



Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI IESUM

Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church

Making Sense of Lent



and the “Election” of Suffering

Lent is upon us — and many of us find ourselves in a rather recurring quandary. What are we going to do during Lent? Even the youngest among us have had many years to ponder this question and to arrive at something of an answer

that will satisfy not simply the question, but the season. It is, after all, a season of abnegation, of self-denial, calculated to something more than what we intend to actually derive from it. What I mean is this: we've squandered the years in petty oblations that are in some way more satisfying to us than vexatious, let alone painful. We are reluctant to attend the school of suffering and most often find ourselves truant.

Indeed, we think to ourselves that we have suffering enough — all of us — and see little value in that apparently wanton sacrifice we call Lent.

It is true.

It is equally true that none, or little, of the suffering we endure (and much of it is great) is of our own choosing, but rather comes to us wittingly or not, through the wiles of the world, the flesh and the devil — or through apparently capricious, or at the very least unavoidable, devices and circumstances to which we are naturally averse. We cannot change this — or we would. We endure it — because we must.

This is suffering rightly understood as an evil. And so it is. It is a privation of a good that ought to be present but is not, or is present very defectively or deficiently. In any event, we cannot change it.

This is quite distinct from suffering not as an ineluctable evil, but *as a redemptive choice*. It is, in fact, and the more you look at it, much more akin to the sufferings of Christ — Who *chose* to suffer ... Who was, in fact, “The Suffering Servant”.

What are we to make of this?

Jesus Christ did not “have to” suffer – He *chose* to suffer.

Why?

To redeem us from our sins.

Is that answer too simple, too naive, to be acceptable?

I will not weary you with the unnecessary complexities of theological justifications (all quite valid, all quite in keeping with reason) which concern the nature of the inextricable relationship between love, justice, and atonement — especially as they pertain to the very ontological fabric of existence itself ... of which we are part.

You will have to seek that elsewhere. *Start with your Catechism (the Baltimore Catechism is still by far the clearest and the best.)*

The point of Lent is this: *we choose to suffer*. We choose to conform ourselves to Christ — and not just because Christ suffered, but because to conform ourselves to Christ ineluctably entails suffering and privation. As it has been observed, there are many who wish to share in Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem — but few, exceedingly few — who wish to share in His Passion on the night of His betrayal and the day of His Crucifixion.

We do not “have to” — but we can *choose to*. Choice is ever the election of love, yes? And love, as St. John of the Cross states, ever makes likeness between the lover and the Beloved. We choose to be like Christ. We choose, in some way, in some measure, to do something akin to what Christ Himself had chosen to do — *for us*.

And now *we* choose, too — and to do it *for Him!*

Choosing Suffering

Yes! We may *choose* our sacrifice! We may *choose* our suffering — but I suggest that our own present suffering, the suffering from which we cannot escape ... the suffering that, were it otherwise possible, we would flee, is the one most acceptable to God — and only remains to be *chosen* by us ... also.

Of course, in the suffering that inevitably leads to death there is always the ghastly option of “physician-assisted suicide” — a mortal sin with everlasting consequences: eternal separation from God and unending suffering in Hell — for both the physician and the dying; that is to say, a choice between *passing* suffering and suffering for *all eternity*. This is the trendy option of the living who do not know God and abhor the very concept — and the dying who have a defective or deficient concept of God, or no belief in Him whatever. This is not only suffering

without meaning, but suffering as an instrument to impugn God, and in this sense, it is *doubly* mortal.

There are infinitely better paths before us in our encounter with suffering: ***we must make it an election***, we must willfully take to ourselves that which is natively repugnant to us — ***but*** — and here is the crux (Latin for *Cross* ...) of the matter: it must benefit *others* — not us. Even if we *choose* that suffering from which we cannot possibly extricate ourselves, we must bear it for *others*, as Christ bore His suffering for *us*.

We must pray that we be united in our suffering *with* the suffering of Jesus Christ in the Garden, at the Pillar, and on the Cross — for *only in this will our suffering become meaningful: through Him, with Him, and in Him* — it can become *redemptive of souls!*

St. Paul tells us,

“I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the Church.” *

(Colossians 1.24). In other words, we can share, even participate in the suffering of Christ — *if we choose to* — and for the same end for which He Himself suffered:

the redemption of the world, the salvation of souls. Through this mysterious union in suffering with Christ we exceed ourselves, surpass all that is possible to us apart from Him ... by becoming one with Him. One in suffering. One in purpose. And was there ever greater purpose ...?

Lent call calls us to become like unto Christ, to be conformed to Him in this life – so that after the Cross we will be found to be conformed to Him at the hour of our death ... and following Him, join Him in Heaven where He has prepared a place of everlastingness for us ... that where He is we may also be!

* *“Qui nunc gáudeo in passiónibus pro vobis, et adimpleo ea quæ desunt passiónem Christi, in carne mea pro corpore eius, quod est Ecclésia.”* (Colossians 1.24)

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