

Balm For Our Anguish - by Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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St. Therese of Lisieux longed for martyrdom as the ultimate expression of self-giving. She wrote, "Martyrdom was the dream of my youth and this dream has grown with me within Carmel's cloisters." When thinking of the torments described for the end of time, she says, "I would that these torments be reserved for me" (*Story of a Soul*, p. 193). An unenlightened critic might call such declarations, which echo other Christian saints, the effusions of masochism. But the masochist relates in an unhealthy way to an imprisoned self, which feeds on its own interior substance with an ongoing diet of self-hatred. The masochist uses pain to relieve unresolved inner conflict--and sacrifices personal good and often the good of others. Christian suffering is never self-feeding and never an end in itself. It looks for healthy solutions, but when they are not forthcoming, it makes personal anguish productive for the sufferer and for fellow human beings. Our pangs are linked to Jesus Who "became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8).

We live in an age where terrible suffering is brought before our eyes every day through a media that captures the horrors almost as they take place. It has been said that such a communication of misery makes compassion go into overload.

That would never have been true for Therese. When the accumulation of horrors mounts so high, she would go, as we must, to a God who permits such wretchedness. At the same time, like her we make use of whatever comes into our individual lives. We ask that our distress reach out to relieve victims, innocent or guilty. We pray that grace bring succor to our fellow beings. Our turning is to the mercy of God when people are merciless to one another. Especially we seek out the Face of Jesus as we look upon the bruised faces of our brothers and sisters. In doing this, we don't unravel the mystery of so much human sorrow, often inflicted by other human hands. But in our own small way, we enter into the process of redemption.

Therese writes to her sister, "Since Jesus was alone in treading the wine which He is giving us to drink, let us not refuse in our turn to wear clothing stained with blood. Let us tread for Jesus a new wine which may quench His thirst, which will return Him love for love. Ah, let us not keep back one drop of wine that we can offer Him....His face was as though hidden. Celine, it is still hidden today, for who understands the tears of Jesus?" (*Letter 108*) She asks that question and so do we.

In our world today, the tears of Jesus weep for the terror and violence imposed on the weak, for the desolation inflicted on all areas, urban or rural, for the rape of nature's beauty and its resources. All creation groans and each one of us groans. But our sadness is not without hope. It has been said that already we dwell in heaven or hell according to how we choose to live in this temporal sphere.

The poet Dante described the deepest pit of the Inferno as frozen in ice. Not flames. Ice. A human heart rigid in its own frozenness, chilling others as it relates to them, gives us a breath of hell in this world. It doesn't matter how much success, fame, and fortune have been attained. An earthly life whose every aspiration is centered on itself, creates its own icy emptiness. If hope is limited only to what time can yield, earthly existence is indeed bleak.

The author of the First Letter of Peter describes a very different kind of hope. He assures us, "We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to an inheritance imperishable, undefiled and unfading--kept in heaven for you" (1:3,4). He says, "kept in heaven," but already in this life we draw on our inheritance. The church gives us the sacraments which communicate divine riches in an especially powerful fullness of grace. The First Letter of Peter continues, "Without having seen Him (Jesus Christ), you love him; though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with inexpressible joy" (1:8).

In our pain, can we rejoice? We cannot always control our emotions, but we do not let them erase hope from our spirit. We know that our suffering, enclosed in the boundaries of time, will finally give way to a fulfillment promised by our Savior. As centuries ago the author of the first epistle of John addressed the early Christians, so he addresses us today, "**I have written this to you to make you realize you possess eternal life—you who believe in the name of the Son of God**" (5:13). Whatever our anguish, these words spread like a fragrant balm over our waiting spirit.

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