

“I CAN’T BELIEVE IN A GOD WHO WOULD LET THIS HAPPEN!”

REFLECTIONS ON SUFFERING,
DEATH, AND ETERNAL LIFE.



*Second of an
8 Part Series*

Advocates for legalizing assisted suicide continue to exploit fears about suffering at the end of life by parading “hard cases” in the media to advance their cause. Concerns about suffering from “helplessness” are prompting people with terminal conditions in Oregon to request lethal drug overdoses as allowed by that state’s law.

And, as Pope John Paul II noted in his 1984 Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, the prospect of suffering may cause “people [to] reach the point of actually denying God.”

All this shows, in the words of the Holy Father, “the importance of the question of the meaning of suffering” and requires “much care . . . in dealing with the question itself and with all possible answers to it.”

A Radical Look at Suffering

The world sees suffering as an evil to be avoided at all costs, while the Holy Father calls us to view suffering not as an evil itself, but as “the experience of evil,” an experience that is, given the pervasiveness of evil in the world, unavoidable.

We can and must work together to alleviate pain, poverty, and all the other evils that confront us. Any one who claims that Catholics must accept all suffering without relief distorts our faith.

But not every experience with evil can be avoided, since even life itself eventually succumbs to physical death.

The difference John Paul II points to is crucial: evil lacks love and goodness while the experience of evil carries within it the possibilities of growth and grace. We know this through our faith, which proclaims that Jesus Christ, by His suffering, death and resurrection, has redeemed all suffering.

Lessons from Life

We know even outside our faith that some who have suffered have not despaired. In even the most difficult circumstances, people throughout history have risen above their encounters with evil, not by ignoring their suffering, but by breaking through it.

It still happens today. Not just those acclaimed as saints, but ordinary people find the strength to bear their suffering. They meet evil with goodness. It is this goodness that the Church treasures and the world puzzles over.

Dr. Ira Byock, a renowned hospice physician and writer, has witnessed suffering among the dying patients he treats, and has seen many patients transcend their suffering.

The patients most likely to succeed are those who, with the help of family and caregivers, can “mine” their imagination “to discern any glimmer of possibility of relief and release” from within the suffering accompanying their dying process.

They are able to envision new meanings even in the face of disability and imminent death where before they could see none. Life is lived fully and personal growth is ongoing right up to the natural end.

By short-circuiting the natural process of dying, assisted suicide destroys the very source for growth, life itself. It seals the failure of the imagination and denies all possibility of meaning and goodness.

Lessons from faith

When St. Paul declared that “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake” (Col. 1:24), he revealed suffering’s role in God’s plan of redemption as a means to eternal life.

Down through the ages, countless individuals have made the same discovery. They have experienced and shared God’s love in the most unlikely places.

We too can enlarge our imagination, as it were, to see suffering’s broader significance. As John Paul II has written in *Salvifici Doloris*, suffering “is above all a call . . . a vocation” to share in Christ’s work of salvation by uniting our suffering with His.

Yet, “it often takes time, even a long time, for this answer to begin to be interiorly perceived.” We must be patient with ourselves, we must even allow for anger and questioning as we find our way. God can take it.

Trusting God in the midst of suffering is not easy. That’s why the Catholic Church believes no one should die alone. We need to help each other, and share in each other’s suffering. Are we up to the challenge?

For more information about these issues, contact the Massachusetts Catholic Conference by calling 1-617-367-6060, or by going online to www.macathconf.org.

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A Catholic Initiative Responding to the Needs of the Dying & the Threat of Assisted Suicide