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PUBLISHER’S NOTE: Clarence J. Enzler was the author of many Catholic books and booklets, including *My Other Self* (1957) and *Everyone’s Way of the Cross* (1970). His nine-part series of Lenten reflections, published under the title “Heroism and Holiness,” first appeared in the *Ave Maria* magazine in February, March, and April of 1963.

Lenten Reflections

Seven: Suffering Is an Alms of God’s Love

BY CLARENCE J. ENZLER

Love is tested in suffering. The measure of the love one has for another is the degree to which he prefers the other’s wellbeing to his own, the extent to which he is willing to sacrifice himself. If he is unwilling to suffer at all for the good of someone he professes to love, he does *not* love. If the limit of his sacrifice is a little inconvenience or discomfort, he does not love deeply. If it extends to the constant and continual preferment of the other, day in and day out in a thousand little sacrifices—the sacrifices good wives make for their husbands and good husbands for their wives and good parents for their children—then he loves both deeply and well.

But if it extends beyond this to include *any* sacrifice, it matters not how painful—even to the deliberate choice of death itself—in order to produce a commensurate benefit, then he loves nobly, heroically, divinely; for that is how the Divinity loves us.

This is the fulfillment of Our Lord’s *new* commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

It is because the true test of love is suffering that the willing acceptance of the crosses sent by God at every moment of our

lives is the surest, quickest, safest road to heroic holiness.

Suffering visits every life, an inevitable, unpredictable, and humanly most unwelcome guest. It may come in the form of physical pain due to illness, accident or ailments. It may come in the form of worry, worry about finances, the job, loss of property, the threat of failure in business or a profession. It may come as a saddening disappointment: discord at home, a child marrying outside the Church or throwing away opportunities at school. It may come as grief: helplessly standing by watching a little child, a parent, a brother or sister, a wife or husband slowly die, or seeing mental illness corrode the mind of one we love.

Everyone’s Way of the Cross

Clarence Enzler’s perennially popular *Everyone’s Way of the Cross* was first published by Ave Maria Press in 1970 and has since gone on to sell over 3.6 million copies, in both a [regular](#) and a [large print](#) edition. Ideal for either private devotion or public Stations of the Cross, Enzler’s meditation booklet urges us to carry on Christ’s “unfinished business” and unite our will with His.

When in the grip of pain, we are prone to ask: Why? Why must suffering be our common lot? Why does it have to be unavoidable, inescapable?

Fundamentally, I suppose the answer is this: Because it is *the test*.

It is easy to think we love when all our days are filled with joy. Obedience that costs nothing, tests nothing. It is only along the way of the Cross and on Calvary that heroes and heroines prove themselves.

But suffering is more than a test. It serves as a reminder that this mortal life is not the Christian's *real* life, nor this earth his permanent home. And these truths never needed emphasis more than now in relatively affluent America.

Moreover, suffering is the hammer and chisel of holiness. No one could reasonably contend that suffering is good in itself. But there must be something wonderfully good to be derived *from* it. Suffering shapes the soul as a Michelangelo shapes the beauty hidden in a block of marble; only God is a Sculptor Who knows precisely how hard to strike to bring out the exact measure of beauty and heroism He has implanted in us.

He knew exactly how hard to strike St. Paul, who confessed in his second letter to the Corinthians: "Lest I should be puffed up with vanity, there was given me a thorn for the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to buffet me. Concerning this I three times besought the Lord that it might leave me. And He said to me: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfectly evident in your weakness.'"

With awful precision, He struck Mary's soul as she watched her Son fall beneath the heavy beam and saw Him driven like an animal through the streets of Jerusalem. These two placed their martyrdoms side by side, hiding not one sorrow from the other, sparing each other not one pain. It was for this they were born, Jesus the Son, Mary the Mother.

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Surely it can only be because suffering is essential that God would bestow it upon the human nature of His Son and so rend the body and soul of His spouse. Surely when He permits us to suffer, it is for love. May we not believe that the more terrible the suffering He permits us to endure, the greater His "trust" in us? Since He will not try us beyond our strength, it must follow that great trials are matched by great faith, great hope, great love—and great expectations.

Yet it is natural for us to be bewildered. Can it truly be that suffering which hurts so much *must* work unto good if only we love God? This concept is perhaps less incomprehensible to parents than to others. Mothers and fathers who are forced to subject a child of their mutual love to the pains of surgery know how their love makes it necessary for them to provide encouragement, gifts, and extraordinary proofs of affection. Surely, our heavenly Father is no less versed in the medicine of love than we whose love is but the palest reflection of His.

How many times parents make up to a child for a pain, a loss, a disappointment, an injustice, in ways the child never recognizes until years later, when he, too, has become adult and something brings to mind forgotten incidents of the distant past. Surely it will be true that when at last we see God face to face, we will understand with a certain knowledge that He did indeed make all things work together unto our good because we loved Him. Omnipotence has the power to make up whatever is lacking—and love demands that omnipotence do so.

In a thousand different ways God uses suffering to shape, strengthen and purify our souls. "Some persons," writes Father Joseph Schryvers, "understands this loving conduct of God and let themselves be formed as He

wills. Others are astonished; they murmur, and shrink from the divine operations.”

This is the point of separation between the heroic and the mediocre Christian. “The trial is the same, the occasion is the same; the only difference is in the interior disposition.”

Never is this point of separation more sharply defined than in time of sickness. Making all due allowance for the fact that the threshold of pain and the tendency to worry differ widely from person to person, the response to illness, especially serious illness, is often the acid test of one’s submission to the will of God. How difficult it is to accept the particular sickness that befalls us without seeking to cut the pattern to suit ourselves. How often we say, “I wouldn’t mind being sick if only it didn’t interfere with my work.” Or—“If only it didn’t last so long.” Or—“I wish I weren’t so weak.” Or—“If only this headache were not a part of it.” Or—“If only the meals in this hospital weren’t served cold.” Or—“If only I could be somewhere else.”

These, actually, are not serious complaints. Often they are little more than conversational gambits. But sometimes, especially when the siege stretches into months, complaints become rebellion. This is tragic. But the tragedy is not in the discomfort rebellion produces in the patient and everyone around him; it is rather in the waste of God’s best gift.

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How differently the heroes in holiness have acted. First, they’ve not feared the onslaught of sickness. If this happens to be part of God’s plan, so be it. Reasonable care of one’s health, yes; but beyond this “behold the servant, or handmaid, of the Lord.”

When sickness strikes, they again do all that reason calls for, obeying the doctor, submitting to hospital routine, offering whatever pains may come in praise of the

love which sends them. As for not being able to carry forward the work they had in progress, this now becomes God’s business, and it is up to Him to provide for it as He sees fit. Through this sickness, God has spoken as clearly as if He had said in so many words: “For the time being you do My will best by being sick. You serve Me better in illness than you could possibly do in health.” And the answer again is, “Behold the servant, the handmaid, of the Lord.”

Heroic souls have allowed God to engrave on their hearts the beautiful words of the marriage ceremony which applies to all sacrifice—“Love can make it easy, and perfect love can make it a joy.”

Therefore, when illness besets them, when their bodies cry for rest and their work seems more than they can manage; when they are tormented by worry that seems beyond their power to control; when they are subjected to ridicule and have lost the respect of others; when grief assaults them and threatens to overcome them, and they momentarily feel that even God Himself has deserted them and their broken, abandoned souls are totally unable to bear another wound, then perhaps God recalls to their minds these sentiments of St. Francis de Sales:

*God in His divine wisdom
has from all eternity beheld the cross
He bestows upon you—
His precious gift from His heart.*

*He contemplated this cross
with His all-knowing eye
before bestowing it upon you.*

*He pondered over it
with His divine mind;
He examined it
with His all-wise justice;
with His loving mercy
He warmed it through and through*

*And with both His hands
He weighed it
to determine if it be
one ounce too heavy for you.*

*He blessed it with His all-holy Name.
With His grace He anointed it.
And with His consolation he perfumed it.*

*And then once more
He considered you
and your courage.*

*Finally, it comes from heaven
as a special message of God
to you; an alms of the all-merciful
love of God for you.*

With such a sublime concept of the divine love is it any wonder that St. Francis could say in another place: “If jealousy could enter into the realm of eternal love, the angels themselves would envy the sufferings of God for man, and those of man for God”?

For the heroic soul, then, the cross is not something to be avoided. Neither, generally speaking, is it something to be sought. Rather, the cross is to be accepted, and borne, exactly as God presents it at every present moment.

Particularly is this true of our major, or predominant, cross. As we go through life, the trials and sufferings are many and varied. Usually, at any given time, some one cross, trial, problem, or difficulty predominates. This year it may be poverty, next year ill health, either afflicting us or one dear to us. For youngsters it may be inability to get into college, failure to make the team, lack of popularity in the group. For any of us, it may be a physical handicap; a speech difficulty which causes acute embarrassment and

hinders professional progress; defective hearing; sudden loss of a limb; partial or total blindness.

Whatever the cross and however burdensome it may be, it is intended to be a seedbed of virtue; and it *can* be. Since it is our major cross, it is the major mortification God has selected or has permitted us to have as of this moment. It is the key to holiness which He Himself holds out to us. In patiently, willingly, lovingly bearing it, we are in effect carrying a sliver, or more, of Christ’s own Cross. We are sharing in His atonement, making up as St. Paul put it “what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.”

Our major cross will increase our faith—if you believe that it come from God.

It will increase our trust—if we can realize that God knows best.

Our love—if we bear it with love.

Humility—if it makes us see ourselves as we really are.

Prayerfulness—if we ask God’s help to cope with it.

Generosity—if we offer it up for others.

Patience—if we accept it serenely.

Fortitude—if we bear it bravely.

Prudence—if it keeps us from attempting more than our handicap permits.

Indeed it is true: In the Cross is the seed of every virtue.

In this season of Lent when the Way of the Cross is so much a part of the Christian’s prayer and thoughts, it is appropriate to call to mind the relationship between Our Lord’s journey to Calvary and our meditations on the 14 Stations. Our Lord’s life was incomplete until it was crowned by His Way of the Cross. Our meditated way of the Cross will remain incomplete until it is crowned by our lives.

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