

## The Mystery of Suffering, the Virtue and Grace of Suffering<sup>1</sup>

St. Peter Julian Eymard to the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament  
Paris, Tuesday, April 24, 1860

[...]

We have set down an important principle: through suffering God sanctifies souls. You probably already know this, but if you have never suffered, you don't. **Today, I want to speak to you about the mystery of suffering.**

God surrounds suffering with mystery – especially the sufferings of love that we can call the sufferings of sanctification. He wraps them up, he hides them from us. He has to wrap them as in a veil of mystery, so that we will not recognize them. We can have a foreboding of sufferings, and, no doubt, know them in advance, and we can say: I will suffer. But the spiritual man does not see the suffering until the time of God has come. God does not manifest it. Each of us has a sum of sufferings that weighs on us like the cost of sanctification – these sufferings will bring about our glory. St. Paul said: ***If you suffer with Jesus Christ, you will also be glorified with him*** (cf. Rm 8:17). He does not speak of any other good works: If you participate in his sufferings, you will participate in his glory – we are assured of our salvation by suffering.

**Even natural suffering** disposes us for sanctification. Natural suffering upsets us, and places us into the hands of God. That is why we say: Prolonged illness brings a person to God. Only two were aware of their future sufferings: our Lord as man always knew and always had them before his eyes – nothing was hidden from him. As God, he knew everything, and he had shown this to his human nature. And the Blessed Virgin, when the old man Simeon had revealed her sufferings (cf. Lk 2:33-35) – she knew about Calvary. Since her immense graces were greater than her crosses, she could bear the sight. God had removed the veil from her eyes. For forty days, God allowed her to enjoy her motherhood, but then came the sorrows and the sword. To others, God does not reveal their sufferings; they know them only if God reveals them, but then they will not feel the sharpness of these sufferings.

However, there are natural ills that we can foresee, such as diseases, but these sufferings are so tempered by daily graces that they hardly deserve the name, because they are only sufferings of nature. We can easily accept them, but only to the point where we cannot claim the prize of victory – our Lord wanted to put this prize only at the crucifixion.

**Why are our sufferings hidden from us?** If we could see all the sufferings, all the crosses that God is preparing for us, we would be frightened. I am not speaking of natural sufferings – they hardly deserve to be called crosses. I know very well that they are difficult, that we feel them severely, but I want to talk of the crosses that God gives us directly, spiritual sufferings – because the others can be relieved: there is no cross of nature without a nearby comforting hand, someone who consoles – you see this all the time. I'm speaking of interior sufferings, of fear, or of dryness – these are very painful. For one who loves God, this is the strongest temptation, enough to frighten one's virtue. If God did not sustain us, we would despair.

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<sup>1</sup> Number 209. *Le mystère de la souffrance, la vertu et la grâce de la souffrance.*

**There are temptations against the faith:** we have no light; and **against hope:** God doesn't love us, and we don't love him, like the temptation of St. Francis of Sales. There are some terrible temptations of despair, those of predestination, of rejection – it's frightful. The greatest saints would yield if God were not watching over them.

**There are temptations against chastity.** Once we have reached one of these states, we need a grace from God to sustain us. These are the greatest sufferings: all the virtues of a person can do nothing in these states – an extra grace is needed to conquer temptation. These sufferings are so great that they could make us die of sorrow.

In natural sufferings, it seems that we do not realize the power of suffering. God seems to have made this power without limits. There are some people who frighten us for having suffered so much, but without reference to God. What the unfortunate Hindus (suffer) for their religion; what the bonzes and mandarins inflict on their enemies. We could say of the crude soul that suffering is its burden. The greater the sensitivity of a person, the more it wants to be perfect, the more it will suffer. If God showed us in advance all our sufferings, we would lose our mind, become insane, and despair.

**God prepares us by his grace** and this preparation is wonderful. He gives it to us drop by drop, without awareness, when he wants to prepare us to be heroes of his love. Naturally, we are horrified by suffering. God prepares us by counsels, even by natural dispositions that he gives us. We arrive at the foot of Calvary and, finally, look at it with resignation and with love. This is our crown.

It is the same with death. God usually prepares us for it, through some sickness – that is the most beautiful flower of those who are predestined. We end up desiring death as a natural thing. We could even say that the principal virtue of grace is to dispose us for suffering.

**The mystery of God is not always due to our weakness, but also to our virtue.** Our virtue can wear thin, but we can never exhaust the truth and the love of God.<sup>2</sup> Since suffering is the keystone of our sanctification, God hides it from us, so that our virtue can always feed on something new. When we have made the rounds of sufferings – they can last a while – they will come to an end. God wants us to go from grace to grace. It's amazing how he seems to play with us in these trials. He shows us certain crosses with all their austerity, in a way that one cross becomes several crosses, appearing to us in different forms. God does this deliberately in order to vary our virtues.

As a precious stone has as many facets as it has sides for us to look at, this suffering that will be our beautiful crown in paradise will have as many facets as there are ways of experiencing it. Light is a pure body: white is the most beautiful; it can be mixed with others, and it comes to us through a prism – that's what makes the rainbow, with its radiance of colors. God does the same, so that our life can be enriched though a single suffering.

What is surprising is that **God does not always want the fulfillment of the suffering he shows us** (cf. Gn 22:12). We see it as an extremely great cross, and whoever sees it as coming from God will adore and accept it, and then it disappears. What happened? While desiring it ahead of time, it happens that the Good Lord no longer wants its execution – and this happens very often. God shows us the suffering with all its severity, but as soon as we accept it, he turns it into a flower; he takes the flower and leaves the cross aside. It's wonderful. Whoever loves God is never satisfied with the present state – we would exhaust ourselves in a single act and would be unhappy. Whoever loves has need of a mystery in order to

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<sup>2</sup> Everything God hides from us, whether it is the truth, his love, or our sufferings, can be due to our weakness, but also due to our virtue. By gradually making these things known, he gives our virtue always new food.

give to its virtue the quality of infinity that is not like God's, but as vast as man can have it, in order to make its love as great as possible.

How will this happen? **We have certain faculties within us:** the imagination sees the suffering and multiplies it a hundredfold; the function of the heart is to suffer; the will is frightened by suffering which is disagreeable to human nature – we were not created to suffer. God presents a cross, and immediately there is war, a struggle. This speck of dust grows like a mountain, so that each faculty can have its suffering.

My Sisters, let us bless the Lord, and **let us not try to probe the depths of the mystery of suffering, and try to lift the veil of the future.** Remember that a cross is a cross only when God's time has come – before that time we will eat a fruit that has not come to maturity. It is only blossoming time. It is a time of grace, and the purpose of this grace is to give us virtue. When it is not yet God's time, it is something that will not go well; we will spoil it instead, because we will be there with our own weakness. It would be presumptuous.

St. Peter wanted to go ahead of time: *When all would have abandoned you*, he said to our Lord, *I am ready to die for you* (cf. Mt 26:33, 35). He did not have the grace; he became a renegade. Thirty years later, on Montorio in Rome, the cross became his triumph. The apostles also spoke like him, but they were irresponsible; when our Lord was arrested, they all left him and fled (cf. Mk 14:50). You must not anticipate your crosses; look at your weakness. The Good Lord will certainly send some to you; it suffices to accept them if God shows them to you. If he does not show you any, allow him [to keep hidden] the mystery of the cross. You would be imprudent to anticipate it.

**Many souls are imprudent: they want to confront the cross.** This seems very good – they are imitating St. Peter. We need the humility of the cross: when the time comes, grace will lead the way; it goes ahead of you, it accompanies you, and it follows you – then, go to meet the cross. God precedes it; he is with you. There is an article of faith that our trials will never be greater than our strength. St. Augustine says: God proportions our trials according to our weakness; and St. Paul is even stronger: ***God will not let you be tried beyond your strength*** (cf. 1 Cor 10:13). From this, we can state a principle that if I feel abandoned, it is I who have abandoned the Good Lord – he does not abandon me. We can draw a practical conclusion: **it is not prudent for us to imagine our future crosses when God does not show them to us; not having the grace when we bring them to mind, we expose ourselves to become troubled.**

Here is the advice of the masters of the spiritual life: to want a cross ahead of its time, is a temptation. Let us accept it when the Good Lord shows it to us in his Providence. Let us not look for anything else – it is the devil who shows it and not the Good Lord. That is the mystery – now here is the grace. We, who are directors, don't need to know the mystery; but, we need to know a person's grace of suffering, so as to guide her. Whoever does not know her grace of suffering – I might say even more: ordinarily, she cannot know it. **There is the mystery of grace, like the mystery of faith. Why?** God wants her to be dependent on him; it is not even suitable for her to know it. If she appreciated his grace – but she cannot – she would be tempted to pride, or the devil would get involved. The director must know her, in order to direct the soul. But how will he know her? God will show her to him – he must pray: he will guide her well only in this way. There are signs by which to know her, when the director does not know her through confession.

As a rule, there is only one director; very rarely are there two. There are some saints who were fortunate to have had two: the Visitation (Sisters) had St. Francis de Sales and St. Vincent de Paul. There is the primary director, and there are directors of application who come later: St. Vincent de Paul, Fr. Olier, the founder of the Oratory, were directors only for the details. The primary director must know the grace of suffering, in order to set the foundations. How will he know it? It is God's secret: as long as he has not

found it, he can only prepare the person, but he cannot yet set the foundations, because he has not yet discovered her fundamental grace, which is the grace of suffering.

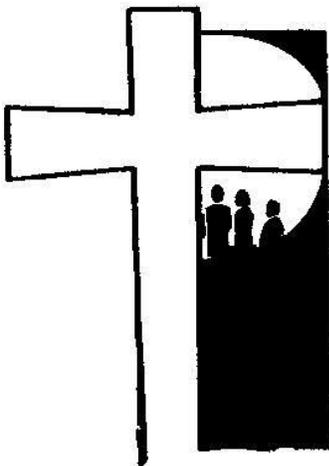
A director sees the person in different ways: sometimes through a word the door to a room of mysteries opens up. Sometimes there is a necessity: a director is not a Simeon – he is not a prophet – but he usually has that actual grace. He himself must be dependant on God: he must pray and meditate – the work of the sanctification of a soul requires all the care of a director. What you must ask for is **fidelity to this grace of suffering**, because if you miss it, you will have to redo what you had not done. You must allow this flower to reach maturity – the more you draw back, the more you suffer.

We are so weak [...]. We easily ask to be faithful to a grace of recollection and peace; we feel good when we are united to God. We are like a tired traveler who is resting, like someone who is very hungry and begins to eat, or like having weathered a storm and now are resting. That fidelity is very important, but we must realize that fidelity to the grace of suffering is even more precious. What must you do? You tend to preserve what you have, while a new crown that you will give to God is worth much more than the little good that you have. The devil is always ready to deceive us into hanging on to a few devotional graces. A grace of suffering is worth more than a thousand others, more than anything you might do: when you suffer you are giving yourself. Your recollection must go in that direction.

Imitate our Lord: in his life, he was always gathering graces of suffering. Also the Blessed Virgin, after Simeon had revealed her sufferings to her, gathered a few thorns from Calvary – her love was great enough to see ahead of time what she would suffer. That's what happens to great souls.

**There is a third element: besides the mystery of suffering and the grace of suffering, there is also the virtue of suffering.** We would quickly want to be rid of suffering, since we do not like what drags on. We would like to see the arms of the cross, but the Good Lord hides it. We continue seeing it until eternity. The Good Lord wants fidelity until death. What does he do? He surrounds you with mystery. On earth, perfection consists in loving suffering in the will of God, at the time and in the manner that he wills – no more. If you don't see your sufferings in the love of the divine will, you are lost. Why? You will have only the cross with its thorns and its torture – you will not have life.

If you place someone face to face with her Calvary, she will become terrified. Put the thorns, the nails and the spear in the wounds of our Lord, they take on a divine character. They will become luminous, bringing you the grace of our Lord. Otherwise, it's the end. God placed happiness in the cross, says the *Imitation* – that is why the saints don't lose their joy in their sufferings, **they suffer in the love of God.** Look at the martyrs: their love overcame the storm. That is what we must do: change the name of suffering – call it the will of God, the grace of the moment, as you prefer. Bless the Good Lord. Review your life to see how God has led you to your present state – it was by the cross.



#### **Points for reflection:**

We cannot escape the mystery of Suffering. Here, St. Peter Julian places before our eyes the reality of suffering, both on the natural and supernatural level. He gives advice on how to confront it. Concretely, what advice does he give? What is your experience with suffering? What helped you to bear it? What hindered you?