

Suffering & the Mass: The Great Exchange

By Jeff Cavins (an excerpt from *Catholic for a Reason*)

Pope John Paul II said, “Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace.”¹ How many times have you heard someone say, “The Mass is boring,” or “What does the Mass have to do with my situation in life?” How many of us have grown up not understanding that in the Mass we have the divine drama of sacrificial love presented to us with the invitation to participate in the ultimate act of love? Unfortunately, for some, the Mass becomes a duty of time where images, scents, responses, and movements swirl about to make up what we call religion.

The most ironic thing about many people’s experience during Mass is that they have brought their problems, their suffering, and their preoccupations to the very place where their suffering can find true meaning. Why is it that we oftentimes review our life’s difficulties in our minds, completely missing the very drama that changes the question mark in our hearts to an exclamation mark? Like the dehydrated man circling a drinking fountain contemplating how thirsty he is, so today, many Catholics are circling the Mass with thoughts of their own predicament.

In this chapter, we will focus on one aspect of the liturgy—suffering, and how Christ’s suffering can transform our lives in the Mass. Every time we go to Mass, we should be struck by the fact that God has come to earth, suffered, died, and now asks us to follow in His footsteps. At the end of every Mass, we must leave with the attitude: Not only am I going to join myself to Him in His sacrifice, but I’m also going to live that sacrifice when I exit the door and go to my home, my work, and my neighbors. In short, I’m going to become like Jesus in every area of my life.

Often our lives are spent trying to avoid suffering. We don’t like to suffer, and most of us have unanswered questions about suffering. Especially, we wonder

¹ *Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering Salvifici Doloris* (February 11, 1984), no. 26, emphasis omitted.

how God, if He loves us, could allow us to suffer. The gospel message provides answers to the question of suffering, but those answers may not be readily apparent. Throughout salvation history, we see that the ways of God are often not the ways of man. Embedded in the dark confines of an oyster, we find, to our surprise, shining pearls. Perhaps the circumstances in which you find yourself appear to be dark and hopeless. But know: you are not alone. Not only have others been where you are, but more importantly, Jesus has been where you are.

Part of the problem of understanding the subject of suffering is that we are accustomed to quick answers, and we usually don't contemplate suffering until we are in the midst of it. When we are in the midst of suffering we usually are not focused or disciplined enough to wrestle with the biblical text, the writings of the Church Fathers, or the Tradition of the Church. Often we become stuck in the quicksand of our pain, distracted by difficulty, and feel that answers are just out of our reach. Furthermore, the pace of modern life dictates to us that we should be able to go to Mass, pray a quick prayer, and expect relief from our problems by the time we get back home for the football game.

The time to study the topic of suffering is before major problems of life occur. However, an academic study of suffering can only go so far. Suffering is part of the Christian vocation and can only be truly understood in the school of suffering. I became interested in suffering when, not too long ago, I found out that I had a split disk in my neck that caused excruciating pain. While I knew the teachings of the Church on redemptive suffering, I did not know how to put those teachings into practice in my life. I didn't understand why or how suffering could become a profitable ordeal.

There are various kinds of suffering. Physical suffering, such as a broken leg, neck pain, or cancer, can be quite intense and, if prolonged, can wear a person down. Spiritual, moral and emotional suffering, such as betrayal, depression, loss of a loved one, and disappointment, can often be worse than physical pain. Any kind of suffering can be devastating.

As we survey human history, it becomes evident that it's not "if" we are going to suffer during our lives, but "when," and, more importantly, "how" will we suffer—poorly or well? Once the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is understood, it will become the key to suffering well, rather than losing hope in life. There is meaning in

suffering that can change your sorrow into joy. I know—I've been there and have, like many others, been transformed as a result of understanding the message of the Mass.

When there is no meaning attached to suffering, people can easily fall into despair. However, once meaning is attached to suffering, it is astounding what people can endure. The key is not the suffering, but the meaning attached to it. Most would agree that they would not be willing to endure great agony for six months for a mouse, because they don't see any meaning in their suffering for a mouse. But most would enthusiastically raise their hands in affirmation if I were to ask, "How many of you would be willing to endure pain for your daughter or your son?" They would raise their hands because they would find meaning, namely the life of their child.

The key to understanding suffering is found in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. When asked, "Why did Jesus come to earth?" the answer is usually, "He came to die for my sins." While this is true, there must be more—for if He only came to die then why wouldn't He have accepted death as an infant? He was fully God as an infant, so why not offer Himself shortly after being born? As we will see, the mission of Jesus involves more than simply dying. It involves a complete identification with humanity, including suffering. We will also see that our mission in life constitutes more than merely going to church every week. We are called to not only attend Mass, but to completely identify with Christ by joining our lives to His.

At every Mass across the world, you will most likely see a crucifix made out of wood, metal, or some other material. It may be a simple cross or an expensive ornate one. The question is: Why did Jesus have to die such a death, and what does His death mean to you in your current problem?

In Luke 24, Jesus is walking with two men on the road to Emmaus shortly after His Resurrection. The gentlemen were sad, disappointed—in a word, they were suffering. They had thought that Jesus would restore the kingdom of God and redeem Israel. Though they did not recognize Jesus at this point on their journey, they were walking with God, talking to God, complaining about God. How ironic that these two men, in the midst of their suffering, did not know that the One who suffered for them was walking right beside them. Jesus finally says, "O

foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (vv. 25–27).

The question of our suffering begins with a more basic question: Why did God suffer? To answer this we must see the relationship between Adam and Jesus in terms of their relationship to God, the Father. The Apostle Paul sees a direct correlation between the fall of Adam and the victory of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45, he writes, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. . . . Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

Shortly after Adam and Eve's creation they underwent an ordeal in the Garden of Eden. Created in the image and likeness of God, Adam and Eve had an intellect and a will. In other words, they could know a thing and act on it. In the garden, Adam and Eve were given directives and a choice. Successful completion of this ordeal would give them the opportunity to fully enter into the life of the Trinity through obedience and sacrifice.

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Gen. 2:8–9, 15–17)

Adam was given two commands by God: Till and keep the garden and do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the consequences would be death. While Adam was immortal, his body "was mortal by nature, with a healthy, instinctive abhorrence of physical death."² The punishment of death had meaning to Adam because he understood the gravity of death. Shortly after God gave the two commandments to Adam, Eve was fashioned from Adam, creating a spousal relationship. It's

² Scott Hahn, *First Comes Love: Finding Your Family in the Church and the Trinity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 66.

implied in the biblical text that Adam, as husband, would communicate God's commands to Eve.

In the Hebrew, we find an interesting word, "keep," that loses some of its impact in English translations. The Hebrew word for "keep" is shamar and means, "to guard." Adam was told to guard the garden and cultivate it. The command of God begs the question, guard against what? We don't know at this point in the text, but as we turn to the third chapter of Genesis it becomes clear.

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. (Gen. 3:1-7)

So often when people read about the serpent in Genesis their minds go back to children's Bibles that depict the serpent as a small snake slyly staring at Eve. However, in the Hebrew the word for "serpent" is nahash, translated as "dragon" in Isaiah 27:1 and "sea monster" in Job 26:13 (Contemporary English Version). Clearly this was an imposing foe that did not have Adam and Eve's well-being in mind.

What is important to understand is that the serpent's point of attack is not the existence of God. Rather, would Adam and Eve, created to participate in the life of the Trinity, fully enter into that life by imitating the self-donating communion of the Godhead? In short, would our original parents trust God?

Upon further study, we see that the remarks of the serpent are left unfinished. Adam and Eve must conclude the serpent's thoughts. "You will not die" if you eat the fruit, the serpent suggests. From Adam's perspective, the serpent's statement

could be interpreted as a veiled threat. The enemy would kill them if they didn't eat the fruit.

Facing Adam and Eve are some choices: Would they entrust themselves to their Father, would they enter into combat with the enemy and guard the garden, would Adam defend his bride? Would Adam risk his life in a self-sacrificing offering, or would he succumb to pride and rely upon his own resources, preserving his natural life? Given Adam's awareness of the possibility of death and the veiled threat by the enemy, it is easier to see how Adam could remain silent and allow his bride to take the direct hit. And this is exactly what he did. Their disobedience resulted in death for our original parents. Adam and Eve chose to preserve their natural life, and in the process, they lost their supernatural life. Divine sonship was lost and they died spiritually. As a result, even their natural life was affected as sin ate away at their bodies and minds. Suddenly life was quite limited.

But God in His mercy would not give up on mankind. Genesis 3:15, the first announcement of good news, forecasts the day when the Messiah would crush the head of the enemy by self-donating sacrifice. The text reads, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This first announcement of good news would involve a bruising, or in other words suffering.

Adam was given the opportunity to imitate the self-donating, life-giving love of the Trinity, but he failed, and the result was a curse.

To the woman [God] said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." And to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Gen. 3:16–19)

The result of Adam and Eve's sin, while appearing to be devastating, would actually double as a remedial lesson, showing Adam and Eve that fruit can come out of suffering. In Genesis 3:16–19, we see that both Eve and Adam would endure suffering, but out of that suffering would come natural fruit. Eve would

give herself to her husband, resulting in the pain of childbirth. The cries of childbirth would soon turn to tears of joy, as both parents would celebrate the wonder of new life. Adam also would suffer, and toil resulting in fruit in the form of bread from the earth.³

As salvation history developed, we see that, throughout time, God made successive covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. But in all cases, man fell short of completely offering himself, as Adam should have. If the love of the Trinity were to be imitated in man, God would have to become a man and face the trial that Adam faced.

The promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, became a man two thousand years ago and fulfilled the law (cf. Rom. 13:10) by loving the world with the ultimate sacrifice of His life. Saint Paul calls Jesus the “last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:20–23, 45) because He would lay down His life “as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45).

Jesus conquered death by taking on human nature, that He “might destroy him who has the power of death” (Heb. 2:14). He loved by freely offering Himself for you and me and, in the process, not only purchased us, but also set an example for us of how to love as He loves.

The serpent in the Garden of Eden suggested to Adam and Eve that there was an easier way to fulfill their destiny—to grasp power by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent’s remarks implied that one could be like God without self-donating love. This was a lie, and Adam and Eve bought it. Jesus faced a similar challenge in Matthew 16 when Peter suggested that Jesus could fulfill His destiny without completely offering Himself up.

After giving the keys to the kingdom to Saint Peter (Mt. 16:19), Jesus announced that He was going to go to Jerusalem to suffer many things and be killed (v. 21). Peter reacts to Jesus’ announcement of suffering and death with the same spirit conveyed by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (v. 22). Recognizing the false solution to the grave predicament of mankind, Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men” (v. 23).

³ For further reflection see Hahn, *First Comes Love*.

Before Jesus, the last Adam, moves toward the Garden of Gethsemane, Satan had already entered Judas (cf. Lk. 22:3). Jesus enters the garden (cf. Mt. 26:36), and then Judas enters the garden (cf. Jn.18:1–3), setting up a parallel event with the Garden of Eden.

The Garden of Gethsemane scene starts out with an almost prophetic statement from Saint Peter, a statement that reflects Peter’s desire to participate with Christ in His mission.

Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples. Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go yonder and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.” And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.” And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done.” And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” (Mt. 26:35–45)

In the passion of Jesus, “his sweat became like great drops of blood” (Lk. 22:44), and He wore “the crown of thorns” (Jn. 19:5)—reminders of the result of Adam’s ordeal (cf. Gen. 3:18–19). Jesus did what Adam should have done. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb. 5:7–9).

Though Jesus was in the form of God, He “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5–8). Jesus completely emptied Himself and demonstrated the love of God in all its fullness.

The good news is that He rose from the dead, defeating death, hell, and the grave. Indeed, Jesus answered in the affirmative the question raised in the Garden of Eden: Can we trust God? Unlike Adam, Jesus obeyed the Father and poured out His life for His bride. When we realize that the bride of Christ is the Church, and Jesus loved us so much, it's almost too much to take in. Oh, how we are loved!

But now, what about you and your suffering? Didn't Jesus suffer and die so that we wouldn't have to? Jesus suffered and died that we might become a part of the family of God, become spiritually healed and share in His nature. But He didn't eliminate suffering. The work of Christ doesn't guarantee the lack of suffering. Rather, He changed the meaning of suffering. Through baptism into Christ—into His death and Resurrection—we have become intimately joined to Him, so much so that we are His body. Because of our union with Christ, even our suffering is changed; it becomes redemptive by virtue of “being in Christ.” Pope John Paul II said in his Apostolic Letter “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering” that “in the Cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been Redeemed.”⁴ In other words, suffering is worth something if it is in union with Christ.

At the point where Jesus seems to be the weakest, the complete self-donation of the Cross, the most powerful act of the Passion, the Resurrection, took place. So too, our weakness is capable of being filled with the same power manifested on the Cross. Saint Paul experienced much weakness and suffering; however, when he asked that his own infirmity be taken away, Christ answered, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Then Saint Paul could proclaim, “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:9). Pope John Paul II, a man also acquainted with suffering, said, “It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls.”⁵

Saint Paul understood that our life is a cooperation with the work of Christ when he said to the Colossians, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that

⁴ *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

is, the church” (1:24). Think about that—Paul said that something is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. What could possibly be lacking in Christ’s afflictions? Your part! Again, Pope John Paul II said, “[T]he springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human weakness. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle of the infinite treasure of the world’s Redemption, and can share this treasure with others.”⁶

For the Apostle Paul, completing what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ does not mean that the suffering of Christ is not complete. It means that the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all love expressed in human suffering. While Jesus achieved the Redemption completely, He did not bring it to a close. The door is still wide open to participate with Him in the redemption of the world. We will see that our best opportunity is during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass where the meaning of suffering is most clearly understood.

Jesus tells us that if we are to follow Him, we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily (cf. Lk. 9:23). Our lives become an imitation and participation in the love of the Trinity when we offer up our entire lives in union with Christ. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. . . . [K]nowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence” (2 Cor. 4:8–11, 14).

The Resurrection is our guarantee that we can trust our heavenly Father; we can participate in the lifegiving love of the Trinity by laying our lives down for the sake of His kingdom. The fruit of our suffering is raised to a supernatural level; it becomes eternal in nature. Though Eve’s love for Adam resulted in suffering during childbirth, it ultimately resulted in fruit, a son. So too Jesus brought “many sons to glory . . . through suffering” (Heb. 2:10).

In the midst of suffering, we experience the love of God. We enter the very heart of the Trinity, and it is there that we come to know God. Christ allows us to

⁶ *Ibid.*, *emphasis omitted.*

participate in His Cross because that is His means of allowing us to participate in the exchanges of the Trinity, to share in the very inner life of God. This is why sometimes “bad things happen to good people.” Prior to the incarnation, Mary, the mother of Jesus said “yes” to God. This “yes,” her fiat, would result in pain. Simeon told her, “[A] sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Lk. 2:35). But what was the fruit of Mary’s suffering? Life for the entire world.

As stated earlier, the suffering and death of Jesus does not mean that we won’t suffer. In fact, we are told that we can expect some suffering if we follow Him. Jesus, while not removing all suffering from us, does change our suffering and makes it redemptive. Jesus empowers us with His life and enables us to love as He loves when we offer our lives in union with Him.

The most perfect place to offer our suffering in union with Christ is during the Mass. It is in the Mass that we fully participate in the mystery of Calvary. The Mass is divided into two main movements, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After the readings from Scripture and the homily, the focus shifts from the ambo to the altar. The altar is the place where the sacrifice of Jesus is offered. It’s important to remember that the Paschal mystery of Christ does not remain only in the past, because He suffered and died for all men. This redemptive event is eternal and transcends time, making it a historically unique moment.

We participate in this unique moment by way of a sacrament. Time is mysteriously suspended, as the past, present, and future converge into the most important event in history. When we participate in the Mass, the liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us, but actualizes them in the present.

Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz in his book, *A Shepherd Speaks*, recalls a very old prayer that speaks of Mass as an admirable commercium, or a “marvelous exchange.”⁷ Each of the two parts of the Mass is an intimate exchange with God. In the first part, the Liturgy of the Word, we exchange words with God. We speak to Him in prayer and He speaks to us in His Word. In the second part, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we bring to God our bread, wine, and offerings. These represent our work, our tears, and our joys, and yes—our suffering.

⁷ Most Rev. Fabian Bruskewitz, *A Shepherd Speaks* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 290–91.

The bread used during Mass is referred to as “the host,” derived from the Latin *hostia*, which means “victim.” When the host is placed on the paten (usually a plate made of precious metal), it is elevated and offered to the Father by the Son. The deacon or priest pours wine into a chalice and adds a drop of water. The wine stands for Christ and the water humanity. The image here is that our humanity is totally immersed in His divinity. We truly are “in Christ.”

At this point in the Mass, our attention should be completely focused on offering ourselves in union with Christ. This is the moment when our minds and hearts dare not wander. It is at this precious moment when our cares, pain, and suffering are consciously united with Christ, and we choose to love as He loved in self-donating love.

The priest invites the assembly to join him in one accord in praying “that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” While Christ is the one sacrifice on the altar, offering up their lives in union with His sacrifice unites the laity to Him.

“Then at the climax of the Mass, Christ takes our worthless gifts and changes them, through the invocation and blessing of the Holy Spirit and the words of institution, spoken by the ordained priest, into His gift of Himself to God. Thus, our gifts, joined to His, become of infinite worth and of unsurpassable value. This is what makes each Mass, even when imperfect with defective music, ceremonies, rubrics or homily, infinitely meritorious before God.”⁸

The great exchange has taken place, and all things have become new, and “in everything God works for good for those who love him, who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Indeed, when we participate with Christ by offering our lives in sacrificial union with Him, we enter the heart of the Trinity and can truly say, “I have come to know His love.”

Are you suffering now? Do not despair—this is your opportunity to draw close to Christ and entrust yourself to God (cf. 1 Pet. 2:23; 4:19). By picking up your cross and following Christ, you will come to know Him more deeply. Each of us should leave the celebration of the Mass knowing that we have found and participated in

⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

the meaning of suffering. Armed with this knowledge of the nature of suffering, we can go through anything and need not despair.

What is the worst thing that has ever happened on earth? Deicide—the crucifixion of God. What was the result? The salvation of the world. If God brought such a great good out of such evil, then what can He bring out of your situation?

Having returned to the Catholic Church after twelve years as a Protestant pastor, Jeff Cavins communicates his zeal and deep love for Jesus Christ with clarity and enthusiasm through radio, television, books, and conferences.

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