

## **Lent: A Season of Grace in suffering for the Individual and the Family**

**-Fr. Kenneth Teles Director, DFSC**

Lent is the period of forty days which comes before Easter in the Christian calendar. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is a season of reflection and preparation before the celebration of Easter. By observing the forty days of Lent, the Christian replicates Jesus Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for forty days. Lent is marked by fasting, both from food and festivities.

Pope Francis says Lent is "a new beginning... a season which urgently calls us to conversion, to return to God, to refuse to settle for mediocrity and to grow in friendship with the Lord, a favourable season for deepening our spiritual life through the means of sanctification offered us by the Church: fasting, prayer and almsgiving."

"Return to me your God – gracious and compassionate with your whole heart" (Joel 2: 12-13) is an invitation to penance. In times of hardships, public fasts were proclaimed in Israel. People would wear mourning clothes with sack-cloth, or they would cover their faces with ashes. In the Gospel, Jesus does not say that the signs of physical penance, like fasting to express sorrow and to accompany prayer are useless, but He makes it clear that these external signs of penance are not everything.

St. Mathew in his Gospel gives us a secret without which we shall not see God: work for Him alone without wanting anyone to know and in such a way that we ourselves will immediately forget what we have done. This will enable us to enter into the secrets of God.

Jesus neither justifies nor condemns fasting. He himself remained without food for forty days. For Jesus fasting is unworthy when done to obtain human approval rather than God's. All religions accept fasting. It is a way of calling upon God when one is under the burden of sin, when one faces problems and difficulties and especially when misfortunes fall on us. It helps the sinner to move towards God who is compassion and love, a God who forgives. It helps the individual to exercise self-control and to be ready for divine communication.

### **Why forty days?**

Forty is a significant number in Jewish-Christian Scripture:

- In Genesis, the flood which destroyed the earth was brought about by forty days and nights of rain (Gen. 7: 17).
- The people of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness before reaching the land promised by God (Ex 16: 35).
- Moses fasted for forty days before receiving the ten commandments on Mount Sinai (Deut. 9: 18).
- Jesus spent forty days fasting in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry (Mt. 4:2).

The duration of forty days (which symbolically represents the forty weeks a child remains in its mother's womb in preparation for birth) was already present in the life of Moses and Elijah (Ex 24: 18; 1Kg.19: 8). This fast is for Jesus what the command to sacrifice his son had been for Abraham, and for Moses the rebellion of a thirsty people or the incident of the golden calf.

For us Christians, Lent is a call to acknowledge our sinfulness, to repent and to be cleansed of the filth through the forgiveness and mercy of God. It's a call to love others as God loves us: to love unconditionally –oneself and the neighbour, especially our enemies and those who persecute us. We are called to see in others the image and likeness of God. We are called to love generously and universally. Forgiveness given and received enables a new kind of relationship among people, breaking the spiral of hatred and revenge and shattering the chains of evil which bind the hearts of those in conflict with one another.

### **Sin and Temptations**

Satan works largely using worldly distractions and manipulation of thoughts. Today's world is full of pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth/laziness, which are the root of all temptations. We should learn to resist our bad habits with God's grace.

Pope Benedict XVI says: "Man is never wholly free from temptation... but with patience and true humility we become stronger than any enemy. The patience and humility required to defeat *the enemy* come by following Christ every day and from learning to build our life *not outside of him or as if he did not exist*, but in him and with him, because he is the source of true life. In contrast to this is the temptation to remove God, to order our lives and the world on our own, relying solely on our own abilities. This is why, in Jesus, God speaks to man in an unexpected way, with a unique and concrete closeness, full of love. This is because God has now become incarnate and enters the world of man to take sin upon himself, to overcome evil and bring man back into the world of God". Let's keep our will firm with prayer, penance, piety, watchfulness, self-control, self-denial, and purity of heart to expel every temptation that enters our body and soul. "Penance requires ... the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction". (Council of Trent)

### **Notion of suffering**

Suffering is the disruption of inner human harmony caused by physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional forces experienced as isolating and threatening our very existence. As the deprivation of human good, suffering is inseparable from the mystery of evil. However, suffering and evil are not caused by God, the author of all

good (Genesis 1.), but are inherent in the universe's natural processes and in the uniqueness of human freedom, in the misuse of free will that is the moral evil of sin.<sup>1</sup>

*“From a simply human point of view, pain and illness might appear as an absurd reality. However, when we allow ourselves to be enlightened by the light of the Gospel, we succeed in appreciating its profound salvific meaning.”*<sup>2</sup>

Suffering reminds us that we are not made for this world of sin, that we are not of the world, that the world must be changed, modified, upset-converted. C.S. Lewis says that suffering *“plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.”*<sup>3</sup>

Suffering transforms, matures and instructs. Suffering increases our capacities of love and understanding. All suffering makes us have something in common with any of those who suffer. It is a power of communion. Undoubtedly, suffering sometimes hardens us. It does not necessarily bring us closer to virtue. But it always brings us closer to truth.<sup>4</sup>

### **Suffering According to Sacred Scripture**

According to the Old Testament we see the suffering of the innocent as an exemplary suffering endured by chosen individuals. For example, Moses (cf. Num.11:11); Elijah (1Kg. 19); men whose very office exposes them to suffering.

According to the New Testament we see the **suffering of Christ**. People express unity between suffering and fellowship. The idea of suffering is inseparable from the NT concept of Koinonia –fellowship and Lord's Supper. He who arms himself with the same mind as Christ will have to suffer in the flesh (1 Pet. 4:1; Cfr.2Cor 11:23ff). To suffer *“as a Christian”* (1Pet 4:16), means to share in the suffering of Christ (1Pet 4:13; Phil 3:10), to suffer with him. Indeed, such is the mystic union existing between Christ and his body the Church that their suffering may be identified as one and the same. In Christ, with Christ suffering has become a means of communion and a place of redemption.

But not all suffering is fellowship with the suffering of Christ. Suffering becomes real fellowship with the suffering of Christ only when suffering is *“according to God's will”* (1Pet 4:9), suffering *“in the name”* of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:16; Phil 3:10), suffering *“for the Gospel”* (2Tim 1:8), suffering *“in mindfulness of God”* (1Pet 2:19), *“for righteousness sake”* (1Pet 3:14) and looking forward in hope *“for the kingdom of God”* (2Thes 1:5).

For Christ, suffering and death are means of reconciling the whole universe to God (Col 1:20-21), and union with his passion is the indispensable way of sharing in his

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<sup>1</sup> MARY ANN FATULA, *“Suffering,”* as cited in JOSEPH A. KOMONCHAK, Op. Cit., pp.990-991.

<sup>2</sup> POPE JOHN PAUL II, Address of the Pope on the World Day of the Sick, February 11, 2004, in *“Health in Abundance,”* January-March, 2004, Vol.2, n.1, p.10 as cited in *“Sharing the Fullness of Life,”* Commission for Healthcare Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, August, 2005, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> LOUIS EVELY, *“Suffering,”* (London: Burns & Oates), 1966, p.94.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.95.

glorious victory over sin and death itself (Rom 6:5; 7:4; 8:17). A Christian outlook thus finds the meaning of suffering in Jesus' own redemptive death and resurrection. The redemptive value of suffering, accepted and offered to God with love, derives from the sacrifice of Christ himself, who calls the members of his Mystical Body to share in his sufferings, to complete them in their own flesh (cf. Col 1:24).

### **Eschatological aspect of suffering**

Just as Christ's suffering is not an end in itself, but a means to a great end, namely, perfection (Heb. 2:10), so also in case of his people. The life of suffering can be perceived as a liberating, redemptive and hope-inspiring experience by that person.

### **'Suffering' according to the documents of the Church**

The theology of the Vatican II focuses Christian attention today on the meaninglessness of human suffering viewed apart from Jesus' healing death and resurrection. In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. For, by his incarnation, He, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man.<sup>5</sup> Christians are called to show love and concern to the poor and the sick and to alleviate suffering actively, especially as it results from unjust social and political structures, and, where possible, to eradicate its causes.

We must above all accept the light or revelation not only insofar as it expresses the transcendent order of justice but also insofar as it illuminates this order with Love, as the definitive source of everything that exists. *"Love is also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the cross of Jesus Christ"*.<sup>6</sup>

*"As a result of Christ's salvific work, man exists on earth with the hope of eternal life and holiness. And even though the victory over sin and death achieved by Christ in His cross and resurrection does not abolish temporal suffering from human life, nor free from suffering the whole historical dimension of human existence, it nevertheless throws a new light upon this dimension and upon every suffering; the light of salvation. This is the light of the Gospel, that is, of the Good News."*<sup>7</sup>

Health is a gift of God; suffering has value. It is right to fight sickness because health is a gift of God. At the same time, it is also important to be able to interpret God's plan when suffering knocks at our door. For us believers, the key to the interpretation of this mystery is the Cross of Christ. Only if we are united with the sufferings of Christ, do our own acquire full meaning and value. By the light of faith, they become sources of hope and salvation.

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<sup>5</sup> G.S, n. 22,

<sup>6</sup> Salvifici Doloris, n133.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., n.15, p.606.

In the article 'Drinking the cup of suffering with Jesus' (Oct 16, 2015) by Dr. Mark Giszczak, he writes about the cost of following Christ. The wonder of this undoing of the power of sin comes at a price: The spotless Lamb is sacrificed. While He invites everyone to follow, Jesus also invites us to "count the cost" (Lk 14:28) of following him. Christianity is not for wimps. We too are called to walk the hill of Calvary with Jesus, to "take up our crosses," to drink the cup of suffering, to be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom 8:29). While it is easy to wonder about the rewards of discipleship, often we are faced with the cost. Yet it is there, in the midst of that cost, in the midst of the daily sufferings with Jesus, that we finally begin to realize what life is really about, who God is calling us to be, what it really means in the end. And it is not about hoarding as much money and stuff as we can, but about giving ourselves away in love.

### **Family offers their sacrifices through the Sacrifice of Christ**

The summit of life of Christ is his Paschal Mystery and the heart of the Paschal Mystery is his suffering and death: He gave himself up on the cross. Giving oneself up means willingly accepting a life of surrender. In the eyes of faith, suffering in life is not a burden, but a great opportunity to fulfill God's will. The sufferings of Jesus are an inspiration to us, because they are valued as his self-sacrifice made in surrender to the Father's Will (cf. Mt.26:36-46). God will therefore, be pleased with any sacrifice we make with the intention of offering ourselves up to Him in surrender.<sup>8</sup>

The core of the celebration of the Eucharist is same self-offering that Jesus made on the cross and whose memorial He established at the Last Supper. He chose two signs: bread and wine, because these two items were essential to the Jewish meal. Bread and wine symbolize human weakness, human toil or sacrifice, in one-word human life, indeed family life. By the sweat of their brow, the husband and the wife lovingly place 'bread and wine' meaning food and drink on the family table. Bread and wine also signify the happy and the sad events, day to day painful or sorrowful experiences of life, the doubts and the hopes, the sufferings, pains and afflictions accepted by the family in a spirit of faith. That is why in every celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the husband and the wife can, through the symbolism of bread and wine, offer their whole family life, indeed the entire world to God.<sup>9</sup>

It is crucial to discover the presence of God amid the struggles and strains of daily life. There are many personal situations, worries, anger, envy and many other spiritual and psychological states that cause spiritual and psychological numbness or paralysis. He is the living water that regenerates and makes everything, and everyone, whole and sounds again. Jesus stands at the doors of our hearts and speaks to the heart of each person on earth, offering the water of eternal life--the life that flows from God.

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<sup>8</sup> Ecclesia de Eucharistia, n.13.

<sup>9</sup> Christifideles Laici, n.14.

God's Word is the living water that detoxifies our soul. The more we drink of it the more it cleans, refreshes and renews us

## **Things to be done as individuals or as members of a family during Lent**

### **1. Deepen Prayer life**

Often our days are filled with activity. At the end of the day we have little or no time to pray to God. It's important to look for opportunities to pray, to raise our minds and hearts to God in prayer.

Every family should have fourfold prayer: Individual or Personal Prayer, Spousal Couple's Prayer, Family Prayer and Community Prayer. Pope John Paul II and Pope Paul VI say that prayer increases the strength and spiritual unity of the family, helping the family to partake of God's own strength.

Meditative Family rosary is one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common that the Christian family is invited to pray.

Parents have another duty towards their children and that is to educate them. They are to be taught basic formulas like Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Angelus and other small prayers. (*Kuttumbik Jivitak -I*)

### **2. Live the life of Faith in the Family**

In all cultures, the family is the nursery of life and growth. It is here that faith formation and development is realised. Day to day negative or unpleasant experiences like disadvantages, failure, financial difficulties, are helps to the family to be faithful to the mystery of the cross. "*Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail*". (1Cor 13: 7). When man and the woman are united in matrimony, they form a communion of three where God is the center of their life. The family should nourish their faith by spending time in quiet reading and reflection. The word, read, reflected and pondered upon, will be a source of energy and strength to love their enemies and forgive those who persecute them.

### **3. Be open to life**

Pope John Paul II points out that no living being on earth except humans were created in the image and likeness of God. "*Human fatherhood and motherhood, while remaining biologically similar to that of other living beings in nature, contain in an essential and unique way a "likeness" to God which is the basis of the family as a community of human life, as a community of persons united in love*". (Letter to the Families, n.6). In *Familiaris Consortio* he writes "*Fruitful married love expresses in serving life in many ways. Of these ways, begetting and educating children are the most immediate, specific and irreplaceable*" (n.41).

Transmission of life is the most precious service that the family can do to the society. This lent spousal couples could consider being more charitable in being open for another child. To bring to life another child, gift another brother/sister to their existing child and raise them up according to the plan of God is the most wonderous thing that parents can do for their children.

#### **4. Foster Education to Holiness**

Conjugal spirituality is born of faith, it lives in hope and grows and expresses itself in charity. The word of God, repentance and Eucharist are the framework of conjugal and family prayer. The Word of God enables the family and its individual members to recognise themselves as sinners, and introduces them to repentance and to trust in the Father's love and grow in holiness. Let our families then strive to grow in holiness.

#### **5. Bear One Another's Burdens**

Wherever two or more persons live together, differences and frictions are bound to occur. The family is no exception to this. If the family has to go forward in peace, love, joy and unity, members must be willing to forgive others and to seek forgiveness for themselves. In this lies our joy.

St. Paul urges us to "*Be always humble, gentle and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another*". The pooling together of interests, energies, efforts and resources is necessary for a good family. If the spouses do not offer support to each other, it is really difficult to go forward in family life. So, this lent season let us take from the abundant grace overflowing from the cup of The Lord and in and through our suffering, united with the suffering of Christ, grow in holiness and live in eternal joy.