

30. April 2023

Suffering for the Lord's sake

1 Pe 2:20b-25

The merit in the sight of God is in putting up with it patiently when you are punished for doing your duty. This, in fact, is what you were called to do, because Christ suffered for you and left an example for you to follow in his steps. He had done nothing wrong, and had spoken no deceit. He was insulted and did not retaliate with insults; when he was suffering he made no threats but put his trust in the upright judge. He was bearing our sins in his own body on the cross, so that we might die to our sins and live for uprightness; through his bruises you have been healed. You had gone astray like sheep but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

In this biblical passage, St. Peter particularly exalts suffering, which for us human beings is a difficult subject to understand.

In fact, suffering can also be the consequence of sins and mistakes, which should serve as a pedagogical measure to bring us back to the right path. But today's reading is not about this kind of suffering. Rather, it is addressed to those who suffer in spite of having done right and fulfilled God's Will. If they remain on the right path even though suffering befalls them, then their pain is directly united with Christ's pain.

These words of St. Peter remind us of one of the beatitudes: "*Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account*" (Mt 5:11).

The text even says that such suffering would be a grace before God. Now grace is a manifestation of God's love, so how can we understand that suffering, whatever it may be, is a grace, if we always experience it as a restriction in our life?

This definition can only be understood if the atoning and redemptive dimension of Christ's Passion is kept in mind. This is precisely what St. Peter describes below, reminding us of what the Lord suffered for us.

In imitation of Him, the suffering that is borne becomes a redemptive suffering. We share in Christ's suffering; indeed, we join in it. God transforms from within the heaviness and burden of suffering, and will repay us as merit.

Perseverance in the midst of suffering is a special sign of our love for Christ, for it is precisely in these circumstances that we are tempted to flee from pain and forget the Lord. Imagine, for example, the situation of being persecuted for His sake, with the fear of death that this implies. Not everyone is able to stand firm, for this requires the gift of fortitude, which we can always ask for.

How, then, can we acquire such steadfastness, so that we can also cooperate with God's grace?

First of all, we should always pray, preparing ourselves for times of tribulation: "Lord, strengthen us when we have to suffer, so that we may stand firm". Such a prayer corresponds to Christian prudence and realism, for we can never be too sure of ourselves. The experience of St. Peter, who denied the Lord three times, should serve as a warning to us not to trust in our own strength and emotions.

Then, when tribulation comes upon us, we must not concentrate too much on the suffering, breaking it down in all its dimensions, exaggerating it or mentioning it too much to others. We must beware of falling into self-pity and victimhood, which often arise in these situations, and of seeking false comfort from others.

It is important to consciously accept suffering from the hand of the Lord and to unite it with His suffering, through a simple prayer like this: "Lord, I accept this suffering from your hand. Give me strength and make it bear fruit". When temptations come to sink into suffering, it is important to lift up our hearts again and again to God in prayer and to call upon His name. Sometimes we can also simply bring our pain before Him in silence. In these times we become stronger!

The more consciously we accept suffering and bear it in the Lord, the more easily it can become a small hidden treasure, a relationship of intimacy with God, because no one else can fully understand our pain but Him.

As time goes by, we may even feel called to bear that suffering, which the Lord entrusts to us as a sign of His love, thus including us in His plan of salvation and making us grow in love. We will understand that He is giving us an opportunity to show Him our love. In this way, we can go so far as to thank Him for having considered us worthy to endure suffering for His sake.

If, with God's help, we take this path, that grace of which the Apostle Peter speaks can become effective.

Note: if you want to go deeper into the subject, you can watch this lecture that I published some months ago on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyd1b03I3Wo>