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those days was not really the pain. It was the powerlessness. For me suffering means having the control of my life in someone else's hands.

The suffering of Christ and his passion also have more to do with control, and its loss, than with physical pain — or so it seems to me.

For many of us it takes something like a heart attack, with its powerlessness, to become aware of just how much control we possess, how much control we find natural in our lives. It is so easy to overlook the powerlessness — and the suffering that goes with it — that is the lot of so many people in the world.

This theme, I think, is what underlies so much of the church's social teaching today: How to give to all people the control over life that is their due as human beings.

Church social teaching challenges us to come to terms with what the suffering of others means.

Control and powerlessness are also the principal spiritual issues that make or break our families and our other valuable relationships. Twenty years of counseling married couples taught me that the struggle for control can be the

major problem for many a troubled family. It proves to be the key issue that has to be clarified when a couple plans a marriage.

The image of Christ on the cross is a picture that reflects a sinful human race having its way with God. It also is a picture of Christ submitting to this lack of control, this powerlessness.

St. Paul said that Christ became like us in all things except sin. He put up with the worst that humanity has to dish out. He was bent and broken in a humiliating and degrading way. Two thousand years later it is still very disconcerting to think that there was something so sacred and divine about his suffering that we can hardly understand it.

We have it in our means, most of us, to impose suffering. But in reducing human relationships to a tug of wills, and determining that "I" will prevail, we become power traders.

Jesus never did that. In fact, he did just the opposite.

What he did that was so different is the story we witness in the last days of Lent.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

ssity of bearing the burden

"You yourself will be pierced with a sword" (2:49).

The nature of that sword becomes clear very soon. It is seen when Mary and Joseph find the boy Jesus in the temple after an anxious search of three days. Jesus responds to Mary's reproachful question with one of his own: "Why did you search for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49).

Anyone who has ever lost a child, even for a few minutes, can appreciate the anxiety which must have pierced Mary.

But on a larger scale, Jesus' response to Mary let it be known in no uncertain terms that he had interests which transcended family affairs. This must have hurt Mary: to realize that his work, whatever it was, would mean at least physical separation.

What made it even more difficult was that neither she nor Joseph was able to understand what he was talking about. Understanding would have helped at least a little.

And so it was to be all through her life. In the account of the wedding feast at Cana Mary remarks to Jesus that the wine

has run out. His reply again implies dissociation of his work from hers — at least for the time of his public ministry: "Woman, how does this concern of yours involve me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4).

The death of Jesus must have twisted Mary's knowledge that her son was dying in such disgrace and excruciating pain must have been almost unbearable.

The other disciples also had to learn the lesson of the cross, though they were reluctant to do so. The Gospel of Mark stresses the resistance of the disciples to Jesus' persistent teaching on the cost of discipleship.

After each prediction of the passion by Jesus, they simply ignored the implications his suffering had for them. But each time Jesus insisted that they must follow his steps — all the way (Mark 8:31-38; 9:30-37; 10:32-45).

Like so many disciples after them, they were all too eager to bask in glory. But they were most unwilling to pay the price — the price Jesus himself paid.

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FOOD...

...for thought

God's existence.

The pope advises those who wonder why suffering occurs that the answer to their question isn't given in the abstract. "Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: 'Follow me! Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering!'"

Human suffering "has reached its culmination in the passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: It has been linked to love," says Pope John Paul. "With the passion of Christ all human suffering has found itself in a new situation."

Suffering possesses both supernatural and human meaning. It is supernatural, for "it is rooted in the divine mystery of the redemption of the world."

But it is human too. For in suffering, "the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission."

Suffering, says the pope, is one of those points in which a person "is in a certain sense 'destined' to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way."

People react to suffering in different ways. But almost always they enter into suffering with a protest, writes Pope John Paul II.

The pope speaks about the Christian meaning of human suffering in a 1984 apostolic letter. Many of his reflections will strike a chord with his readers.

Anyone who suffers wants to know why, the pope observes. Often the question "Why?" is directed to God and to Christ. But then the questioner "cannot help noticing that the one to whom he puts the question is himself suffering and wishes to answer him from the cross, from the heart of his own suffering."

It is part of the mystery of suffering that this question "Why?" is difficult to answer.

Pope John Paul recognizes that many people think of suffering as a form of punishment. But he cautions readers:

"While it is true that suffering has a meaning as punishment, when it is connected with a fault, it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of punishment."

The importance of questioning suffering's meaning is clear when one realizes that suffering often raises conflicts in peoples' relations with God, that its frustrations even lead people to deny

...for discussion

1. People know when they are suffering and they want to know why they suffer, Pope John Paul II writes. He adds, if they do not find a satisfactory answer to their question, they suffer still more. Do you agree? And, what makes suffering difficult to fully understand?

2. In his apostolic letter on suffering, Pope John Paul II writes: "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....When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal." What do you think the pope means by this? Have you ever known a person who approached suffering in such a way that it became "a touching lesson" to you?

SECOND HELPINGS

"The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering," by Pope John Paul II. In this 1984 letter, the pope explores the big questions people ask about suffering: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does suffering occur? The letter addresses both the individual who suffers and the Christian response to others who suffer. "Human suffering evokes compassion; it also evokes respect and in its own way it intimidates," the pope writes. Down through the ages, he adds, "it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person...close to Christ." The full text appeared in the Feb. 23, 1984, edition of *Origins*, NC Documentary Service, 1312 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005. Single issue, \$3. Multiple copy rates on request.