

CATHOLIC STORIES OF FAITH AND HOPE

HOW GOD BRINGS GOOD
OUT OF SUFFERING

*Authored and Compiled by
Steven R. Hemler*

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INTRODUCTION

This book provides a Catholic response to the big question, “Why would a loving God allow evil, pain, and suffering?” We all wonder why bad things happen to good people, and many wonder why bad things happen at all. Watching a relative slowly die of cancer, losing a child during pregnancy, seeing addiction wreck a friend’s life—suffering like this can cause us to wonder why God doesn’t step in and stop these problems.

Since he’s God, it seems God could stop the suffering many people experience—from physical pain (such as from disease or illness), mental anguish (such as from the death of a loved one), and natural disasters (such as hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, floods, tornadoes), as well as from evil human behavior (e.g., crime, injustice, war). Since God is loving and compassionate, then why is there so much undeserved suffering in this world? And since God is all-powerful, why doesn’t God intervene and stop bad things from happening in the world and to us?

Why God allows undeserved suffering is a mystery. No explanation seems to fully satisfy our human desire for understanding. This conundrum, traditionally called

the “problem of evil,” is an ancient difficulty, one that people have struggled with for millennia.

This book, therefore, looks at how the greatest Christian thinkers of all time have dealt with the problem of pain and the mystery of suffering. We will explore possible reasons why God might allow suffering that have been proposed by theologians throughout Church history, including how suffering can help us grow in character by finding a deeper perspective and more meaningful purpose in life.

God does not want us to suffer and does not directly cause our suffering. He is not distant and uncaring. Rather, God holds us in the highest empathy and compassion during our suffering. Nevertheless, God allows us to suffer like any parent allows their child to go to school and into the real world—to make their own decisions, including mistakes. God also permits suffering so we can learn to be courageous in the face of fear, restrained in the face of desire, compassionate with those who are hurting, and choose to love God more than the things of this world.¹

A dominant message in our increasingly secular culture is that suffering is irredeemable, worthless, and to be avoided at all costs. However, the type of lifestyle that is focused on worldly success and having a good time will crumble in the face of life’s inevitable pain and suffering. But this is no reason to despair or become bitter.

Christians today and saints throughout history have shown how God brings good out of suffering and how suffering provides an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth. We can better endure the ordeals that come

our way if we, like them, develop the practice of suffering with Jesus and focus on how deeply he cares about us and our own suffering today. As such, this book will help us understand what it means to suffer well. It seems there is nothing more foreign to the modern mind than this.

The problem of evil is not merely a theoretical problem but an intensely personal one because everyone experiences pain and suffering in life. Therefore, this book includes the inspiring personal testimonies of several Catholics who have dealt positively with significant suffering in their own lives. We will see how suffering can teach us spiritual truths, build our character, and draw us closer to God, others, and the Church. Understanding the purpose of suffering can help us and those we love become better, rather than bitter, when facing life's hardships and difficulties.

Part I

**SUFFERING FROM DISEASE
AND NATURAL DISASTERS**

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW NATURAL EVIL?

Let's first look at the "big question" of why a loving God would allow disease and natural disasters, which is sometimes termed natural evil or physical evil. Typical examples of natural evil are natural disasters (such as hurricanes, tornados, floods, and earthquakes), illnesses (such as cancer and Alzheimer's), and disabilities (such as blindness and deafness). Why God allows natural evil, for which human beings cannot reasonably be blamed, is a mystery. But let's look at some possible reasons.

Suffering as a Wake-Up Call

One reason God allows us to experience pain, disease, tragedy, disappointment, and failure in life is because God is able to bring about a greater good from them. It may sound odd, but difficulties and hardships can be blessings in disguise. That's because they can be a catalyst

for achieving new heights in our personal and spiritual lives. But how can this be?

We may not like to admit it, but most people are naturally self-centered. Most of us want to be self-sufficient and in control of our lives. We do not want anyone telling us what to do, and this may include God. However, in times of difficulty and hardship, we may turn to God and seek his help.

That's because for many people, God is not a "fair weather friend" but a "bad weather friend" to be called upon mainly during the hard times in life. God is often viewed as some kind of vague emergency service who is needed only when the going gets tough or when we have some kind of need. Therefore, if everything was always wonderful, do you think we would seek God or need him? Probably not, since many of us will not turn to God as long as there is any other place to look for happiness.

Our pride and desire to be in control of our life mean that we typically will not surrender our self-will to God as long as we believe all is well. Our Creator, however, has an eternal perspective that we lack and knows that our true happiness and ultimate well-being are found in being united in love with him in heaven for all eternity. Only after we surrender our will to God can we find true joy and happiness in this life, as well as the next. Yet we will typically not give our life to God as long as it remains pleasant.

C. S. Lewis addressed this in his book *The Problem of Pain*:

Everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well with

us. . . . Now God, who has made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call “our own life” remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make “our own life” less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible source of false happiness?²

John Stonestreet, when reflecting on how we often go to great lengths to keep God and thoughts of death at bay, had this to say:

Years ago, when my grandfather was dying, he suffered terribly for about three or four months. In sorrow, I remember asking my pastor, “Why doesn’t God just take him?”

Honestly, I expected my pastor to say something along the lines of, “Well, God has His ways, and His own timing.” But he said something more important that I’ll never forget: “Because your grandfather,” he said, “needs to know his mortality before he meets his maker.”³

Our illusion of self-sufficiency and self-control must, for our own sake, be shattered. Pain and suffering often shatter this illusion. For our own good, we may need to be reminded that we are not really in control of our own lives. The dark times of suffering and upheaval can shake us and cause us to reexamine who we are and what we are doing with our lives. Suffering can help us focus on

the truly important things and let go of the unnecessary “clutter” in our lives.

Suffering can be a big wake-up call and bring us humbly before God. For we naturally seek God when we are walking through the valleys in our life. As C. S. Lewis also noted, “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world*” (emphasis added).⁴

When we suffer, we start looking deeper into ourselves, and it is in the lowest moments that we reach out to God to help us get through troubled times. Pain and suffering are a reminder of our dependency upon an all-loving Creator who wants us to be in full union with him. What other choice does God have when we continue to seek our own desires and look for happiness in all the wrong places?

As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him” (1500–1).

It is important to recognize that God does not directly cause our suffering or make us suffer just so we will love him. True love cannot be forced in that way. Rather, God allows us to suffer so that we will recognize our

dependence upon him and choose to grow closer to him. We all need to realize that we are absolutely dependent upon God whether things are going well or going poorly. However, for those who do not yet have that realization, suffering can become a path to an awareness of who is really in control.

Pope Francis made this point while praying for an end to the coronavirus pandemic during the extraordinary *urbi et orbi* (to the city and the world) blessing on March 27, 2020 in the empty, rainy, and dark St. Peter's square:

The [coronavirus] storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots. . . . You [God] are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing. It is not the time of your judgment, but of our judgment: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others.⁵

Randall's Story

Physical or emotional pain and suffering can be the means by which we become motivated to give ourselves to God and to seek what God desires to happen in our lives. This is exemplified by former atheist Randall in his powerful conversion story:

I was a practicing atheist for nearly twenty years of my life. As a lawyer and businessman I focused everything on materialism and secular success. I had no time for emotional things, spiritual things, and I liked it that way. There was nothing that was going to get in the way of that. Unknown to me, during those twenty years my precious mom constantly prayed for me. She was praying that anything would reach me, anything would reveal God to me.

It was in late 1999, actually, that my mom found herself in a battle with cancer. At that time, I was helping her out and attending oncology appointments with her. There was one oncology appointment, where in one instant, I actually had my atheism just shattered. It was just one instant of pain and just seeing her pain that the reality of life and the truth of God was just there before me. I didn't know who this God was. And, I didn't know how to reach Him. But I knew He was there at that point in time. I started praying. I didn't know who I was praying to. But I started praying for mom and her painful trial. And, at that time my heart started

opening up to also look at the claims of Jesus Christ and the claims of the Bible. I was absolutely stunned by the evidence.

On Mother's Day 2000, I gave my life to Jesus and it was that day that my mom's twenty years of patient prayer were answered. It was also that day where her battle with cancer, her painful trial, was given meaning. I think when you look at why does a loving God allow bad things to happen to good people, I think my mom actually summed it up best in one of her last journal entries before she died.

She said, "God does answer prayers in mysterious ways and does answer a mother's most fervent prayers for the soul of her beloved son. What a grand purpose for my cancer. I agree with Paul in Romans 8, for I consider that the sufferings of this present age are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us."

I know in my heart that, like Christ, my mom suffered and died for me. As hard as that was for me to understand and comprehend, I now view it through more eternal goggles. I now see meaning and purpose and hope in my life, and I made the best decision I ever could have.⁶

As this personal testimony illustrates, we are not just imperfect people who need to be improved, but "rebels who must lay down our arms."⁷ What else can God do but allow our lives to become more difficult and take away false sources of happiness?

Until we feel that empty ache, the helpless yearning, such as someone who is addicted to drink or drug experiences, we are stuck and cannot save ourselves. It is often when we hit bottom and finally surrender to God that we can make real progress in rising above our trials and troubles. That's because the times that bring us to our knees can bring us closer to God.

Suffering reminds us how much we need God. God often allows pain and suffering to help us find the proper perspective in life—that we are not fully in control of our lives and God is all we need. *We may not realize that God is all we need until God is all we've got.*⁸

Suffering Can Bring Us Closer to God

Suffering helps us realize that we need to give God more of our attention and our love. When we suffer, we often begin our conversations with God by asking, “Why is this happening to me?” Maybe in some way this is how God is asking us to pray more and connect with him in a deeper way.

God, in his sovereign mercy, sometimes uses our physical pain and emotional hurts to awaken in us our desperate spiritual need for him. This was addressed by Bill McGarvey in the Jesuit magazine *America*, “It is through suffering that we are broken down and made to confront our own weakness and vulnerability. This can be a transformative moment, in which we recognize at some deeper level that we are not the center of the universe. It is a moment that either opens us up to a journey

in which we move beyond ourselves to see a profound connection between our suffering and the suffering of others, or it marks the beginning of a desperate attempt to reclaim our centrality in the universe.”⁹

Indeed, suffering has been the cause of the conversion of many saints throughout history. Pope St. John Paul addressed this in his apostolic letter *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, “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. To this grace many saints, such as Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Ignatius of Loyola and others, owe their profound conversion. A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that he becomes a completely new person.”¹⁰

It took being locked up as a prisoner of war in a grim dungeon for over a year for Francis of Assisi to find joy in God.¹¹ After being freed, he voluntarily gave up his previous life of wealth and luxury and embraced life as a poor itinerant preacher. Others joined him and they eventually founded several new religious communities, which have drawn countless people closer to Christ for more than eight hundred years.

And it was while being bedridden for several months after being struck by a cannonball in the leg that Ignatius of Loyola experienced his profound conversion.¹² He had dreamed of glory on the battlefield, but instead, he heard God’s call and started down a new path in life. This included founding a new religious order, the Society of

Jesus (Jesuits), which has also drawn countless people closer to Christ for nearly five hundred years.

As the lives of these famous saints and many other people attest, God is wise enough to know that we need some pain and suffering, for reasons we may not fully understand, but which God knows is necessary for our eventual good. In other words, God allows short-term suffering for our long-term good. To quote the modern adage, “No pain, no gain.”

Jesus himself even told us, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Jesus said we cannot be his follower unless we take up our cross with him every day. If we want to be with Jesus, we are to be with him in suffering.

Suffering and pain are not necessarily the same as harm because they can make us stronger in ways that we did not understand beforehand. It is just like a young child being given a vaccination shot. All the child knows is that it hurts. She does not understand that this temporary pain is ultimately for her own good. In the same way, God may allow suffering and hardship in order to help us move towards a greater good—spiritual maturity and eternal life in heaven.

It is understandably difficult to always have this perspective when going through tough times. For some people, faith is strengthened in adversity, while for others, hope and faith seem to be dashed. But allowing feelings of despair or anger towards God to overwhelm us is not healthy. Instead of becoming bitter or merely seeking a human solution, we do well when we turn to God for

help and strength in times of trial and trouble. Sometimes, it is the pain that enables God's grace to feel so good. Difficulty is often the path that brings inner joy and wholeness.

Joni's Story

This is vividly illustrated by the testimony of Joni Eareckson Tada, who was paralyzed from the shoulders down in a diving accident when she was seventeen years old.¹³ During two years of rehabilitation, she struggled with anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, and had serious religious doubts. But through her physical, emotional, and spiritual struggles, Joni eventually learned to trust in God, and this led to a very active ministry. She has written dozens of books, recorded several musical albums, starred in an autobiographical movie of her life (*Joni*), and is an advocate for disabled people. She shares her testimony:

When I was first injured, I imagined myself as a human guinea pig lying there on my Stryker frame. I was doing nothing but eating and breathing and sleeping, and really just existing. And, I thought, "Most people out beyond these hospital walls are going to college, getting married, having children, going to work, and I'm just lying here sleeping, breathing, eating. And I realized, oh my goodness, upon my life all the truths of the human race are going to be tested. Is there a God? Does He care? What's the purpose in life? And, if there is no God,

then why not have my girlfriend slit my wrists? Why not take my mother's sleeping pills? Why not end it all? I mean who can face a life of total paralysis?"

And somewhere in there, in my anger and frustration, I realized life's got to be more than just getting born, and growing old and then dying. There has got to be a God who cares. We are too significant. There must be meaning in all of this. I don't think I would have asked those larger than life questions were it not for my suffering.

There are a lot of people who think I am a strong person. And, I'm not. I am such a weak person. I wake up in the morning and, honestly, I think, "Oh Lord, I don't have the strength for this. I am so tired. I am so tired of this paralysis." But when I start to feel overwhelmed, I'll say, "Oh God, I have no strength for this day. But, You do. I have no resources, but You do. May I please have Your resources. May I please have Your strength. I can do all things through You if You strengthen me. Please let me borrow Your smile for the day."

And, honestly, before the morning has hardly begun, I've already got a perspective on the day. I have already got peace in my heart and a mission to accomplish. And, it's because I have been pushed up against God. And, God has shown me some deep things about His purpose and Himself that, for me, are so satisfying, so pleasurable that I wouldn't trade the wheelchair for anything.¹⁴

Isn't it astounding that Joni actually says she "wouldn't trade the wheelchair for anything"? Of course, it has not been easy for Joni. As she shares, "Every single morning when I wake up I need Jesus so badly. I just can't tolerate the thought of another day as a quadriplegic with someone else giving me a bed bath and exercising my legs and toileting routines. It all just seems too overwhelming." And yet Joni perseveres, continually crying out to God for support.

The suffering she experiences brings humility and a new perspective. Because of her paralysis, she discovered the presence and love of God in a way that most of us have not. Joni is quite certain it is because of her suffering that she has grown as a person and found true happiness and joy by coming closer to God. As she shares, "It sounds incredible, but I really would rather be in this wheelchair knowing Jesus as I do than be on my feet without Him."¹⁵

Joni's personal testimony shows how God can enable good to emerge from suffering—if we run towards God, instead of away from him. When calamities or trials threaten to overwhelm us, how will we respond? Our challenge is to respond with trust and hope in God's love, care, and presence with us. The power of faith can bring confidence that we are being guided and cared for, even when that guidance and care are not immediately apparent. Faith can provide the courage and patience we need to face trauma, sickness, and even death with hope and without despair.

We know from experience that no one can escape the inevitable trials of life—pain, suffering, sickness, and death. When we encounter hardships, grief, or tragic

loss, our challenge is how we will respond. With fear or with faith? With passive resignation or with patient hope and trust in God?

Jesus asks us to trust him in all things. He said, “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me” (Jn 14:1). And as Jeremiah the prophet stated, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD” (Jer 17:7). But what does it mean to trust, to have hope, to turn our hearts to God? It means to focus the whole of our life in God and not to focus on the things of this world, such as money, power, pleasure, possessions, and prestige. Suffering has the power to bring about a new perspective on what is truly important in our lives.

It also helps to remember, as Joni does, that God never gives us more than we can handle, with his help. We will never have to suffer more than we can endure if we have faith and trust in God. As St. Paul promised, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). When we are rooted in God, we can bear any burden because we are linked to and strengthened by that great power and person who created the entire cosmos.

The entire point of religion is to make us humble before God and to open us to the path of love. Suffering has the power to do that. It is through suffering that we can learn to rely on God and to trust in God’s plans for us in a deeper way. It helps to remember that every trial can be a blessing in disguise and bring us closer to God—if

we let it. Our pain does not have to pull us away from God, it can pull us closer.

The Witness of Those Who Suffer

When a person who is suffering maintains hope in God and belief that there will be no more suffering when this life is over but only happiness for those who die in friendship with God, this person's suffering becomes a powerful witness of faith and may lead to the conversion of others. When someone sees us maintaining our peace, even when the seas of life are getting choppy all around us, this can lead them to ask the reason for our hope (see 1 Pt 3:15). We can then point them to the grace of Jesus Christ and the love of God that is active in our lives, even in the midst of our suffering.

St. Rose of Lima, the sixteenth-century South American hermit who is patroness of the Americas, wrote of the knowledge she received about the unfathomable treasure of divine grace that comes to us through affliction, tribulation, and struggle:

Our Lord and Savior lifted up his voice and said with incomparable majesty: "Let all men know that grace comes after tribulation. Let them know that without the burden of afflictions it is impossible to reach the height of grace. Let them know that the gifts of grace increase as the struggles increase. Let men take care not to stray and be deceived. This is the only true stairway to paradise, and without the cross they can find no road to climb to heaven."

When I heard these words, a strong force came upon me and seemed to place me in the middle of a street, so that I might say in a loud voice to people of every age, sex and status: "Hear, O people; hear, O nations. I am warning you about the commandment of Christ by using words that came from his own lips: We cannot obtain grace unless we suffer afflictions. We must heap trouble upon trouble to attain a deep participation in the divine nature, the glory of the sons of God and perfect happiness of soul."

"If only mortals would learn how great it is to possess divine grace, how beautiful, how noble, how precious. How many riches it hides within itself, how many joys and delights! No one would complain about his cross or about troubles that may happen to him, if he would come to know the scales on which they are weighed when they are distributed to men."¹⁶

Thomas à Kempis wrote a book over five hundred years ago entitled *The Imitation of Christ*. This book, which has become a Christian classic, describes the spiritual value of suffering and hardship. In it, he wrote:

When you are troubled and afflicted, then is the time to gain merit. You must pass through fire and water before you come to refreshment. . . . Submit yourself to the will of God, and bear whatever shall happen to you for the glory of Jesus Christ, because after winter comes summer; after the night the day returns; after the storm comes a great calm. . . . In

the cross (suffering) there is the completion of virtue; in the cross there is the perfection of sanctity. There is no health for the soul nor hope of eternal life, except in the cross. Therefore, take up your cross and follow Jesus and you will attain eternal life. . . . If you are his companions in suffering, you shall also be partakers in his glory.¹⁷

Throughout the past two thousand years, many saints and Christians, including St. Francis of Assisi and St. Ignatius of Loyola, have shown how their suffering brought them closer to God and enabled them to grow in holiness. Some other such saints include St. Anthony of Egypt, St. John of the Cross, St. Bernadette of Lourdes, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and St. Teresa of Calcutta. If we try to follow their examples, we can trust this will be true in our case too.

They have shown how God uses suffering to help us become more virtuous and loving and enable us to help others be more virtuous and loving, as well as how God allows suffering to bring us and others into an eternal life of his unconditional love and joy. When we recognize this, we can transform our suffering from an isolating and embittering experience into an opportunity for growth and self-gift.¹⁸

God Brings Good Out of Suffering

St. Augustine summarized the mystery of suffering well when he stated, “For God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist.”¹⁹ Even

though God does not directly cause suffering, God can bring good out of it in many ways, including developing our personal character and virtues.

Natural disasters, disease, and illness present us with the opportunity to help others and thereby develop within ourselves the virtues of compassion, unselfishness, charity, generosity, etc. Our own suffering allows us to develop the virtues of courage, patience, humility, endurance, etc. Developing these virtues would be more difficult, if not impossible, in a perfect world totally free of pain and suffering.

Our own suffering can help us develop a deeper understanding of people and their pain. This helps us be more compassionate and sympathetic to others, with a greater capacity to love. God made us for community, and having deep empathy and the opportunity to help those in need builds bonds of love. When someone is grieving or in shock, they often do not want to hear words of encouragement. Just being with them and patiently holding their pain with them is sometimes all we can do to help.

As Christians, we are called to help those who are suffering, even if they brought it on themselves through their own fault or negligence. Our love and concern in helping those who are suffering needs to be real and practical. Good intentions, showing pity, or merely empathizing with others are not enough (see Jas 2:14–17).

Our compassionate love for others must be as wide and as inclusive as is God's love. God excludes no one from his care and concern. God's love is unconditional.

So, too, we must be ready and willing to do good for others who are suffering, just as God is good to us.

Offering Up Our Suffering

When facing our own suffering, we can also “offer it up” for the good of others.²⁰ This means that our suffering can be united with the suffering of Christ on the cross for the salvation of the world. As stated in the *Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Christians should not seek suffering, but when they are confronted with unavoidable suffering, it can become meaningful for them if they unite their suffering with the sufferings of Christ.”²¹ St. Peter also advised, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pt 4:12–13).

If we offer up our suffering to God, uniting it to Christ’s sacrificial offering, then we are cooperating with God’s divine providence and God’s divine plan to bring about a greater good. Fr. Paul Scalia reflects on this:

Everyone suffers. But not everyone sacrifices. Suffering is the simple experience of physical illness, injury, disease, and so on. We all encounter that. Sacrifice, on the other hand, is the offering of this suffering in union with Christ. Saint Paul was the first to articulate this theology of suffering: “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” (Colossians 1:24).

What has come to be called “redemptive suffering” begins with the awareness that Christ suffered first and most of all, that all our suffering must be seen in light of His. Then we recall that He is present to us in our suffering such that He shares our suffering and we share His. He is not a mere observer but has drawn close, taken our suffering upon Himself, and remains with us in the midst of it. Finally, our suffering becomes a sacrifice when, conscious of this union with Him, we offer it to Him.

As Saint Paul told the Colossians that he offered his sufferings “for your sake,” so also we should offer ours for specific intentions. As He hung upon the Cross, enduring the extreme of suffering, our Lord saw each and every one of us . . . every struggle . . . every wound . . . every hurt . . . every need . . . and He offered His sufferings for us. Attaching to our offering a particular person, group, or situation helps to give meaning to our suffering and to unite it more perfectly to His. When we do so our suffering ceases to be merely that and becomes through, with, and in Christ an offering to the Father.²²

When we take up our cross with Jesus, our suffering is transformed into a means for our sanctification and the salvation of the world. This understanding (called “the redemptive nature of suffering”) has been an integral

part of Christian discipleship for centuries. As Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his apostolic letter on suffering:

The witnesses of the New Covenant speak of the greatness of the Redemption, accomplished through the suffering of Christ. 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.²³

Of course, absolutely nothing was lacking in Christ's suffering, and his sacrificial death on the cross is sufficient for the salvation of the whole world. God does not need us to add our sufferings to those of his Son. Rather, God allows us to do so in order that we may participate more fully in Christ's suffering and unite our own suffering with his. It's like a child assisting a parent at some task that the parent is fully capable of accomplishing on their own, but the parent allows the child to participate so the child can be part of the final product.

Monsignor Charles Pope has this to say:

Although we live forward in time from Christ's passion, we were still mystically, but really and truly, present on that day. It is in this sense that we

are “filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” It is only lacking in the sense that our share of the Passion is extended in time. When our time comes, we fulfill our role and endure our share of the Passion. This fills the gap in the Passion that waited for us, even as other gaps will be filled by those who come after us to fill up their portion. So there is nothing lacking in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus as such (cf. Hebrews 10:10-14). It is just that the portions assigned to all the future members of the full Body of Christ are yet to be realized. It is our part that is “lacking,” not Jesus’ part.²⁴

As members of Christ’s Mystical Body (the Church), we are able to unite our sufferings and sacrifices to Christ’s so they take on an infinite value for the redemption of the world. Author Julie Onderko reflects on this: “Often those who are aging and suffering do not unite their pain with the redemptive work Jesus did on the cross. Bishop Fulton Sheen lamented the ‘wasted suffering’ when he would pass by a hospital. He knew that some of the most important work for the salvation of souls could be done from a hospital bed. We are invited to share in the redemptive work of Christ with our own suffering—what an amazing privilege!”²⁵

We can offer up our suffering as a sacrifice of love to God when we endure afflictions without complaining and without despair. As St. John of the Cross stated, “Whenever anything disagreeable or displeasing happens to you, remember Christ crucified and be silent.”²⁶

One of the best ways Catholics can “offer up” our suffering is to offer it to God as a sacrifice during Mass. For example, during the preparation of the gifts when the priest prays, “Pray, brothers and sisters, that *my sacrifice and yours* may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father,” we can consciously offer up our suffering as a sacrifice to God.

Natural Disasters and God’s Providential Plan

Furthermore, the human misery and suffering that results from natural disasters is sometimes linked to immoral human behavior (moral evil).²⁷ For example, the results of earthquakes and hurricanes are often more disastrous in poor and underdeveloped countries with substandard buildings, such as Haiti, than in more prosperous nations. This poverty is frequently exacerbated by the exploitation of an elitist upper class that has left the masses living in substandard housing. Therefore, the results of natural disasters are often made much worse because of evil human behavior.

It is also important to recognize that natural disasters, such as earthquakes, fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc., are not a direct judgment or punishment of God.²⁸ Rather, natural disasters can be a normal by-product of a universe operating according to certain natural laws, like plate tectonics or weather systems. The same characteristics in our atmosphere that give us rain can also give us hurricanes. Our environment had to be constructed in such a way as to promote the flourishing of life, and it

just so happens that the best combination of atmospheric factors to accomplish this can also produce hurricanes on occasion.

Earthquakes are due to plate tectonics, which is also essential to the flourishing of life on our planet.²⁹ While major earthquakes cause destruction and suffering, this does not mean that the shift of a tectonic plate is an inherently evil event. Rather, it is the by-product of a world operating according to natural laws that make life on earth possible.

God permits these things to occur because they fit into God's providential plan for human history. As discussed earlier, if we lived in a world totally free of pain and suffering, we would likely be spoiled, pampered brats who would ignore God and have no need of God whatsoever.³⁰

While it is unfortunate, the reality is that people are more likely to come to know, love, and serve God, the source of true joy and eternal happiness, in a world that experiences natural disasters and disease. The fact that we live in a world with natural disasters and disease is not inconsistent with God's love and sovereignty.

God is Lord of his creation and is indeed present to us in our suffering. *God's purpose for allowing suffering is always to draw some good out of it.* We can trust that God is accomplishing a "good work" in us, though the nature and exact trajectory of that work may remain obscure to us.³¹ As Joni Eareckson Tada adds, "*God permits what He hates to accomplish what He loves.*"³²

It is not that God wants us to suffer, but God knows that suffering provides us with the opportunity

to cooperate with God's grace in our lives and experience deep blessings. Suffering forces the decision as to whether we will sink into bitterness and despair or seek to trust in God and grow in virtue. If we let him, God will use our suffering to draw us closer to him and develop our character.

How some people have experienced this in their own suffering is what we will explore in subsequent chapters. The suffering and loss we read about in these true, personal stories may seem so senseless and unnecessary. But we will also read in these inspiring stories about the good that God can bring about from suffering and loss. We will hear real stories of how God provides strength to persevere in the toughest of times, companionship to remind us that we are never alone, hope that we will meet our deceased loved ones again, and true love as we walk the journey of faith in this life.