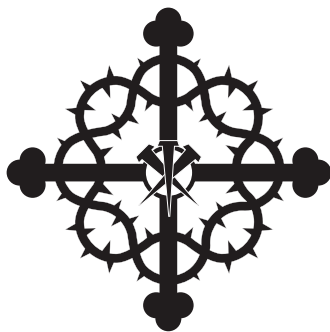

MANUAL FOR SUFFERING



Fr. Jeffrey F. Kirby, STD

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Personal Note

To Mary Ann Mervak,
a Servant among the Suffering

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HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL

n our devotional tradition, we call this life “a vale of tears.” While life is good, we know that it is fallen. The original harmony that God desired for us, and for our world, was broken by the tragic consequences of sin. Sin has damaged the goodness and beauty of our human nature and of creation. Thus, we struggle with natural evils, moral evil, and universal evils. Each of these evils pose their own cycles of hurt and harm.

It’s for this reason that I am grateful you picked up this manual. My heart goes out to each of you, and especially to those who are particularly suffering. We each have our questions, our frustrations, and our anxieties. We want to know why we suffer, why our loved ones suffer, why there is suffering at all. How can a good and all-powerful God permit suffering?

This manual will seek to provide answers. It will also provide spiritual aids to help in navigating and dealing with suffering in our fallen world.

The first part lays out the biblical and theological foundations for suffering and the world’s fallenness. The second part offers aids for those

who suffer: scriptural texts, magisterial teachings, words and anecdotes from the saints, prayers and devotionals.

The purpose of this manual is to help those who suffer find the meaning, purpose, and value of suffering in Jesus Christ. It is intended for personal use and private reflection. It's meant to be a guide and companion to those along the *via crucis*, the path of the cross, the path along the way of the sufferings and sorrows of this fallen world.

Our prayer is that many people will find the answers they seek and hope they need through the pages of this manual. We pray that people will begin to see their sufferings, and the sufferings of our world, through the lens of divine wisdom and the providential care of our heavenly Father.

And by finding such consolation and encouragement, we pray that every person of goodwill may find the reason to always and boldly “rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Rom 12:12)!




PART ONE

The Mystery of Suffering

I

THE PERENNIAL QUESTION

The Pressing Inquiry of Fallen Humanity

ome years ago, I was called to the hospital room of a dying woman. Amidst the security measures of the intensive care unit, the beeping machines, and the scurrying of nurses, I made my way to the person in need. When I arrived in the room, there was a man sleeping in a chair and another standing by his mother's bedside. The woman was skeletal in appearance and heavily sedated. Her son saw me come in and offered a half smile. He looked exhausted.

I introduced myself and offered to celebrate the Last Rites. He thanked me and asked what he needed to do. I told him he could stay where he was and that we could pray together. I asked if his sibling would want to join us, but he told me that his brother had just fallen sleep and was in real need of some rest. He also told me his brother had been away from the Church for some time. I nodded and agreed that we would just begin the rituals.

After the celebration of the Last Rites, I could tell the son needed someone to be with him. I stayed for

a while, silently praying, when suddenly he began to cry. But he tried to muffle his cries. He was trying to be strong.

Eventually, he told me, “Mom has been through so much. The cancer was hard enough, but then all kinds of other things just started happening. It was too much. She couldn’t fight them all.” Then he looked at me and said, “I wish you could have known my mother before all this. She was fearless.” He took out his phone. “I want to show you a picture of my mom before this all happened.”

He was tired and it took him awhile to find the picture. When he finally found it, I was shocked. The woman was robust, bright-faced, and beautiful. The man noticed my reaction and said, “Father, that was only about a year ago.”

This exchange brought about a few more tears. He held his mother’s hand and fell into deep thought. I waited and prayed. When he was ready, he raised his head and looked halfway up. He said to me, “Father, this is terrible. I can’t believe this is happening. Please help me. Please explain *why* God would let my mother suffer like this?

And there it is! Such a question becomes the pressing inquiry of fallen humanity. It can be found in every heart, in different ways and in diverse sufferings, throughout the history of the human family.

We all ask the questions in one way or another: Why do we suffer? Why do our loved ones suffer? Why is there suffering at all?

Answering the Question

In this manual, we will address the vast world of human suffering.

In part one, you will find a systematic answer to the perennial question of human suffering. For our answer, we will draw from the sacred narrative of our salvation as contained in the Sacred Scriptures, as well as our vast Sacred Tradition and its theological reflections and insights.

In part two, you will find a collection of biblical, theological, and spiritual works that address suffering, as well as specific prayers from the Church's spiritual treasury for particular needs and sufferings.

The Lay of a Fallen Land

Now, therefore, we stand before the mystery of suffering and what St. Paul called the "mystery of lawlessness" (2 Thes 2:7). The horizon is regrettably vast, tragic, and heartbreaking. But our questions compel us to seek answers. We want to know why there is suffering.

As we initiate our search for the answer to the overall question of evil and suffering, we need to make some distinctions. These distinctions will help us keep a clear mind, receive the different parts of the answer to human suffering, make the answer

“digestible” to us, and help us to integrate it into our hearts and live it in our lives.

And so we distinguish between three major types of evil in our fallen world.

Such categories include:

1. suffering caused by natural evils,
2. suffering inflicted by moral evil,
3. and suffering that is caused by universal evils.

All three types of suffering are the results of our fallen world.

The first type of suffering consists in part of the hurt and harm caused by natural evils, such as tsunamis, tornados, earthquakes, pandemics, hurricanes, flooding, cancer, dementia, heart disease, miscarriages, physical disabilities, depression, mental illnesses, emotional disorders, and famine, among many others. These sufferings require a broader understanding of theological truths since no act of human freedom directly caused them.

The second type of suffering consists in part of the heartache and agony inflicted by moral evil, such as lies, betrayal, financial misfortunes, loss of meaning, divorce, wayward children, broken hearts, rejection, loneliness, addictions to gambling, drugs, alcohol, and pornography, as well as child abuse, domestic violence, dissatisfaction with life, unrequited love, disordered affections, gay

marriage, overeating, poor self-image, empty relationships, abortion, sorrow over the loss of a loved one, unemployment, discrimination, broken and estranged relationships, and many others. Of the three types of suffering, these inflictions can cause the most sorrow since they are usually accompanied by an act of human freedom, and oftentimes bring moral guilt with them for acts of omission or commission by one or all of the parties involved.

The third type of suffering consists of universal acts of destruction or desecration. These include, in part, the horrors of war, killing fields, concentration camps, nuclear bombs, networks of human trafficking, economic recessions, and many others. This type of suffering reminds us that we are a part of a fallen race. They are oftentimes accompanied by a profound sense of helplessness and powerlessness in the individual heart.

This is our fallen lot. This is the lay of a fallen world. We do not live in a heaven on earth. There is no place, and no heart, without suffering. And this reality—our state of affairs in this life—needs an explanation.

Why do we suffer?

With these distinctions in mind, let's begin our answer. Here is a systemic presentation of the biblical and theological answer to the question of evil and suffering in the world and in our lives.