
OUR LADY OF SEVEN SORROWS: A GREAT SIGN OF HOPE



Notre-Dame-des-Sept-Douleurs [Our Lady of Seven Sorrows] Church in Edmundston stands as a great sign of hope for the many men, women and children who experience pain and suffering. The church reminds us of the priceless value inherent to suffering joined to Christ: the child's suffering from cystic fibrosis, the mother who has just been told that she has breast cancer, the man afflicted with prostate cancer, the grandfather who has leukemia and the grandmother deteriorating from Alzheimer, the neighbour who has had an automobile accident, the countryman who has been electrocuted, a parish priest with heart problems... However, there is not only physical suffering; there is also the anxiety and psychological disturbances, the worries and uncertainties all around us and in us. Suffering is our fate in life, it is part of the human condition; sooner or later it affects us, without our necessarily seeing it coming. Suffering is not always for one's neighbour, it knows how to reach us, even without our being aware!

CHRISTIAN MEANING OF SUFFERING

Pope John Paul II wrote about the Christian meaning to suffering, on February 11, 1984, the sixth year of his pontificate. He had already been hospitalised several times as a result of his being a victim of attempted murder in St. Peter's Square, where he had narrowly escaped with his life. At the very beginning of the document, he writes : "In explaining the saving value of suffering, the Apostle Paul writes: 'I complete in my flesh what is lacking in the suffering of Christ for his Body which is the Church.' These words seem to come at the close of the long road which humans travel along the meanders of suffering on which the light of Christ shines. They are like a joyful, definitive discovery. And so, the Apostle writes : 'I find joy in the suffering I go through on your behalf.' Joy comes from discovering the meaning of suffering. Human suffering inspires compassion as well as respect; it bears with it the greatness of a very special mystery. In his suffering, the human being remains an inaccessible mystery. Why suffering? The question is addressed not only to man but also to God. Yes, man can ask this question to God, with all the emotion the heart can raise, as the spirit is caught up in shock and worry : the question found its fullest expression in the Book of Job. In the life and death of Jesus, as in the Virgin Mary's womb, the question is raised again and again. And the risen Jesus says to the disciples, 'Did not Christ have to suffer, to enter into his glory?'"

GOSPEL OF SUFFERING

The witnesses of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ transmitted to the Church and the whole of humankind a specific gospel of suffering, written by the Redeemer himself through the suffering he himself lovingly accepted so that man not perish but have eternal life. His suffering, along with the living word of his teaching, has become a rich source for all the people who have shared in Christ's sufferings, in the first generation of those who were his disciples and who proclaimed their faith in him, then down the generations that followed through the centuries.

MOTHER OF SORROWS

In the forefront, right next to Jesus and very visible, there is his Mother, since throughout her life she has been the privileged witness of the gospel of suffering. In her, many terrible sufferings befell her that, while showing

her unshakable faith, she contributed to the redemption of all. In fact, from the very moment of her secret dialogue with the angel of the Annunciation, she had an intuition that her mission as mother would make her share in an absolutely unique way in the very mission of her Son; this was confirmed to her very soon, in the events around the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, in the words of the elderly Simeon speaking of the sword which would pierce her heart, or in the anguish and want experienced in the flight into Egypt because of Herod's cruel decision. It was on Calvary that Mary's suffering, close to her Son's, reached a paroxysm hardly imaginable, humanly speaking, but mysteriously and supernaturally fruitful, at the level of universal salvation. Her walk to Calvary, her presence at the foot of the Cross, with the beloved disciple – along with the words of her Son, which she received from his lips –, these were an altogether special sharing in her Son's death and redemption, a solemn handing down of this special Gospel to be announced to all the believers.

INEXHAUSTIBLE SOURCE OF HOPE

Personal witness to her Son's passion, sharing in it through her compassion, the most holy Virgin Mary brought her own original contribution to the Gospel of suffering, and she fulfilled before it was even expressed the statement of St. Paul : she completed in her own body, as she had already done in her heart, what was lacking in Christ's suffering. The Gospel of suffering implies not only the presence of suffering in the Gospel, as one of the themes of the Good News, but also the revelation of the saving power and meaning of suffering in Christ's messianic mission and, following this, in the Church's mission and vocation. Christ did not hide from his listeners the need for suffering. He clearly said : "If anyone wishes to follow me, let him pick up his cross every day!" He then talks of persecution, anguish, and tribulations in the wake of the Gospel proclamation and the coming of the Kingdom . Christ still keeps in his risen body the marks of the wounds caused by the cross, on his hands and feet and side. The enigma of pain and death is enlightened by Christ and in Christ. On the cross is the Redeemer of humankind. Mary, at the foot of the cross, is closely associated to his sufferings, is for us a sign of hope, as Our Lady of Sorrows. When she received the body of her Son, all seemed ended and all hope lost. But life was to spring from death, and light from darkness. "Mother of sorrows, we ask you to heal all who suffer and who are sorrowing, and to lift up those who have fallen into despair. Give us hope and strengthen our faith. Be to us, in our cities and towns, and in the midst of our lives, a great sign of hope."

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