



THE TWELVE STEP REVIEW

Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P.



Fall 2015

Dear friends,

Many people ask for my schedule for retreats and conferences, so here is a list as I now have it, but please always check with the parish.

- Nov. 9-12, Parish Mission, Corpus Christi, Portsmouth, NH.
- Nov. 16-19, Parish Mission, Our Lady of Fatima, Piscataway, NJ.
- Nov. 30-Dec. 3, Parish Mission, Sacred Heart, Terrace, B.C. Canada.
- Dec. 7-10, Parish Mission, St. Andrew's Cathedral, Victoria, B.C. Canada.
- Dec. 14-17, Parish Mission, Proto-Cathedral of St. James, Vancouver, WA.
- Jan. 18-21, Parish Mission, Queen of Peace, Ocala, FL.
- Feb. 1-4, Parish Mission, Our Lady of the Mountain,

Ashland, OR.

- Feb. 6-7, 2-day Mission, St. Paul Miki, Littleton, CO.
- Feb. 15-18, Parish Mission, St. Anthony, Wylie, TX.
- Feb. 22-25, Parish Mission, St. Joseph's, Modesto, CA.

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Recovery and the Cross of Christ.

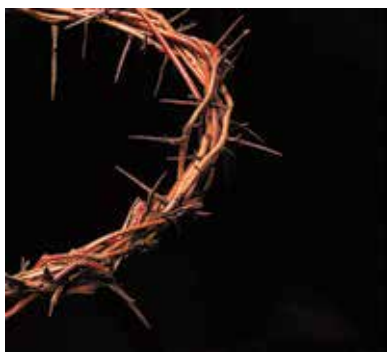
Father Fred, a recovering alcoholic (whose book on 12-step recovery is well worth reading) once remarked on why an alcoholic, who is so miserable because of his drinking, would continue to do so, and his response was:

For fear of being miserable, we cling to our misery.

The way out of the misery that causes death to body and spirit is the life-giving Cross of Christ. One must embrace short-term pain for the long-term gain of genuine peace and lasting happiness. Recovery necessarily entails suffering.

Let's begin with an understanding of the role of suffering in the life of Christ and in the lives of

His followers, a sometimes difficult



thing to comprehend given that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). I often tell people of my first recollection of this conflict: a loving God and terrible suffering—a scandal

to both Jew and Gentile (1 Cor 1:23). It took place when I was in elementary school.

I was standing in the dining room when my atheist father announced, "A little girl was killed in a car accident today! God is love?" He said this to me because I was interested in the Catholic Church and all things religious, having a devout Catholic aunt who inspired such things in me. I'd return from her home with a rosary, then one time with a lovely statue

"If you really want to love Jesus, first learn to suffer, because suffering teaches you to love."

St. Gemma Galgani

of St. Therese (I found it amusing that my father thought it was the Blessed Virgin Mary). So I think he may have had my growing interest in religion in mind with his taunts about suffering and a loving God. And I grew up wondering about this mystery. It is often the atheist's major complaint against religion. So how to understand suffering?

As Christians we know that with sin came suffering and death. Satan enticed early man to join his rebellion, and he continues to do so today. One has only to peruse the daily news to see how successful he's becoming. But sin does not only affect man.

The Environmental Impact of Sin

The evil perpetuated by man in his rebellion against God and his commandments not only affects

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Recovery & the Cross, continued

the human community but the environment as well (as we see—to give just one example—in people wanting to protect the earth by promoting clean air). Sin not only impairs the human person but the earth as well. Thus does God always warn, whether in the Old Testament, the New Testament, or with Our Lady at Fatima, that if man continues to sin gravely, this will affect the environment with an increase in earthquakes and plagues, as well as the devastating effects of war. Sin is detrimental both to man and to the earth he inhabits.

One could say, “Okay, man sinned and with that came suffering and death. But why do good people suffer? Why doesn’t the Mafia get cancer? You join the Mafia, cancer!”

Suppose, for the sake of argument, it was discovered that church-going people *never* got cancer! Would more people go to church? Most certainly. Because they love God and desire to do His will? No. Rather, they’re afraid of getting cancer and dying. And what if it were discovered that church-going people were the only people ever to win the lottery? Would more people attend church? Indeed. Why, because they love God? No, because they want to win the lottery.

Many church-going people assume that if they go to church nothing evil will happen to them, and they believe this, whether implicitly or explicitly, despite the fact that Christ warned, “I have spoken these things to you so that you shall have peace in me. You shall have suffering in the world, but take heart, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). He offers us the Cross as the way to life. He says nothing about, “Follow me and your troubles are over.” So the functional level of laboratory rats is not what we were created for. There is terrible suffering in this world, and Christ came, not to relieve us of the suffering, but to give us not only grace to transcend the trouble, but also the power to bring a greater good out of the trouble had it not occurred in the first place. Thus the lesson of the crucifixion. Step 11 as expressed by AA sets aside all self-serving motives for worshipping God. We are called to friendship with God in Christ, something unique in the world’s religions, but we must guard against being “fair-weather friends.” We wouldn’t want “friends” who hang around us only when we have something to give them,

but friends who support us in our trials and tribulations. Christ wants the same from us—true friendship.

Suffering and God’s loving plan

Christianity is a religion of hope. Hope is one of the theological virtues that tells us God would never allow anything to happen in the past that’s not part of His loving plan for the future. In faith we trust in this hope. Many people today who are good people but have no profound faith, despair when the only input they have is from the secular world where suffering is never seen as a meaningful part of life but only as an interruption. Such was the case, for example, with Jacques and Raïssa Maritain.

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The road is narrow. He who wishes to travel it more easily must cast off all things and use the cross as his cane.

In other words, he must be truly resolved to suffer willingly for the love of God in all things.

St. John of the Cross

The Jewish bride cries under the wedding canopy.

The little Jew who dances does not lose the memory of his misery; by dancing he mocks it and accepts it as his divine lot. If he sings, he sings with sighs; for he is penetrated with the past sufferings of his people and his soul is bathed in the prophetic awareness of the unimaginable sufferings that are reserved for it. Did not God forewarn them about it? Did not God take the trouble, something he did not do for any other people, to tell them through the prophet Isaiah, through Jeremiah and the other great voices of the Bible, about the purifications that his love reserves for them? They know all of these things, those Jews who have not given themselves over to the secular world, but are bathed each day in the living waters of the Scriptures. They know these things, the Jews of Chagall.

All through her growing-up years as a Jew she struggled with the problem of suffering. Eventually her family emigrated to France where they became affected by materialism and scientific rationalism, which led their faith in the personal God of the Jewish Covenant to fade away. By the age of fourteen, Raïssa posed for herself the problem of God and suffering:

Now that I knew (at least I dimly perceived it) how unhappy or wicked men could be, I wondered if God really existed. I recall very clearly that I reasoned thus: If God exists, He is also infinitely good and all-powerful. But if He is good, how can He permit suffering? And if He is all-powerful, how can He tolerate the wicked? Therefore He is not all-powerful nor infinitely good; therefore He does not exist.

With this dilemma of reconciling suffering with the God of love, Raïssa attended the University of Paris, which turned out only to compound her troubles because most professors were materialists, diminishing the hope her heart held out for an answer. But her search was not to be carried out alone. She met a fellow student, one year her senior—Jacques Maritain. He was from a secular French family but also in search of truth. Together in this search they became more disillusioned because the intellectual environment of the university was one of materialism and atheism. In the midst of their distress, Jacques and Raïssa reached a fateful decision. They both agreed that if it were impossible to know the truth, to distinguish good from evil, just from unjust, then it was impossible to live with dignity. In such a case it would be better to die young through suicide than to live an absurdity. However, grace prepared them for their future role as professors of Truth, and suicide was delayed as they continued their pursuit.

Life Lived in the Service of Truth

In short, Raïssa discovered something she had already sensed: the salvific power of human suffering when in God's grace it is united to the sufferings of Christ. The sufferings of the Jews became a sign to her that pointed to Christ the Messiah, their fellow Jew who suffered with them. With her husband Jacques she was baptized into the Catholic Church. Eventually Jacques and Raïssa became Benedictine oblates, establishing together a domestic community of prayer and study for which they decided to live as brother and sister, forsaking marital intimacy and the joys of raising a family in order to dedicate themselves more deeply to their vocation of serving the Truth. It was also during those years that the Maritains discovered Saint Thomas Aquinas and began, under the guidance of their Dominican mentors, to study his works in depth. They made their home a place where their students could find friendship and lively discussion in their search for Truth. Some of these young students became famous Dominican theologians.

Through prayer and study she attained a profound grasp of the ever-present mystery of Christ's suffering and her vocation to participate in it. In her journal she wrote:

During silent prayer I feel inwardly solicited to abandon myself to God, and not only solicited but effectively inclined to do it, and do it, feeling that it is for a trial, for a suffering, for which my consent is thus demanded. I make this act of abandonment in spite of my natural cowardice.

The awareness of God's providence in the midst of human sinfulness brings hope to the world, a hope that springs from a deep faith that God would never allow anything to happen in the past that's not part of His loving plan for the future. For example, a Catholic woman, pregnant with her

third child, lost her husband in an unfortunate accident. So, "God is love?" taunts the atheist. An unfortunate and deeply painful experience, no doubt. As it happened, she married again some years later and had two more daughters who lived to be great-grandmothers. They and their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were alive because of the death of their mother's first husband. Not only that, but the youngest of these two sisters, Theresa, married a gentle and kind man named Ronald. Ronald had no brothers but had one sister. Because she never married, she was very close to her brother and his six children. Years later Ronald found out that she wasn't his sister. She was his mother, raped at the age of 14. Her parents decided to bring her son up as if it were their son and not their grandson. Ronald, his six children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were alive because of an evil rape. Does that mean that rape is good? No. Just as the crucifixion of Christ is an evil—"Woe to him by whom the son of God is betrayed" (Matthew 26:24)—nonetheless God is so powerful that he can bring a greater good out of the suffering, a good that would never have otherwise occurred. Scripture conveys this mystery saying: "Where sin abounded, grace abounded more" (Romans 5:20).

What about abortion—can that be a part of God's loving plan for the future? Here is a true case (the names have been changed). Ruth's wealthy atheist parents flew her to a foreign country to have an abortion (it wasn't yet legal in the States). The experience so traumatized Ruth that she became an opponent of abortion and eventually talked her atheist friend Judy out of her abortion. Then Ruth and her atheist boyfriend, because of abortion, were led into the Catholic Church, along with her friend Judy who gave birth to a beautiful daughter. Ruth and her boyfriend married in the Church and gave birth to 10 beautiful children, today solid Catholic adults, married with children of their own—except for one son who was ordained a priest just a few years ago. All of this happened, not despite Ruth's abortion, but coming right out of her abortion. Does that mean abortion is right, rape is right, the crucifixion is right? No. It means that "God makes all things work together for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28). ✨

To be continued in the next issue. . . ✍

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