RETREAT GUIDE

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CATHOLIC RETREATS

A MOTHER'S TEARS

A RETREAT GUIDE ON OUR LADY OF SORROWS

Written & presented by Fr. John Bartunek, LC, S.Th.D.
RCSpirituality.org

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

If you could protect your mother from terrible suffering, would you? I think I would; I think most of us would. Mothers suffer enough in this fallen world. If we could bring them some relief, we would do so gladly. And yet, Jesus didn't. His mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, had to endure immense suffering on his account.

It was no picnic, for example, when she and Joseph and Jesus had to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's persecution, or when Joseph and Mary spent three days frantically searching for their lost son, until they found him in the Temple.

But even those sufferings were nothing compared with what Mary had to go through during our Lord's passion: She stood by, helpless, watching Jesus being condemned unjustly, mocked, scourged and tortured, crowned with thorns, and crucified.

Could anything be more horrible for a mother than to witness that happening to her only son? Jesus, being God, could have preserved her from that. He could have brought her home to heaven before those events occurred, for instance, as happened with St. Joseph. But he didn't. Somehow, his love for his mother included allowing her to suffer, and to suffer deeply, painfully, terribly.

Why? That's what this Retreat Guide, A Mother's Tears: A Retreat Guide on Our Lady of Sorrows, will delve into.

- In the meditations, we will reflect on the meaning behind the ancient liturgical celebration of Our Lady of Sorrows, which the Church commemorates every year on September 15th.
- And in the conference, we will unpack the meaning behind the traditional Catholic practice of "offering up" our sufferings.

To begin, let's turn our attention to God, who is thinking of us and loving us right now. Let's thank him for that, and ask him to bless this time we will spend with him, so that it will give him glory and bring grace to our souls.

FIRST MEDITATION

Sorrow Is Part of God's Plan

In this fallen world, Jesus, the Son of God, suffered. And that makes sense, because his mission of salvation included paying the price for our sins.

But if he has already paid the price for our sins, why is there still so much suffering in the world? If Jesus suffered for our sins, and we believe in Jesus and are following him, then why do we still have to suffer?

Some Christians say that we don't. Some Christians think that if we believe in Jesus fully and leave behind all sin, we will experience heaven on earth, all sorrow and all suffering will be banished from life. For them, the cross is a symbol of something that happened in the past, not a path that each one of us is called to follow.

That's why many of these Christians don't make the Sign of the Cross and don't have crucifixes in their churches or homes. For them, and for many other people who have bought into the modern worldview, suffering is meaningless, or at best a sign of being far away from God.

And so they shun it and turn away from it; they consider pain and sorrow to be dead-ends, unnecessary mistakes, a waste of time and energy that should be spent enjoying the good gifts of God.

From that point of view, suffering has no value in life, no meaning, no purpose. But is that point of view really based on the gospel?

It can't be.

FIRST MEDITATION

Jesus and Suffering

Jesus made it clear that his work of redemption did not eliminate suffering from the lives of his followers.

True, he promised that when he comes again, at the very end of history, he will "make all things new" and rid the universe of sorrow and pain. This promise appears in Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation:

> *He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.*
>
> —Revelation 21:4

But that's a promise about the end of history. In the meantime, another promise holds true, the promise Jesus made during the Last Supper, when he warned his Apostles that being faithful to his friendship would involve pain and suffering. He told them:

> *If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you. Remember the word I spoke to you, "No slave is greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you... In the world you will have trouble...*
>
> —John 15:18–20, 16:33

Earlier on, during his public ministry, he said the same thing more concisely and more starkly. St. Luke records it like this:

> *Then [Jesus] said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."*
>
> —Luke 9:23–24

Sorrow, loss, pain, suffering—Jesus didn't save the world by eliminating these things, but by redeeming them. These are unavoidable realities in a fallen, broken, sinful world. They are not signs that God has abandoned us, or that he is angry at us, or that he has somehow lost control of the universe.

FIRST MEDITATION

Mary and Suffering

And the most dramatic proof of this is what happened to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Of all people, she who was free from sin and had such a unique relationship with the Savior would have the greatest claim on a life without sorrow. And yet, God saw fit to make sorrow her constant companion.

Certainly she experienced joys and satisfactions in life, as each of us does, but she also experienced the full measure of human sorrow.

Over the centuries, the Church gradually came up with a list of Mary's Seven Sorrows, all of which are found in the Gospels. This doesn't mean that she only had seven sorrows. Rather, seven is a symbolic number, a biblical number that indicates fullness and completeness.

Mary, the most perfect human being ever created by God, the most virtuous, the most filled with the Holy Spirit and the closest to Jesus, experienced the whole gamut of human suffering.

It started just a few weeks after she gave birth to Jesus, when she visited the Temple, and the holy man Simeon, holding the baby Jesus in his arms, turned to look at her and uttered this troubling prophecy:

> *Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted—and you yourself a sword will pierce...*
>
> —Luke 2:34–35

Soon afterwards, Mary and St. Joseph had to undertake a desperate, midnight flight into Egypt to protect the baby Jesus from the bloody swords of Herod's soldiers—the second sorrow.

Later, when Jesus turned twelve, he was lost for three days, and when Mary and Joseph finally found him in the Temple, she said to him: "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety" (Luke 2:48). The third sorrow.

Mary's final four sorrows are all associated with her son's passion: his agonizing walk to Calvary under the weight of the cross; his excruciating three hours hanging from that cross during his crucifixion; the deposition of his mutilated corpse from the cross and the placing of it in her arms; and, finally, the numbing burial of that same corpse, wrapped now in a linen shroud of death, just as he had been wrapped years before in linen swaddling clothes.

These are the Seven Sorrows of Mary, the Mother of God and the Queen of the Universe.

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion: Suffering with Mary

These are the Sorrows that we call to mind every year on September 15th, the liturgical memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows, when the entire Church turns its attention to Mary's tears, to the swords that pierced her heart.

These are the Sorrows that God in his wisdom has given to us to contemplate and to find deep comfort in, because if he did not spare his own mother from suffering such sorrow, if her journey to eternal glory had to wind through such awful paths, then we can rest assured that our own sorrows and pains, as unbearable as they may feel at certain times, are not beyond the wise and loving reach of God's redemption.

Mary's Sorrows were immense, but they were all redeemed and turned into glory, because they were all suffered with Christ the Redeemer.

And so, when we look to her in the midst of our own sorrows, we can find compassion, comfort, hope, and a strong help in keeping our crosses united to Christ's.

The Opening Prayer for the Mass of Our Lady of Sorrows sums up beautifully the message the Church wants us to hear and to find consolation in as we contemplate Mary's sufferings:

O God, who willed that,
when your Son was lifted high on the Cross,
his Mother should stand close by and share his suffering,
grant that your Church,
participating with the Virgin Mary in the Passion of Christ,
may merit a share in his Resurrection.

Take some time now to reflect prayerfully on this comforting truth, that even life's most horrible sorrows are not outside the redeeming reach of God's wisdom and love. And so, when we live them with Mary and Jesus at the foot of the Cross, they can bring new life to our souls.

The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. When Simeon said to Mary "a sword will pierce your heart," how might she have felt about that? What effect might that prophecy have had on her first years of motherhood? Why might the Holy Spirit have inspired Simeon to share that prophecy with Mary so early on in her life as a mother?

2. What have I learned from the sufferings and sorrows that I have experienced in life so far? How has God used them to help draw me closer to him? Are any of my sorrows still unredeemed, still sources of anger and resentment rather than humility, compassion, and faith?

3. If suffering and sorrow are such a necessary part of life in this fallen world, even for Christians, why is it often so hard for us to accept and endure them?

Quotations to Help Your Meditation

Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let no one among you be made to suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as an intriguer. But whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed but glorify God because of the name.

—1 Peter 4:12–16, NABRE

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church, of which I am a minister in accordance with God's stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God, the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past. But now it has been manifested to his holy ones, to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; it is Christ in you, the hope for glory.

—Colossians 1:24–27, NABRE

... [T]he Divine Redeemer wishes to penetrate the soul of every sufferer through the heart of his holy Mother, the first and the most exalted of all the redeemed. As though by a continuation of that motherhood which by the power of the Holy Spirit had given him life, the dying Christ conferred upon the ever Virgin Mary a new kind of motherhood—spiritual and universal—towards all human beings, so that every individual, during the pilgrimage of faith, might remain, together with her, closely united to him unto the Cross, and so that every form of suffering, given fresh life by the power of this Cross, should become no longer the weakness of man but the power of God.

—John Paul II
Salvifici Doloris 26

SECOND MEDITATION

The Meaning of Suffering

St. John Paul II sometimes carried an extra-long rosary, a rosary that contained seven decades instead of just five. He would use this rosary to meditate on Mary's Seven Sorrows.

He was certainly someone familiar with pain and suffering. His mother died when he was nine-years-old. By the time he finished college, he had also lost his brother and his dad. He lived through World War II and experienced his beloved country struggle through two violent, oppressive occupations, first by the Nazis and then by the Soviet Communists.

When St. John Paul II meditated on Our Lady of Sorrows, he could relate to her. It's no coincidence, then, that as pope he wrote an Apostolic Letter on the topic of suffering. It is called, *Salvifici Doloris, On the Meaning of Human Suffering.*

At one point in this Letter, he 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, a special grace.*
>
> *—Salvifici Doloris 26*

We have already seen that God didn't save the world in Christ by eliminating suffering, but by giving it meaning. In this statement from St. John Paul II, we begin to see what that meaning is.

Somehow, in the midst of our suffering, we can be drawn closer to Christ, who redeemed the world through suffering on the Cross, through loving sinners to the point of dying for their sins.

In Christ, then, our sufferings can draw us closer to God. But why is it that way, and how does that happen? There is a deep mystery here, and we will never be able to fully understand it. But at least one aspect of this mystery is clear. When we experience sorrow, pain, and suffering, we experience our human limitations; we are faced with the reality that we are not all-powerful, we cannot control everything we would like to control, we are not God.

And that experience gives us a unique opportunity to reverse in our own hearts and minds the self-centeredness that we all inherit by being born into this fallen world.

Original sin happened when Adam and Eve refused to accept the limitations of their human nature and tried to become "like gods" (Genesis 3:5).

And our fallen human nature has a built-in tendency to repeat that pattern, to try and become self-sufficient, to try and create heaven on earth by our own merely human efforts.

But that is not the path to true happiness. True happiness only comes from accepting our human limitations and learning to lean on God, to live in communion with him, to love him and to lovingly abandon ourselves to his love, just as Jesus did on the cross.

And the experience of suffering and sorrow is a powerful invitation to do exactly that. Through suffering in Christ and with Christ we truly discover our deep need for God, as well as the fullness of God's absolute dependability.

In that same Apostolic Letter, St. John Paul II puts it like this:

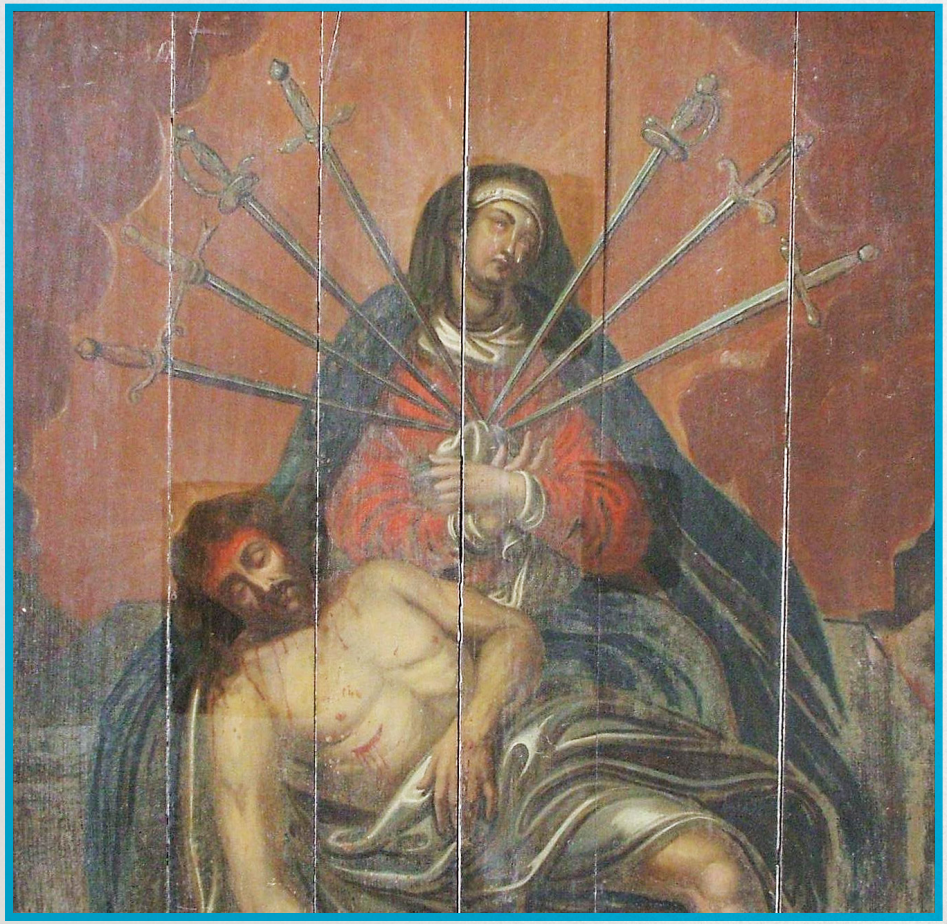
> *Human suffering has reached its culmination in the Passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: it has been linked to love... to that love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering, just as the supreme good of the Redemption of the world was drawn from the Cross of Christ, and from that Cross constantly takes its beginning.*
>
> —*Salvifici Doloris* 18

SECOND MEDITATION

Mary Our Teacher

These theological truths can be difficult to understand, and that's one reason why the Church points our attention every year to Our Lady of Sorrows.

When we gaze at Mary, the first and greatest Christian, suffering with Christ out of love, we can learn to do the same thing even without having to master all the theology of suffering. Children learn many valuable things from their mothers without understanding all the reasons behind them. In the spiritual life, that's what happens through contemplating Our Lady, and that's why St. John Paul II often prayed the special Rosary of Mary's Seven Sorrows.



A couple aspects of the liturgical celebration of Our Lady of Sorrows are especially interesting from the point of view of learning how to give true meaning to our sufferings.

For example, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows always occurs on the day after the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. September 14th is dedicated, liturgically speaking, to venerating the Triumph of the Holy Cross, which was the instrument God chose to save us from our sins. Then, the next day, September 15th, we commemorate Mary's special role in salvation history under her title of Our Lady of Sorrows.

The lesson is clear: suffering all by itself is meaningless, a result of sin and evil. But when we link our sufferings to Christ's sufferings, when we connect our crosses to his, as Mary did, they become redemptive.

SECOND MEDITATION

Hope of a Papal Prisoner

The liturgical celebration of Our Lady of Sorrows goes back many centuries, but it was only made obligatory as a memorial for the whole Church in 1814, under Pope Pius VII. The circumstances that led him to give special emphasis to this devotion are instructive.

In 1809, Pope Pius VII was arrested and abducted by officers from Napoleon's army, which had invaded Italy and occupied Rome. For the next five years, this elderly pope was kept as a prisoner under Napoleon.

He was shipped back and forth from various locations, kept isolated from his advisors and friends, and at times not even supplied with some of the most basic necessities. Throughout his imprisonment, the French Emperor intimidated and threatened him, trying to gain control over the Catholic Church.

During this extended and dramatic trial, which thoroughly depleted him both physically and psychologically, Pius VII composed a special prayer to Our Lady of Sorrows—a litany that is still prayed today. And soon after his release, he inserted the commemoration of Our Lady of Sorrows into the universal liturgical calendar of the Roman Catholic Church.

Throughout one of the most dire and depressing periods in the entire history of the papacy, how did this pope deal with his sorrows and his constant, intense suffering?

He put his hand in Mary's hand and stood firm with her at the foot of Christ's cross, learning the meaning of suffering from the heart of his spiritual mother.

God in his providence wanted every Christian to follow that example, to learn that we are never alone in our sorrows, and that no matter how horrible they may be God can redeem them—and that was the origin of our liturgical memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion: "Follow Me!"

I would like to finish this meditation with one more quotation from St. John Paul II, in which he points out that the meaning of suffering cannot be found only by thinking about it. He writes:

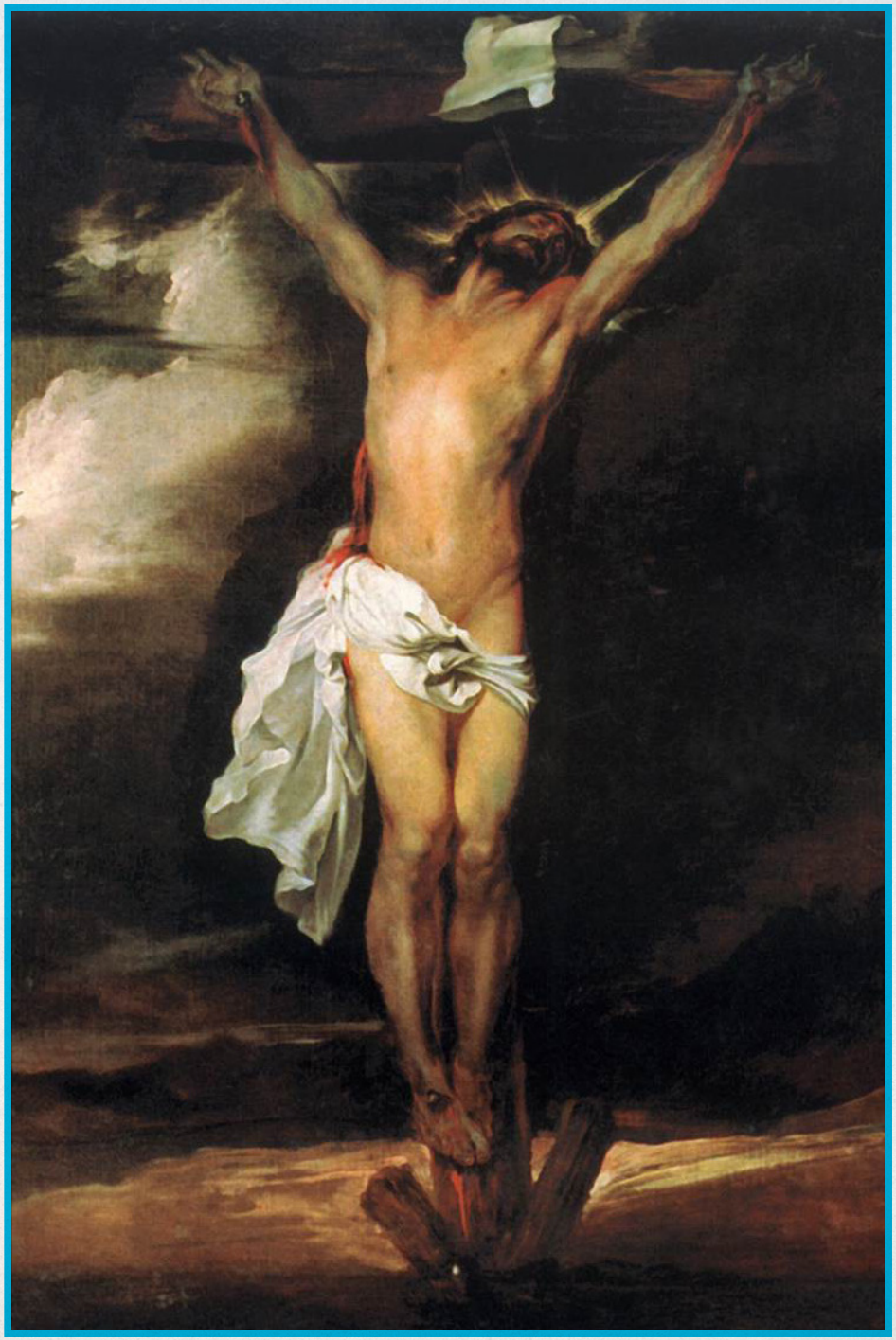
> *Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: "Follow me!" Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! Through my Cross. Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him. He does not discover this meaning at his own human level, but at the level of the suffering of Christ.*
>
> —*Salvifici Doloris* 26

From Christ, to Mary, to Pius VII, to St. John Paul II, to you and to me, the promise of Our Lord continues to ring true: when we unite our sufferings to his, they are redeemed. As he put it in St. Matthew's Gospel:

> *Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.*
>
> —Matthew 11:28-30

Take some time now to reflect prayerfully on the lessons the Church wants to teach us by turning our attention every year towards Our Lady of Sorrows.

The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

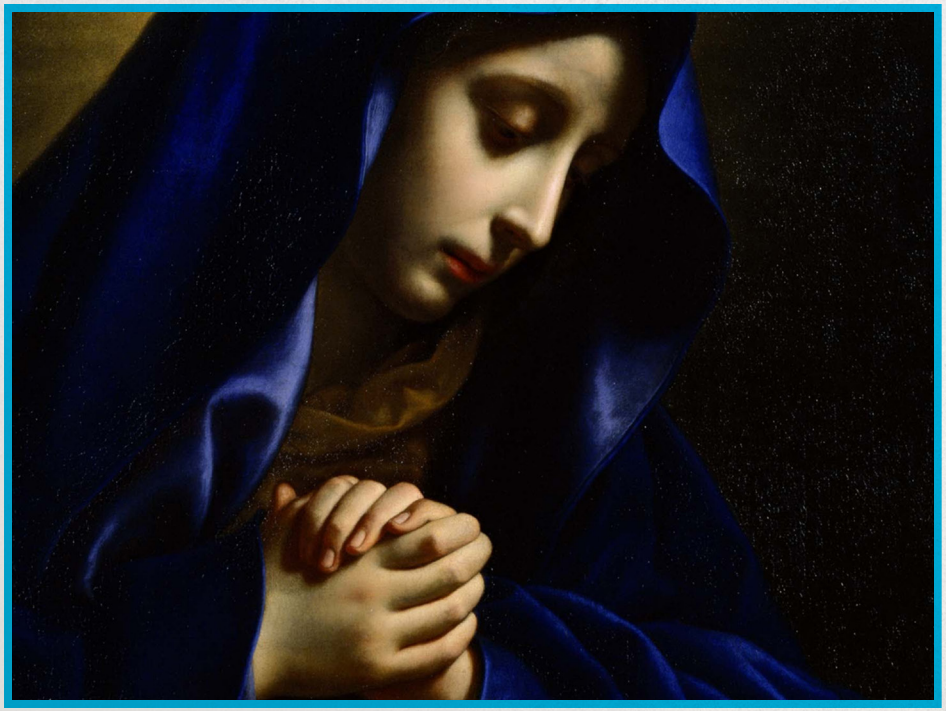


Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. St. John Paul II wrote: "Christ has led us into this Kingdom through his suffering. And also through suffering those surrounded by the mystery of Christ's Redemption become mature enough to enter this Kingdom" (*Salvifici Doloris* 21). How would I express in my own words what he means by saying that suffering can help foster spiritual maturity?

2. What role does the Blessed Virgin Mary play in my daily life? What role do I think she should play? How can I fill the gap?

3. What do I usually have in my mind and my heart when I make the Sign of the Cross? How could I give this simple but powerful prayer more meaning in my life?



Quotations to Help Your Meditation

But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

—2 Corinthians 4:7–11, NABRE

Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us.... Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

—Romans 5:3–5, James 1:2–4, NABRE

In the Cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed... The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.

—John Paul II
Salvifici Doloris 19

CONFERENCE

"Offering It Up"

Along my path of conversion to the Catholic faith, I ran into a lot of things that took time to understand and digest.

One of them was the traditional way that Catholics apply the concept of redemptive suffering to daily life, what I heard my Catholic friends call "offering it up."

It seemed to be their natural response when something bad happened, whether a little thing like getting a headache or a big thing like being diagnosed with cancer.

That small phrase, "offer it up," encapsulates a large theological reality: namely, how we can follow the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary and become, in a sense, co-redeemers with Christ through uniting our own sufferings with his. In this conference, we will reflect on the meaning of that phrase, both theologically and practically.

What Do We Mean by "Merit"?

The first theological concept we need to tackle is what the Catechism calls "merit." Merit, at its most basic level, is simply the right someone earns to receive a reward.

A worker merits his wages, for example. Soldiers who risk their lives for their country merit respect and security when their time of active duty is up.

Jesus spoke often about merit. In his parables about the final judgment, for example, he drew a direct correlation between how we behave here on earth and the reward we will receive in eternity. Another example is from Luke 12, where Jesus admonished:

> *Provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.*
>
> —Luke 12:33

Somehow, then, according to Jesus, we Christians have the ability to make such a positive difference in this world that we will merit a reward for it in heaven.

In other words, as Christians, our freely undertaken actions and our freely accepted sufferings can serve as conduits, in a sense, of God's grace, the grace that redeems fallen humanity and rolls back the forces of evil and the effects of sin.

Earthly Actions with Heavenly Rewards?

But there seems to be a problem here, if we scratch beneath the surface. Our actions, even our good ones, are just human actions. And yet, what redeems the world is divine action, divine grace.

So how is it that our human actions contribute to this divine action, meriting for us the heavenly reward that Jesus speaks about?

On our own, it is true, we are nothing more than fallen, sinful human beings, incapable of being channels of God's grace in the world. But in Christ, we are no longer on our own.

An unplugged lamp won't give off any light, no matter how many times you turn the switch. Similarly, original sin unplugged our souls from the source of grace—God himself. When Jesus became man and sacrificed his life in atonement for our sins, he plugged human nature back in to God, so to speak. This was the redemption.

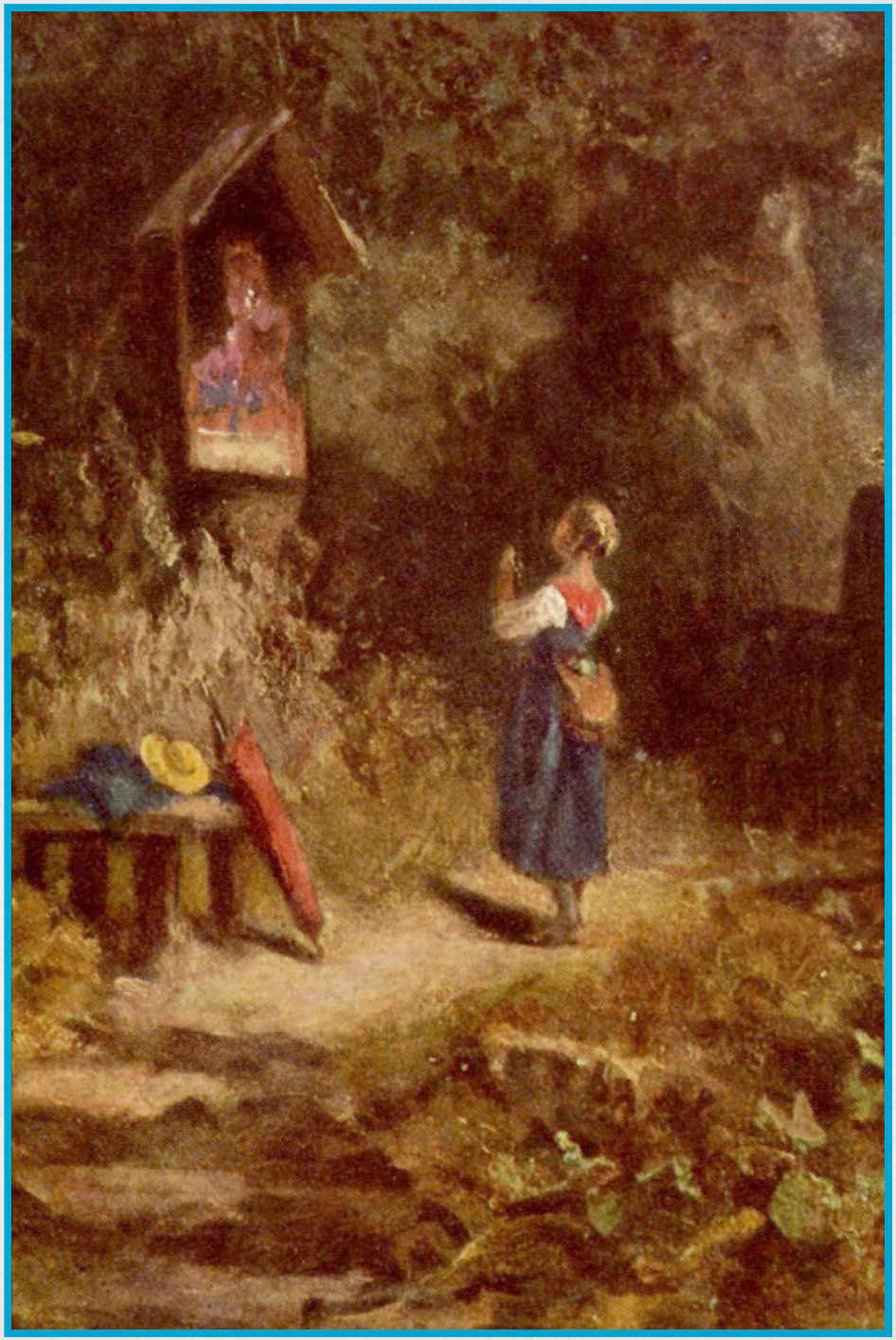
And so, everyone who is united to Christ through faith and the sacraments is now once again connected to the source of grace.

Traditional Catholic spirituality calls this "living the life of grace" or living in the "state of grace." And that's why our natural actions can have a supernatural impact; in Christ, and only in Christ, they can become channels of saving grace. As Jesus put it during the Last Supper:

> *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*
>
> —John 15:5, see also CCC 2025

This is truly an amazing gift from God, if we think about it.

What we do and how we choose to live our ordinary lives can actually increase the flow of grace in the world, spreading Christ's kingdom and storing up treasure for us in heaven.



Why "Offering It Up" Really Matters

With that brief theological discussion under our belts, we are now ready to look a little more closely at the phrase "offer it up".

At its most fundamental level, "offering something up" simply means uniting it, through prayer, to Christ's own offering of himself to the Father for our salvation. It's similar to what happens during the offertory at Mass.

At Mass, we offer to God bread and wine. Through the priest's words of consecration, Jesus himself becomes present in those offerings—he unites them to his own self-offering to the Father.

And so, our gifts of bread and wine become the Eucharist; they become channels of grace for the world. By living the life of grace, we can do something similar with all of our prayers, virtuous actions, and even our sufferings and sacrifices.

Through a simple lifting of our hearts to God we can unite them to Christ's redeeming prayers, actions, and sufferings, so that they become pipelines of grace, so to speak, extending from the heart of Christ (who is the source of redemption and grace) into our hearts, and through us into the Church and the world around us.

This flows from being a member of the Church, the Body of Christ, and sharing in what the Church calls the "common priesthood."

Those of us who have received the sacrament of holy orders share in the ordained or ministerial priesthood of Christ, which enables us to celebrate the sacraments.

But every Christian "shares in the divine nature," as the Bible puts it (2 Peter 1:4). And so every Christian is called to be a bridge between heaven and earth over which the redeeming power of God's grace flows into the world—this is the "common priesthood of all the faithful" (CCC 1547).

In his First Letter to all Christians, St. Peter expressed this mysterious reality by a vivid analogy. He wrote:

> *... like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*
>
> —1 Peter 2:5

When we "offer up" our own sufferings by prayerfully uniting them to Christ, we are exercising that common priesthood, increasing the flow of God's grace in the world for the benefit of Christ's Kingdom.

But How Does "Offering It Up" Really Happen?

But exactly how do we "offer it up" to God? Is it really enough just to say those words, "Lord, I offer this up to you"? Yes, and no.

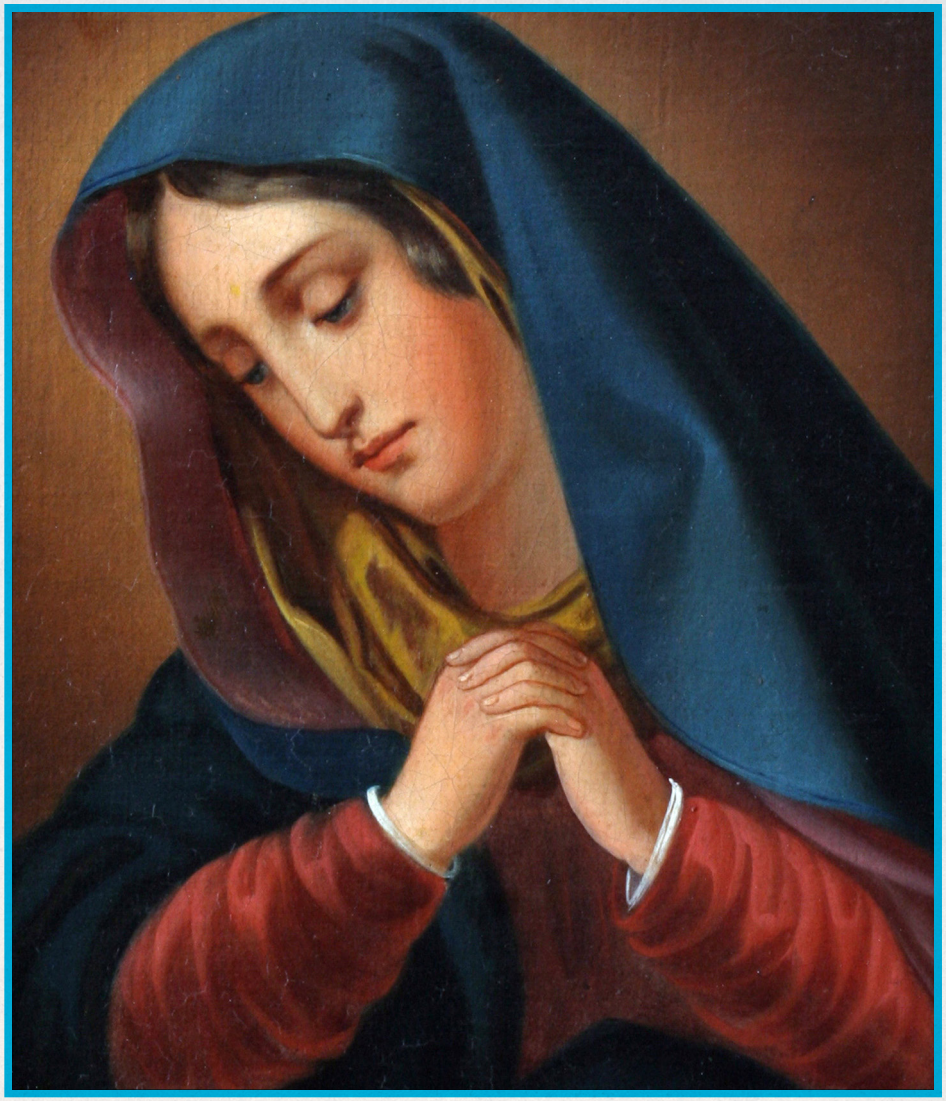
When we do that, linking our sufferings (or prayers, actions, and desires) to Christ, we become pipelines of grace.

But the diameter of the pipeline is not fixed; it can increase or decrease depending on at least three factors. Let's look at them one by one.

Union with God

First, there is the depth of my union with God, the intensity of God's grace at work in my own soul. The more I am filled with grace, the more merit my prayers, virtuous actions, and sufferings will have when I offer them to God.

This is why the Blessed Virgin Mary has such a unique role in God's plan of salvation—she was uniquely filled with divine grace. The more grace present in my life, the higher the wattage on the lamp of my soul. This is because grace is what makes us more like God, more united to him, and he is the source of redemption.



Christians who pray daily, try to live in God's presence throughout the day, receive the sacraments regularly, and make an effort to deepen their friendship with Christ by rooting out sinful tendencies, avoiding sin and the occasions of sin, and making a decent effort to love their neighbor as themselves, can constantly deepen their union with God, widening their spiritual pipeline.

Purity of Intention

Second, there is our purity of intention. We can "offer up" our sufferings, using them to gain merit, for many different reasons:

- Because we don't want to go to hell;
- Because we want more glory in heaven;
- Because we want our sufferings to win graces for others who are in need;
- Because we want to show God that we love him no matter what, even if he permits suffering in our lives;
- Because we want to conform our lives more perfectly to Christ...

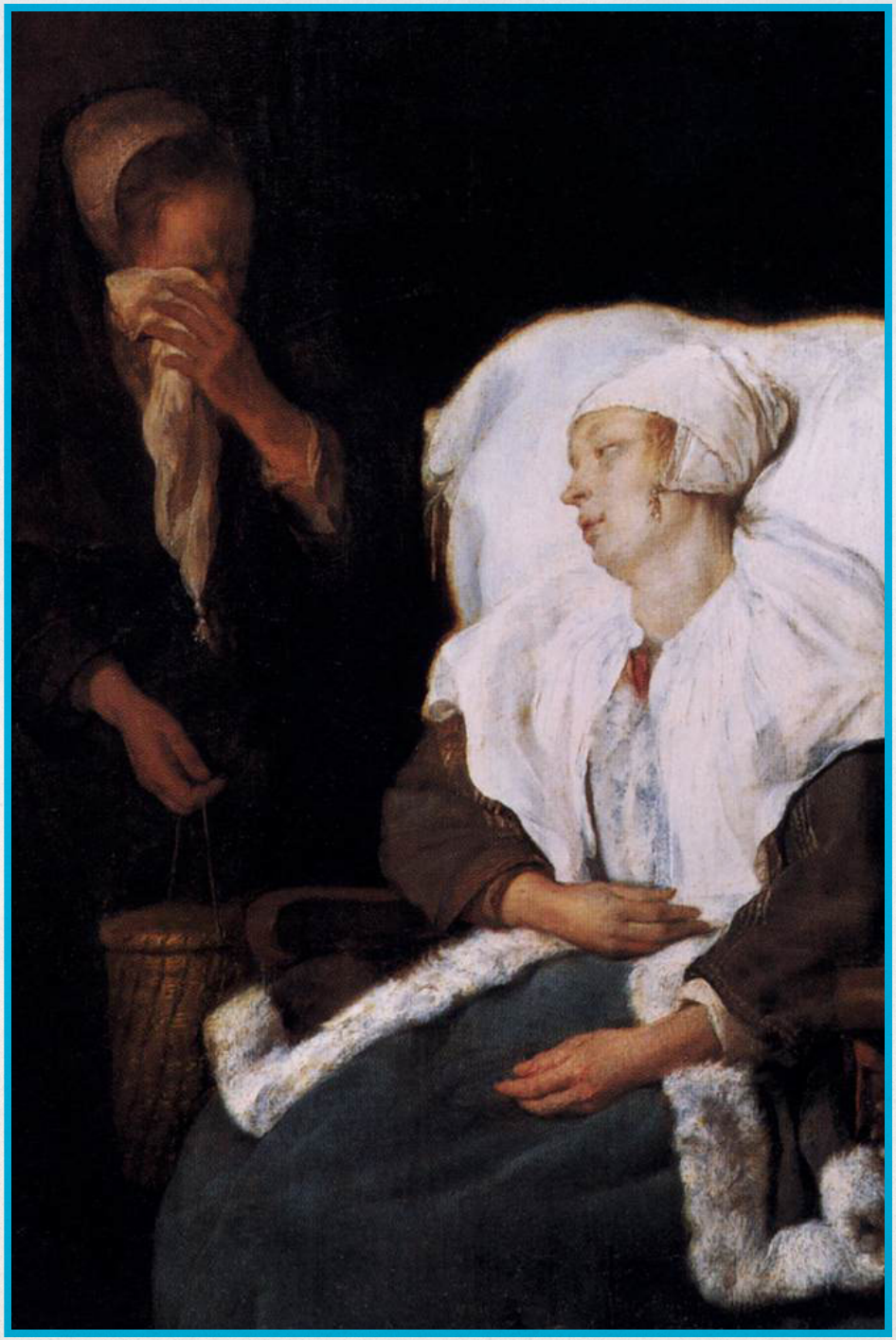
The default setting for our interior intention is usually self-centered. But with God's help and a decent effort on our part, we can make it more and more mission-centered, kingdom-centered, Christ-centered.

Of course, usually we have more than one intention—we want to do what is right, but we also want to experience happiness. Multiple intentions are natural and normal, because human beings are complex creatures.

But the more we can consciously renew our supernatural intention, stirring up the reasons for doing things that are based on the wisdom of our faith, the bigger pipeline of grace we can become. This factor applies even to the littlest things we do, as St. Paul makes clear:

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.

—1 Corinthians 10:31



Fervor and Focusing the Heart

Third, there is the factor of fervor. There can be twenty kids in a math class, and every single one of them can be working on an exercise, but not all of them will be putting their whole heart into it.

Just so, we can all say the words, "Lord, I offer this up to you," but we will not all say them with equal fervor; the more love and meaning we pour into them, the wider our pipeline.

When sufferings come our way, for example, we can accept them with different degrees of fervor: reluctance, patience, gratitude, or even supernatural joy. As long as we accept them out of faith, we will help increase the flow of grace in the Church.

But if we accept them with a greater degree of faith ("Lord, you are giving me a chance to unite myself more closely to Christ on the cross; help me to share his love as I share his pain!"), there will also be a greater degree of merit. Jesus stressed this when he identified the most important commandment:

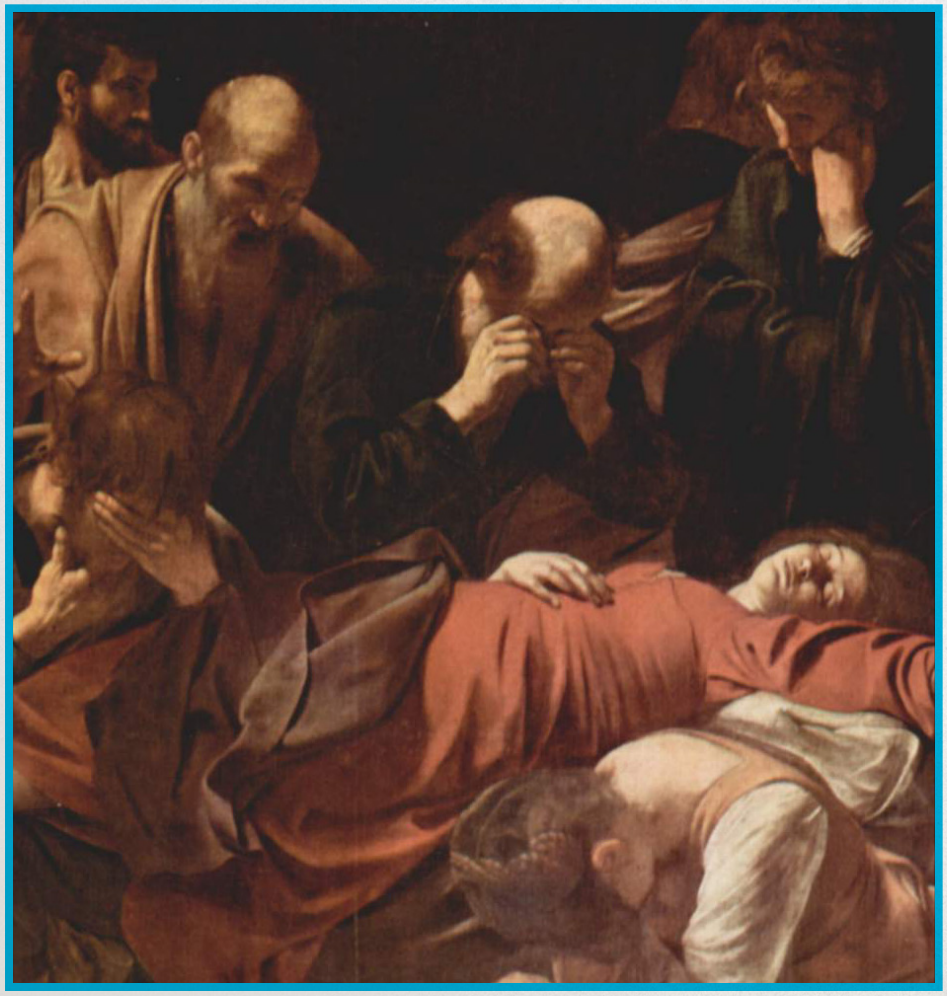
> *You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*
>
> —Matthew 22:37

He said "all." The implication is that we can love with different degrees of totality.

Conclusion: Real Co-Redeemers

Union with God, purity of intention, and fervor are three factors that help us "offer up" our sufferings, prayers, and actions more and more meaningfully.

But the bottom line is clear and simple: When we are living in Christ, one simple reality (a prayer, a headache, an act of service, an honest word, a chore or a sacrifice) can trigger an outpouring of redeeming grace, maybe a trickle, or maybe a flood.



Like Mary at the foot of Christ's cross, we can really become co-redeemers of this fallen world when we "offer up" our own daily struggles and activities by uniting them spiritually to Christ.

Take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the ten questions in the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you find practical ways to apply these theological truths.

Personal Questionnaire

1. How often and in what contexts have I heard or used the phrase "offer it up," and what has it meant for me up to this point in my life?

2. When I think about what Jesus taught regarding meriting rewards in heaven, how does it make me feel? Am I comfortable with it or uncomfortable? Why?

3. Some people confuse merit and love—they tend to think that they can "earn" God's love by giving a good "performance" in their Christian life. What is wrong with this point of view?

4. In number 2008, the Catechism explains that our possibility of contributing to Christ's Kingdom is itself a gift of God. Read over this number, then reflect on what this gift shows us about God's love for us. Why would he give us this possibility?

> *The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. Man's merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit.*
>
> —CCC 2008

Read over the following number from the Catechism, then answer questions 5–7:

> *Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God's wisdom. These graces and goods are the object of Christian prayer. Prayer attends to the grace we need for meritorious actions.*
>
> —CCC 2010

5. How would I explain this number in my own words?

6. How did I receive the "initial grace of forgiveness and justification"? Savor and thank God for that gift.

7. How firmly do I believe in my capacity to merit graces for myself and for others? How consciously do I try to do this in my daily life?

8. What am I doing in my life right now to deepen (not just maintain) my union with God?

9. Reflect on the major commitments that I have right now. What are my motivations, my intentions, for living them faithfully? How can I purify those intentions and link those activities more closely to my relationship with God?

10. What suffering am I experiencing in my life right now? Take some time to reflect on that suffering in the light of Christ's cross, and to prayerfully "offer it up" for an increase of the flow of divine grace into the world.

FURTHER READING

For Reflection & Prayer

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *The Mother of the Redeemer*
  by John Paul II
- *On The Meaning of Suffering*
  by John Paul II
- *33 Days to Morning Glory*
  by Michael E. Gaitley
- *Hail Holy Queen*
  by Scott Hahn
- *True Devotion to Mary*
  by Louis de Montfort
- *The Spiritual Life*
  by Adolphe Tanquerey

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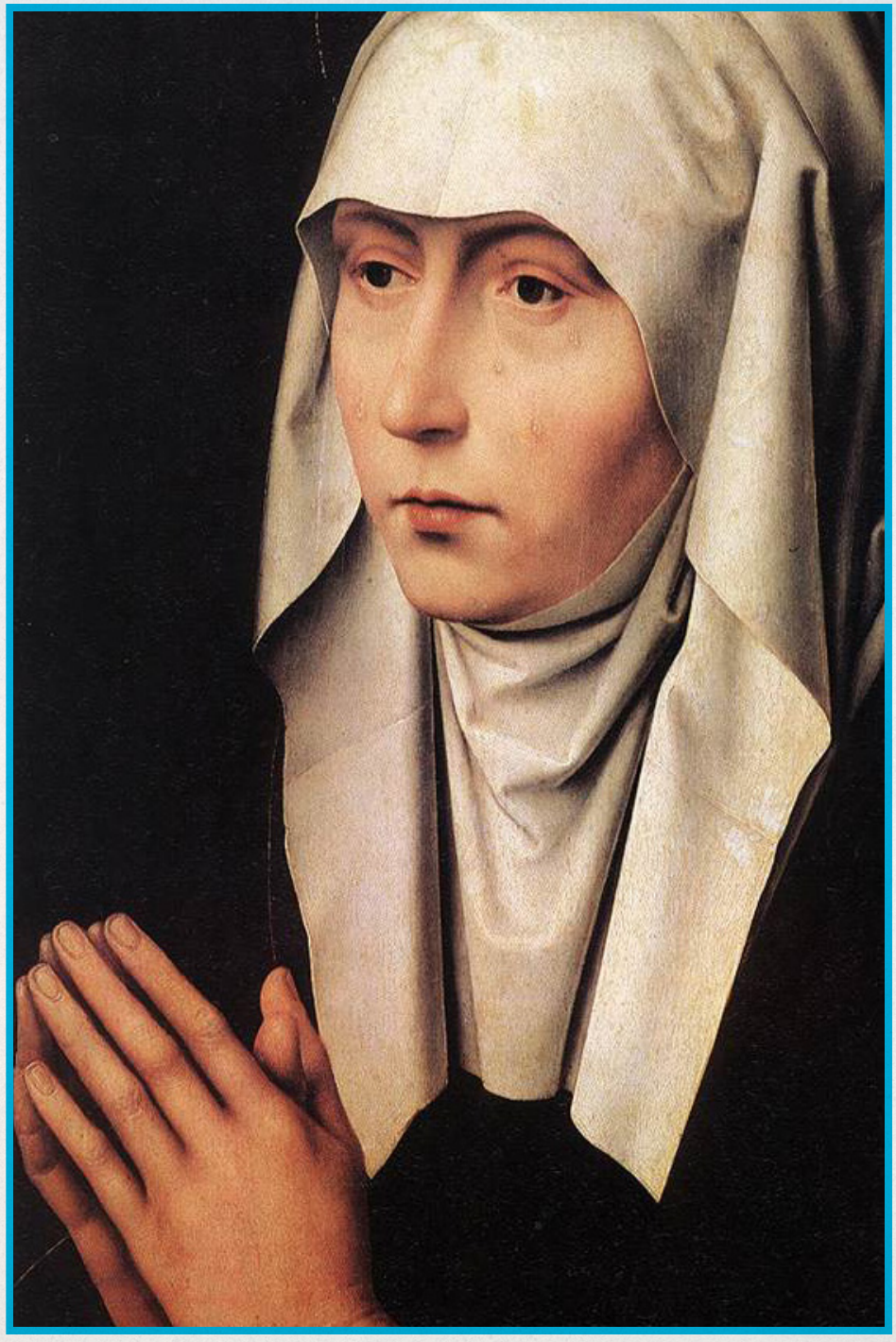
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