

# SUFFERING

## A Means Toward Redemption

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**L**ove expresses itself in a willingness to suffer for the beloved. This principle is at the heart of all the Marian apparitions because it is at the heart of Catholic spirituality.

Our Lady told Lucia and her cousins that many souls go to hell because they have no one to pray and make sacrifices for them. What is this economy of salvation that allows souls to be purchased only at the price of prayers and the willed suffering of others? And what may be the cost to souls of a world intent upon banishing suffering? Banish suffering and you banish sacrifice.

And if sacrifice is the currency used in the economy of salvation, then the absence of sacrifice would bankrupt that economy and souls would be lost. It is the resolve of the modern world to effect such a bankruptcy. It must then be the resolve of the Church to oppose the modern world. Our churchmen should be reminding us that we are not

tourists, but pilgrims; that life is not a sightseeing excursion conducted for our pleasure; but a pilgrimage to Calvary to be crucified with Christ.

And we will be crucified in the flesh, all of us, whether we will it or not. Our bodies, despite all our pampering and the ministrations of modern medicine, will inevitably succumb to disease and death; many of us here may suffer much before we die. The crucial question is whether our suffering will become a sacrifice, and that will depend upon how we use that one gift that shall not be taken from us: our will.

Not all suffering has value. A man can suffer, and curse his suffering and even curse God for allowing him to suffer. In this way, his pain will have been wasted. What might have become a sacrifice in expiation of his sins and for the salvation of others is poured out like water in the desert instead of welling up into that spring of everlasting life. The

man who suffers pointlessly is like one who has great wealth he can bequeath to others but chooses to burn it or bury it, so that no one will ever benefit by it, least of all himself.

Jacinta, who became a model of how to turn suffering into sacrifice, was graced during her long illness with prophetic visions. One of her revelations was that most of those who would die during World War II would go to hell. It was a terrible vision and one that distressed her deeply. The whole world at war, but no one fighting for the Kingship of Christ.

Has the world repented since World War II? Have we seen a return to the idea of man as penitential pilgrim, offering sacrifices for his own salvation and for the conversion of sinners? Has devotion to Her Immaculate Heart been preached to us in season and out as our only hope in this dire time? Have Our Lady's simple requests been fulfilled?

We all know the answers to these questions, and they are such as should make us tremble at the chastisement that is doubtless coming.

### **God's Merciful Pardon**

Yet, there is hope, for we know this much about the

mysteries of Providence: that God will pardon a great deal for the sake of a few good men. We have the account in Genesis in which Abraham bargains with God to spare the evil cities of the plain. He begins by asking if God will spare them if 50 good men can be found there. God agrees. Then, the bargaining gets under way. What about for the sake of forty-five good men, Abraham asks. God again agrees that for 45 good men, He will spare the rest. The bargaining continues, until God agrees to withhold His justice for the sake of only 10 good men. Would God have gone lower, say, for the sake of one good man? We don't know, for the negotiations stopped at ten. But the ten could not be found.

### **Sacrifices for Conversion**

How many of us might be required to make sacrifices so that sinners will be converted and a terrible chastisement averted? Our Lady of Fatima never told the children, as far as we know, but there can be no doubt that all of us who are not sleepwalking through this terrible crisis in the Church and in the world are enjoined to make as many sacrifices as

we are able.

Jesus, of course, is our supreme model for how to offer sacrifices to God; but He has also shown us, through His Mother, how we can, in our small way, win great graces for souls through acts of love and abandonment to His Providence. The seers of Fatima, especially the two younger ones, Francisco and Jacinta, who died within a few years of the apparitions, offer us an instruction in how to fulfill the requests of Heaven as perfectly as possible.

Once the children learned that Heaven wanted them to make sacrifices, first from the Angel of Peace and then from Our Lady, they began to search for ways to do this. They first fastened upon the most obvious way: denying themselves what small sensual satisfactions they enjoyed. They ate bitter acorns and suffered thirst that they might save sinners.

It is tempting to speculate how closely the experiences of the children correspond to the degrees of prayer described by the mystical Doctors of the Church, such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. It can be said with certainty that the seers did all they could to enter actively that dark night of the senses described

by St. John of the Cross as the usual prelude to contemplation. St. John tells us that the senses cannot bring us to God, and that the more we indulge the senses, the farther we put ourselves from God. So, the first step in any advance toward a deeper prayer life must always be an increase in sensual denial, in asceticism. As St. Teresa of Avila so simply and concisely stated:

“Prayer and self-indulgence do not go together.”

### **Francisco's Suffering**

Francisco was most notably ascetic, and he also manifested that virtue, so highly praised by the mystics, called detachment. He tended to view the world very much as the passing show that it is and even stopped attending school so that he might spend his days kneeling in front of the Blessed Sacrament at the village church in Fatima, consoling the hidden Jesus, as he put it. When asked what he wanted to be when he grew up – and he was frequently pestered by such questions – he would respond that he did not want to be anything; he only wanted to die and go to Heaven.

When Portugal, like the rest of Europe, was decimated by the influenza epidemic that

followed World War I, the people in the vicinity of Fatima were not spared. All of Lucia's family, except her, were stricken, and all in the Marto family, except the father, Ti Marto, also became seriously ill. Both Francisco and Jacinta knew that they would never recover and that this illness marked a road of penitential suffering that would only end with their deaths. But they accepted this calmly, even joyfully, for they had Our Lady's promise that She would take them to Heaven.

Francisco lay motionless in his bed during the last few days of his illness, and on April 4, 1919, less than two years after the last apparition, he died peacefully, with a faint smile on his 10-year-old face, and was buried the next day at the churchyard in Fatima.

### **Jacinta's Suffering**

Jacinta was to die the following year after a more prolonged and excruciating illness. If Francisco manifested detachment and tranquility, which are associated with a purification of the will, his younger sister displayed what might be described as a mystical illumination, a purification of the understanding. It may be that of the three children, Jacinta was

most immersed in the sense of the supernatural. The Blessed Mother also continued to appear to her, both at her home near Fatima, when she was ill, and during her hospital stay in Lisbon, before her death.

Jacinta was the youngest of the three children, only 6 years old during the apparitions of the Angel of Peace in 1916. As Jacinta was just beginning to learn her catechism from Lucia, who at 9 was by no means an expert, she was rapt in the atmosphere of the supernatural by heavenly visitations: first by the angel, then by the Mother of God, and finally, by the Holy Family during the Miracle of the Sun. How can we imagine her experience of the faith?

I will venture to speculate that of the three seers, her faith was probably the purest, and in saying this I mean no disparagement of the faith of Lucia and Francisco. But they were older, and if they knew little of the world, they at least knew and understood more than Jacinta.

Even as children growing up in Catholic homes, we cannot escape the awareness that we live among many people who reject Christ's Church or, even worse, accept it in a lukewarm manner. So while we are learning our catechism, there

runs parallel to our religious instruction the spirit of irreligion, the spirit of the world, that eats away at our faith even as it is being formed, like a corrosive poison that is difficult not to ingest. I think that Jacinta never had to drink this poison; that she was shielded from the spirit of irreligion and her intellect was endowed with an almost angelic quality, so that her instruction in the faith was not so much passed through the filter of discursive reasoning as it was purely infused. What a wonderful gift she received.

But as with all such Divine gifts, the effect was to make the recipient conform more perfectly to the giver, who is Christ crucified. Jacinta became ill during the same influenza epidemic that sickened Francisco, but the progress of her disease was to be long, complicated and excruciating. Like her brother, she remained tranquil and resigned to her suffering, which she also welcomed as a Heaven-sent opportunity to offer sacrifices for the conversion of sinners. Jacinta's attitude toward sinners, like that of all the seers, was not one of condemnation, but of great pity. She had seen hell, and she had had a foretaste of Heaven. She did not

envy the wicked their forbidden pleasures, which she saw in their true light, as the prelude to eternal misery; she rather pitied them for their blindness to the true and lasting joy of loving God.

Jacinta developed pleurisy. Our Lady appeared to her and told her that she would have much to suffer; that she would be taken to a dark hospital in Lisbon, and there she would die alone; but that she should not worry, because Our Lady would come to take her to Heaven. She told her family of this communication from the Blessed Mother; only Lucia believed her.

### **Jacinta's March to Calvary**

But as Providence unfolded, she was taken to Lisbon through the good intentions of a priest and his wealthy doctor friends, who paid the expenses of what amounted to her medical torture. Thus began what Jacinta knew would be her march to Calvary. She did enjoy a brief respite before her final agony. While waiting for arrangements to be made for her to be received at the hospital, she stayed at an orphanage under the care of a Franciscan nun, Mother Godinho, who quickly came to love her and to

believe that this child that had been placed under her protection was a saint. "She speaks with such authority," she would say of Jacinta, whom she liked to draw into conversation, often writing down the wisdom and prophecies that poured from her.

### **Wars are Punishments for Sin**

Jacinta told her that wars are punishment for sins; that the world is preparing for itself terrible chastisements. She warned against a love of wealth and luxury and counseled instead a love of holy poverty and silence. She spoke of how much Our Lord values mortification and sacrifices. And she said that doctors do not have the light to cure illnesses because they do not love God. So all wisdom, worldly and other-worldly, must be rooted in this love.

When she was taken to the hospital, the doctors decided on an operation. Local anesthetic was administered, but apparently failed to have its full effect, and Jacinta endured what can only be described as ferocious pain as two of her ribs were removed. During the operation, she cried to Our Lord and Our Lady, and said:

**"It is for Your love, my**

**Jesus. Now You can convert many sinners, for I suffer much."**

For six days she continued to suffer, then Our Blessed Mother appeared to her and took away her pain and told her the day and hour of her death, assuring her again that She would come to take her to Heaven. Four days later, on Feb. 20, 1920, Jacinta Marto died alone in her hospital bed at the age of 9. When her body was exhumed in the early 1950s, her face was found to be incorrupt. She is now Blessed Jacinta.

As for the sacrifices made by the oldest of the seers, Lucia, we can only imagine what they might have been. She lived a very long time, and if her cousins' brief sojourns in this vale of tears were marked by physical suffering, Lucia's life, from the beginning of the apparitions until her death, was to be marked by spiritual suffering. Like Our Lord, who came unto His own and His own received Him not, Lucia was to be doubted and denied and disrespected, first by her family, then by officials of the state, and lastly and most lamentably, by the hierarchy of the Church.

One can only imagine her

loneliness after the only other persons in the world capable of fully understanding her died so soon. Without Francisco and Jacinta, Lucia's sense of isolation must have been overwhelming. But it was her lot in this life to have only one source of comfort: God. In this, one might say, she both suffered and found great mercy, for although it hurts to be stripped of the consolation we find in other people and in our creature comforts, all of these things are, in a sense, illusory, and the more we cling to them, the farther we put ourselves from God. Lucia was to learn at a very young age the truth of those words written by St. Teresa of Avila, whose order she would eventually join:

*Todo se pasa, Dios no se muda – All things pass, God alone does not change.*

Lucia watched as the world plunged more deeply into its madness, unmindful of the requests of Heaven and, like Jerusalem of old, not knowing the time of its visitation. What did she suffer as she saw the Blessed Mother ignored and Jesus offended more and more? Her mission was to engender love for the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and she instead had to witness ever-mounting out-

rages against the Immaculate Heart.

Yet, it is the paradox of our faith that salvation comes through suffering. God can make evil serve goodness. So until the end of her days, with each new wound suffered by the body of Christ, with each new insult offered to Our Lady of Fatima, Lucia was making sacrifices for the conversion of sinners, and the Mother of Our Lord was in turn presenting them to Her Son.

### **How Many of Us Will Be Saved by Jacinta's Sacrifices?**

We cannot know. But every time we receive an infusion of grace; every time we unexpectedly manifest a surge of fortitude that defeats a temptation or turns us from a sinful habit, we should remember with gratitude that others of our faith, our true brothers and sisters in the family of God, are filling up for us what St. Paul said was needful in the sacrifice of Our Lord: the sacrifice of their will to the love of God. And this in turn will engender in us a desire to join in this great sacrifice, to place our own willfulness on the pyre of love that burns in the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. 