speak for a bit about Christian Mystery of God as Trinity: the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit.

This Trinitarian nature of “God is Love” is unique compared to many world religions. God, as divine Subject (here we could use the word “Lover”) is, by his nature relationship: Lover and Beloved, divine Community. In the Gospels, Jesus reveals God as Trinity, One who is at the same time Revealing Self and Being

Revealed (One who begets, One who is begotten). The two are perfectly one.⁵ God’s perfect self-expression in Love is speaking the *perfect* “Word” of self-revelation.⁶ This self-emptying Word is so perfect that another Subject is being begotten, the Beloved. We use the language of “Persons,” the same substance, indivisible yet distinct in their Person-ality. To know one is to know the other.⁷ Jesus uses the names “Father” and “Son.” This self-gift in fullness involving both Giver and Receiver, Being and Being Begotten, is the eternal reality of God’s life. In this, God is perfectly happy in Godself. The relationship of Love between Giver and Begotten—which is in constant motion and action, is shared, coming forth, and binding the two in perfect love—is the resulting Holy Spirit of God. A distinct Person (though the same God), the Spirit in turn, pours out from the Community of Father and Son as Gift, seeking to share the perfect joy of God.⁸

5. “Jesus, speaking to the Jewish leaders about those who have become his followers: ‘My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.’” (Jn 10:29–30)

6. The beginning of the Gospel of John proclaims Christ as the Word of God preexisting all creation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:1–5, 14)

7. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves.” (Jn 14:9–11)

8. “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth . . . I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you. Whoever

3. “While [Jesus] was at table in [Matthew’s] house, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat with Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees saw this and said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ He heard this and said, ‘Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”’” (Mt 9:10–3.) “So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” (Lk 7:47)

4. “The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?’ (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him and he would have given you living water’” (Jn 4:9–10). “And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, [Jesus] said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Mt 49:50)

In the context of this dynamic action of divine relationship, creation is taking place. God calls us first into his relationship: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain . . .” (Jn 15:16), and gives to humanity a free will so that we may freely choose him in returning love. Without this freedom to choose, we would be little more than slaves, forced to love God. Thus the possibility of sin exists. Sin happens where we choose *other than God*, and the reality of suffering—in the form of brokenness, illness, isolation, fear, or even death—enters into God’s creation as a possibility. We would not be able to freely choose to love God in return, if we weren’t also free to sin. For believers in Jesus, this primordial choice of *other than God* is called “original sin” and is the advent of all suffering to follow.

Pope Francis, just last month, called the Trinity:

the wonderful mystery from which we come and to which we are going, which makes us renew our mission to live in communion with God and to live in communion with each other, based on the model of divine communion. We are required to live not without others, or above or against others, but with others, for others, and in others. . . . The Trinity is also “the final object of our earthly pilgrimage. . . . Therefore, we seek to maintain the “high tone” of our life, recalling the reason and the glory for which we work,

has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him . . . Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.” (Jn 14:16–18, 20–21, 23)

struggle and suffer, and the immense reward to which we are called.⁹

Christians understand sin as an act or a failure to act according to the faithfulness due to God and our relationship with God. Rather than love of God and other, our activity (or lack of it) is directed by selfishness. If God is love, then sin is choosing not to respond in love to that trust, the covenant that God has established with people. For the rupture to be reconciled, forgiveness is required. Sin, as a part of our lives, causes suffering, both spiritually and on all levels of human relationship.

Forgiveness cannot be earned; humans, after sinning against God, are not capable by their own power of reconciling that relationship of Love with God’s justice. In the fullness of time, God stoops down, in Jesus Christ, his definitive “Word,” the invisible God made visible in the Incarnation, to accomplish the work of redemption and communion. The Word became flesh so that God’s creation can once again experience Love’s fullness as the Beloved.

This self-emptying nature of God (*kenosis*) is seen in the Father begetting the Son,¹⁰ in the Son becoming Man, emptying himself and “taking the form of a slave”¹¹ so that the glory of God might be seen, and pouring out his Holy Spirit upon creation.¹² Jesus, in his

9. Pope Francis, *Angelus Message*, May 31, 2015.

10. “All things have been handed over to me by my Father.” (Mt 11:27)

11. “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:5–8)

12. “But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the

Incarnation, did not enter into history with any power or prestige; rather he entered as a humble and poor man in the ancient Near East, the stepson of a carpenter, Joseph. He chose to enter the reality of our poverty and homelessness.¹³ In his humility Jesus gave over to us everything that he received from his Father.¹⁴

He went about preaching of the Kingdom of God, life eternal, an existence of perfect joy, and he alleviated the suffering of others, healing illness, restoring wholeness and casting evil away. He bestowed upon us the new life of adopted children of God¹⁵ calling all creation back together in unity in Godself. Jesus then sent his followers out into the world in poverty to do the same:¹⁶ to continue this mission he received from his Father, the work of mercy, reconciliation, restoration to truth, beauty, and goodness. They went out, knowing that their ministry would lead to persecution

things that are coming. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you.” (Jn 16:13–15)

13. Mt 8:19–20.

14. “I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you gave me is from you, because the words you gave to me I have given to them, and they accepted them and truly understood that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me.” (Jn 17:6–8).

15. “In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved” (Eph 1:4–6)

16. “Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, ‘. . . As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give. Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep.” (Mt 10:5–10)

and death.¹⁷ Finally, Jesus, without sin, freely chose a death for himself that he would not have known otherwise,¹⁸ to atone for our sins and to take upon himself our sentence of God’s justice. In Jesus we see the Father: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love” (Jn 15:9).

The Reality of Suffering

We see in Jesus an approach to suffering that is not avoidance; rather he responds in love, acknowledging and entering into the suffering of others. He experiences grief, rejection, humiliation and ridicule. He opens himself to hatred and hostility, persecution and threats on his life. He accepts betrayal from people who plot against his life as well as from his closest circle of friends. I imagine, as God, how he must have suffered watching how people had no regard for God, no respect for one another, no stewardship for his creation.

There are many examples in the Gospels where Jesus went about in his public ministry, the final three years of his life, healing the sick, delivering people from evil spirits, miraculously providing food for the hungry and bringing people back to life. In his compassion he wills that those who suffer find relief.

17. “You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved.” (Mt 10:22)

18. “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father.” (Jn 10:17–18) “For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. . . .” (Rom 5:6–8)

In what are called his *Beatitudes*, Jesus gives a heavenly perspective to the merit of and reward for embracing human suffering, even persecution at the hands of others for his sake.¹⁹ When asked how many times we must forgive those who cause us suffering, Jesus replies, essentially, as many times as we are asked to forgive.²⁰ One of Jesus's most moving parables is commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son, wherein the father embraces his repentant son after he finally comes home. He rejoices that his son who was as much as dead has come back to life.²¹ It is actually the Father who is more reckless with his mercy than all his sons and daughters who have squandered their inheritance by sin.

Jesus shows by his words and deeds that his disciples must reach out in mercy and healing to all, following his example. So often his compassion drives him to restore order where his creation has become disordered. In one of his parables, he speaks about a man who was attacked by robbers on the road. He is passed by a priest and a Levite, but a Samaritan, his cultural enemy, the least likely to take pity on him, stops, gives him compassionate care, carries him to a local inn and pays for his lodging while his wounds heal.

19. "Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Mt 5:10–12)

20. "Then Peter approaching asked him, 'Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.'" (Mt 18:21–22)

21. "His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began." (Lk 15:21–24)

"Who was the true neighbor?" asks Jesus.²² One day Jesus and his disciples encounter the grief of a widow who follows in funeral procession the body of her deceased only son. The scene so moves Jesus, prefiguring his own death and the grief of his own widowed mother, Mary, that he brings the young man back to life.²³ His own grief at the death of his friend, Lazarus, and his desire to give witness to the life-giving love of God are motives for him to bring Lazarus back to life as well.²⁴ The compassion shown to Jesus by a thief crucified alongside him at Calvary was enough for Jesus, in the midst of dying, to promise him paradise that very day.²⁵

Perhaps the most graphic and starkest teaching of Jesus about our obligation to alleviate the suffering of others comes late in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus speaks of the image of the Son of Man on the throne of judgment on the last day.²⁶ The ones who

22. "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?' He answered, 'The one who treated him with mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Lk 10:36–37)

23. "When the Lord saw her, he was moved with pity for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' He stepped forward and touched the coffin; at this the bearers halted, and he said, 'Young man, I tell you, arise!'" (Lk 7:13–14)

24. "When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Sir, come and see.' And Jesus wept." (Jh 11:32–35)

25. "Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus replied to him, 'Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" (Lk 23:42–43)

26. "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say

will be saved, who will be brought into “the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world,” are those who gave food to the hungry, clothed the naked, gave of themselves to those who suffer. Those who did not do this will go off to eternal punishment. Jesus clearly identifies himself as “one of these least brothers of mine.” In another place Jesus promises that, of his disciples, the one who gives even as much as a glass of cold water to one who is thirsty “will surely not lose his reward.”²⁷ The lesson not to be missed, of course, is that the motive for action is not only to alleviate suffering, but also to make manifest Christ’s unconditional love for the person who is to be served. The one who serves becomes, too, “the least of these,” transformed into the image of Christ.

The transformation that takes place in a true disciple of Jesus Christ is taken literally in his teachings and in the witness of the church. The generations that followed Christ who gladly gave up their lives rather than deny him are an eloquent witness to this faith, as are the many today who lose their lives because they are his followers. In his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul states so simply, so perfectly this transformation: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”²⁸

Suffering as Love

Human suffering, for Catholics, finds its fullest meaning in Jesus Christ, whose love transforms our human suffering. Through his

to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’” (Mt 25:34–40)

27. Mt 12: 42.

28. “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me.” (Gal 2:19–20)

teachings, his words and his deeds, he does not only model a humanity that is compassionate in seeking to end the suffering of others. He freely chooses to enter into relationship with us and to heal our damaged relationships with one another and with God. Consider Jesus Christ, as Christians do, one Person with two natures, divine and human (God incarnate). Anything less than the perfect joy of his divinity is, for him in the context of time and space, some form of privation, or suffering.

Jesus first empties himself of his glory as Son of God in the Incarnation, embracing the suffering of human limitation. But to see this only from a human perspective would be to obscure the love with which God decided to intervene in human history. God, whose love is perfect, chooses to experience that privation; but because his motive is perfect love, and is not limited to human suffering: *it is joy*. What humans would consider pain, privation, loss, and humiliation is, in Christ, the fulfillment of his Father’s will and plan of Love. His selflessness allows all focus (*intention, action*) to be not on the One who loves, but on the beloved.

Further, the pain of human suffering, itself, is the reality that Jesus Christ incorporates into his own Mystery of the invisible God made visible. Having no requirement to know our suffering, he freely chooses it, in life and ultimately in the greatest sacrifice of self-emptying love in his death, passing *through* suffering—not circumventing it—to bring all things into one in him.

Finally, it is in the Mystery of Jesus on the Cross, freely chosen for us (*in our place*) and for our salvation (*in our interest*) that the sacrifice of self-interest in the form of suffering becomes the greatest expression of God. Tortured and crucified as he was, I am certain that this was not a happy moment. At the same time, I believe that the fulfillment of his Father’s will and the accomplishment of

saving his creation, as a shepherd goes out and finds the lost sheep, in this case, humanity produced a perfect joy even in the middle of such pain and sorrow. One theologian said that it was in the Silence of the Cross that the Word of God has its most profound proclamation.

In this mystical life in Christ, Christians learn to embrace their own crosses according to Christ's own example: "We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Gal 12:38–39).²⁹ The self-emptying love of the Father, given completely to the Son, is now given to us: He has given it all to us and has transformed death to life.³⁰ Jesus loved us to the point of death that we might know eternal life: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so should you love one another. This is how all will know you are my disciples" (Jn 13:34–35). "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:11–13).

It is Jesus's love for the Father, to do his will, and his love for us to die for our sake, that gives us a profound challenge to love unconditionally and to enter willingly into the suffering of others for their redemption in the name of Christ. In this understanding, "to take up our crosses" means to bear our suffering patiently, to bear the burden of others' suffering with them, and to make of it

an offering to God, an act of selflessness to balance the scale of the world's acts of selfishness and lack of love.

It calls us to an intensification of compassion, not only to accompany others in their suffering and alleviate it as we are able, but also to enter willingly into the mystery of our suffering in Christ's name. He not only suffered alongside us, in poverty and homelessness and privation, but also entered completely into our suffering and death, accomplishing a favor from the Father that we could never have accomplished ourselves. In the face of our willful lack of love, which is the cause of our suffering, he has willingly emptied himself of life, of blood, of Spirit. On the cross he says, "I thirst," and as the moment of Silence comes on the Cross, Jesus, the Word of God says "It is finished" (Jn 19:28 and 30). His mission is complete.

This was a moment of the greatest agony that a human being could endure, the moment that God had planned for the reconciliation of all humanity with himself. Jesus's human consciousness was aware of every pain and suffering which was known to him, but he also knew that he was fulfilling the will of his Father. This knowledge, because of his Great Love despite the unhappiness of suffering, was for him the source of pure joy. We pray that by his grace we can follow him.

One clarification may be needed in conclusion: as God who is All, God cannot know a lack of love, or suffering. He exists in perfect beatitude, joy in the community of divine relationship. His relationship of Love, however, involves him in the experience of the beloved, and in our case this involves suffering where creation has diminished in love. For this reason, he becomes one of us so that he might use our human experience of suffering to restore us to union with him because he is Love. A sixteenth century mystic

29. "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." (Rom 8:16–17)

30. "If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him." (Rom 6:8)

in the Carmelite tradition, Saint John of the Cross, simply put it this way: “Where there is no love, let me put love, and there I will find love.”

What a remarkable, healing reality union with the divine must be. There may be myriad, parallel ways to achieve this bliss. For Christians, suffering is given as a path: salvation for those who serve to heal the suffering of others, salvation for those who freely choose to endure suffering for the sake of the Kingdom, and salvation for those who are willing to give the ultimate sacrifice of self for another. All of these are forms of self-emptying love, out of which the self realizes fullness in time and is given eternal life.

Fr. Donald Rooney is president of the United States Catholic Association of Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers (CADEIO). He is a Roman Catholic priest of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia. He received a degree in systematic theology from St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia, and is currently pastor of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Parish in Fredericksburg, Virginia.