

...it's how you play the game

By Monica Clark
NC News Service

All Jerry could do was concentrate on taking his next breath. Even that took such energy he didn't know whether he could push on again. His wife, Ann, leaning over the hospital bed's metal sidebar, squeezed his hand encouragingly and again told him of her love.

He could not return the squeeze. What little strength remained during this ninth round of chemotherapy had to be focused on surviving to the next moment. He was an exhausted fighter in a battle against the villainous cancer raging within him.

When he emerged victoriously cancer-free several months later, I asked him how he had endured. He told me that during his illness one image kept recurring to sustain him: The image of Jesus as his coach.

At first I was startled. Jesus as a trainer shouting plays from the sidelines?

But as Jerry and I talked further, I understood what he meant.

"To be a good coach," he reminded me, "it helps to have played in all kinds of circumstances. You need the experience of being bruised, bloody and broken. You need to know how to be a winner even when the score says you've lost."

He pointed out that Jesus went through emotional anguish, physical pain, public humiliation. "Because he knew how to transform suffering, he is our best teacher," Jerry said.

I had to agree. I pictured Jesus alone in Gethsemane, terrified of what lay ahead. His closest friends, those who should have been offering all the support love can give, were asleep. He cried in his agony, "No, not me!"

Jesus was in his prime, only three years into his life's work. His friends still needed his direction. His mother didn't deserve the horror of her only son's death. Most important, he had done nothing wrong.

Jerry said he had similar thoughts as he struggled to understand why at 37 he was a cancer victim. He said he had tried to live a Christian life: He attended Mass regularly, prayed daily and participated in parish and diocesan activities. He volunteered his time and talent.



He tried to be ethical in his business dealings and was a loving husband and a devoted father to his five children, ages 7 to 16.

So why would God let him suffer so much?

Jerry said he thought about Jesus' experience on Good Friday. That helped him realize suffering isn't punishment for personal wrongdoing, but is a mysterious human phenomenon which Christians understand and ponder as somehow related to the divine.

Jerry also realized that accepting suffering doesn't guarantee pain will cease. In fact, after Jesus submitted to his Father in Gethsemane, greater suffering occurred: A disciple betrayed him, soldiers mocked him, a judge condemned him, he was crucified.

"That's part of the mystery I don't fully understand," Jerry said. "But knowing Jesus had already traveled to the depths of

desolation and pain made him my co-sufferer and that gave me great comfort."

Jerry went on to tell me how during chemotherapy he could sense Jesus' presence beside him, coaching him along with encouragement and love. "I knew that like a good coach he wasn't going to come in and run the game for me," he said. "I had to do that, but I could look to him for strategies and ways to play."

During the painful treatments, Jerry pictured Jesus compassionately saying, "I know what you are going through. I've been there. I've been victorious, you can be too."

For Jerry, cancer brought him face to face with the mystery of God's love in ways he had never anticipated: He met a Jesus he had not known before.

(Ms. Clark writes for the Catholic Voice in Oakland, Calif.)

The worst part

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

On Sunday, Nov. 13, I woke up unusually early in the morning, feeling wide awake but very ill at ease. I checked the clock. It wasn't quite 5:30. But I decided to go out and get the paper, which had just been delivered.

Suddenly I found myself doubled over as a chest-wrenching pain brought me to the edge of death. In those moments, as the artery nourishing the back wall of my heart choked off, my own control over my life was slipping imperceptibly from my tightly clenched fists.

Ironically, five days earlier I had undergone a complete medical exam, the first in 10 years. "You have the strong pulse of a runner," the doctor said, "and the stamina of a young man."

A few months earlier, just after my 50th birthday, I had gone backpacking in Oregon's Cascade Mountains. I was both surprised and pleased to discover how well I handled the mountain trails.

But independence and health all seemed very far away as I lay wired and doped in the hospital's coronary care unit.

The suffering for me during

The necessity of

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Here is a forthright statement of the cost of being a Christian: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my steps" (Mark 8:34).

If it is impossible to understand Jesus apart from the cross, it is also impossible to be a Christian without accepting and enduring crosses. Suffering, far from being a sign of God's displeasure, is a sign of his acceptance.

That is part of the mystery of suffering.

The fact remains: no pain, no gain. And when one stops to think of it, this is true of life in general, not just the Christian life. The first followers of Jesus learned this the hard way.

Mary, the first disciple — and the model disciple — was familiar with suffering. Not that her life, or anyone else's, was an unrelieved succession of disasters.

She experienced joy and many moments of happiness. But she also knew and accepted suffering.

An aged man named Simeon is met in Luke's Gospel. Simeon warns Mary with these words:

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