

Traveling Companion: The Pain of it

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“Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence.” When I read this quote from Leon Bloy, I began to ponder its message and implications.

As a priest, I listen daily to people’s struggles, sufferings, pains and aching hearts. I realize there is no easy answer to such so I allow the person to vocalize their feelings and questions in the hope that together, we may try and discover the message and implications of their sufferings.

Too often, in the past, when someone shared their sufferings with another person, they were met with a stock answer, namely, “It is God’s will.” Other times, the advice might have been, “Offer it up. It will make you stronger.” Some may have said, “It is good for the soul.” Others said, “Look at it this way, get your Purgatory over you in this life.” Still others said, “This will bring you closer to Jesus. Look what he suffered for our sins.”

Humanly speaking one may not want “places in the heart which do not yet exist” to exist. We may not be ready to discover them, embrace them or journey into them.

As I think about the places in the heart that do not yet exist but will exist because of the presence of suffering, my thoughts are drawn to the invitation of Jesus to take up the cross. I know that the pain will not go away; that I must befriend it if it is to teach me something.

I think of the many reactions to Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion.” One reflection that I have heard many times from viewers, is the Marian dimension to the movie. I remembered Mary standing by the cross of Jesus. I never really thought of her gesture of “standing” before I saw the movie. She stood erect by the cross in her pain, sorrow, loneliness and suffering. If I lie down and give in, I miss the teachable moment that God is offering me. Jesus reminded the apostles about the coming crises and disasters and advised them to “stand erect, hold your head high because your deliverance is at hand.” (Luke 21:28). It is hard to “stand erect” because the tendency is to complain, to feel overwhelmed, to pity oneself.

I begin to realize that if pain and suffering is to become something positive for me, I have to believe that it conceals the glory of God beneath its dark surfaces.

I remember coming across a passage from spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen that crystallized these thoughts for me. He wrote “Our life is a short time in expectation, a time in which sadness and joy kiss each other at every moment. There is a quality of sadness that pervades all the moments of our life. It seems that there is no such thing as a clear-cut pure joy, but that even in the most happy moments of our existence, we sense a tinge of sadness. In every satisfaction, there is an awareness of limitations. In every success, there is the fear of jealousy. Behind every smile, there is a tear. In every embrace, there is loneliness. In every friendship, distance. And in all forms of light, there is the knowledge of surrounding darkness...but this intimate experience in which every bit of life is touched, by a bit of death can point us beyond the limits of our existence. It can do by making us look forward in expectation to the day when our hearts will be filled with perfect joy, a joy that no one shall take away from us.”

Oh! How I wish there were simpler ways of discovering the parts of me that still lay hidden. How I wish there was a more pleasant path to help discover it. But, alas, I find no shortcuts. I find that the road of life, as modeled by Jesus, goes through the Cross to the Resurrection; goes through the Calvaries of life to the Easters of New Life.