

## Manna 3 – Second Session

### If We Endure with the LORD, We Shall Reign with the LORD: Eucharist and Human Suffering

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*Be assured, Madame, that storms do not last.  
Your soul seems to be dying in the midst of suffering.  
That's true, but it is in order to be reborn from its ashes.  
A soul which loves God lives through death. So have courage!*

-March 21, 1851

Letter to Mrs. Franchet from Saint Peter Julian Eymard

### ***Preface***

In this letter to Mrs. Franchet back in 1851, Father Peter Julian Eymard went on to encourage her to “fix your heart on the LORD. Rest assured that he is there within you, contemplating your struggles and preparing to reward them.” As he so often did in his many hundreds of letters, Father Eymard was like a cheerleader, sending his support and encouragement to the spiritual counselee to “hang in there,” to “hold on to God,” and bring those trials and tribulations to God, in prayer and in the Eucharist.

Father Eymard himself suffered extensively throughout his lifetime, almost dying as a young man. Reflecting on his own suffering (what he called “crosses”) during the retreat in Rome in 1865, Father Eymard wrote in his journal, “I offered the three crosses of today, which were weighing heavily on my mind and breaking my spirit. I must pray, be patient and thank God; that’s all. I must see especially what there is of goodness, justice and truth in the Cross” (March 20).

Going back to the letter to Mrs. Franchet, the editors of *Counsels for Spiritual Life* remind us that Father Eymard used examples from nature to make a point.

The difficulties are a little like Winter, when nature dies, to be reborn with a new vigor. Thus, if the turmoil makes something in us die, it is to make something new be born, flower and bear fruit. This is the surprising dynamic of the Paschal Mystery: life which springs from death (17).

## ***Introduction to the theme***

When I was a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame in the late 1970s, one of my professors, a very distinguished sacramental theologian, asked us to reflect on this question: “How would you go about sharing with a non-believer that Jesus of Nazareth was really and truly a human being?” Many of us responded with all kinds of philosophical and psychological answers. Our teacher very graciously received them all. When the discussion was nearing its end, he shared with us his answer. “What convinces me, from my reading of the scriptures, that Jesus was truly human,” he said, “is two things. He suffered and he prayed.”

No one is immune to suffering. Whether we are rich or poor, young or old, professional people or blue-collar workers, a constitutive element of our being human is that we suffer. The Buddha, one of the world’s great religious visionaries, said, “All life is *dukkah*,” that is, “suffering.”

In this session of *Manna*, we seek to understand the reality of human suffering in the light of the Eucharist. We will look at three kinds of human suffering: the suffering of the innocent; physical suffering; and emotional suffering. The passion and death of Jesus (the mystery of the cross) will be the spiritual place to which we will bring our suffering, and one in which we will discover meaning and hope in the midst of our pain.

## ***Opening Prayer***

Loving and compassionate God,  
in the ministry of your son, Jesus  
we draw comfort from knowing  
that he eased the suffering of many  
and revealed your tenderness in touching  
lepers, the blind, and the deaf.

We also praise and thank you,  
for in the passion of your obedient child  
we can begin to comprehend just how fully  
Jesus Christ took on our humanity  
becoming the person of sorrows,  
who absorbed into himself all our pain and anguish  
and in whom our suffering can begin to take on meaning  
and lead us to acceptance.

Holy and merciful one,  
our suffering often leaves us hurting and wounded.  
Teach us how to bring our wounds to the celebration of the Eucharist.  
There, as we remember the passion and death of your Son,  
enable us to place our wounds into the wounds of the Christ.  
Sustain us in our belief that if we die with the LORD,  
we shall live with the LORD. If we endure with the Lord,  
we shall reign with the LORD. Amen.

***Song Options***

- “Healer of Our Every Ill,” by Marty Haugen
- “Precious LORD, Take My Hand,” by George Lockwood and George N. Allen

### Work Exercise

1. Identify a period of suffering that you have endured. What did this experience of suffering teach you about yourself, about life, and about your relationship to God?
2. Identify a period of emotional suffering that you have endured. How did you cope with this suffering? Were you able to reach out to others? What did you learn about yourself and your relationship with God?
3. With the extraordinary amount of innocent suffering that is taking place in our world; for example: the starvation of tens of thousands in South Sudan, Somalia, Haiti and other parts of the world; the abandonment of children in Brazil, Mexico, South Africa; the incidence of genocide in recent decades (Bosnia, Rwanda, Syria); what kind of response can the Catholic Christian make? How do these realities affect you and how do you bring these to the Eucharist and adoration?

*The work exercise is followed by a small group sharing and a large group sharing.*

## ***Teaching***

1. No one escapes the pain of human suffering – not even Jesus and Mary. It is part of what makes us human. What is so often troubling and difficult for us to understand and accept is that terrible suffering often is inflicted on the innocent, on those who do not deserve it. Jesus, himself, is condemned to an excruciatingly painful death on trumped-up charges. Mary must suffer the personal anguish and public humiliation of her only child being tortured, derided, scorned, made to be a laughingstock and, finally, hung on a cross as a common criminal. Yet, unlike our initial response to such apparently unnecessary cruelty and horror, neither Jesus nor Mary storm heaven with complaints of injustice nor harden their hearts against God. Is it possible that human suffering is part of God's plan for us? What does suffering teach us about ourselves and about our relationship with God in Jesus Christ?

2. *The suffering of the innocent*

I want to comment on the suffering of the innocent with a story from Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, a Catholic Christian organization that creates communities with emotionally and physically handicapped adults. Vanier's story is this:

Once while I was giving a series of talks in Ontario, Canada, a woman came up to me and told me this story. At four years of age, her only child, a little boy, was diagnosed with a neurological disease for which there was no cure. By the time the boy was five, he was already bedridden and his legs were paralyzed. By the time he was six, he was paralyzed from the neck down and was going blind. Each day, the boy's mother would feed and bathe him, doing all that she could not to show the terrible grief she was carrying inside herself for her son. Now, with the boy completely blind and beginning to lose his hearing, the boy's mother could no longer control her emotions. One day while she was feeding him, she could no longer bear all the pain and suffering that he was going through and she began to sob. The boy, hearing his mother's crying, said, "Mommy, Mommy, please don't cry and be sad. I still have a heart to love you with."

3. This child had attained an extraordinary degree of emotional and spiritual maturity. In the first place, despite his suffering, he was not absorbed with himself but focused on his mother. Secondly, and of extreme importance for us, he was not resentful or bitter about what he had lost. Rather, he was rejoicing in what he still possessed. "I still have a heart to love you with."
4. This child did not deserve to suffer. He did nothing wrong. Nor can we say that God willed this child to suffer. The God revealed in Jesus Christ and presented in the New Testament writings is not a God who enjoys watching creation suffer. In fact, one can say just the

opposite. The God of Jesus Christ desires to make us whole and holy. What, then, can we say about suffering and the suffering of the innocent?

5. Suffering just is. It is part of the “given-ness” of being human. It is woven into the social, political, and economic realities of life. This does not mean that we must passively accept all forms of human suffering. On the contrary, we have a moral and ethical obligation to do all that we can to transform sinful social structures that cause and or maintain the horrid suffering of so many people in the world. Thousands of people dying of starvation throughout the world represent a form of innocent suffering that can be addressed, and indeed, must be addressed by the world community. Nonetheless, when it comes to more individual forms of human suffering, the issue becomes not that I suffer, but rather, how do I choose to suffer. I can choose to be angry, bitter, and resentful. I can blame God and those around me for my suffering. Or, like the little boy, I can focus on what I still have and how I can use what I still have to love others.

6. *Physical Suffering*

Most of us know what it is like to have a toothache, or a backache, or even to break a bone. We suffer from migraines, from arthritis, from emphysema, and countless other physical maladies. Here, before I address the issue of physical suffering, permit me to tell another story. This time, the story is from my own ministry.

I was ordained a priest in 1976. My first assignment was as Parochial Vicar at Saint Joseph’s church in Old Town, Maine.

The parish had a very active charismatic prayer community and I was asked to serve as its spiritual director. There was a woman in her early 60’s who was an active and vibrant member of the prayer group. Rose radiated a profound sense of peace and her *joie de vive* was almost contagious. You can imagine how shocked I was when one afternoon, I received a phone call from Rose’s daughter telling me her mother was dying. “But that’s impossible,” I said, “I saw her just last Thursday night at the prayer meeting and she looked great.” “Oh Father,” the daughter’s voice continued, “I thought you knew. Mother is dying of pancreatic cancer; there is nothing the doctors can do. She has taken a turn for the worse. Can you come to the house and anoint her?” “I’ll be right there,” I said. When I arrived at Rose’s home, she was in bed. I had no idea how much physical pain this woman had been enduring. As I looked more closely at her beautiful and serene face, I began to notice the discoloration around her eyes and the dark blotches on her face and arms. Rose was indeed dying. Sitting on the edge of her bed, I took her hand and in a soft voice whispered, “Rose, you are suffering so much.” Immediately, she turned her eyes from me and gazed at the crucifix on the wall opposite her bed and said, “Nothing, Father, compared to how much he suffered for me.”

7. Rose had found a way not only to manage her suffering but also to let it become an agent of spiritual transformation in her living. Rose did not see her cancer as a punishment. No, she chose to see her suffering as a means for participation in the passion and death of our LORD. Rose freely and fully embraced the paschal mystery. In baptism, she understood that she was being baptized into Christ's death, and his death was one of excruciating physical suffering. If Jesus, who had never sinned, should have to face the horrible suffering of crucifixion, should she expect that as his disciple her life should be any different? Rose's attitude toward her suffering was not just one of passive acceptance in Christ. She believed that God was doing something positive for others through her communion in the suffering of the one she always called *mon doux, Jesus* (my sweet, Jesus).

8. *Emotional suffering*

I mentioned earlier that no one escapes the reality of suffering, and that includes me. While I have not known the innocent suffering of the little boy mentioned in the first story, nor the physical suffering of Rose, I have had to learn how to live with serious episodes of depression which, believe me, bring their own kind of human suffering. As medicine and science take a closer look at clinical depression, their results often point to a physiological or chemical change that occurs in the brain and the body. While this chemical change can be the result of the loss of a loved one, or one's job, or another kind of major setback, it also can become "triggered" for no apparent external reason.

With each recurring bout of depression, I have learned to live with or "cope" with my illness. I seek professional help. I take the proper medication. I commit myself to a daily pattern of strenuous exercise, and I reduce my workload. Each of these things has proved to be very beneficial in navigating my way through the intense emotional pain of depression. There is, of course, something else that I do and that involves my faith in Jesus, the divine physician, and his "healing medicine," the Eucharist.

9. When I am having a series of very bad days during a depressive episode, I do all that I can to go and participate in the Eucharist. While the gifts of bread and wine are being brought to the altar, I picture in my mind the risen LORD Jesus standing before me showing me the wounds in his hands, feet, and side. I then take the emotional pain that I am feeling and place it into Jesus' wounds. I pray,

Christ, you were no stranger to pain and suffering, and today I am suffering a great deal. I place my woundedness into your wounds because I believe that your suffering and my suffering are part of the same great mystery, the mystery of human salvation. I place my wounds into your wounds because I believe that you are the way, the truth, and the life.

LORD, to whom can I go, but you? Christ, I believe that my suffering is absorbed into your suffering and that my communion in your body and blood and in this faith community is the path that leads to wholeness and life.

10. The Eucharist is the best place that I have found to deal with the reality of human suffering. Our participation in the paschal mystery of Christ helps us to contextualize our own suffering and that of our neighbors. Our communion with Christ in word and sacrament enables us to pattern meaning out of our experiences of physical and human suffering. The Eucharist does not take our pain away. Rather, it is that *pain* through which we can embrace the crucified Lord and in so doing begin to find meaning and hope in the midst of our own suffering.

### ***Closing Prayer***

*Preparation: In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, if possible or within the context of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.*

*Opening Song: “Keep in Mind” by Lucien Deiss*

*If in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, exposition is made during the opening hymn. When the hymn is concluded, the assembly may kneel in silence for several minutes. During this silence, the community welcomes the presence of the Risen LORD before them in the Holy Sacrament and within them as the LORD’s own body.*

*First Reading: 2 Timothy 2:8-12*

*Period of Silence:*

*Meditation:*

*Intercession:*

Response: *In your wounds, O LORD, your people find hope in their suffering.*

Leader: We remember all those who meet death through violence and hatred.

Response: *In your wounds, O LORD, your people find hope in their suffering.*

Leader: We remember children and teenagers who are addicted to drugs and alcohol and whose lives seem empty and directionless.



Response: *In your wounds, O LORD, your people find hope in their suffering.*

Leader: We remember all those who daily must face chronic physical or emotional pain.

Response: *In your wounds, O LORD, your people find hope in their suffering.*

*(Additional petitions may be added spontaneously by those present.)*

*Second Reading: Hebrews 5:7-9 (Optional)*

*Period of Silence:*

*Communal Response:*

Side A:

At the cross her station keeping  
stood the mournful mother weeping  
close to Jesus to the last.

Oh, how sad and sore distressed  
was that mother highly blessed  
of the sole begotten one!

Is there one who would not weep,  
o'erwhelmed in miseries so deep,  
Christ's dear mother to behold!

Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled,  
she beheld her tender child  
all with bloody scourges rent.

O sweet mother! Font of love,  
touch my spirit from above  
make my heart with yours accord.

Holy mother, pierce me though  
in my heart each wound renews  
of my Savior crushed.

Side B:

Through her heart, his sorrow sharing  
all his bitter anguish bearing  
now at length the sword was passed.

Christ above in torment hangs  
she beneath beholds the pangs  
of her dying, glorious Son.

Can the human heart refrain  
from partaking in her pain  
in that mother's pain untold?

For the sins of his own nation  
saw him hung in desolation  
'til his spirit forth he sent.

Make me feel as you have felt;  
make my soul to glow and melt  
with the love of Christ, my LORD.

Let me share with you his pain  
who for all our sins was slain  
who for me in torments died.

Let me mingle tears with you  
mourning him whom mourned for me  
all the days that I may live.

Virgin of all virgins blest!  
listen to my fond request  
let me share your grief divine.

Wounded with his every wound  
steep my soul till it has swooned  
in his very blood away.

Christ, when you shall call me hence,  
be your mother my defense,  
be your cross my victory.

Amen!

By the cross with you to stay  
there with you to weep and pray  
is all I ask of you to give.

Let me to my latest breath,  
in my body bear the death  
of that dying Son of yours.

Be to me, O virgin, nigh  
lest in flames I burn and die  
in his awful judgment day.

While my body here decays,  
may my soul your goodness praise,  
safe in heaven eternally.

Alleluia! [Lent: Amen!]

*If in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament – Incensing of the Blessed Sacrament and assembly*

*Song: “We Remember” by Marty Haugen*

*If in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, incensing of the Blessed Sacrament and the assembled community occurs after the prayers. Consider using the ritual books for Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside of Mass (2024) that provides this ritual texts of prayer, praise, The Lord’s Prayer, etc.*

*Closing Prayer:*

Holy and Almighty God,  
in obedience to you  
your only son accepted death on the cross  
for our salvation.  
Marked by the mystery of the cross in our own lives,  
we await in joyful hope the redemption that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

*Sign of Peace:*

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