

# Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

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This reflection appeared first in *The Church World*, the diocesan weekly of Maine.

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## SUFFERING AND THE GRACE THAT COMES WITH IT

Suffering is the great enigma of earthly living. Our world today seems overwhelmed by reports of victims of disaster. Suffering is not the impenetrable mystery only of human living, because all creatures that breathe face its burning reality. Animals do their best to avoid it. So do human beings, but we go further. We reflect on its meaning. We dare to ask why it should be. Scientists, scholars, theologians, artists, and poets ponder their own suffering and the deprivations we all experience.

Why? they ask. Why? we ask. It's not a new question, even though today we more successfully pursue ways to control pain, to do battle with it. And conquer suffering? Not really. Suffering is the ultimate victor. Or is it?

All philosophical systems have wrestled with this problem. Every great cultural epic, every lasting narrative reminds us that we are subject to loss. The ancient Greek dramatists devised stories so poignant they can make us weep even today and we borrow their words to describe the onslaught of overwhelming misfortune.

For a gripping saga of affliction and adversity portrayed in scripture, we read the book of Job who is a legendary figure in a tale set forth in poetic form. At the beginning, all is sunshine and prosperity for Job. Happy Job. Fortunate Job. And then the reports begin. Oxen and asses, sheep and shepherds, camels and their caretakers--all are lost. Job hears that ringing refrain of each messenger, "I alone have escaped to tell you" (1:15, 16, 17). Finally the crowning sorrow: Job's seven sons and three daughters die from a house that collapses under the force of an overpowering wind. "I alone have escaped to tell you." Job himself is assaulted with loathsome sores. All this in Chapters One and Two. Unhappy Job. Unfortunate Job. We follow Job's debate with his reproachful friends. We listen to Job in his misery still describing the Lord as "wise in heart and mighty in strength" (9:4). We hear God's answer coming out of a whirlwind.

Finally the conclusion: Job is justified. All is restored and more than restored--sheep, oxen, camels in far greater numbers. And lo! seven more sons and three more daughters. The same number of children in the same proportion of boys and girls. I wish the author had let us see Job looking back on the earlier ten children, remembering he had loved them and lost them. Gazing at his second set of children, did he say wistfully to himself, "She smiles like her older sister. His eyes remind me of his dead brother"?

So we ask: Why? Why do we lose those we cherish? Why do catastrophes occur? That part of the text in Isaiah which is called the Book of Consolation begins with the words, "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly (40: 1, 2). You are precious in my eyes and glorious...I love you" (43: 4). This same God acknowledges, "I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my

own sake, I do it" ( 48: 10, 11). Then Isaiah describes how the Lord deals with those embroiled in tragedy, "(God) Who pities them, leads them and guides them beside springs of water "(49:10). "Break forth into song, you mountains, for the Lord comforts and shows mercy to the afflicted" (13); "...Sorrow and mourning will flee" (51:11). "With enduring love, I take pity on you, says the Lord your redeemer "(54:8). What a message conveyed to us by Isaiah, one to read and reread!

The comfort of God empowers us. The word *comfort* derives from the Latin word *to strengthen* . Suffering drains us, and in this depletion we need the solace that will help fill in some part of that emptying out. Grace comes to us as God's gift of mercy to tell us that God will make up what we have lost. Again Isaiah speaks his message of hope. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me. God has sent me to bring glad tidings... to place on those who mourn a diadem instead of ashes, to give them oil of gladness in place of pain" (61: 1, 3).

Isaiah is describing a total reversal. He seems to tell us the anguish in our lives gives us a claim to new gladness. This is the work of grace which enlightens us in our affliction. Grace opens up new capacities for recognizing God's presence in our grief, and in that presence is the seed of current peace as well as future happiness.

As death drew near, St. Therese of Lisieux summarized her short twenty-four years of human living, "My life hasn't been bitter, because I knew how to turn all bitterness into something joyful and sweet" ( *St. Therese of Lisieux : Her Last Conversations* , p 119). Such knowledge Therese gained not from the beginning but through the struggles everyone has to contend with as life unfolds. This does not mean Therese did not weep as we do when we face stress and tragedy. But faith and hope lift our hearts even as our tears flow. All that we lose will be given back when eternity dawns for us, and that realization brings light into the darkness of earthly agony.

**"I will rejoice and be glad in Your kindness, when You have seen my affliction and watched over me in my distress" (Ps 31:8).**

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