

Complaints - by Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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Complaints

Do you know someone who likes to complain, pouring out what's wrong with his or her special world and especially the people in it who seem to arouse the speaker? "Let me tell you how badly I've been treated." You're thinking, "Must you tell me?" but you try to look receptive to the story of misery. You recognize the need to unload.

All of us do have tales of woe from time to time. This is part of the human drama. But making all the chapters of life into a dirge is a sad way to pass the years assigned us. We can develop a habit of looking at the black side of things and miss out on the rays of sunlight being offered. A habit means we order our reactions according to a certain pattern. And that becomes the quickest, easiest way to proceed. When complaining develops into a habit, the song we keep singing is "Poor me!" Something deeper seems to be going on in that unhappy spirit, hungry for instant compassion.

"I feel for you." The words are not just a formulaic response. Others do feel for the moaner, especially since the attitude keeps reasserting a list of laments to anyone who will listen. That downbeat perspective truly arouses pity because it situates one in a ditch where looking out on the world is from an underneath viewpoint. The air there is heavy and stifling.

Complaints. Complaints. Who doesn't have them? If you want to find words to express complaints, you can go to scripture. Lots of complaining there. We find passages in Job that bewail what he is going through. We read his unhappy reflections on human existence. "Is not life on earth a drudgery? ...I have been assigned months of misery and troubled nights have been allotted to me" (Jb 7: 1,3) Yes, the time when the sun goes down can be harder. Darkness outside adds to the darkness within.

Human living is not a cruise on untroubled waters. Waves of anguish overtake us from time to time. Often situations do not yield the results we hope for. People we count on do not come through. Expectations founder before an adverse wind. Anyone can find some source for discontent. "Why isn't this working out? Why do I have to put up with....?" You fill in the blanks. Results do not emerge with what we feel we deserve.

Every personal history in this troubled world yields a basis for complaining if we do not deal with it in a way that refuses to succumb to the negative elements. We are called by Jesus to lift our hearts and find Him in every adverse circumstance. When things go wrong, we need to pause before we shout out--to reflect that each moment has a message for our spirit which will not subtract from our existence but add to it.

If I have established a habit of complaining and want to reverse it, I must be patient with myself and realize a habit never disappears at once. It is too well grounded psychologically and that is what makes it a habit. I must proceed as peacefully as I can and take steps along the opposite route. I ponder my tendency and then try to uncover some aspects in a situation that I can affirm. I don't deny what is clearly negative but I don't keep underlining it mentally and emotionally.

When I'm in a responsible position and it's my duty to reprimand, I try to find something worthy of praise in that person. I approach the individual first of all with some approving comment. I take note of an attractive quality. Next I move into what needs to be handled. "You do so well with anything involving hospitality and that is good." Then I bring up the "however". "However, you give so much attention to this that it uses up your time. It becomes hard for you to carry out your assignments." The criticism coming right away could call forth a self-protective posture in the listener who reaches for weapons of defense. Acknowledging a positive quality first puts him or her on a more even level with me.

Jesus says to His disciples, "You are the salt of the earth." Then His "however" follows. "But what good is salt if it loses its flavor?" (Mt 5:13).

Complaints can have a basis in reality, but staying with them reduces the sunshine in our world. The emotional stance becomes a set position. "She is always complaining!" We don't want to echo Job when he says "I will give myself up to complaint!" (10:1). Many chapters later he finally acknowledges, "I have dealt with great things that I do not comprehend" (42:3).

We were born into a world where limitations of all kinds surround us. Shortcomings are part of our human experience: shortcomings within ourselves and those we have contact with. St. John of the Cross advises us, "Many things will seem wrong; , even were you to live among angels, because of your not understanding the substance of them" (The Third Precaution Against the World, p.721, Complete Works, ICS edition). Spiritual writers tell us that God makes use of what we find irksome to advance us in holiness through deeper knowledge about ourselves and others. Our immediate personal reactions can grasp only so much. When tempted to complain, let's pause first and ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to see a situation in all its ramifications and to help us deal in a positive way with whatever is negative.

"May God enlighten your innermost vision that you may know the great hope to which God has called you--the immeasurable scope of divine power in us who believe" (Eph 2: 18, 19).

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM