

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

A Man of Sorrows and Familiar with Suffering

Over the years many fine studies have spotlighted the individuals who crowd the pages of the Gospel. Some of these studies present "a gallery of Gospel portraits." Others portray the friends of the Savior in terms of "devotional cameos." Still others profess exclusive interest in Jesus as protagonist in "the drama of redemption." Whatever their specific aim and technique, such studies try to flesh out the silhouette of Christ found in the Gospels — no biographies, to be sure, but recollected memories of the faith community about its master and Lord.

In this series of Lenten reflections, we have so far explored the prayerfulness, the forgiveness, the compassion of the Savior. A fourth dimension of the ministry of Jesus is suffering, a reality wider and deeper than the physical pain of the Passion and Death hours of his life. I will key in on those persons whose lives closely intersect with the Savior's. This technique will offer significant details in sharp focus.

One of the Lord's followers who had little, if any, understanding of suffering was Peter. A rough and ready Galilean fisherman, he left gainful employment for a close and lasting association with Jesus. Difficult days, and nights too, battling the turbulence of Lake Gennesaret, had built up in him a need for security. When Jesus on occasion announced that his days in Jerusalem might be filled with suffering and even death at the hands of his enemies, Peter vehemently rejects the entire scenario. It is both a mark of Peter's intimacy and a sign of his short-sightedness that he literally "began to rebuke" Jesus. In fact, so strong is Peter's remonstrance that he emphatically denies the very possibility. The Master's retort is no less strong: "Get behind me, Satan. You are an obstacle in my path, because the way you think is not God's way but man's." (Mt. 16:23)

The Gospels portray Peter as a confirmed skeptic in this area. He found it convenient and comfortable to screen out suffering. Indeed, he had a capacity for walking away from the reality of pain. The pattern is re-enforced during the Passion hours: he stands close enough to be curious, distant enough not to become involved.

A second interesting stance toward suffering is

demonstrated by the three disciples in Gethsemane. For all of Jesus' warnings about the coming trial, they surrender to sleep. Luke defends the three by citing their fatigue and he has Jesus return from his prayer only once. Whatever the actual case, those closest to the Savior prove negligent in a most critical hour of his life.

As the three disciples sleep in Gethsemane's shadows, the hour that does not pass Jesus by (contrary to his prayer), does pass them by. Jesus, forsaken and isolated, drains the cup of suffering — alone.

A third participant in the drama of Christ's suffering is Pilate. He runs the gamut of attitudes towards this teacher from Galilee. At first Pilate is unconcerned, then he becomes overzealous, finally he realizes he has lost the initiative to the crowd. Instinctively he asserts he can "find no crime in this man." (Lk 23:4) Nonchalance yields to political fence-mending (Lk 23:6-16) or to a struggle over recognition of power (Jr 19:10). The Pilate of the fourth Gospel is a highly complex personality who maximizes his role as supreme judge. He is not above chastizing and even tormenting Jesus. He becomes overinvolved. His strategy of appeasement only excites the blood-thirsty mob all the more.

In Pilate insecurity engenders inflexibility. He is willing to dabble intellectually with questions of authority and truth, even to experiment with some tactics. His cowardice locks him into a reluctant logic and he compounds the suffering of the man before him. Herod makes an even more despicable person. The Galilean's reputation has preceded him and Herod is stimulated by a powerful curiosity. He asks for a manifestation of power. Given the silent treatment, Herod lashes out in retaliation. After this display of raw power, Herod sends Jesus back to Pilate. Neither ruler has achieved his primary objective.

Pilate weak-kneed as Herod is sensuously curious even to the point of taunting Jesus. The long-standing feud between the two leaders is at length resolved, but at the price of a third man's life.

On the final day of Jesus' life, two other examples of suffering emerge. The Savior is reckoned among the criminally condemned, and two thieves flank him on Calvary. The thief on the left takes part in the mockery of the crowd. His taunts are incredibly egotistical: "If you are the Christ, save yourself and

us." The other thief takes quiet note of his own suffering over against that of Calvary's central figure. In this closing hour of his life, he learns to frame a simple prayer: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power." Through his own sufferings, he discerns the specialness, the innocence, perhaps even a touch of royalty.

On Calvary, two thieves were hurled into the jaws of death. One chose to plead his self-preoccupation: there was too much of justice by which he suffered while another, unmarked by crime, suffered unjustly. It was this discernment that evoked the assuring word: "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." (Lk 23:43)

The skeptic naively filters out imminent pain. The negligent ignores its presence. The coward sees pain as an occasion to debate some vaguely related issues. The curious is moved by an interest that makes pain sensuously convenient. The angry person turns pain into a cruelty. On the other hand, only the person with a sense of justice, who has not forgotten to pray can derive redemptive value from the experience.

In each of these cases, the attitude is critical. How one encounters suffering makes all the difference. What we have done here is not to view Jesus' own attitude toward suffering, but rather how others viewed and responded to his agony and ordeal.

The early Church saw the most authentic reflection of Jesus in the double mirror of Isaiah's suffering servant (52:13-53:12) and of the psalm of personal lament (Ps. 22). The early faith community saw Jesus as a figure of desolation and woe — abandoned by those he had benefited most, unpitied by those who might have empathized, "treading the winepress of suffering alone."

The cross, symbol of guilt and instrument of death, was a delicate stragem of torment. It was not meant to execute a person outright, but rather to prolong painfully the death process. Perhaps no other factor in Jesus' life can match the sign-value and impact of the cross. As a token of shame and suffering, its lengthened shadow at first challenged, but then dramatically validated, the authenticity of his life and ministry.

Several questions need to be raised here.

First, what is our own attitude towards pain and suffering? Are we, in the face of pain, skeptical, negligent, cowardly, curious, egotistical, angry, or prayerfully just? Attitude determines whether pain will be a radical problem or a radical mystery.

Second, pain of itself is neither feasible nor significant. What counts is the meaning one attaches to suffering. The redemptive dimensions of suffering emerge only when one sees its relation to Calvary. "As the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so, through Christ, does our consolation overflow." (2 Col 1:5) "It makes me happy to suffer for you... and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church." (Col 1:24)

Third, there is a certain reversibility to suffering. Persons who share the fellowship of suffering are at one in a mystery. This is the mystery of communion and participation — of union in one body. More often than not we look on suffering as a failure, a compromise of our personal dignity. Suffering, rightly understood and rightly accepted, makes accessible an extraordinary power, a victory over self. After all it was not in spite of, but because, of his having "suffered all these things, that Jesus was finally able to enter into his glory." (Lk 24:26)

Lastly, there are many ways in which one can bridge the gap between oneself and Christ. The acceptance of the cross is more than fatalism or resignation. It is the touchstone of the followers of the suffering servant of God, Jesus. Of this Jesus has given clear assurance: "If you wish to be my disciple, deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me." (Lk 9:23).

How are we measuring up? May your Lent bring you ever closer to Christ.

vatican news

Be Present to the World

Because of the Holy Father's attack of influenza, the general audience of March 9 was cancelled. Following are excerpts from the pontiff's words on other occasions the week preceding.

The Church cannot live today at a normal, tranquil, slow and peaceful tempo, which is unfolded almost automatically, which history brings with it, since the institutions of the Church are guaranteed by a perennity that does not let her die. But it is from these very times that this call comes for us: it is necessary to be present with one's whole soul; it is necessary to be present with an effort and an awareness of fullness and generous correspondence. We cannot be creatures of habit, half-hearted collaborators. We wish really to enter the heart of the Church and hear also the appeal of the times calling us to a serious contribution for peace and agreement among peoples. We must be watchful, especially we who have the responsibility for this Apostolic See which is in a way

the thermometer of the history of the Church and peoples. The Church is living a decisive moment of her dramatic history, a stimulating one for those who really have that love for the Church of which we have heard in the fine talks of the last few days. — At the conclusion of spiritual exercises on March 5.

One of the bishop's fundamental duties is, in addition to his dedication to God, his dedication to his own faithful: "I will," St. Paul says, "most gladly spend and be spent for your souls." Approach, love and listen to your people. Their problems have multiplied: human and social problems, closely connected with moral and religious ones. Vast areas are decimated by the exodus of workers, who are seeking elsewhere a living for themselves and their families. Young people, workers or students are harassed by the problem of finding employment... There are old people, at the decline of their lives; sick people in search of comfort; children who wish to pass their childhood in joy and are sometimes compelled to live in conditions that are certainly not worthy of the human person. Be fathers, brothers, friends for all of them, but particularly for the priests, your collaborators in the pastoral ministry and candidates for the priesthood. — To the Sicilian Bishops on March 5.

