

Homily for Solemn Vespers at Passionist Nuns

Dcn. Bruce Sullivan

Feast Day: St. Gemma Galgani

Primary Text: 1 Peter 4:13-14 (the reading for Vespers in the Passionists Breviary)

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**READ:** *But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. (1 Peter 4:13-14).*

These words regarding suffering are really a summary statement of an Epistle that really has a theme of suffering running throughout it. In every chapter there is something mentioned regarding the sufferings of Christ and / or the sufferings of Christians.

This verse underscores that sharing in the sufferings of Christ is an occasion for rejoicing. That is something that is easy to forget and, sometimes, hard to put into practice.

**TODAY:** Passionists around the world celebrate the Feast of **St. Gemma Galgani**. She serves as an example to us of how to be united with Christ in His sufferings.

St. Gemma—often referred to as the “Daughter of the Passion”—was well-acquainted with suffering. She was the fifth of eight children. Two of her siblings died at an early age. Her mother contracted tuberculosis and suffered with the disease for five years before succumbing to it when Gemma was only seven years old. Her beloved brother, Gino, would also die from tuberculosis while studying for the priesthood. She, herself, suffered with the experience of spinal meningitis when she was 16. Shortly before turning 18, her father died and she was left with the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings. Finally, at the age of 25, she too—after months of suffering—died from tuberculosis.

### **WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF THAT?**

LET US CONSIDER ST. GEMMA against the backdrop of three, radically different perspectives.

**ST. GEMMA & POP, THERAPEUTIC RELIGION:** To listen to the vast majority of televangelists and modern pop spiritual writers in our day one would think that faithfulness to Christ is the ticket to health, wealth, and worldly success. In their way of thinking there must have been something horribly amiss in St. Gemma’s spiritual life.

**ST. GEMMA & ANGRY ATHEISTS:** Steven Fry is a popular British comedian and actor who also, happens to be an atheist. I watched a video clip Mr. Fry being interviewed on a British Sunday morning television program. During the interview, Mr. Fry railed against the God of the Bible because he could not reconcile the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God with all of the seemingly senseless suffering in the world. Therefore, he concluded that if there is, in fact, a God who created the universe, He must be, by definition a maniac and a monster. He stated that, “*The moment you banish Him, your life becomes simpler, cleaner, purer, and more worth living.*”

In Mr. Fry’s way of thinking, St. Gemma was a fool for embracing a God who was so apparently indifferent to her suffering. She would have been better off to have deposited her faith in the dustbin.

HOWEVER, Mr. Fry’s thinking does not deliver what it promises. For instead of experiencing a life that is “*simpler, cleaner, purer, and more worth living,*” his admirers who put his thinking into practice will eventually end up experiencing lives of hopeless despair. Why? Because EVERYONE—without exception—faces suffering in this life, and much of it IS shrouded in mystery. Much of it is seemingly senseless...Christians have no problem admitting that. But if one does as Steven Fry does and summarily dismisses God because of the presence of seemingly senseless suffering, the resulting position is infinitely more problematic than the mystery of seemingly senseless suffering because, without God, seemingly senseless suffering becomes ultimately MEANINGLESS suffering. In fact, life itself becomes a meaningless absurdity.

Does that sound like a recipe a life that is “*simpler, cleaner, purer, and more worth living*”?

**ST. GEMMA & THE GOSPEL OF SUFFERING:** You will, no doubt, recognize the descriptive “Gospel of Suffering” as being from the magnum opus on suffering, Pope St. John Paul II’s *Salvifici doloris*.

Unlike the practitioners of “pop” therapeutic religion, St. Gemma did not subscribe to the warped and shallow notion that faith allows one to bypass and avoid suffering.

Unlike an angry atheist, St. Gemma allow the experience of suffering to short-circuit and sabotage her faith.

Rather, St. Gemma—“The Daughter of the Passion”—intuitively understood the Gospel of Suffering as it would later be elucidated by John Paul II.

In the opening paragraph, St. John Paul II cites Colossians 1:24 wherein St. Paul says, “*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake*”. The sainted Pontiff goes on to say that,

***“the joy comes from the discovery of the meaning of suffering”***. From that point forward—using approximately 17,000 words—he unpacks the human experience of suffering and what he calls the “Gospel of Suffering”.

For me, two of his statements summarize the whole of this “Gospel of Suffering”...a Gospel embraced by St. Gemma and by all who seek to be united to our Lord in His Passion.

In paragraph 19, we read: *“In the Cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed... Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.”*

Then, in paragraph 26, he goes even further. Not only has human suffering—through the person of Jesus Christ—been raised to the level of the Redemption, it has, in fact, become a call...a vocation...the vocation embraced by St. Gemma...the vocation embraced by all members of the Congregation of the Passion...the vocation that properly belongs, in fact, to ALL Christians.

*“For it is above all a call. It is a vocation. Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says, ‘Follow me!’ Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering.”*

Having said all of that, I want to come back to our starting verse of Scripture and ask a question.

St. Peter said, *“rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings”*. My question is this: What exactly are ***“Christ’s sufferings”*** today—here and now. We are told that we are blessed when we share in “Christ’s sufferings”...but, again, what exactly ARE those sufferings.

The sacred writer mentions, for example, being “reviled for the sake of Christ”. But, is suffering persecution explicitly for one’s faith in Christ the sum and total of “Christ’s sufferings” that we share in?

This is a deeply personal question with which I struggled intensely some years ago. Why? Well, some of you will recall the “Healing of Families” book that made the rounds about eight years. The author, a Catholic priest, insisted that only sufferings explicitly tied to our faith in Christ had spiritual value and that all other forms of suffering (like, for example, sufferings due to sickness) were, as he put it “unnecessary sufferings” that we could be shed of if we only prayed correctly. ***In so doing, he inadvertently turned the Gospel of Suffering on its head (when, in fact, it is the Gospel that turns suffering on its head).***

When I was struggling with this question I asked Mother Catherine Marie a question. It was a question that, more than anything, showed my ignorance and lack of Catholic formation.

I was struggling with the disheartening effects of chronic, debilitating illness in the lives of my children. My youngest, Therese, had been reduced to the use of wheel chair for mobility, and I was desperate for answers. I had already drunk deeply of the poison-laced Kool-Aid of “The Healing of Families” and wasn’t sure what to believe.

In the midst of all of that, a well-meaning Catholic lady—upon hearing about the sufferings of Therese—said, “*I hope she is not wasting all of that suffering.*”

Without intending to do so, she was laying upon my children a very heavy burden and feeding a gross misconception in my own thinking...the misconception that led to the question I would pose to Mother Catherine Marie.

My misconception was related to the idea that was foreign to my Protestant upbringing but apparently very familiar to well-formed Catholics. What was that idea? It was that of “Offering it up!”

The phrase “offer it up” rolls off the tongues of Catholics so easily, but as someone who did not have a Catholic formation, I was struggling to understand exactly how to do that.

Is there a word formula to use?

Is there a certain sacramental to be employed?

Are there specific prayers that have to be offered...and offered “just right”?

You can feel free to laugh...I know it was silly...but I was struggling with those questions.

Have you ever noticed how the Devil does that? How he takes things that are actually GIFTS of God to His people and tries to turn them inside-out and on their heads?

How sacramentals instead of predisposing us to grace can take on superstitious dimensions.

How a liberating concept like “offering it up” can become a cause for concern if one does not do so “correctly” or with perfect thinking in mind.

So, with all that as a backdrop, I asked Mother Catherine Marie this question. I asked her, “***How do I make my sufferings the sufferings of Christ so that they have redemptive value?***”

With my advancing age, I am forgetting a lot of things...but, I do not think I will ever forget with Mother Catherine Marie said.

Do you know what she said?

Can you guess what she said?

With all tenderness and compassion she said, "***Oh, Bruce, you don't understand. Because you are a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, your sufferings ARE the sufferings of Christ. And, whether you realize it or not, He offers all of them to the Father every moment at every Mass that takes place throughout the world.***"

THAT is the Gospel of Suffering.

THAT answers the question I asked a moment ago as to which of our sufferings can be said to constitute sharing in "Christ's sufferings."

As members of the Body of Christ, ALL of our sufferings are, in fact, "Christ's sufferings" and, as such, we can rejoice knowing that through our union with Christ they have redemptive value...redemptive value that does not depend upon word formulas, perfect intellectual conceptualization, or, even, explicit actions on our part.

The Father asks only that we trust in His infinite mercy.

Jesus asks only that we embrace His sufferings on our behalf and that we follow Him on the pathway of suffering offered in love for the redemption of the world.

THAT is more than enough reason to rejoice in the midst of suffering.

THAT is the Gospel of Suffering.

St. Gemma and St. John Paul II...pray for us.