

ABOUT:

BR. JOSEPH FREYMANN

grew up in Hawaii and attended Rice University and the Franciscan University of Steubenville, graduating magna cum laude in 1995 with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Programming. After college he joined the Legionaries of Christ in Connecticut, studied Philosophy in Rome, and worked for three years in California. He then returned to Rome and received a Master's in Philosophy. Currently based in Washington, D.C., he collaborates in the Legion's youth ministry programs and is finishing a degree in Theology. He will be ordained a deacon June, 2008. This article develops the concept of suffering from a philosophical point of view and is an addendum to the most recent CCWF forum, **True Grit: Women Confront Life**, Nov. 11, 2007.

CALIFORNIA SURF CAMP

"Surf and Church" - a week-long summer camp for boys features professional surfing instruction and Catholic spiritual formation in an atmosphere of safety, fun, and personal attention. Campers develop a deeper friendship with Christ through Mass, rosary, gospel reflections and talks. Determination, perseverance, and self-confidence are fruits of four days of intense surfing instruction, sports and games. Campers stay at Rancho Capistrano Retreat Center and surf at Huntington Beach. Boys aged of 10 and 14 may participate. Dads are welcome.

www.californiasurfcamp.com

CALIFORNIA CATHOLIC WOMEN'S FORUM

is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization offering educational opportunities and resources on gender-specific issues affecting women. Taxpayer I.D. #47-0953215

California Catholic Women's Forum

Building the Culture of Life one woman at a time.

Addendum to the CCWF forum **True Grit: Women Confront Life**, with thanks:

The Redemptive Value of Human Suffering

by Br. Joseph Freymann, LC

February 28, 2008

1. A preponderance of pain

"Everybody hurts. Everybody cries. Everybody hurts...sometimes." These simple but profound lyrics constitute the refrain of an old R.E.M. song that topped American pop-music charts in the early 90's. The melancholic tune was beautiful, the song's message powerful. "Everybody hurts sometimes." Whether you are unknown or famous, poor or rich, sick or healthy, depressed or cheerful, a dark reality lurks beneath the surface of your life, sometimes manifesting itself in tears, groans and sighs. It's called PAIN: you have suffered before, you are probably suffering right now, and you will suffer and eventually die someday.

We all know that suffering can be atrocious, especially when human cruelty is involved. Think of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany, the gulags in Soviet Russia, the ethnic cleansings in Albania and Rwanda, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the horrors of war, torture, and slavery. The worst sufferings ever inflicted on this planet have been the result of man's diabolic cruelty towards man. What does it all mean? Why does God allow it?

Consider the pain caused by earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados, hurricanes, and other natural disasters: no one is to blame, but many suffer and die. Call to mind the tremendous grief caused by the unexpected death or suicide of a loved one. Think of the many ravaging diseases that stalk us, or the predators such as sharks, bears and lions who threaten us whenever we venture into the wild. Consider all the plants and animals that can poison us, or the freak accidents that can destroy us. What does it all mean? Why does God allow it?

Finally, take an inventory of all the annoyances, difficulties, sadness, pain and discomfort that you are experiencing right now in your life, and you will soon realize that you are indeed suffering. Maybe there are many other human beings who have it much worse than you do, but the fact remains that you suffer. No one in this world, absolutely no one, lives a pain-free life. What is the meaning of your own suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people?

2. A few answers

The ultimate cause of all human suffering is sin. The original disobedience of Adam and Eve entailed serious consequences, not only for the human race but also for the entire universe. Don't imagine that an angry, offended God unleashed his wrath upon Adam, Eve and their descendants; rather, understand original sin as a tragic mistake that by its very

nature wreaked havoc on everyone and everything. If you take rat poison after reading the warnings on the bottle, your whole body will suffer the consequences. Unless a miracle happens, God won't heal you on the spot, as if you had never swallowed the rat poison. The same thing happened when man sinned: God had warned Adam and Eve *for their own good* not to disobey his order (which he had also established for their own good), but they did so anyway. They took "rat poison" which infected themselves and the whole material universe of which man was a part. Rebellion and hatred entered their souls, death and disease overcame their bodies, and disorder ruptured the cosmos. After the fall, nature became man's enemy and man became his own enemy. Suffering has become the plague of human existence ever since.

God's punishment for original sin is just, although in the opinion of some it may seem excessive. Why so much punishment for original sin? Because sin is a terrible offense against a loving God who deserves our obedience and gratitude. God's punishment for original sin is nothing less than the deep wounding of human nature and the ruptured harmony of the cosmos that came as natural consequences of our rebellion against the Creator. It is a punishment not inflicted by God but chosen by man.

Imagine for a moment that in your backyard pool you have a pet dolphin intelligent enough to understand human speech. You tell your dolphin not to leave the pool and walk around on land, because he will surely die if he does. But your dolphin doesn't believe you. He thinks you're just being a control freak who is trying to limit his freedom. While you are away at work one day, the dolphin jumps out of the pool and starts flopping around the neighborhood. You return home to an empty pool, and while you are frantically searching the neighborhood you find him, dried out and about to die. Why? Because dolphins can't live on land. It's not how they were made. You didn't inflict this punishment on your dolphin; he brought it upon himself by doing something contrary to his nature. Original sin had the same effect upon us. We were created to live for and with God, and rebellion against our purpose and nature had terrible intrinsic consequences. Not only did Adam and Eve suffer these tremendous consequences, but so did all of their descendants. Just as a pregnant woman addicted to heroin usually passes on that addiction to her unborn child, Adam and Eve passed on their tendency to sin (concupiscence) to all of their offspring, who in turn also suffered the consequences of their own sins.

You may ask, "Why does God allow so much sin in the world?" Because He respects our freedom and permits us to sin if we so desire. God has made it possible for us to reject his love, precisely because true love for him would be impossible without the radical liberty to either choose Him freely or reject Him. Hitler, Stalin, Osama bin-Laden, drug lords, murderers and rapists have chosen their own behavior, and millions have suffered as a result. But even without such criminals, millions would have suffered from a host of other "natural" enemies, simply because the human race and the entire world has been ravaged by the effects of original sin.

Now you still may ask, "Why doesn't God just say, 'enough already?'" Hasn't there been sufficient pain in the world? Why doesn't he intervene more often to relieve suffering, instead of letting it happen to good people? Here I'm not speaking of the suffering caused by human cruelty, which has to do with moral freedom and is NEVER willed directly by God. Rather, I'm talking about tragedies that befall the innocent. Why does He permit them? Because God in his omnipotence and providence knows how to bring great good out of apparent evil and suffering. He may let terrible things happen sometimes, but only because these things are part of his overall plan in which goodness will ultimately triumph over evil. If God lets anything bad happen, it's for a good reason that we may not understand right away.

Allow me to provide a simple example of God's ability to bring good out of suffering. I had a friend named Ed who was a great football player at the University of Colorado. When he was a senior, many NFL teams were knocking at his door trying to recruit him. One day in a game against the University of Oregon, Ed caught a pass and landed on his head when tackled. The blow caused a concussion so severe that Ed entered a coma. During the next several weeks, Ed's parents took turns at his bedside, praying that their son would wake up. Well, eventually he did wake up, but he no longer remembered who he was, nor how to talk, nor how to walk. He couldn't dress himself. He didn't even remember how to eat. Ed's parents had to teach him everything from scratch, as if he were a baby again.

Ed's story is an apparent tragedy, right? It is until you hear "the rest of the story." At the time of the accident, Ed's parents had been going through a bitter divorce. The plight of their injured son now reunited them with a common purpose and helped them to rediscover their love for each other, which they had lost long before. Today, Ed remains permanently disabled but lives a functional life. He has a job, walks on his own, can carry on a basic conversation, and knows himself and God. Ed's parents are an exemplary couple, not only loving each other and their children but also running a local outreach ministry for Catholic families. Ed's successful football career, for the unity of his family: was it a fair trade? Ed would say "yes" in a heartbeat, and God brought it all about through suffering.

If God permits evil and suffering in the world, it's to bring about a greater good that would have been impossible without it. How can this be?

- a. God stands outside of time and sees the big picture; we don't. In his providence he allows evil and suffering because he foresees its good consequences (e.g., Ed and his parents). This is hard to accept when innocent people suffer, but we have to trust in God's loving providence. If he permits something bad to happen, it's for a good reason.
- b. God is omnipotent and could prevent moral evil if he wanted to. However, for God our complete freedom to accept or reject his love is a greater good than the forced acceptance of his laws, even though the latter would certainly reduce the amount of evil and suffering in the world.

In addition to God's ability to bring good out of suffering, which has come into the world as a consequence of original sin, he can also bring it forth from moral evil. In other words, even though God hates evil and never wills anyone to commit a sin, he sometimes permits sin in order to triumph over it with his mercy. The single greatest example of this is the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. The worst sin ever committed against God (the murder of his Son) has become the instrument of our redemption. How can such an apparent contradiction be possible? This is the subject of our next section.

3. The meaning of Christ's sufferings

Before we can comprehend the full meaning of human suffering, we have to understand the salvific nature of Christ's Incarnation and Passion. To help us in this task, let's adopt Stephen Hawking's approach of drastic summarization. Instead of "A Brief History of Time," let's run through "A Brief History of Salvation."

- 1) Adam and Eve sinned by distrusting and disobeying God.
- 2) God allowed them and all their descendants to suffer the consequences of their rebellion. It's not that God inflicted punishment on his children; rather, he let them freely bring it upon themselves. This does not mean that God wasn't deeply offended. He was, just as any father or mother is offended when a child turns against his parents. But it would be a mistake to think of God as a vengeful tyrant who unleashed his wrath on sinful man. God simply let man suffer the consequences of his own sin. We can call these consequences "punishment" in the sense that God allowed them, but not in the sense that God inflicted them directly.
- 3) This just punishment (not inflicted but chosen) had both a retributive aspect and a corrective aspect. (We see this reflected in our jails, which are called "correctional facilities.") The punishment of humanity, consisting in death and all the other sufferings that entered the world through original sin, was a necessary result of God's retributive justice (not angry revenge, but just retribution).
- 4) However, this punishment was not sufficient to satisfy God's corrective justice (that is, the healing of man's nature). In other words, the punishment incurred by Adam and his descendants was unable to change man's nature, radically damaged by sin. I compare this phenomenon to a hardened criminal who doesn't repent in jail, in spite of severe ongoing penalties. More than simply not repenting of their behavior, Adam's descendants only continued to worsen. The proliferation of their sins kept incurring new punishment and making their tendency to sin even more acute.
- 5) Human nature had to be REGENERATED, but how? *Verbum caro factum est* —The Word became flesh. God became man so that man could become like God. Christ assumed human nature in order to regenerate it from within. The Eternal Almighty One became one of us! He didn't *have* to do this, but he wanted to because he loves us.
- 6) Christ's obedience "undid" Adam's disobedience, and his love "undid" man's hatred. Through the disobedience of one man, all became corrupted. But through the obedience of Christ as man-God (mediator), all men were redeemed (cf. Romans 5:12-21).

- 7) So why did Christ suffer so much? Wasn't his Incarnation enough? Why did he have to die, and why did it have to be such a terrible death?
- a) Suffering showed the degree of his obedience. If he hadn't suffered, his obedience would have been easy (there is little merit in something easy). "Obedience" must be understood in the proper sense here. It's not that God the Father willed his Son's violent death directly (that would be contrary to the very nature of the Father's love); instead, God the Father *permitted* Christ's Passion and Death as a means of gaining merit for the entire human race.
 - b) Suffering showed the depth of his love. If you really love someone, you show it in self-sacrifice. Saying "I love you" is cheap when it doesn't cost anything.
 - c) The sufferings of Christ aren't what saved us (as if pain itself were redemptive); what saved us was the great love and obedience with which he endured this pain, and the fact that his sufferings were a *consequence* of his great love for us (expressed in fidelity to his mission). Here we are talking about "obedience" in the proper sense: God sent Jesus to preach the Good News and to serve (cf. Luke 4:18-19), and in obedience to his mission Christ incurred the hatred and rejection of sinners, ultimately leading to his crucifixion.
 - d) The meaning of Christ's suffering can't be reduced to the mere "payment of a debt." The satisfaction of God's retributive justice wouldn't have warranted so much suffering. In much of Protestant theology, the Passion is understood as the blazing wrath of the Father unleashed upon Christ as an innocent substitute for sinful man; the Victim's blood thus appeases divine anger. What a negative view of God, as if he were a vengeful tyrant! What a distortion of the Father's love for his Son! There had to be much more to Christ's Passion than the mere satisfaction of divine justice. Christ's merits were not only enough to "pay off the remainder of debt" (retributive justice) and regenerate human nature (corrective justice), but were also sufficient to earn a reward for the entire human race (also justice, but in the sense of just REWARD rather than just punishment).
- 8) OK, so Christ saved us through his Incarnation and Passion. But if Christ the Innocent One was "crushed for our offenses" (cf. Is 53), did he really suffer "in our place" as if our own sufferings had no value whatsoever? Isn't it unjust for an innocent man to die for another's guilt?
- 9) How is human suffering a participation in Christ's Passion? What value does it have? Does human suffering save souls? If so, under what conditions? Does human suffering console Jesus by making his cross lighter (cf. Col. 1:24), just as Simon of Cyrene's did? How?

4. The redemptive value of human suffering

The whole key to understanding the value of human suffering lies in the doctrine of the "Mystical Body of Christ." The doctrine is based on Christ's own words (cf. Mt. 25:40—"whatsoever you did to the least of my brothers, you so did unto me"; Acts 9:4—"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"), as well as the writings of St. Paul (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23; Eph. 4:15-16). These passages show us that the Incarnate Word identifies with each individual as members of his own Body.

We can also develop the doctrine of the Mystical Body from philosophical reflection on the Incarnation of Christ. When the second person of the Trinity assumed human nature, he elevated it to a greater dignity and became the new standard and model of humanity. As such he replaced Adam as the head of the human race. Although he was descended from Adam in the flesh, Christ was begotten by God in his divinity; thus he became the New Adam, capable of transforming the entire human race. Just as Adam transmitted fallen human nature to his descendants, Christ by means of the Incarnation transmits holiness to all men who participate in His life through baptism. Christ is the Head of the Mystical Body, and we are its members. When Christ became one of us, we truly became "related to God," not only spiritually but also physically.

Whatever the Head does, the members do by participation. We see this in our own bodies. If you have a migraine headache, your whole body suffers. If your arms and legs are sunburned, you become mentally conscious of the pain. When you break a finger, you don't say, "My finger is suffering." You say, "I'm suffering because of my broken finger." The seat of suffering resides in the consciousness, which the head contains. It is the

same way in the Mystical Body: Christ's sufferings have become our sufferings, and ours have become his. Christ's merits have become our merits, and ours have become his. Finally, Christ's triumph over death in the resurrection, which he merited through obedience, has become ours: right now it is pledged to us in baptism, later it will be fulfilled in the resurrection of our bodies at the end of time.

When St. Paul said, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church" (cf. Col. 1:24), he wasn't merely speaking in figurative terms. The Christian's suffering has REAL value, precisely because it is a participation in Christ's passion. It's not that Christ's passion lacked anything in itself, but rather that Christ's sufferings as Head of the Mystical Body incorporated the future sufferings of his Body's individual members. A person with third-degree burns all over his body doesn't say, "I'm suffering but my limbs are not," nor does he say, "My skin is burnt but I'm not suffering." Rather, the *whole person* suffers. This is no less true regarding the Passion of Christ's Body and the sufferings of his Body's members. Our sufferings are redemptive because they participate in His.

Let's draw a few conclusions from the doctrine of the Mystical Body:

- 1) If it's possible to alleviate the sufferings of Jesus by relieving the pain of those in need (e.g., the Good Samaritan, or the figure of Simon of Cyrene), it's because Christ has made our sufferings his own. He took on our sufferings so that whatever we do to alleviate the sufferings of others, we do unto him.
- 2) If it's true that Christ died once and for all ("there" in Jerusalem and "then" in 33 A.D.), and yet the grace of redemption must be applied to the "here" and "now" of each individual through the Mass and the Sacraments, then it's no less true that his sufferings on the cross (there and then) must be shared in the here and now of each person through every human suffering.
- 3) *Quod non assumptus, non redemptus* (cf. the Council of Chalcedon): Christ had to assume human suffering in order to become "like man in all things but sin." He had to assume our pain in order to redeem it, in order to transform it into something holy.
- 4) The true value of Christ's suffering (and our own) lies not in the pain itself, but in the love with which that pain is endured. Also, pain is often a *consequence* of sacrificial love; it is the *proof* of true love. In this way, suffering is transformed into love, and love is manifested in suffering. The greatest merit lies in suffering for the sake of love. In Christ's passion and death, the two sources of his merit were: loving to the point of suffering, and turning suffering into an act of love. Love becomes suffering, and suffering becomes love. This is the essence of the Beatitudes: to love and to suffer (cf. Matt. 5:3-12). Five of the Beatitudes refer to "turning suffering into love," the last Beatitude refers to "loving to the point of suffering," and the two Beatitudes regarding the single-hearted and the peacemakers can be understood as "loving to the point of suffering," since being single-hearted and working for peace often involves great sacrifice.

How did Christ love to the point of suffering? In loving obedience to his Father he was faithful to his mission: he preached the Good News, forgave sinners and healed the sick, incurring the hatred and jealousy of his enemies which ultimately led to his crucifixion. How did Christ turn suffering into love? He accepted the pains and discomforts of his hidden life, the toil and opposition of his public life, and the agony and torture of his Passion in a spirit of obedience to the Father's will (understood as the Father *permitting* Christ's sufferings, not willing them directly). In so doing he converted suffering into love.

How can we love to the point of suffering? We can be faithful to our conscience and profess our faith boldly, knowing that sometimes this will incur the world's hatred and rejection. We can be kind to our enemies and speak well of those we don't like, which is much harder than fasting or wearing a hair shirt. How can we turn suffering into love? We can obediently accept all of our aches, pains, sorrows and troubles, knowing that God has permitted them in our lives for a good reason, and that all of our sufferings participate in the redemptive Passion of Christ. We can be patient in adversity and forgiving to those who hurt us, thereby converting pain into love.

- 5) How love becomes suffering:
 - a. love is expressed in obedience (doing the will of the beloved), and frequently the consequence of such obedience is suffering
 - b. true love often involves sacrificing one's own preferences for another's sake; this causes pain
 - c. fidelity to one's conscience (a form of love for God) often leads to discomfort or inconvenience

- 6) How suffering becomes love:
 - a. acceptance of suffering is a form of obedience, since the one who suffers is accepting what God has permitted; his “passive” obedience thus becomes an expression of love
 - b. patience turns adversity into love; forgiveness converts into love the suffering caused by someone else’s sin
 - c. voluntary penance, and the willing acceptance of involuntary suffering, become an expression of love when the soul, sorry for having offended God, is eager to expiate sin through suffering
 - d. voluntary “extra” sufferings, and the joyful acceptance of involuntary suffering, become an expression of love when the soul desires ardently to love God more; unsatisfied with expressing love in acts of charity and obedience, the soul seeks to suffer “extra” pain as an act of love, either to show gratitude to God or to intercede for a sinner’s conversion

- 7) There are also certain natural and supernatural benefits of our suffering:
 - a. makes us humble, less arrogant
 - b. makes us more dependent on God
 - c. makes us more compassionate towards those who suffer
 - d. makes us better at counseling those who suffer
 - e. makes us mature, more able to deal with life (e.g., young cancer patients)
 - f. makes us patient, more able to tolerate others
 - g. makes us sorry for sin, which is the ultimate cause of suffering
 - h. makes us grateful for what we have lost (and what we hope to regain)
 - i. strengthens our will, fortifies our hope, increases our patience (an important ingredient of charity)

- 8) Finally, there are also natural and supernatural benefits of Christ’s suffering:
 - a. consoles us when we suffer (misery loves company, and we are consoled to know that he suffered first, that he suffers with us, that we suffer with him)
 - b. strengthens us to bear our own sufferings (his example encourages us, his strength is transmitted to us through grace)
 - c. teaches us that suffering is OK, that it is to be endured without complaint and accepted patiently; Christ teaches us HOW to suffer
 - d. makes us sorry for our sins, which have caused Christ to suffer (both directly and indirectly)
 - e. makes us grateful to Christ for loving us to such an extreme degree

4. A brief summary

Since this article has covered many points, a brief summary may be helpful to conclude it:

- 1) Sin corrupted human nature.
- 2) Christ assumed human nature in the Incarnation, in order to regenerate it.
- 3) Acting as Head of the Mystical Body, Christ redeemed man, making up for human disobedience with his heroic obedience. The merit of obedience lies in its difficulty, and this involves suffering. Christ suffered for us by suffering *with* us and *over* us; that is, by suffering as our Head. As Head he didn’t “substitute” the Body, as if the sufferings of his Body’s members didn’t count for anything; rather he *represented* and embraced the whole Body. Thus the pains and sorrows of all the Mystical Body’s members participate in the sufferings of their Head. Our sufferings are truly redemptive! “Offering it up” isn’t a trite platitude at all; it’s a real source of merit. We can truly help save souls by directing our pains, sorrows, setbacks, difficulties, disappointments and sacrifices (both voluntary and involuntary) towards specific people and intentions.
- 4) Christ’s merits took two forms, just as our merits take two forms: a) love, expressed in obedience, which leads to suffering; and b) suffering, accepted in obedience, which turns into love. It’s not that suffering itself has any merit; rather, the value of suffering derives from the love which causes it, or the love with which it is endured. All merit thus boils down to two “chemical formulas” that we can put into practice in imitation of our Master, and in real union with our Incarnate Lord:

a. love ————^{expressed in} obedience ————^{leads to} suffering

b. suffering ————^{accepted in} obedience ————^{turns into} love

- 5) Christ's merits won a just reward from the Father: his triumphant resurrection. This same reward is transmitted to all Christians through their participation in the Mystical Body. Right now we experience it in Baptism and the other sacraments; later we will receive it fully in the resurrection of the body on Judgment Day. On that great day, this brief life of suffering will seem like a single grain of sand on an endless beach of happiness, and St. Paul's words to the Romans will be fulfilled: "I consider the sufferings of this present time as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us." (cf. Rom. 8:18)

Sources: The New American Bible, Salvifici Doloris (JP2), Soteriology of St. Paul (Fitzmeyer), Discourse of JP2 to the Sick (Jan 24, 1998), MESSAGE OF JP2 for the WORLD DAY OF PEACE (Jan 1, 2002), Message of Benedict XVI for Lent (Feb 13, 2007), Deus Caritas Est (Benedict XVI), Summa Theologiae (Aquinas).