

## **“Will You Accept My Cross and Crown of Thorns?”**



In the fall of 1954, about two years before Our Lady's first appearance to Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil as **Our Lady of America**®, an angel appeared to Sister.

I saw the Angel standing before me towards the left. He was dressed in a white robe or garment, which was perfectly plain and perfectly white. The whiteness of his robe stood out against the darkness about him. It was like a light in the midst of darkness. He was holding a green palm and a drawn sword in his left hand, the tips of both palm and sword resting against his left shoulder. ...The Angel said to me, "Receive the palm of victory." I became suspicious, I could not think of any victory of mine that deserved such a reward. ... I have always been wary of words of praise; they put me on my guard. Why was the palm not given to someone else more deserving of it than I? So I shook my head and resolutely went back to my prayers. But the Angel would not go. He spoke again, "You do not believe me. Will you accept the cross?" For me this struck more nearly home. I said, "Yes, I will accept the cross." To this he replied, "Then you will accept the palm and the sword. With the sword the saints conquered themselves, the world, and the devil. I am the Angel of Peace. I come to those whose hearts are attuned to the Voice of God. To such as these I remain a perpetual light through blinding darkness. I was sent by Him Who said, "I am the Light of the world." Later it was made known to me that the Angel of Peace was St. Michael.

Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil, Diary, OUR LADY OF AMERICA®, Fostoria, OH, Pgs. 7-8.)

The cross is a powerful symbol of suffering. Crucifixion, the most disgraceful form of execution, was perfected by the Romans to ensure the greatest possible pain and suffering. Since the innocent Christ was tortured and crucified on such a Roman cross, it has become the most sacred symbol for Christians. Suffering is a terrible enigma for mankind. We try to avoid it at all costs. We question, if there is an all-good God, why is there suffering at all? And, if God is just, why do good people suffer while evil people seem to prosper? Why do some people achieve great sanctity in spite of suffering while others end their lives in despair? Can suffering have any meaning? Why are millions of innocent children dying from starvation, abuse, sex trafficking, and abortion? Why are so many people killed in wars and genocides? "Why?" we ask. "Why?" Who can answer this problem of suffering, evil, sin and death?

Great philosophers throughout history have grappled with the question. It was prophesied that Gautama Siddhartha would be India's greatest king or its greatest mystic, so his father forbade him to leave the opulent "perfect" palace he had built for his son to shield him from the real world. In his 20's the prince snuck outside the walls and discovered four distressing sights: a sick man, an aged man, a dead man, and an old Hindu mystic who had renounced the world in order to purify his soul and find wisdom and understanding of the great mysteries of life. Gautama

chose to be a mystic but did not find wisdom through asceticism, so he chose a middle way, having only what was truly necessary. One day, while sitting under the Bodhi tree, he proclaimed, "I am Buddha," the "enlightened one," and formulated his 4 Noble Truths: 1) We are born in, live in, and die in suffering. 2) **The cause of suffering is desire**, for we have what we don't want and don't have what we *do* want. 3) The way to end suffering is to end desire, for to remove the cause is to remove the effect. 4) We end desire by the Noble Eightfold Path of ego-reduction, achieving the state of Nirvana. His philosophy, however rich, is flawed, for to kill the "I" that suffers is also to kill the "I" that loves. And who can live without desire or love? His philosophy promotes compassion as virtue, but it cannot grasp the concept of **agape**, an unconditional and totally unselfish love. Ref: <http://www.biography.com/people/buddha-9230587#early-years>

In his book **WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE** Rabbi Harold Kushner tried to understand how an all-good God could allow his son to suffer a rare disease that aged him prematurely so that he died like an old man in his teens. Kushner denied **fatalism**, a doctrine that dismisses everything as the will of God, thereby affirming the power of God at the expense of His goodness. Instead, he chose a **naturalist God**, one close to us in nature and experience and therefore still lovable, but he could not believe there can be a God of **both infinite power and infinite love**. He could not believe in a **supernatural force** that could explain suffering.

In the Old Testament the question of evil and suffering centered on the figure of Job, the long suffering, righteous one who lost all his family and all his property and yet proclaimed, "**The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.**" Job understood nothing is truly ours; everything is a gift from God, the Creator. His second affliction, however, nearly broke him and he cursed the day he was born. Only when he was in the abyss of emptiness and had to surrender to the mystery of God, whose reasons we cannot always understand, was the Lord able to fill him again in greater measure than before.

Peter Kreeft, in his book **MAKING SENSE OUT OF SUFFERING**, lists four propositions around which the question of evil and suffering revolve: **God exists, God is all powerful, God is all-good, and evil exists**. He outlines 10 cheap answers to the question of evil and suffering that have arisen throughout the years but which skirt the issue and end up being irrational, inhuman and unlivable. The cheap answers deny one or more of the propositions and fail to truly answer the question. Three **deny God's objective reality, the fact that He exists. Atheism** admits evil exists but argues that an all-good and all-powerful God could not allow the horrors history records; therefore, there must not be a God, or miracles, or resurrection. But, since man cannot live in a void the atheist has to create his own god, as is seen in the rise of atheistic dictators and rulers who assume divine rights and total power over others *without any real goodness*. They become forces of evil, for if there is no God of goodness, anything goes. Morality, which defines us as humans and separates us from the animals, disappears. How can we be surprised then if men begin to act like animals instead of humans! Why be good if it doesn't matter or if there is no Supreme Good by which to measure ourselves or to imitate? The atheist has no answer to death but simply avoids discussing it as too morbid. It is easy to live as an atheist but very hard to die as one. They say there are no atheists in the fox holes. Who wants to worship a mere man instead of God, or live a life of suffering and injustice only to die without justice or mercy and fade into oblivion? **Demythologism**, too, denies the objective reality

of God, Truth and Scripture and reduces it all to myth, no more true than a fairy tale. **Psychologism** denies an objective God when it denies the God outside of ourselves and creates its own god within; it is purely *subjective*. We act on our own perceptions, but perception of reality is NOT Reality. How can this god be our Creator if we created him?

Another three of these cheap answers **deny God's infinite power**. The **old paganism or polytheism** created many gods to coincide with the forces in the universe, but these gods were weak and in constant conflict and full of the same errors as men. How could they answer the primal innate recognition of the creature that there has to be a Creator greater than oneself to explain the mysteries beyond our created nature and reason? **The new paganism or scientism** claims that what science cannot detect does not exist, thereby admitting nature but denying anything supernatural. Today science boasts it has a right to do anything it can discover, regardless of any moral or ethical questions; it deifies itself. **Dualism** believes in two gods, a god of good and a god of evil but neither has all the power so the god of good can never triumph.

Kreeft then cites the philosophies that **deny God's infinite goodness**. **Satanism**, increasing in today's atheistic culture, is the worship of Satan as god, the enthronement of evil, of power, but evil can never be greater than good for it is, in essence, a negative, an absence of goodness. Kreeft calls **Pantheism** the Blob God. It is everything in general and nothing in particular, passionless and dull; in other words, nothing is forbidden and everything is divine. It resolves evil by making it part of the blob. God is not all-good but both good and evil for He is part of everything. Therefore, Hitler is God as well as is Christ. I, too, am part of God. God has no transcendence and I have no identity or distinction from God, no individuality or real personhood. Since God cannot die and I am part of Him, I cannot die. This view is simply absurd! Then there is **Deism**, the Snob God as Kreeft calls it. It holds that God created the world, wound it up like a clock and left it to unwind. It denies God's goodness saying He is neither good nor evil, just *indifferent* to us. While admitting an aloof transcendence, it denies the immanence of God, saying God neither loves us nor hates us. And lastly, there is **Idealism** which denies the very real existence of evil. We see suffering and death all around us with our physical eyes but pretend it isn't there. Real evil, however, is deeper than the physical eye can see for it is an absence of goodness, and God, as infinite Goodness, is Pure Spirit. Thus, evil is a disorder in both the natural order and in the spiritual order and, on the spiritual level, is only truly discernible by the inner eye of the conscience, which is formed according to objective Goodness, God. To deny evil with our inner eye is to deaden our conscience so we can justify to ourselves ignoring evil (sin), ignoring God. We walk around with our eyes closed, physically and spiritually, and therefore cannot see God. We walk in a land of darkness. **"God is light, man is darkness, and unless he comes into the light, he will be forever darkness."** (Diary, Pg. 4.)

It is God in Jesus Who gives us the answer to the problem of evil, suffering and death. When Job questioned God why these bad things were happening to him, God asked **"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?"** (Job: 38:4.) God is telling Job that suffering is mystery, that He has His reasons for letting bad things happen to good people but He's not telling Job and Job can't find out. Human reason can't figure it out. Sometimes God might well sacrifice our subjective temporal happiness for our objective eternal happiness; this is not an incompatible view with His infinite goodness or His infinite love for us. We are familiar with Our Lady's words

to Bernadette at Lourdes: **“I cannot promise you happiness in this world but only in the next.”** Suffering is not always a “justifiable” punishment for sin, but may be a test of love or a call to deeper conversion and perfection, or a call to share in the work of redemption in our solidarity with the Sacred Humanity and with all mankind in our shared human condition.

How do we enter into this mystery of suffering? A story is told of a mother teaching her child to make the sign of the cross. One day, while gazing at the crucifix, the child asked her mother: “Who is that?” The Mother explained that it was the God to Whom she prays Who had become Man and was nailed to the cross. A few days later, the child asked, **“Mother, do I have to be nailed to the cross like God was?”** The child had unwittingly captured the essence of being a Christian. We see the sufferings of Jesus became very real to a young man crippled while climbing the Alps. As he pondered the mystery of the Son of God suffering for the salvation of the world, for *his* sins, his own sufferings became less significant. What he had lost was fleeting but what he gained he could keep forever. He was given the vision of the final goal of all Christian suffering. He saw Christ, the King of heaven and earth, Creator of all that is, hung upon a cross--crucified by His own creatures for whom He gave His life--His hands and feet and side a blaze of glorious wounds! With Christ were the saints who had suffered with and for Him. Such was the vision and hope offered the cripple; such is the promise offered to us. **“If we have suffered with Him, we shall also be glorified with Him.”** The cross of Jesus, now the symbol of triumph, gives us a meaningful answer to the problem of sin, evil, suffering and death.

On February 11, 1958, Our Lady spoke to Sister Mildred on the need for suffering to complete the work of grace transforming the soul into the image of the Suffering Christ, our only Savior. In other words, we must be identified with His suffering in order to enter into His triumph over evil, sin, suffering and death. Our Lady certainly was deeply identified with Christ’s passion and death as no other. Their two hearts were as one. Who could be a more perfect image of the Son than she? She died with her Son on that cross in Her very soul!

**“My child, nothing is accomplished without pain. Prepare to suffer much. You see the sword in the Heart of your Mother. Suffering completed the work of divine grace in my soul. He who refuses to suffer will never abide in the Spirit of Christ, will never be formed into His image. My sweet child, the Father will never recognize a soul as His own unless He sees in it the likeness of His beloved Son. Souls must attain to the perfection of the Father through the Spirit of the Son.” ... There is only one true way to the Father, my child, only one way to eternal union. It is the way of the divine humanity. It is through my Son, the Only-begotten of the Father, that souls attain perfect union with the**

The real meaning of suffering is particular to the human person in the sense only a person can be conscious of his or her own experience. Only a person can weep and wonder. Suffering in God’s view is always one of salvific love. We do not come to this answer by way of reason but by way of Faith; it is divinely revealed. Only love can explain the mystery and meaning of suffering and its redemptive capacity to overcome evil and sin. It was Love that prompted Jesus to offer Sister Mildred a very special share in His redemptive mission, and it was love that evoked her response. Her August 6, 1956 letter to her spiritual director states...

**Jesus came to me holding a large cross and a crown of thorns. He said to me smiling, as though He knew what the answer would be (He did of course.) “I come with**

**My cross and My crown of thorns, will you accept Me My spouse?" You know the only answer I could give, Father. Who could refuse Jesus anything? During the night I awoke and Jesus said to me, and He said it with a profound emphasis: "I have placed you upon the Altar of Sacrifice."**

**On June 14<sup>th</sup>, anniversary of my perpetual union with Jesus, He asked me again: "Bride of My Heart, do you still wish to suffer all things to give Me to souls?" I answered: "Yes, yes dear Lord, I am poor and wretched, and unworthy, but you know what is in my heart." He said, "My little white dove, will you then continue to wear the Crown of Thorns, and permit yourself to be nailed to the Cross?" I told him in the best way I could, how much I desired Him to do with me just as He desired. So in this way my desires are wholly united to His.**

Venerable Servant of God Bishop Fulton J. Sheen sums up the issue thus:

**What He [Jesus] has done with His human nature, we must do with ours—plant it in the soil of the cross and await the Resurrection of the Eternal Easter.... The cross is the condition; we must be nailed to it. Our Lord loved His Cross so much that He keeps its scars even in His glory. He who had won victory over death, kept the record of its wounds. If so precious to Him, they cannot be meaningless for us. In their preservation is the reminder that we too must be signed with those signs and sealed with those seals. On Judgment Day He will say to each of us: "Show Me your hands and feet. Where are your scars of victory?" ... But woe to us who come down from the Calvary of this earthly pilgrimage with hands unscarred and white!**

**(Fulton J. Sheen, THE SEVEN CAPITAL SINS, Alba House/St. Pauls, Pgs. 69-70.)**

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