

Doce me passionem Tuam.

STEADFAST IN SUFFERING

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My work as a psychiatrist often reminds me of two inescapable truths. First, to a greater or lesser degree, everyone suffers in this life. Second, we often have no idea what other people have suffered. In my clinical practice, I frequently see patients who have endured unspeakable evils. They bear an anguish that cannot be adequately communicated or comprehended. Trying to accompany them in their pain has been my daily bread for over twenty years.

When we suffer, we understandably want to comprehend the reasons for our anguish. My patients often ask me, as I ask when I am in pain: *Why is this happening? Did I do something wrong to deserve this? Is God punishing me?* These questions are perfectly natural. But this side of

eternity, we are not usually given the answers to those questions. For our finite intellects are incapable of comprehending the reasons behind God's providential designs.

The answer to the age-old problem of evil—why an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God would allow so much human suffering—is not found in some philosophical treatise. It is found only in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Notice that our questions typically involve asking God to teach me about *my* suffering. But to find liberation and peace in the midst of trials, we must turn our attention from our sufferings to the sufferings of Christ.

The Cross

The world and even many in the Church today have forgotten the Cross.

Naturally, everyone loves the miracle-working Christ, who heals the blind, the lame, and the lepers, who turns water into wine and multiplies loaves and fish. Everyone loves Christ the wise teacher and brilliant preacher. Everyone loves Christ the good shepherd, carrying the little lost sheep. Everyone loves the glorified and risen Christ who overcame death.

But we often prefer to ignore the crucified Christ.

Even devout Christians tend to sanitize Christ's Passion. Protestants have removed the corpus from the Cross, and even Catholics have rendered Christ's body bloodless on many of our crucifixes—leaving us with a serene Jesus gazing down on us from the Cross. The American "prosperity gospel" ignores the Cross of Christ. Contrary to this counterfeit

"Christianity," it's *not* that Jesus suffered so we don't have to; on the contrary, Jesus suffered so that our suffering can unite us to Him.

In the affluent society of the West over the past fifty years, we increasingly focus on victimhood. We vie for the status of victim. Our narcissistic public discourse becomes about "me, me, me." Even devout Christians today forget that Christ is the only truly innocent victim. We understandably tend to flee suffering, to avoid the Cross at all costs. As Pope Benedict XVI observed, our culture's impoverished and misguided understanding of freedom is reduced to the freedom not to suffer.

But Christians should realize that this is a counterfeit freedom: For it is only in Christ's scandalous Passion, with all its horrors—all the blood, the dirt, the grit, the sweat, the tears—it is only there that we find liberation.

Occasionally we may encounter an old, bloody Spanish crucifix or statue of Christ scourged at the pillar, covered in wounds. These images can shock our contemporary sensibilities. But they are a bit closer to what the actual Passion would have looked like. At the center of the Christian claim is God Who became man in Jesus Christ, and as a man *suffered* all that could be suffered—for you and for me, for each of us alone and individually. And He did not teach us to seek a life of comfort and ease, but to deny ourselves, take up our cross *daily*, and follow Him.

Christians sometimes jokingly remark, "Be careful what you pray for": If you ask God to give you humility or patience, He often sends you humiliations or life challenges that test your patience. But we can

be brave enough to pray for these virtues and to ask God to send whatever trials are necessary for us or for our families—not because we like suffering, but because we want to accept God’s will in all things. We want to take up the Cross daily.

From Our Sufferings to His

For a Christian, the fact that we cannot escape suffering is not necessarily a tragedy. That’s because in our suffering we can find the Cross, and in the Cross, we find the full manifestation of God’s love for us.

Attention to *our own* feelings and experiences of suffering is of secondary benefit for anyone who first learns *Christ’s* suffering. When we learn *His* suffering, when we go more deeply into *His* Passion, we find peace in our own pain that is deeper than anything that this world can provide. When we seek first Christ’s Cross, then my sufferings, and your sufferings, eventually fade into the background. That’s when our pains ebb, when we become unburdened by our anguish, when the shackles are removed. The martyrs show us that even the most horrendous sufferings can become insignificant, even nothing, if our eyes are fixed totally on Christ.

The Christian meaning of suffering can be distilled in a simple but profound prayer, a short aspiration that anyone can learn:

Doce me passionem Tuam.

This translates to “Teach me Your suffering,” or more literally, “Teach me Your passion.” If you remember nothing else from this article, remember these four words.

This little aspiration, *doce me passionem Tuam*, does not ask God to help us avoid suffering—as much as we might want that. It does not even ask God to explain to us why we are suffering. Instead, it takes us more deeply into Christ’s suffering—which draws us into the depths of His love.

This prayer consists of only four words, yet one could pray it one hundred times a day and never exhaust its depths. After all, the most profound realities are often conveyed with the fewest words. Consider for example the four words at the consecration of the Eucharist: “This is my body,” which encapsulates the great mystery of faith. Likewise with this prayer, *doce me passionem Tuam*. We can begin by simply saying these words and desiring this in our hearts. We don’t need to engage in a complicated exegesis; we don’t need a degree in theology. If we say this prayer and unite the words with the longings of our heart, Jesus will do the exegesis for us. He’ll unpack what it means for each of us personally.

The Cross is scandalous. It is shocking. But with time and familiarity it has lost much of its shock value. Through this prayer we can begin to recover that jolt of amazement, which should arrest us. We have all read the Gospels, but perhaps we do not yet fully know Christ’s Passion. We must learn it anew, and He must teach us.

None of our sufferings are foreign to Him. In His Passion Jesus Christ suffered every pain, every agony, every horror—whether physical or psychological or spiritual—that any of us have experienced or could experience. On the Cross, Jesus went to the deepest depths of human misery in order to find us.

Christ's Passion

As a spiritual discipline, the saints recommend frequent meditation on the Passion of Christ, and not just during Lent.

Consider the cruelties that Jesus had already suffered by the time he took up His Cross. In our prayer, we can sit with Jesus in the room where He was held after His arrest, where He was hungry and thirsty but was given nothing to eat. Where He was cold but was given nothing to warm Him. Where He was lonely but was offered no human consolation.

Although we may be inclined to look away, we can witness the unspeakably brutal scourging at the pillar, which caused His precious flesh to hang from His body in tatters. We see His poor, hunched-over form, barely able to stand, offered like a lamb for sacrifice. There would have been many eyewitnesses to His scourging, but no one tried to intervene.

We can remain present among the crowd when the soldiers hoisted the heavy Cross on His back, and He began the arduous journey to Calvary. We can feel the weight of the wood and the splinters it inflicted in His shoulder and His hands. He was not given a polished and smooth cross, but a rough cross that continuously added to His injuries.

Here, Jesus the carpenter—an innocent man who plied his trade with wood—spent His final hours dragging a piece of jagged wood uphill where He would be nailed to it: the same type of wood that He had used to make tables and doors, now used against Him. We can contemplate the cruel irony of Jesus, a craftsman, dying nailed to the very instrument of His trade.

The road He climbed to Calvary was not smooth, but sandy and full of uneven divots, with deep ruts worn into it from the wheels of carts. Bystanders watched Jesus struggle without lending a hand. Instead, people taunted, jeered, and yelled at Him. Those who did not open their mouths still lacked kindness and courage in their silence.

Simon of Cyrene had to be compelled to help Him, although in the process Simon's heart was converted. Only Veronica voluntarily came and wiped His face—a face so covered with dirt, sweat, tears, and blood that when she wiped it an image of His suffering countenance was imprinted on the cloth. Jesus came to us with the serene face of a little baby. He showed us the smiling face of a man enjoying a meal with His friends Martha and Mary and Lazarus. But it is telling that the only tangible permanent impressions He left us of His face—Veronica's veil and the Shroud of Turin in which he was buried—are of His bloodied and suffering face, the face of His Passion.

When Jesus finally arrived at the top of Calvary, we can hear Him cry out in pain as the nails are driven in, His arms pinned down by the soldiers. So horrifying is the entire scene that we can barely stand with Our Lady, St. John, and St. Mary Magdalene at the foot of the Cross, waiting for it to be over. Because we love Him, we feel intensely sad and completely helpless. Hanging from the Cross, nearly dead but struggling for each breath, Jesus makes Himself a living sacrifice for you, for me.

Jesus does not want to show us His suffering so that we will despise ourselves or self-flagellate in horror. He shows us His

wounds so we can more fully receive the love that they manifest. The healing medicine for our souls is contained in those wounds. The deeper we enter into and seek to understand the Cross, to contemplate every injury inflicted by it, the more we allow ourselves to be loved by Him.

The path to union with Christ always demands courage and sacrifice. We might desire to kiss the face of the pristine Jesus; but we should also desire to kiss His bloodied face.

This is the same face that Our Lady cradled in her hands as His body was removed from the Cross. It is same face that St. Mary Magdalene washed clean with her tears as she helped prepare Him for burial.

Our hearts must be broken by the image of the crucified Jesus in order to expand. Our hope is found there, hanging on the Cross. That's at the heart of this simple prayer, *doce me passionem Tuam*—teach me Your suffering.

His Healing Wounds

I will be the first to admit: While we labor in this valley of tears, some days the crushing weight of our own crosses feels unbearable. In those times, we beg God for relief. We may be tempted to despair if we continue to suffer without respite. In those moments when our own pain consumes all our attention and energy, this proposal may not at first glance seem very helpful: to turn our attention away from our sufferings and toward the sufferings of Christ.

To this, I can only respond: Try it and see what happens. If you are already

crushed by the weight of your own anguish, what do you have to lose?

Begin very simply: On your worst day, when you feel that you cannot take any more, try the following and see what happens. Go to your nearest Catholic parish and sit before the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. Look up at the crucifix (even if your parish has a sanitized Cross). Pray this prayer, *doce me passionem Tuam*, asking Jesus to show you just *one* of His wounds.

Invite Him, in the simple language of a trusting child, to come and sit with you. Ask Him without fear to hold your hand as you kneel in the pew—tell Him you want to hold His bloody hand, to put your finger in the wound there, just like St. Thomas did. Press your hand into His. Contemplate that one wound. See the dark color of the coagulated blood, mixed with dirt. See the bruising and the splinters from the Cross. Touch His hand and kiss the wound. He wants to be that close to you.

Learn this little aspiration. Repeat it frequently. Share it with your friends. The website passionemtuam.org includes more information about this prayer as well as a prayer of Consecration to the Most Holy Cross of Jesus, which can help you go deeper into the meaning of these words. What I am recommending here is a journey primarily of the heart and not the intellect. This prayer will help you discover that the paradoxical secret of happiness is found by becoming one with Christ on the Cross.

To outsiders, your life might appear very privileged. But my clinical experience has taught me that no political regime, no amount of wealth, no educational degree, and no amount of hard work can spare someone from suffering.

In closing, I invite you to think of the most difficult anguish you have gone through in your life. Maybe you are in the thick of it right now.

One in four of you has suffered sexual abuse. Perhaps your spouse or your children were abused. Most families are not spared this.

Maybe you are in an unhappy marriage. Maybe there has been infidelity. Or physical abuse. Maybe you grew up in a home where abuse was present, where there was *not* unconditional love, where you were subjected to or witnessed yelling and physical violence within the family.

Maybe you lost your parents when you were young. Or a sibling. Maybe you have lost a spouse or a child.

Maybe you have faced bankruptcy, or right now are wondering how you are going to preserve the financial house of cards you have built up.

Maybe you have struggled with questions about your sexuality, or your children have.

Maybe you have strayed from your faith and thought God forgotten you. Maybe your children have lost their faith and abandoned the sacraments. Maybe you are addicted to alcohol, prescription drugs, food, or pornography, or perhaps a loved one is an addict.

Maybe you have experienced crippling depression or anxiety or suffer from another form of mental illness. Maybe you are trying to hide your hoarding or other compulsive behaviors. Maybe you have lost a family member to suicide, or you struggle with that temptation yourself.

Maybe you have experienced infertility and the pain of being surrounded by everyone else who seems to so easily have children.

Maybe you are facing a terminal illness. Maybe you have had a child out of wedlock whom you placed for adoption and whom no one else knows about. Maybe you once killed someone, even if accidentally.

I could go on and on, but every person reading this has at some point faced significant suffering. It doesn't matter what the details are; it's not a comparison or a contest.

Remember that Christ weeps with each one of you. He endured that same suffering, and much more besides, for each of you individually on the Cross.

With this in mind, spend a few minutes meditating on the following considerations. Consider that Jesus's suffering was not limited to Good Friday, but began with the Incarnation, when He became a helpless unborn human embryo. Consider the infant Jesus Who humbled himself to enter the womb of a young girl, to be born in a cold cave and placed in a manger. Like all babies, there were times when He cried, when He was hungry or thirsty or cold or needed comforting. He felt pain. Contemplate the fact that God Himself was hungry. *Doce me passionem Tuam.*

Turn your attention to His Passion: Contemplate the large and small wounds on Our Lord's body. Perhaps those on His face pain us the most. The abrasion on His upper left cheek that had scabbed over and dried, so that it could not be fully cleaned when His body was prepared for burial. The specks of dried blood on His nose that could also not

be removed, because doing so would have ripped off the thin top layer of skin. *Doce me passionem Tuam.*

We can engage all of our senses in our prayer. We can *smell* the blood that matted and hardened into His beard. We can *taste* the blood mixed with gritty dirt that was His only nourishment as He carried His Cross. We can *feel* the film of tears that crusted over His eyes and burned His skin. We can *see* the torn and abraded skin across the knuckles of His hands from every time He fell while dragging His Cross. We can *hear* the words of mercy He uttered as He hung there: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” *Doce me passionem Tuam.*

Carrying the Cross on His shoulder would have produced a terrible wound on top of His lower right back over the curved posterior crest of the pelvis bone. There, the weight of the Cross rubbed and tore into His flesh as He carried it. He did this just for me. And just for you. *Doce me passionem Tuam.*

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in a vision, asked Jesus which was His greatest unrecorded suffering, and Our Lord replied, “I had on my shoulder while I bore My

Cross on the Way of Sorrows, a grievous wound which was more painful than the others, and which is not recorded by men.” *Doce me passionem Tuam.*

Spiritual writers often recommend that we meditate upon the “five wounds” of Christ, which the Gospels tell us remained even after the Resurrection: the wounds from the nails in each hand and foot and the wound caused by the spear in His side. This is salutary, to be sure; however, when we restrict our meditation only to these five wounds of Christ, we miss much of the suffering that Jesus underwent. We could meditate on the thousand wounds of Jesus, and this would not cover them all.

Even then, His exterior wounds were minor compared with His interior suffering—the suffering caused by your sins and mine. But that is a meditation for another day.

Our Lord did not die on the Cross so that we could be free of suffering, but so that we could discover that which transcends our suffering—His infinite love. *Doce me passionem Tuam.* ♦

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