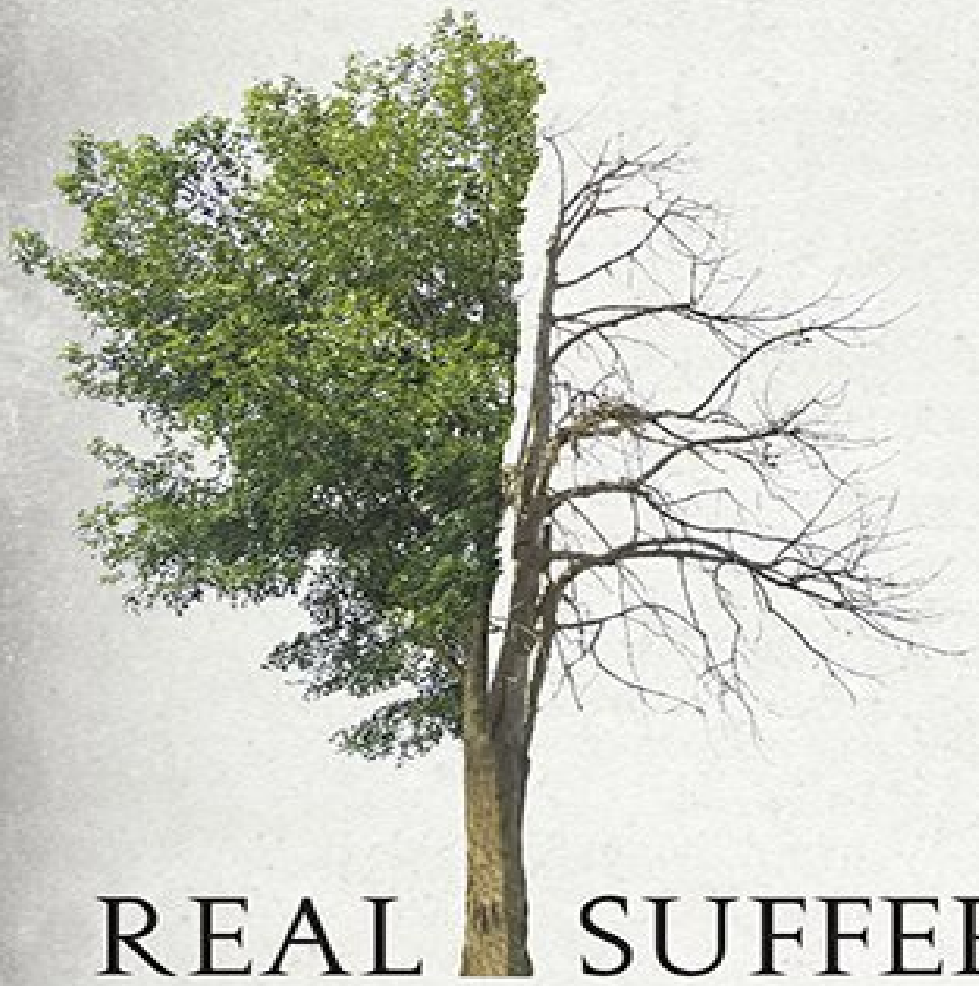


REAL SUFFERING

Finding Hope & Healing in the Trials of Life

DR. BOB SCHUCHTS

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Charlotte, North Carolina

Real Suffering: Finding Hope and Healing in the Trials of Life
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In memory of my beloved wife,
Margie, who left a legacy of love
even through her most difficult suffering

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INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin is credited with the oft repeated maxim: “Two things are certain in life: death and taxes.” Franklin’s clever but sobering remark underscores the inevitability of suffering in this fallen world. Death and taxes are but two of the many kinds of trials we face on our earthly pilgrimage. All of us are touched by suffering in one way or another. During this life, each of us suffers *physically, emotionally*, and *spiritually*. We also share in the suffering of those around us, both near and far.

Though we may try to insulate ourselves from the reality of human suffering, simply turning on the evening news is enough to shock us out of denial. Within seconds, we are inundated with rapid-fire scenes of intense suffering. These haunting images run the gamut of human degradation and heartbreak: refugees fleeing from terrorist attacks, hungry and abandoned children searching for food, racial tensions erupting violently in our city streets, and helpless victims subjugated to sexual abuse through human trafficking. These are just a few of the myriad examples of human suffering that bombard our sensibilities on a daily basis. Simply recounting these events are enough to traumatize any of us. Add to that our own personal suffering and it’s easy to see why many of us run from the reality of suffering.

We may ask, why does God allow anyone to suffer in these ways? We know from Sacred Scripture that he is “merciful and gracious” (Ps 103:8). How can it be his will for his beloved children to live in misery? Pope St. John Paul II answers that question by showing that suffering originates in evil and not from God, the source of all goodness: “Man suffers when *he experiences any kind of evil*.... Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good. We could say that man suffers because of a good in which he does not share, from which in a certain sense he is cut off, or of which he has deprived himself.”[1]

Does it make sense that we all suffer due to the evil that has inhabited our world? The Church teaches that human suffering is a result of our first parents’ rejection of God and rebellion against his loving authority. Some of this suffering is due to our own sin. The rest comes from the sin of others, including what has been passed down through the generations, beginning with Adam and Eve. We all know what it feels like to lack something, or to feel limited in some capacity, don’t we? This lack and deprivation is a byproduct of the evil brought into the world by human free will. It is not given to us directly from the hand of God.

God did not create us so that we would be mired in a life of endless hardship. Neither is suffering our ultimate destiny. In heaven, we are assured there will be no more tears, pain, or suffering (see Rv 21:4). Furthermore, the entirety of salvation history reveals the Father’s intimate concern and active care to deliver us from the evils underlying our suffering. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God is constantly entering into our circumstances to bring us out of our self-created misery. His words to Moses express his tender compassion for us: “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings” (Ex 3:7).

This theme of God's relentless pursuit of our consolation and healing in the midst of suffering is repeated throughout the Scriptures. Listen carefully to the prophecy recorded by Isaiah. These timeless words, fulfilled in Jesus, express the tender and compassionate heart that God has for each of us in our misery:

> The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
> because the LORD has anointed me
>
> to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
> he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
>
> to proclaim liberty to the captives,
> and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
>
> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
> and the day of vengeance of our God;
> to comfort all who mourn;
>
> to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
> to give them a garland instead of ashes,
>
> the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
> the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit;
>
> that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
> the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified….
>
> Instead of your shame you shall have a double portion;
> instead of dishonor you shall rejoice in your lot;
>
> therefore in your land you shall possess a double portion;
> yours shall be everlasting joy. (Is 61:1–3, 7)

These prophetic declarations are bursting with hope and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. I encourage you to read them again slowly and allow the promises to sink deeply into your heart and spirit. This is how God desires to relate to each of us in all areas of our suffering. Jesus became man for this very reason: to save us from our sin and to deliver us from its horrific consequences (see Mt 1:21).

Note carefully what Jesus is offering us in these comforting words: when we are oppressed and bound up in sin, Jesus desires to lift our spirits and set us free. In all the places where our hearts have been broken by betrayal and loss, Jesus desires to tenderly minister his healing touch to restore our capacity to give and receive love. When we mourn, Jesus comes near to comfort us, strengthening us in our weakness. He longs to transform our shame into glory and give us a heritage of joy and praise to replace our listless despair. In all of this, Jesus reveals the Father's merciful heart for each one of us in our suffering.

As if this wasn't enough, Jesus desires to come even closer to us when we are in the throes of anguish. We frail and frightened humans have a natural tendency to avoid suffering, both our own and that of the people around us, but Jesus does just the opposite. He draws ever closer to us when we are brokenhearted and crushed in spirit (see Ps 34:18). He does not want us to be alone to suffer in isolation. He comes near to comfort and to heal us (see Ps 147:3). He comes so intimately close to our suffering that he is willing to take it completely upon himself during his life, passion, and death.[2] He reaches into the depths of our suffering, identifying himself totally with every sick, hungry, hurting, and persecuted person (see Mt 25:35–36; Acts 9:5).

Furthermore, Jesus's passion, death, and resurrection stand as the centerpiece of all of human history. He came to share in our suffering in order to free us from our misery. *Nothing in this life or the next makes any sense apart from*

these realities. All the suffering we encounter in our daily lives is meant to be a sharing in Christ's paschal mystery. We, too, are called to draw near to Christ in our own suffering. The goal is not to remain nailed to the cross. That would be endless misery. Instead, we are called to persevere with Jesus through our suffering into the joy of his resurrection.

The entire work of the Holy Spirit in the Church is for this purpose: to heal us through the suffering of our personal crosses so that we can live ever more fully in the hope of Christ's resurrected life.[3] Apart from Christ's redemptive sacrifice and resurrection, there is no other genuine path to healing.

With this in mind, I have chosen to organize the book around the paschal mystery. We will examine three of the primary figures in the Calvary narrative: Jesus, Mary, and Simon Peter. Each of them will serve as our models for how to embrace and overcome the suffering in each area of our lives (physically, emotionally, and spiritually).

> Part I provides an overview of the **Three Kinds of Suffering**, looking at the personal suffering we encounter and the hope that Christ provides in and through it all. In the opening chapter, I share some of my personal experiences of suffering in all three areas, including some very challenging events in my life recently, as a way for you to reflect on your own experiences. My desire is for you to find encouragement and healing in every area where you or your family members have endured any kind of suffering.
>
> Part II is a reflection on **Physical Suffering**, examining the sources and effects of living with physical pain. *Jesus* is the ultimate model for how we can face our physical suffering with faith,

hope, and love while offering it as a gift for others. He is our healer and our source of strength in the midst of physical suffering.

Part II addresses **Emotional Suffering**, caused by the many different kinds of losses we experience in our lives. *Mary*, Our Lady of Sorrows, knows more than anyone the painful reality of emotional suffering and loss. She shows us how to keep our gaze fixed on Jesus as we walk through these difficult times of loss. As we follow her example, we discover the way to emotional healing and restored joy in response to our own interior suffering.

Part III focuses on **Spiritual Suffering**. *Simon Peter* is represented throughout Scripture as the prototypical disciple. During our Lord's passion, Simon Peter exemplifies our common spiritual suffering as he is beset by guilt and shame after denying Jesus. In the process of his restoration, he becomes the model for all of us seeking reconciliation and healing in any area where guilt and shame have kept us bound and hopeless.

As you work your way through this book, I encourage you to draw near to Christ and know that he is nearer to you in your suffering than you might think.

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1 Pope St. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 7.
2 See Pope St. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 16.
3 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 1091; Phil 3:10.

PART I

THREE KINDS OF SUFFERING



CHAPTER 1

TRANSFORMED BY SUFFERING

When the good people at Saint Benedict Press first invited me to work on this book and program,[4] I wasn't thinking about my own experiences of suffering at the time. I contemplated the many things I learned over the years as a family therapist, walking with people through their hardships in light of the timeless wisdom gleaned from years of studying Scripture and Church teaching. But then, within a very short time after beginning this project, my wife, Margie, came down with a mysterious illness. Though she had been healthy her entire life, she suddenly contracted a rare neurological disease with no known cause. Within four months of her first symptoms, she passed away. My family and I witnessed her gradual deterioration in neuromuscular and cognitive functioning over the course of the disease and then shared intimately in her suffering during those months leading up to and following her death.

During this same time, my dad's health also began to rapidly deteriorate. Two weeks before my wife, Margie, died, my father also passed away. The week in between their two deaths, I attended my dad's funeral in West Virginia with our family. My children remained at home to care for their mom because she was unable to travel. Driving back to Florida after the funeral, I discovered that Hurricane Irma was heading on a direct path toward our city. My mom and

siblings and I were driving back into the storm as Margie, our children, and grandchildren were anxiously watching the weather reports. We had to decide whether to evacuate Margie in her vulnerable state. After praying together over the phone, we discerned that it would be best to care for her in the familiarity of her surroundings, and so I headed straight home to be with her. With some fear and trepidation, we rode out what was predicted to be a Category 5 storm. Thank God, we ended up being safe, with no major damage (it slowed to a Category 3 before reaching us). I returned hours before the hurricane hit Tallahassee and was able to hold Margie's hand as she slept peacefully through the howling winds that night. God's presence remained a constant strength in the midst of these trying circumstances.

I don't believe God orchestrated all this so that I could write a better book on suffering. But I do trust that, through it all, he is teaching me, and all of us, how to embrace our suffering in communion with Christ. I offer my experience as a way of encouraging you in the varied and unique circumstances of your life. None of us are experts when it comes to dealing with suffering, whether it is our own or the suffering of those around us. We each desperately need God's grace and wisdom to negotiate these unwanted and often dreaded circumstances in our lives.

I am writing this book as a fellow companion on this journey. Jesus has already shown us the way, through his passion, death, and resurrection. He is the only expert when it comes to human suffering. He shows us how to transform our suffering through his grace so that we don't transmit it to others.

SUFFERING THAT IS NOT TRANSFORMED IS TRANSMITTED

Sister Miriam James Heidland is a dear friend of mine and fellow speaker at the John Paul II Healing Center. She has walked through a tremendous amount of suffering in her life, but you would never know it just by seeing her. Her radiant smile conveys a peace and joy that shows her suffering has not defeated her. Instead, as she says, Jesus's love in the midst of her suffering has brought her ever deeper into the pierced heart of her Bridegroom.[5]

During our healing conferences, she speaks of the importance of allowing ourselves to be transformed by our suffering. She often paraphrases a well-known saying: "Suffering that is not transformed is transmitted."[6] This succinct but powerful phrase puts the whole matter of suffering into perspective. If we don't face our suffering and allow Christ to transform us in and through it, we will pass our misery on to others (we will transmit it), causing them and ourselves even greater suffering. But, if instead we face our suffering and allow it to draw us deeper into communion with Jesus, we will be radiantly transformed through it.

Thus, the question remains for each one of us: how will we respond to the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering we must inevitably contend with in our daily life? Will we embrace it in order to be transformed by it? Or will we wallow in our suffering, deny it, or run away from it out of fear, and thus increase its devastating effects on ourselves and for those around us? As Christians, we have been called to embrace our personal suffering in communion with Christ and to comfort those around us who are suffering.

In his letter to the Church in Philippi, St. Paul says, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil 1:29). In another personal letter to the Church in Colossae, he adds, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's

afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24).

At first glance, those words from St. Paul seem foreign to us, don't they? Why would anyone want to embrace suffering, let alone rejoice in it? Suffering, as we learned from St. John Paul II, is the result of evil in the world and the deprivation of the good things we desire. Yet this attitude of rejoicing in our "suffering for Christ" is evident in all of the saints. It seems to defy good common sense and go against our natural instincts. Have you ever wondered why the Church speaks of suffering in such a positive light? Am I supposed to convince myself that the diseases and deaths that took my wife and father are something to celebrate? Is God asking me to rejoice in disease and death?

I don't believe so. And I don't believe that is what St. Paul is saying. Instead, I believe he is teaching us how to suffer with Christ so that we can rejoice in the healing and hope that this suffering will bring into our lives.

JOINING OUR SUFFERING WITH CHRIST

As I have wrestled with these questions of human suffering, both in my own life and in accompanying others, only one answer satisfies my heart: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). *Jesus suffered out of love for his Father and as an expression of his deep and unending love for us. He did it for our sake*. In doing so, he shows each one of us how to transform the evil of suffering into a much greater good by embracing every last ounce of it with faith, hope, and love. Jesus transformed the greatest of evils—wicked men torturing and killing the Son of God—into the greatest possible good: the redemption of the whole world. Jesus conquered temporal suffering and death *by entering into it*. Ultimately, he took this road less traveled to save us from eternal death and the never-ending

suffering of hell. It is the ultimate paradox. God's ways are clearly not our ways.

Jesus could have remained aloof from our human suffering. But instead, motivated by the greatest possible love, he chose to become intimately acquainted with our misery in order to redeem each one of us from it. He descended into the hell of our human distress and showed us the way through it. He never lost hope through all that he suffered. He knew his suffering was temporary, while the resurrection would be everlasting. Through it all, he gained authority over all the suffering and death in the world and left us an example to follow in his footsteps (see 1 Pt 4). Jesus has redeemed suffering and invites us to participate in his redemption.

REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING IS FOR US TOO

As followers of Christ, we do not rejoice in evil (see 1 Cor 13:6). Rather, we rejoice in overcoming evil with good, the same way Jesus did. He did not avoid or deny the suffering that came his way but accepted it and even found joy in the midst of it. This is what love does, it responds to human suffering by embracing it and turning it into a greater good by God's grace (see Rom 8:28). I believe this is what St. Paul means when he says he makes up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of the Church. Paul did not redeem the world, but he participated actively in the mystery of Christ's redemption by joining his sufferings with those of Jesus. We are each called to do the same.

St. Paul's personal suffering came about as the result of persecution. Jesus prophesied that St. Paul would suffer greatly for the sake of Christ's mission (see Acts 9:16). It is for this reason that Paul could rejoice, because he was following in Jesus's footsteps, suffering as his beloved Savior

did for the spread of the Gospel. Some of us suffer in the same way by being persecuted for our faith and for the sake of Christ. But admittedly, much of our suffering is not the direct result of persecution. Who really knows the immediate causes of all of our pains and sicknesses, our losses, and our guilt? We may or may not play a part in causing some or all of it. But, whatever the source of our suffering, the Church over the centuries has taught that all our suffering can be joined to Christ's and thus assume a redemptive quality.[7]

I saw this reality of redemptive suffering play out in beautiful and transforming ways during my wife's and my dad's illnesses and dying processes. Ultimately, God accomplished the greatest good—their complete healing and eternal happiness—by bringing them through the temporal suffering and the debilitating evil of disease and death. In the midst of their suffering, they underwent a noticeable transformation, becoming increasingly more radiant and loving throughout the process.

And they were not the only ones transformed by their suffering. God's love and personal graces enabled *all of us* to see beyond the disfiguring evil of disease and death to behold the beauty and goodness of his love in the midst of it all. I do not celebrate my wife and father getting sick and dying, or the pain that we all feel in their absence. But I do rejoice in Christ's intimate presence and the abundance of love and healing that we experienced and witnessed through all that took place. This is especially amazing in light of the fear we naturally experience in the midst of suffering.

OVERCOMING OUR FEAR OF SUFFERING

When Margie and my dad began showing symptoms of their debilitating diseases, my initial response was one of fear. But in the midst of these trying circumstances, I was reminded of a passage from Father Jacques Philippe's book *Interior Freedom*, which really helped me maintain a heavenly perspective in the barrage of daily challenges and anxieties we were facing as a family. These insights from Father Philippe are an encouragement for each of us: "What really hurts is not so much suffering as the fear of suffering. If welcomed trustingly and peacefully, suffering makes us grow. It matures us, trains us, purifies us, teaches us to love unselfishly, makes us poor in heart, humble, gentle, and compassionate toward our neighbor. Fear of suffering on the other hand hardens us in self-protective, defensive attitudes, and often leads us to make irrational choices with disastrous consequences."[8]

We all have a natural fear of suffering. Our first and most instinctive response in the face of suffering is to anxiously resist it. We all know what it's like to be struck with dread and anxiety when faced with the possibility of suffering and death. We know suffering hurts, and we naturally recoil from the physical and emotional pain that inevitably accompanies it. But, as Father Philippe highlights, what harms us even more is allowing fear to have the upper hand and hijack our reactions. When we give in to fear, we are more prone to make irrational choices and to barricade our hearts. We become self-protective and withdraw our hearts from the people and circumstances in front of us. In all of that, we lose sight of faith, hope, and love.

On the other hand, when we turn to God with a trusting heart, we are promised the necessary grace to embrace our suffering. We are then softened and humbled through it. This grace of redemptive suffering changes us and brings us into a deeper intimacy with God and with one another. Without Christ suffering in and with us, this would not be

possible. But in union with Jesus, our suffering can bring about our transformation and healing.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND HEALING

The insights from Father Philippe's book became a kind of emotional barometer for me each day as Margie's disease progressed. Though I had a natural inclination to pull back in self-protection, I kept hearing the gentle nudging of the Holy Spirit to engage and love like never before. As much as possible, I cleared my work and travel schedule the last three months of Margie's life in order to be with her. I am grateful for my co-workers who covered for me. I am also deeply appreciative for the love of our daughters, sons-in-law, grandchildren, and other family members who walked through this suffering together with us. Each person's love and care for Margie became a deeper expression of God's kindness and tenderness in the midst of the horror of her disease. There were certainly many moments when each of us became frightened and wanted to pull away, as Margie's physical and mental capacities deteriorated. But thankfully those panic moments were the exception rather than the rule.

The evident grace of the Holy Spirit pouring through Margie's spirit strengthened each of us and helped us overcome our fears. Apart from three or four times of intense anxiety when she lost another major area of functioning, Margie remained calm and peaceful throughout the entire ordeal. Though there were many unpleasant things to deal with, her face radiated with the beauty of God's presence emanating from her. Some of my deepest prayers were answered during these difficult months. For example, for the first time in our marriage, we shared Holy

Communion together daily (sometimes with one or both daughters and sons-in-law).

While Margie's body and mind were wasting away, her spirit was growing stronger every day. Her soul became purer and more childlike. She was humble and gracious in allowing us to care for her. At the same time, we were also growing in our capacity to love and be gentle toward her. I fell deeper in love with my wife during this difficult time, as God's grace met us both in our weakness and desperation. Her relationships with our children and grandchildren and many others also became more beautiful in this time.

I saw a similar transformation in my dad during the last years of his life. Though his mind was compromised from the loss of short term memory, his love for God and each of us showed ever more brightly. It's a mystery that is hard to explain in human terms. But somehow, as we surrender to Christ, his grace working through our weaknesses and afflictions transforms and heals us. St. John Paul II helps us all understand this: "It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls. Suffering, more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity the powers of the Redemption."[9]

We may fear suffering, but when we say yes to the grace that is ever present, it transforms us. I would love to say that I always respond to my own suffering with this kind of trust. But that would not be true. I spent much of the first thirty years of my life running from suffering. I feared it (and still do to some extent). But, as Jesus is bringing me through his school of suffering, my fear is decreasing and my trust is slowly increasing. In looking back over my life, with the perspective of Father Philippe's insight, I can now see more clearly how my life-long fear of suffering has barricaded my heart, making it difficult for me to give and receive love. This self-protective hardening has hindered my trust, both with God and with others. Though constructed

unconsciously, my walls of self-protection eventually became a prison, keeping me bound in self-centeredness and fear. Through much of my life, suffering has not been transformative. Rather, it has been traumatic.

TRAUMATIC SUFFERING LEAVES US WOUNDED

The first time I remember overwhelming suffering in my life was May 30, 1961. I had just turned six years old. Until then my life seemed pretty secure, as far as I could tell. The date stands out because it was Memorial Day weekend and we were in Washington, DC, attending the graduation of my mother's two sisters.

Before the early morning sunlight shined through the windows of our hotel room, I awakened to a commotion stirring all around me. I could feel the anxiety swirling in the room as my parents hastily made arrangements for how we were going to get home. I feigned sleep, shutting down my senses in the midst of the commotion, while simultaneously denying the obvious tension all around. Later that morning, I would discover that our house back in Pittsburgh had burned down in the middle of the night. My dad's father and grandmother, who had moved into the house with us earlier that year, died of smoke inhalation before the fireman arrived to rescue them.

I was too young to understand the implications then, but the impact on my dad and our family proved to be devastating. As a father of five children (at the time), my dad carried the burden of completely starting over with no insurance. But that was not the worst of it. At the age of twenty-six, he lost his entire remaining family of origin. Though he had to identify the corpses of his father and grandmother, he never grieved their deaths until much

later. His mother had also died tragically just a year or so earlier, and he never allowed himself to feel the pain of her loss either. Many years later, I would discover that he carried considerable pain and guilt from his childhood, which complicated his grief over their premature deaths. His fear and avoidance of suffering, starting in childhood, left his heart hardened in self-protection.

My father's traumatic loss of his parents and grandmother caused him to shut down emotionally and spiritually, even more than he had before. Though in many ways he continued to be a good father and outwardly practiced his faith, he became numb to the promptings of the Holy Spirit working through his conscience. He turned away from God and emotionally detached himself from my mom. Eventually, he found his solace in alcohol and other women. Neither of these "medications" required him to invest his wounded and hardened heart, or risk losing his remaining loved ones, as he feared. But the very thing he feared, he ended up causing. By insulating himself from his pain, dad's fear and avoidance of suffering created even more hurt and turmoil for the rest of us. *His refusal and inability to transform his suffering in Christ meant that it was transmitted to us*, his wife and children, as well as to himself for many years to come. I am sure dad never intended to hurt us, he was just running scared from his own traumatic suffering.

Seven years after the fire, my dad left my mom and his seven children, ages three to fifteen. I was thirteen and would not see my dad for two years. This marked some of the deepest suffering in my life. My mom suffered greatly for many years, even more than my siblings and me. But she also came into their marriage with buried emotional and physical pain from her childhood. On top of that, she didn't know how to grieve well in the midst of caring for her large family. Though she was active in her Catholic faith, she similarly hardened her heart in self-protection and

judgment, especially after finding out about my father's drinking binges and infidelity. Though my mother valiantly raised us with all the love she could muster, she was in survival mode. She, too, was running from the pain and suffering. It had all become too much for her to bear. Her response to suffering looked very different from my dad's avoidance. She didn't run away; rather, she took on a victim mentality and remained largely stuck in her pain for many years.

Raised in this environment, it's not difficult to imagine that my six siblings and I learned to fearfully avoid suffering as much as possible. Our parents' divorce, and their lack of a mature response to their pain and ours, left each of us to our own devices in how to react to the devastating circumstances. *The fire* had destroyed our house and taken our belongings and loved-ones. *The divorce* devastated our family and broke each of our hearts. But it was o*ur reactions* to the suffering which set up patterns of coping that affected our lives for many years. These immature responses only served to increase our emotional and spiritual suffering in the long run, and perhaps added to some physical suffering as well. My brother Dave, a year and a half older than me, numbed his pain through alcohol and drugs. A year after my father left, he dropped out of school and within months became addicted to heroin. This addiction marked his vagabond lifestyle for the next twenty years.

Watching all this, I knew that I didn't want to respond like my father, mother, or older brother. So I silently vowed not to find comfort in addictions or give into self-pity. Instead, I became focused on my achievements in sports, school, and church, while hiding my pain behind my activities, intellect, and religious practices. Without realizing it, this became my way of avoiding the suffering that remained buried deep within my soul. Eventually, this buried suffering would take a toll on my body, soul, and spirit. Though I vowed to be

different than my earthly role models, I became like them in my fearful self-protection and hardness of heart. My ways of running were just more socially acceptable than some of theirs and, as a byproduct of that, helped me foster more pride. Each of my younger brothers and sisters also developed their own strategies and ways to avoid suffering, and each has had to contend with the consequences of our less than ideal responses. Thank God for his mercy.

GOD'S MERCIFUL INTERVENTIONS IN OUR FAMILY

Overcoming these destructive patterns of avoiding suffering has been a life-long process for each of us and for our family as a whole. I am eternally grateful to God for his patience and merciful interventions in each of our lives over and again throughout the years. The transformation in my own life started during a season of intense trial and suffering in my marriage (largely caused by our unhealed wounds and hardened hearts). Not wanting to follow the path of my parents and get a divorce, I cried out to Jesus in desperation. He answered by leading me to a Bible study, which began a process of opening my heart to the Holy Spirit. The Word of God confronted my self-protection, which in turn triggered a panic attack, which drove me into therapy. In therapy, I discovered that my panic attack was caused by trying to avoid the emotional pain of all the losses throughout my life.

For the first time in therapy, I reluctantly began facing the pain and guilt I had long ago suppressed. This, in turn, jump-started a major spiritual renewal in my life as I encountered Christ's love in a powerful way on a spiritual retreat at my parish.[10] My encounter with the Father's love began a healing process which eventually touched our

entire family. Over the next several years, one family member after another began having their own encounters with the Father's merciful and healing love. Rather than continuing to run from our suffering, the Holy Spirit gradually led us into situations where we could face our suffering together, talk about our past, make amends, and share God's mercy and compassion with each other.

One of my favorite memories of family healing and reconciliation occurred during a Christian men's retreat in Windy Gap, North Carolina. I remember sitting with my dad and three of my brothers under a gazebo in the midst of the beautiful mountains. My brothers and I listened with gratitude as my dad shared his sorrow and remorse over the ways he hurt us and my mom through those years leading up to and following their divorce. His humility and honesty opened up lines of communication between all of us, which led to further sharing as a family. Soon after, my sisters and mom were able to share in the healing process. As a family, we had finally stopped running away from our suffering and began to face it with the strength of Christ's redeeming love.

I believe in the power of redemptive suffering and healing because I have experienced it firsthand. After witnessing it in our family, I rejoice in seeing God do similar things in many other families. We still have a long way to go, but as you will see in the following chapters, Jesus's healing love has been powerfully revealed in the midst of our suffering. I believe he desires to do that in each of our lives and families. He draws near to us in all our suffering so that he can heal our broken hearts and restore us to wholeness.

* * *

Throughout the remainder of this book, I pray you will see how everything I have just described with my family and the

redemptive suffering we experienced applies to your life. All the ways that you suffer physically, emotionally, and spiritually can be redeemed in a similar way. You have your own stories to tell for the glory of God. As you face and then embrace your suffering, in union with Christ and his grace, he will turn your mourning into dancing and your sorrow into joy (see Ps 30:11)!

In part II, we will focus on *Physical Suffering*, seeing how Jesus teaches us to respond to our pain with faith, hope, and love, and how we are called to follow his example. Through it all, we seek healing from our Divine Physician.

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4 If you are not aware, this book is a part of a much larger project of the same name, with video lectures, powerful profiles of those who have suffered greatly and found healing in Christ, and guide books; the program can be done at home or brought to your parish.

5 See Miriam James Heidland, *Loved as I Am* (Ave Maria Press, 2014).

6 I believe this quote originates in the writings of Richard Rohr.

7 See Pope St. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 19.

8 Jacques Philippe, *Interior Freedom* (New York: Scepter, 2007).

9 Pope St. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 27.

10 I tell this story in more detail in chapter 1 of *Be Healed* (Ave Maria Press, 2014).

PART II

PHYSICAL SUFFERING



CHAPTER 2

PAIN: BLESSING OR CURSE?

Ouch! It hurts! Do you remember uttering those words when you were a child and experiencing some kind of physical pain? Perhaps you scraped a knee, needed a splinter removed from your finger, or were receiving that dreaded shot at the doctor's office. Or maybe it was something much worse, like a terrible disease or repeated surgeries and rehabilitation due to a physical deformity. At any rate, the pain was real, and most of the time we let the world around us know how much it hurt.

Children are often freer and more spontaneous in expressing their pain than adults. As we grow, we gradually learn to ignore and adjust to pain. Playing sports, I learned to suppress physical pain by blocking it out of my awareness. Slogans like "big boys don't cry," "no pain, no gain," and "shake it off" became a part of the sports culture I grew up in. During preseason football practices in August, everyone was hurting. But we all knew in order to play we needed to be tough. Nobody wanted to be a "crybaby" when it came to those normal aches and pains.

Yet there came a point when the pain became so unbearable we had to cry out for help. For me, breaking my wrist and tearing the ligaments in my knee in high school football were two occasions when the pain became so excruciating I could no longer deny it. It screamed to get my

attention. Though I wanted to keep playing, I simply couldn't.

There are parallels here for all of us in our daily lives. Whatever the reasons, many of us have gotten used to being in pain. Whether it is a sore muscle, a physical injury, a sickness, or a chronic ailment, pain can be a constant companion for many people, especially once we enter into the golden years. Most of the time we can play through the pain, but there are times when the pain is so intense that it literally stops us in our tracks. It can be so debilitating that it takes us completely out of the game.

My body hurts somewhere every day. Most of the time, the aches and pains are mild enough that I keep going and usually ignore them. But there are times when we all have to stop and listen to our pain. You may be enduring intense physical agony right now, or accompanying someone who is. If so, my heart goes out to you. Physical suffering is a difficult cross to bear. I admire your courage and perseverance in faith. I pray that, as we address this topic head-on, the Holy Spirit will give you insights that will prove to be a source of consolation and genuine hope for you and your loved ones. You may even come to see your physical suffering as a gift that brings you to God and leads you down a path of healing.

THE CAPACITY TO FEEL PAIN IS A GIFT

When we're in the midst of experiencing pain, it can seem more like a curse than a blessing. But our capacity to feel pain is actually a gift from God. Like the warning light on the dashboard of the car, pain signals there is something in our bodies which needs immediate care and attention. In this sense, pain can be an invaluable gift, even to the point of saving our lives. Whether or not we curse our pain, the

capacity to feel it and embrace it can be a blessing from God in many ways.

God created our bodies with the greatest of all tenderness and love. Everything he made has a purpose. He didn't make a mistake when he created us with the capacity to experience pain in our bodies. Though often unpleasant, and at times intolerable, pain is necessary and even beneficial for our health and holiness. Pain and pleasure are two sides of sensitivity. We can't have one without the other. We are created in such a way that our brains and bodies instinctively seek pleasure and avoid pain. We might wish that we never had to feel it, and some day in heaven that desire will be fully realized, but on earth our experience of pain is a necessary and good thing. I'm not suggesting that God wants us to suffer physically all the time. But without the capacity to feel pain, our well-being would be in grave danger. Pain is a protective system in our bodies and has many good and necessary functions.

Years ago, I read an eye-opening book by Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey entitled *The Gift of Pain*. In it, they described Dr. Brand's work with people suffering from Hansen's disease, the modern name for leprosy. People with Hansen's disease do not have the capacity to feel pain. They could put their hand in the fire and not feel it. As a result, their entire hand could be burned and destroyed. Without pain receptors, stepping on a nail or a piece of glass could also be deadly. Not knowing when they are injured, many with leprosy lose parts of their body to amputation, while other parts literally rot away. All of this happens because they can't feel pain.

These observations working with leprosy patients over many years led Dr. Brand to proclaim that pain is truly one of God's greatest gifts. It is a protective alarm hard-wired into our bodies letting us know when something is wrong with us. In heaven, our spiritual bodies will be incorruptible, and we will no longer need pain as a warning signal. But as

long as we remain on earth with these corruptible bodies, pain is something for which we can be grateful. It orients us back to health and leads us to cry out to God. It also humbles us by reminding us that we are mortal and subject to the curse of death.

DEATH'S CURSE OF CORRUPTIBILITY

In the book of Genesis, we see that as soon as Adam and Eve turned away from God, they cut themselves off from his presence and lost their incorruptibility. Immediately, their bodies became subject to death, just as God had warned them. Though their physical bodies did not instantly die, the process of deterioration began and spread to the whole human race. Since that cataclysmic event, all of creation has been in a state of decay. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, "Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. Because of man, creation is now subject 'to its bondage of decay.'"[11]

No matter how much we may want to deny it, our temporal bodies are weak and subject to decay (see 1 Cor 15:42– 43). Every physical infirmity in our earthly bodies reminds us of the consequence of this primordial curse of death. Our corruptibility is experienced in a myriad of ways, including disease, physical weakness, aging, sickness, injury, hunger, thirst, fatigue, limitation, violence, addiction, deformity, torture, extreme cold or heat, raging storms, and many others. These are all byproducts of the curse of death that resulted from original sin, and each carries its own kind of physical pain that is associated with it.

Without the fullness of God's grace, which Adam and Eve once enjoyed, everything in this world can become laborious and painful. This includes some of the Father's most

beautiful gifts inherent in creation, such as work and childbirth (see Gn 3:16–18). Adam and Eve's sin brought curses of labor and physical suffering upon the whole human race. While the capacity to feel pain remains a gift, most of what causes our pain is not. All of our physical suffering is caused in one way or another by this gradual bodily deterioration.

Some of the inevitable pain we have to endure, like death and disease, is the result of living in a broken world, where God's perfect order in creation has been disrupted by original sin. We can hasten or delay it by our choices, but we cannot avoid it. Other causes of pain (such as violence, torture, persecution, and abuse) are caused directly by the sins of others. For the most part we are victims of this kind of pain. A final cause of our pain is the result of our own sin, such as reckless driving or overeating. These sins against our own bodies harm us physically, but also may harm us emotionally and spiritually.

We each play at least a small part in our overall physical suffering and pain, though we are often blind to those contributions. Too often, we think of physical pain as something that randomly happens to our bodies rather than something we have an active part in enhancing or diminishing. We may fail to see that our lifestyle, our eating habits, our patterns of exercise and breathing, our ways of dealing with stress, and our unhealed emotional, physical, and spiritual wounds may all play a part in our physical pain. That denial begins with our tendency to view our bodies in a materialistic way, seeing them as objects to be used and somehow disconnected from our soul and spirit.

THE UNITY OF BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT

From God's perspective, our body, soul, and spirit are not three separate entities but one. This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of our wholeness as persons: "The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual." And just a little bit later: "The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body.... Spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature." "Sometimes the soul is distinguished from the spirit: St. Paul for instance prays that God may sanctify his people 'wholly' with 'spirit and soul and body.'"[12]

This awareness of the intimate connection between our body, soul, and spirit has tremendous implications for how we understand and respond to the physical pain we experience. Have you ever noticed the interaction between your physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering? For example, are you aware of how fear, guilt, and unresolved emotional hurt manifest as physical pain in your body? Stop for a moment and think about how fear manifests in your body: perhaps as a nervous stomach, pain in your intestines, tense shoulders, or from clenching your jaws. This unexpressed emotional pain actually hurts physically.

Many illnesses and physical ailments in the body can be traced back to chronic patterns of holding on to fear and other unexpressed emotions. This pain is real. If not satisfactorily resolved, these temporary emotional pains eventually become chronic physical pains. These unresolved spiritual and emotional issues may even contribute to various kinds of physical diseases: "If we allow these negative emotions to remain in our spirits, we perhaps will end up with a physical problem such as arthritis, high blood pressure, stomach problems, colitis or heart problems."[13] Medical science is now coming to see and understand the reality of these connections between spirit, soul, and body.

Unresolved grief has been linked with many forms of lung diseases and infections, and various kinds of cancer have been associated with depression, unresolved loss, and unforgiveness. Even our propensity to catch a cold is influenced by the ways we cope with life's stresses.[14]

This understanding of the interdependence of body, soul, and spirit is also important for overcoming physical injuries. I have a friend, Dr. Tom Nelson, a Catholic physician in Chicago, who helps athletes and others recover quickly from their injuries. He also helps many people avoid injuries and overcome diseases by addressing the underlying vulnerabilities that would make them susceptible. In the process of treatment, he is able to reduce pain and restore healthy functioning much more quickly than the normal recovery process. Ironically, the initial treatment itself can be painful, as he presses into the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain trapped in the body. But once those deeper pains are released, the long-term effects are a significant reduction in pain and greatly reduced susceptibility to injury.

The point in all this is that we are not just passive agents in our physical suffering. We have an active part to play. But, in looking at our personal responsibility in the sources of our pain and suffering, we can also make the opposite mistake of thinking that *every* source of our physical suffering and pain is the result of some sin or unresolved emotional problem in our lives. There is much physical affliction that is mysterious and may not be the result of our personal choices and reactions. The book of Job makes this apparent that innocent people can suffer greatly. In the New Testament, Jesus chastised those who errantly judged the man born blind and his parents. Jesus assured them that it was neither this man's sin nor his parents that caused his blindness (see Jn 9:3). Jesus himself is the epitome of one who suffers innocently. As the unblemished Lamb of God, he turned things upside down on the cross. By taking the

curses of sin and death on himself, he turned physical suffering into a source of potential blessing.

GOD'S GRACE IN THE MIDST OF PHYSICAL SUFFERING

There are many forms of physical suffering that result from our personal sin and poor health practices, but still there are others that seem to come out of nowhere, with no apparent cause. Regardless of the source, physical pain and suffering can be turned into a blessing for the person who is experiencing it and for an ever-widening circle of people around them. I have witnessed this many times, most powerfully in my own family.

In the last chapter I mentioned my brother Dave, who became a heroin addict at the age of sixteen. His physical addiction to heroin caused him a lot of ongoing physical anguish. He once confided in me that his body experienced physical agony each time he went through withdrawal. He said he remained in constant pain until his next fix. He would spend hours in euphoria immediately after an injection of heroin, but sometimes days and weeks in the anguish of the inevitable withdrawal. From his perspective, getting high as much as possible remained his only means to avoid feeling so horribly. He lived for the next high, and nothing got in the way of his desperate longing.

After a miraculous reconversion to Christ in his late thirties, Dave was delivered from his addiction to heroin and gradually got free from other addictions as well. God's grace became a powerful source of strength and consolation for him. Gradually, the pain of longing for a fix disappeared, and he was truly liberated from *that* intense physical pain and longing. But tragically, a few years later Dave had to

deal with another kind of physical pain, this time in the form of a debilitating disease called AIDS.

Dave deduced that he contracted the HIV virus from a heroin needle. A few years after sharing an infected needle, Dave began having active symptoms of AIDS. He didn't want to acknowledge it, but the progressively increasing physical symptoms gradually eroded his denial. I vividly remember sitting with him on his front porch on Christmas Eve as the whole family gathered for Christmas in his new home. He looked at me and said, "I am going to the doctor in a few days because I have been having some bad physical reactions in my body. I believe he is going to tell me I have AIDS." I froze in fear, not knowing what to say or how to console my brother.

After a long pause which seemed like an eternity, Dave continued, "I have been praying for a purpose, and I believe God is answering my prayers. If I have AIDS, I want to offer my sickness and pain to Jesus so that he can work through me. *I want to be a person with AIDS for Christ."*

I couldn't believe my ears. After all those years running from pain in self-centered pursuits, my brother was embracing his hurt and offering it as a gift of love to Jesus for his redemptive purposes. Before that moment, our entire family had been afraid that if Dave had AIDS he would run back into the arms of his addiction. But the man sitting next to me on the porch was a new man, full of faith and showing remarkable courage. He knew God's love in the depths of his heart, and he now had a purpose for his life. Even in his pain, he wanted to live for Jesus and no longer just for himself.

In the months that followed, Dave fulfilled his calling to live for Christ in the midst of enduring physical suffering. We were all amazed to see how much his faith, hope, and love touched the lives of others. I went with him once to visit another man who had AIDS. This man was withering away and lost in despair over his current suffering and impending

death. Seeing Dave's joy and faith instilled faith and hope in this man. I believe Dave and I will see this young man again in heaven because of Dave's choice to offer his sufferings to Christ for the sake of others.

That experience was one of many ways that Dave's response to his physical suffering became a source of grace and hope for others. My brother Wayne, who was not actively practicing his faith at the time, felt moved to invite Dave into his home and care for him as Dave's physical condition worsened. Dave's faith and humility allowed Wayne to see the face of Jesus in his dying brother: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). After watching God's grace working through Dave's weakness, Wayne now has an unshakable faith in Jesus.

Contracting AIDS or any disease is never a blessing in itself. It is a byproduct of the curse of sin and death, and in this case, a byproduct of Dave's own sin. But as we will see in the next chapter, physical pain and suffering can be transformed into profound blessings. Dave was following the example of Jesus, who shows us how to respond with faith, hope, and love in the midst of our physical pain and suffering.

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11 CCC 400; see also Rom 8:21.

12 CCC 362, 365, 367.

13 Betty Tapscott and Robert DeGrandis, *Forgiveness and Inner Healing* (Tapscot, 1985).

14 Suzanne C. Kobasa, et al., "Effectiveness of Hardiness, Exercise, and Social Support as Resources Against Illness," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 29(1985): 525-33; B. S. McEwen and E. Stellar, "Stress and the Individual: Mechanisms Leading to Disease," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 153(1993): 2093-101. George L. Engel, "Studies of Ulcerative Colitis—III: The Nature of the Psychologic Processes," *American Journal of Medicine*, August 1955, 649–61; M. A. Price, C. C. Tennant, R. C. Smith, P. N. Butow, S. J. Kennedy, M. B. Kossoff, and S. M. Dunn, "The Role of Psychosocial Factors in the

Development of Breast Carcinoma: Part I. The Cancer Prone Personality," *Cancer* 91(2001): 679–85.

CHAPTER 3

JESUS OUR MODEL

One of the most amazing things about God's grace is that he transforms the most detestable things in life into the greatest of miracles. Dave's transformation is an example of this reality, but the Crucifixion stands throughout history as the ultimate example. What in the entire universe could be a greater atrocity than torturing and murdering the only-begotten Son of God? During the nightmarish twenty-four hours of Jesus's passion, he was stripped, humiliated, mocked, abused, violated, tortured, pierced, and fatally injured. He was left to hang on the cruel and humiliating instrument of death, enduring the most intense and unbearable pain that anyone could possibly experience. From the top of his head to the bottom of his feet, there was not one ounce of Jesus's body spared from excruciating pain.

You probably have knowledge of this already, but let's take a moment and meditate more deeply on just what happened to our Savior on the cross. Inch long thorns thrust into his head would have caused a searing pain beyond even the worst brain traumas or migraines. The slashing of whips brutalized every part of his body, tearing his flesh and leaving him bleeding profusely. His hands and feet, punctured through with heavy spikes, throbbed in agonizing pain. Unable to take in breath, he must have exerted all his remaining strength in order lift his entire body to suck up enough oxygen to survive another moment. His shoulders, hips, and legs would be screaming in pain from the burning

sensation of holding up his body weight. Every muscle would be fatigued beyond exhaustion and every ligament in his body was painfully stretched beyond capacity.

After experiencing complete exhaustion, Jesus breathed his last and died. His agonizing pain finally came to an end. Some medical experts conjecture that his heart ruptured from the intolerable trauma, while others suggest he died of asphyxiation. How ironic that the giver of life and breath should run out of breath himself and that the one that came to deliver us from our infirmities and heal our traumas should absorb immeasurable trauma into his body. What could be more abhorrent and yet so utterly awe-inspiring at the same time? The most detestable event in history has become the greatest of all possible gifts to every human being. “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Mt 8:17). “By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pt 2:24).

None of this makes sense to our rational minds. How can one man’s wounds and trauma heal the rest of humanity? This is utter foolishness! At least that is how human wisdom perceives the cross. But after much resistance, St. Paul came to understand a far superior divine wisdom: “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). I find it ironic that St. Paul, who teaches us the most about following Jesus’s example in suffering, originally did more to transmit suffering than any other of Jesus’s disciples. His transformation from “Saul” to “Paul” is a lesson for all of us in how to follow Jesus’s example in suffering.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF “SAUL” TO “PAUL”

The name “Paul” in the Hebrew language is “Saul.” Saul literally means “Great One.” Saul was a “Pharisee of

Pharisees.” He was highly educated in the Jewish faith and well-respected by his contemporaries. But his pride and self-importance prevented him from seeing the truth about Jesus and his kingdom.

Saul actively participated in the persecution and suffering of Christians. But eventually, Jesus called him to be his follower. He did this on the road to Damascus by letting him know that he was directly hurting himself as well as Jesus: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). In persecuting Christians, Saul was physically wounding Jesus. He was also hurting himself. The expression “kicking against the goads” is a farming term referring to the pointed prongs used by the farmer to keep stubborn oxen moving in the right direction. When the oxen would kick against it, they would receive a flesh wound.

Many of us are like Saul. We kick against the goads and cause our own flesh wounds. We think we are saving the world and ourselves by our own resources, when in actuality we are doing more harm than good. We run from suffering and transmit it to others and are unwilling to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to transform us through our suffering. Through it all, we remain unable to see how our actions are hurting Jesus, ourselves, and others.

After his life-changing encounter with Jesus and subsequent conversion, Saul later came to be known by his Roman name, “Paul.” This name would serve him well in his mission to the Gentiles. But his change in name also reflects a change in his heart. Paul literally means “little one.” This was a fitting change from a name that meant “Great One,” since now he was humbled and wanted only to live for Christ and not himself. Paul discovered God’s grace working powerfully in his weaknesses (see 2 Cor 12:8–10).

We too are called to undergo a similar transformation. No matter how much we have relied upon ourselves and resisted God’s way and his grace, his mercy is always

available to us at any moment. Who would have guessed that my brother Dave, once a self-indulgent heroin addict, would be the one to teach me, our family, and many others how to find Christ in the midst of our pain and suffering? God is amazing. He chooses the little and often despised things of this world to confound the proud and arrogant (see 1 Cor 1:27–28). He desires to transform our worst sins and misery into the most beautiful graces for his glory and our good, if only we are willing to follow Jesus's example.

FOLLOWING JESUS'S EXAMPLE IN SUFFERING

Paul eventually came around to Jesus's divine way of thinking, picking up his own cross and following him all the way to his own martyrdom. His example and exhortations on physical suffering show how much he was personally transformed from his old prideful way of thinking. Thankfully, he passed on this divine wisdom to his beloved followers. He encourages us to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1–2). These words are not just for first-century Christians. We, too, are all called to follow in Jesus's footsteps in our personal suffering and to offer our lives as a living sacrifice. In order to do that, we need to first know how Jesus suffered and what that means for each of us.

As I highlighted in the first chapter, Jesus embraced his suffering with an unwavering faith, an unconquerable hope, and an inexhaustible love for his Father and us. *He suffered for our sake*. In his classic work *Suffering With Christ*, Dom Columba Marmion observes, "In loving us it is His Father He loves; He sees us; He finds us in the Father…. But it was for

us that He bore everything…. He accepted his sufferings voluntarily and from love."[15]

From beginning to end, Jesus kept *faith* by setting his heart on his Father's will. He lived, suffered, and died in communion with his Father. Giving no sway to fear, he remained totally reliant on the power of the Holy Spirit to fortify him. He obeyed his Father wholeheartedly, trusting him every step of the way. Even when that plan led him to the intense suffering of the cross, Jesus did not allow fear to derail him from following the Father's plan. Through everything that happened, he abandoned himself completely into the Father's hands with childlike faith and trust. He expressed his desire not to suffer but ultimately yielded to every word the Father spoke, never wavering or shrinking back. Through every hardship, he continued to grow in trust, even learning "obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8).

Jesus drew his strength by *hoping* in the good things to come. While many of us lose perspective and give into despair in the midst of our suffering, Jesus kept his eyes focused on the "joy that was set before him" (Heb 12:2). He refused to believe the enemy's lie that his suffering was the end of the road and continued to hope in the promise that victory would come through his agonizing death. He knew that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" and that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:18, 21).

Jesus's unwavering faith and steadfast hope enabled him to continue to give and receive boundless *love* through everything he went through. Love for his Father and the Holy Spirit motivated him. This love was tangibly demonstrated to everyone around him, beginning with his mother and his beloved disciple, along with the women who

accompanied him to Calvary, the thief on the cross, his torturers and betrayers, and to the entire human race. In the face of brutal torture, he blessed those who cursed him and prayed for those who spitefully abused him (cf. Lk 6:28). He offered his body as a living sacrifice for the entire human race and for each of us individually (see Gal 2:20). His entire life was a complete self-offering. The Crucifixion became the ultimate sacrifice of his love for us. In turn, Jesus calls each one of us to become his disciples, taking up our crosses and following him (see Mt 16:24).

TRUE DISCIPLESHIP MEANS TAKING UP OUR CROSS

To be a disciple of Jesus means that we follow his example in every aspect of our lives. That includes following Jesus's faith, hope, and love in the face of our physical suffering. It is here that we are often most tempted "to kick against the goads." Many of us, without opening our hearts to God's grace, become self-absorbed in our suffering. We easily lose faith and become self-reliant. Or we look for some "quick fix" apart from God. When we take our eyes away from our heavenly Father and the good that is promised, our hope slowly fades away. We eventually settle into hopeless resignation, believing "this is as good as it gets." When our faith and hope weaken, we gradually lose our strength and, with it, the capacity to love. We turn in on ourselves, becoming self-centered, doing whatever we can to satiate ourselves in our pain, not caring how it is affecting us or those around us. My brother Dave turned to heroin at first. Many of us use various kinds of drugs or other means to numb our pain. But there is a better way.

When Christians under Peter's care were suffering physically due to persecution, he pointed to Jesus as the

prime example for how to suffer “in the flesh.” He exhorted them: “Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourself with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer by human passions but by the will of God” (1 Pt 4:1–2).

I have often pondered this statement by St. Peter—that “whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” Obviously there is nothing magical about physical suffering, but it does get our attention like few things in life. It often stops us in our tracks and causes us to reprioritize. It can also make us more aware of our frailty and our desperate need for God. If in the midst of our pain we seek God’s grace and follow Christ’s example, imitating his faith, hope, and love, we will find ourselves reorienting our desires and being set free from sin in the process.

Suffering in union with Christ for the love of others gives us purpose. We live for Christ and not just for ourselves. Holy suffering also transforms our earthly desires and helps us focus on God’s will. In the process of embracing our suffering, the power that sin holds over us is progressively broken. I have witnessed this transformation in the lives of many people. None have touched me more than experiencing it with my brother Dave, my wife, Margie, and my father (also named Dave). I watched each of them go through a process of transformation through their physical suffering. They each became more trusting in God and more loving to those around them. They exuded hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. The Holy Spirit does some of his greatest work when we are incapacitated and in the throes of pain. St. Paul shows us how God’s grace is perfected in our weaknesses and sufferings.

GOD’S GRACE IN OUR WEAKNESS

St. Paul experienced incredible physical suffering as a disciple of Jesus. He was blinded for a brief time after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Later, he endured what apart from Christ would be unbearable physical hardships. I am amazed at his ability to keep focused on Jesus in the midst of these physical afflictions:

> Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Cor 11:23–27)

We often skip through those verses of Scripture rather quickly (at least I do) without really taking to heart all that Paul suffered and had to endure. He experienced the depths of physical pain. And it wasn't all from events in the past. He must have carried the pain of those beatings and infirmities with him in his body. Paul was a man of great faith. He saw many people healed of every kind of affliction and even saw dead people get up and walk at a simple command. But when he cried out for relief from his own affliction, he received a very different answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

Jesus, our Divine Physician, did not refuse to heal Paul. He answered his prayer. But he offered a different kind of remedy than the one Paul was seeking. Jesus set about healing Paul in a much fuller way: by humbling him and bringing him into a deeper communion with God. I am amazed at Paul's trusting and faith-filled response to Jesus, which shows the grace actively working in his life. Listen to Paul's response: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9–10).

This same grace that the apostle Paul received is available to each one of us in our physical suffering and at every moment of our lives. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: "Grace is a *participation in the life of God*. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life" (CCC 1997). This is the goal and purpose of our life: to develop intimacy with the Holy Trinity and to share in their self-giving love (see CCC 221). Sometimes our physical pain is what compels us to seek God more earnestly. Can we say the same, that we are "content," like St. Paul, in the midst of our physical suffering? That takes a lot of grace in our weakness, doesn't it?

I know I struggle a lot in this area. I am rarely rejoicing, and usually complaining (at least to myself), in the midst of my physical turmoil. I do not naturally celebrate my weaknesses and my sufferings for the sake of Christ. My faith, hope, and love are often diminished. Yet I know that Jesus desires to heal me of my pride, just as he did with St. Paul, so that he can infuse me with a greater measure of his presence. I would prefer a different way. It seems like joy and suffering are on different ends of the spectrum. But apparently, in God's world, they are not. Joy in the midst of

our suffering is a promise offered throughout the New Testament.[16]

JOY IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING

After Dave's conversion and before he began to suffer physically with AIDS, he and I would passionately discuss St. Paul's writings on suffering. By then, Dave had suffered a lot in his life and was rejoicing over his self-imposed suffering coming to an end. I had not suffered physically all that much, except for my sports injuries and a few illnesses. But my love for the Scriptures kept confronting me with the centrality of suffering in Christian discipleship. One of the passages that Dave and I discussed was this one I mentioned earlier from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians: "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake (Col 1:24).

Neither Dave nor I could understand how Paul could "rejoice in his sufferings." And why would he even want to? But we both learned a lot after Dave became sick. After watching him offer his physical sufferings to Christ, this passage began to make a lot more sense to me. Until Dave's illness, we both overlooked the phrase "for your sake." This was the hidden key that we had missed: *love*. Paul was not rejoicing in his pain per se. Neither was Dave. Pain really hurts. It is difficult to bear. We naturally want it to go away as soon as possible. Paul, like Jesus, begged the Father to take away his pain. But when his pain didn't go away, Paul still experienced joy through loving others in the midst of his physical suffering. I later realized that Dave did the same. They each experienced God's grace working in and through their weaknesses. They discovered the way of the cross, finding a way in their suffering to share it with Christ for the benefit of others and for their own salvation.

COMMUNION WITH CHRIST IN OUR SUFFERING

This kind of suffering in communion with Christ is called redemptive suffering. It brings good out of evil, hope in the midst of hopelessness, and healing in and through our pain. Redemptive suffering is an infusion of faith, hope, and love from the Holy Spirit in the midst of our suffering. We not only learn from Jesus how he suffered but also share in the same Spirit which allowed his suffering to be a source of grace for others. The same Holy Spirit that gave Jesus the strength to endure the cross and brought him into the glory of his resurrection also resides in us.

When we follow Christ's example and join our sufferings with his, we also experience the power of the Holy Spirit bringing Christ's resurrection life into our suffering bodies. Jesus is our example. Even more, he is the source of our strength and hope. We find our identity and purpose in Christ. We are in Christ, and Christ is in us. Paul endured his sufferings because it was Jesus's resurrection life suffering in and through him. I also saw this up close with my brother Dave, and most recently with my dad and Margie. They each received a supernatural grace in the midst of their suffering.

Like he often does in my life, St. John Paul II provides the understanding to describe what I witnessed with my family members and with many others dealing with severe physical infirmities:

> More than once I have noted that this terrible irreversibility could be accepted not as a calamity, but as a sign of election and vocation, engendering the inner peace and even that joy which comes to a man when he discovers the meaning of his life and his identity, that is the

> name by which God calls him. In my conversations with the most severely tested people, I have often been struck by a serenity, and unexpected happiness in which I could see only a tangible proof of the intervention of grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the man.[17]

These words are not just theory. Many of us have discovered this reality in our own lives and in the people around us. *Calling, vocation, identity*—those words from John Paul II echo what I heard directly from my brother Dave's mouth as he discovered "the meaning of his life." Serenity, unexpected happiness, inner peace, joy—these are all fruits of the Holy Spirit, and they were evident in all three of my family members as they endured their physical suffering. I have witnessed the same fruits of the Spirit in many others going through similar experiences. It is truly, as John Paul II concluded, a "tangible proof of the intervention of grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man."

This, I am slowly coming to understand, is what it means to share in the sufferings of Christ and to follow his example, suffering as he suffered. The grace of God can so infuse our suffering that it can be transformed into a beautiful manifestation of his glory, bearing the enduring fruit of faith, hope, and love. In this next chapter, we see how these same virtues of faith, hope, and love can bring us healing through Jesus, our Divine Physician.

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15 Columba Marmion, *Suffering With Christ* (Fitzwilliam: Loreto Publications, 2015), 38, 40.

16 See Mt 5:12; Lk 6:23; Acts 5:41; 16:23-25; Rom 5:3; 12:12; 2 Cor 6:10; Col 1:24; Heb 10:34; 1 Pt 4:12-13.

17 Pope St. John Paul II, in Jason Evert, *Saint John Paul the Great: His Five Loves* (Lakewood, CO: Totus Tuus Press: 2014).

CHAPTER 4

PHYSICAL HEALING

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to Jesus as the "physician of our souls and bodies" (CCC 1421; see also 1503). This is one of my favorite titles for Jesus because it captures his primary purpose in walking this earth. He became one of us in order to restore each of us, and all of creation, to wholeness. This is the reason he suffered and died. He did not suffer to glorify pain for its own sake. Rather, he endured the most painful of human experiences to take away our infirmities and bear our diseases (see Mt 8:17; Is 53:4). By rising from the dead, he reversed the primordial curse of death with all its horrific consequences. He suffered for the purpose of relieving us from the root cause of all our suffering. Now we can live forever in heaven and seek his healing touch for our physical infirmities here on earth.

Even before his death on the cross, Jesus demonstrated his compassion by healing many people with every kind of physical affliction. He even raised some from the grave to show his supreme authority over the curses of sickness and death. Among those he healed, many had been suffering for quite some time and had probably given up hope. Think of the man at the pool of Bethesda who had been unable to walk for thirty-eight years or the woman with the issue of blood, who spent all her money and hope over twelve years seeking medical care. They found no relief until they encountered the Divine Physician (see Jn 5:5; Lk 8:43). They may have temporarily lost hope and faith, but Jesus lacked

neither. His love met them in their suffering and relieved them of their pain. Can you imagine their gratitude after having their pain and infirmities completely removed after all those years of physical suffering?

JESUS'S MISSION: RESTORING US TO WHOLENESS

As we have already seen, Jesus's mission on earth was for the purpose of restoring us to wholeness. But he never intended that he would be the only one who could participate in relieving human suffering, or that it would stop when he left the earth. He gave this same commission and authority to all his disciples so that his work would continue until the end of history. First, he commanded his twelve apostles, "And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons" (Mt 10:7–8). Later, he extended this authority and mission to the seventy-two disciples, and then after his resurrection, to all his followers (see Lk 10:9; Mk 16:17–18).

Throughout the book of Acts we see Peter and Paul, and many of the other disciples, continue to carry out Jesus's mission to heal the sick and raise the dead. Can you imagine watching them command a sick person to walk or a dead person to come back to life? It really happened and is still happening today. He never intended to leave you and me out from witnessing his healing miracles. Jesus has continued demonstrating his compassion for those who are suffering in every era of history. He continues to work through his Church in many different ways to show that he is near when we are suffering physically: "'Heal the sick!' The Church has received this charge from the Lord and

strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them in her prayer of intercession”[18]

For many centuries, the Church has been at the forefront of caring for the sick and dying. The first nurses were religious sisters, and even today many of the leading hospitals are faith-based (at least in name). And beyond the medical community, the Church continues to bear witness to Christ by ministering to the needs of those suffering physically. Who has not been touched by images of St. Theresa of Calcutta or her communities throughout the world tending to the sick and those near death? What a beautiful witness of caring for Jesus in the distressing disguise of the suffering.

But that is not the only way the Church ministers to those who suffer physically. She also ministers to those with all kinds of afflictions and infirmities through her teaching, sacraments, and prayer. Miraculous healings have been reported in every era of Church history, including in our own, perhaps now more than ever before. A few years ago I was given a book written by a French priest named Father Hebert entitled *Raised from the Dead*.[19] The accounts in the book were astounding, showing that throughout every century those who trusted in God’s word followed Jesus’s commands to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons.”

Most of the saints listed in the book are familiar ones. Many of them suffered significantly in their life, but they also saw the Holy Spirit work through them powerfully in relieving others of their sufferings. Thousands of healings and other miracles are recorded throughout the centuries. Father Hebert accounts for over four hundred saints who raised people from the dead, including St. Benedict, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. Dominic, St. Francis Xavier, St. Martin de Porres, St. Patrick, and the Blessed Mother (through intercession at her shrines). The list goes on. Each of these

saints also prayed for physical healing for many people and saw them restored to full health. The eyewitness accounts of miraculous healings down through the ages are in the hundreds of thousands.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS OF HEALINGS AND MIRACLES

These kinds of healings and miracles have not lessened in our present day. In fact, the number of miracles and healings today are more than ever before in history. Did you know that all over the world these kinds of divine interventions are being reported? Perhaps you have personally witnessed or experienced Jesus's healing in your life or in the life of someone you know. Personally, I have been healed by Jesus several times and have witnessed his healing touch in others as well. Lately, we are seeing more and more physical healings. Just during the week that I write these words, I heard four different accounts of people being physically healed. The eyewitnesses are people I know and trust.

For many years, I had not witnessed physical healings. I had been praying with people for *inner* healing and led courses that taught people how to pray for the healing of the soul. But at the time, I had only witnessed a few people receive healing for physical ailments. Then, one of my fellow teachers in the ministry school began telling me about events that he witnessed on a mission trip in Brazil. He told me I had to come and see for myself. Immediately, I felt stirred by the Holy Spirit and began sensing the call to go on a mission trip. After getting confirmation from my spiritual director, I decided to go with a team from all over the world to Londrina, Brazil, with a ministry called Global Awakening. I believe I was the only Catholic on the seventy-member

team ministering to a largely Catholic (and ex-Catholic) population. What I saw and experienced that week changed my understanding of God's desire to heal us physically.

While in Brazil, I saw hundreds of people suffering from every kind of physical affliction imaginable. Some couldn't walk, some couldn't talk, some were blind, and several others had been deaf since birth. They came to the healing service desperate for Jesus to touch them and with a hope that he would answer their prayers. Each day, our team went out to meet these suffering people and asked Jesus to heal them. We prayed for the healing of shoulder injuries, back problems, cancers; you name a part of the body that could be suffering and we prayed for Jesus to relieve their suffering.

After those prayers, a great number of people reported that they received healing. Every single day we heard at least a hundred testimonies from people who reported their pain was gone and their body was restored to full functioning, including some who were blind, deaf, and unable to walk. It was truly astounding. Witnessing it all expanded my faith considerably. I am now confident that Jesus desires to heal his people physically, as well as emotionally and spiritually, just as he did when he walked the earth. What I saw also encouraged me to step out in faith.

STEPPING OUT IN FAITH

When I returned home and shared my experience, our pastor and a small team began a healing ministry at our local parish. We saw Jesus continue to heal people, much like he did in Brazil. Through these experiences, I have come to realize the depth of his compassion and how much he desires to heal and comfort us in our pain. I personally

witnessed a young boy healed of a serious eye condition. I also heard testimonies from two women healed from stage four breast cancers and another who didn't need a hysterectomy after receiving healing prayer. There have been many more physical healings at our parish healing service in the years since.

During this time, I was also part of a small community that joined with other churches in our city and began to offer citywide healing nights. Then several years later, a few of us felt called to extend Jesus's healing love throughout the country and beyond. That is when the John Paul II Healing Center began. We now get to witness these kinds of physical healings on a regular basis, in addition to rejoicing with many who receive emotional and spiritual healing.

Along with others, my brother Bart serves in this ministry with me. He frequently teaches people around the country how to pray for physical healing. In one recent conference, as he was teaching people to pray for each other, nineteen people reported that they had received some level of physical healing. We realized Jesus still answers even when we are unsure how to pray. Many said that all their pain went away. One woman had a healing of a chronic pain and injury in her foot that would have required surgery. Another man with a brain injury, who came in with crutches, walked out on his own. It never ceases to bring joy to see Jesus touch people and relieve them of their suffering. Some, like those in the Gospels, had suffered for many years yet persevered in hope that Jesus could heal them.

We, and many others, are seeing more and more of this happening around the country as we step out in faith. Recent books by Dr. Mary Healy, Fr. Matthias Thelen, and Damian Stayne attest to this. Healing is a vital part of the New Evangelization, just as it was a vital part of evangelization in the early centuries of the Church.[20] The most exciting part is that it is not just small teams praying

for people. Many who have never prayed for anyone before are seeing Jesus heal through them as they step out in faith.

This is what happened with Dr. Tom Nelson, whom I mentioned in the last chapter. When he attended a men's retreat in Minnesota, we invited all the men to pray for each other. Dr. Tom, a medical doctor grounded in science, admitted he was pretty skeptical at first. Yet he began to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit and saw others receive healing, so he, too, took a tentative step in faith and prayed for the man next to him who had a hip injury. Later that day, the man he prayed for reported to the several hundred men present that his hip was healed. Tears of joy and amazement sprang to Dr. Tom's eyes.

Though he had dedicated his entire life to helping others heal, he had never before prayed for someone through Jesus's authority and saw them healed immediately. When he returned to his friend's house that night, the graces continued. He woke up around three in the morning, once again feeling the Holy Spirit's presence. Wondering why he didn't ask for his shoulder to be healed earlier that day, he realized he could pray right then. He received a major healing that night. Dr. Tom is now praying with many of his patients and seeing God work in amazing ways. His heartfelt compassion for people in their physical suffering compels him to offer Jesus's healing love to many he meets, in and out of his office.

WHY ISN'T EVERYONE HEALED?

As much as any of us may desire to see everyone healed, there are some who do not receive immediate healing when we pray. This, in addition to skepticism, is one of the reasons people shy away from healing ministry. We are afraid that people will be hurt and disappointed if they are not healed. I

understand this concern, because that was my attitude before going to Brazil. I had a lot of confidence in Jesus healing people emotionally and spiritually since I had seen it happen often in my counseling and ministry work. But I lacked confidence that Jesus would heal people physically. I had not witnessed it much, so I believed Jesus must not want to do it very often. I was mistaken. What I saw in Brazil changed my perception to match what is in the Scripture. I now realize that Jesus desires to heal suffering people. “And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Mt 4:23). “And many followed him, and he healed them all” (Mt 12:15).

Does that mean that everyone Jesus encountered was healed? No. Just because Jesus desired to heal, it doesn’t mean that all received healing. When he went to his hometown in Nazareth, the people would not believe in him. Their hardened hearts limited Jesus’s ability to show God’s merciful healing love (see Mt 13:57). But there are also times, like with St. Paul’s thorn in the flesh, where it seems that a request for healing is refused despite being made in faith. If we look closer, though, we see that Paul was healed in a deeper way, while his physical suffering apparently remained. I have come to understand that Jesus always desires to heal every person in *some way*. How he heals and whether we are open to his healing are often the variables. The *Catechism* states this boldly: “Healing infirmities or forgiving sins, Jesus *always responds* to a prayer offered in faith.[21]

Notice the emphasis: Jesus always responds when we approach him with faith. Sadly, not everyone believes they can receive physical healing. And many that do believe do not immediately experience a miraculous healing. Why is that? Is it all a matter of faith and openness? The *Catechism*

offers a balanced perspective on these matters: “Often Jesus asks the sick to believe. He makes use of signs to heal.... And so in the sacraments Christ continues to ‘touch’ us in order to heal us.”[22] “These signs demonstrate in a special way that Jesus is truly ‘God who saves.’”[23] “The Holy Spirit gives to some a special charism of healing so as to make manifest the power of the grace of the risen Lord. But even the *most intense prayers do not always obtain the healing of all illnesses*. Thus St. Paul must learn from the Lord that ‘my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,’ and that the sufferings to be endured can mean that ‘in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of the Body, that is, the Church.[24]’”

It seems the *Catechism* is contradicting itself. Jesus always responds, but not everyone is healed? How is that? And what does all this mean for each of us in our physical pain and suffering? I believe it means we need to come to Jesus in faith and with a deep sense of surrender, trusting that our Divine Physician desires to show his merciful love to us and through us. We can entrust the outcome in his hands and continue to persist in our prayers. He will heal us in some way when we approach him with faith and surrender.

FAITH AND SURRENDER ARE ESSENTIAL

When my brother Dave became sick with AIDS, I had not yet heard of people being healed from this particular disease, either through medicine or through prayer (this was before I went to Brazil). But we had several people approach us as a family and encourage us to pray for his physical healing. To be honest, I didn’t really have much confidence that Dave could be healed of AIDS. I also didn’t know if Dave desired to be healed, or if Jesus desired to heal him. All I knew is

that I wanted my brother Dave to be relieved of his suffering and live a lot longer than he did. So I started to pray for his physical healing during my private prayer time.

Shortly thereafter, I had a dream. In this dream, I sensed Jesus speaking to me personally. I heard these thoughts in my dream: “Dave will not be healed physically, but Dave’s suffering will bring much healing to your family.” As you know by now, this is exactly what happened. Dave was sustained long enough for all of us (including him) to be healed emotionally and spiritually.

A similar thing happened with my wife’s illness. By this time, I had witnessed many physical healings and had confidence in Jesus’s ability and desire to heal any physical ailment. What I didn’t know was how open Margie would be to receiving prayer for her healing. Like Dr. Tom, she was medically trained. Before she became sick, she remained rather skeptical about physical healing apart from medicine, even though she constantly heard stories of healing from the rest of our family. But to my surprise when she came down with her neurological disease, her fear and resistance seemed greatly lowered. Almost immediately, she welcomed our pastor and long-time friend Fr. Michael Foley as he came to offer her the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. A few weeks later, she allowed me to invite another priest friend from Texas to come pray with her and all of us. Both were touching moments, but we saw no noticeable improvements in her physical condition.

I kept asking Jesus how we should pray. Should we pray for physical healing or for her ultimate healing that comes from being united with him in heaven? I knew in either case to pray for all of us, for spiritual and emotional healing. I had no doubt he wanted to bring healing to all of us through this, and I felt surrendered to whatever way he wanted to do it. So every day after sharing Holy Communion together, Margie and I, with one or both of our daughters, would pray for her healing and for all of our healing as a family.

One day, my daughter Kristen, who works with our ministry and is on the core team for Life Teen, sported a Life Teen T-Shirt with these words: “Cure the Sick, Raise the Dead.” She pointed to the words and asked her mom, “Do you believe Jesus can do this?” I was stunned by Margie’s response: “Absolutely!” That in itself was a major spiritual healing. Never before had I heard Margie so strongly affirm her faith in Jesus’s healing power and presence. With that confidence, Kristen then said to her mom, “Let’s pray right now for you to be able to walk today.” (Margie had recently lost her ability to walk, even with our help). Kristen prayed boldly, “Jesus, I know you love my mom so much, please help her walk again today.” We all watched in amazement as Margie took steps again that day. Spontaneously, we all began to praise Jesus. We had a short-lived hope that this was a sign of the beginning of her complete physical healing. Over time, we saw that it was only a short-term healing. But to this day, we are grateful for Jesus’s intervention through that small physical healing, showing us his love and intimate presence and the gift of faith that Margie received.

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE ULTIMATE HEALING

God’s ways are always so beyond our ways (see Is 55:8–9). That is why it is futile for us to try to figure out in our own minds how he wants to heal us. We can simply trust that he desires our wholeness, because that is why Jesus came. He heals everyone who encounters him, and some of the time that involves healing our physical bodies. So we can continue to pray with boldness, asking him to lead us in the way he wants us to pray. With Margie, we still went to the doctors, received all the tests, and followed the doctor’s

advice. But every day we also first and foremost turned to the Divine Physician and prayed for her complete healing.

I can’t say for sure, but I believe our collective prayers spared Margie from many terrible things that usually come with her disease. She was largely free from pain for most of her illness right up until the end, and she never exhibited the most horrible effects associated with her disease. There were some scary moments though. I remember one time when she lost motor control of her arms. It was awful, sitting there helplessly watching her flail her arms. She and I were alone and both us felt overwhelmed. I started to pray and yet saw no immediate change. Then I received the inspiration to turn on some of the music we played many of the nights from Catholic songwriter Audrey Assad. After just a few minutes of listening to the words about Jesus’s healing, the spasmodic movement slowed considerably, and then completely stopped. Those terrible symptoms never appeared again.

As time went on, I felt great peace trusting that God was healing Margie and all of us and that her ultimate healing would be in heaven. At one point during prayer, I felt as though Jesus was asking me, “Would you be willing to risk Margie’s eternal salvation for a temporal healing?” Immediately, I knew the answer. No. Her ultimate healing in heaven is what I always desired. Though I selfishly wanted her with us longer, not only for myself, but for all of us who love her, I would never want to rob her of her ultimate healing in heaven.

When Margie received the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick and last rites in her final days, my heart rested in complete peace. As we all gathered around her, we were able to express our deep but imperfect love for our wife, mother, grandmother, and sister (in-law). In saying goodbye for now, I could hand her over to her true and eternal Bridegroom. I feel great comfort knowing she is being loved by Jesus and her family in heaven like I could never love her

as her earthly husband. In heaven she is completely beautiful, loved, and whole, and without any pain. Why would I not want that for her? Yes, we are sad, but there is healing available for us too, as we will discuss in the next section when we address the topic of *emotional suffering*. From these experiences I have come to discover that redemptive suffering is also healing.

REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING IS HEALING

I hear many people in the Church say that God does not want us to pray for healing because it is better to offer our physical suffering for our own salvation and the redemption of others. I don't see that viewpoint anywhere in Church teaching or in the Gospels. In fact, Pope Benedict XVI says emphatically, "Jesus Christ came to defeat evil at the root, and instances of healing are an anticipation of his triumph, obtained with his Death and Resurrection."[25] We are encouraged to ask, seek, and knock until our prayers are answered (see Mt 7:7–8). Jesus never turned a hurting person away when they came to him. Even St. Paul, who was given a different answer than what he wanted, received an answer to his prayers for healing.

We can still offer our suffering to Jesus for the sake of others and pray for healing at the same time. Most of us don't stop going to our doctor when we are hurting, so why should we quit approaching our Divine Physician? Margie and Dave never had to choose between going to the doctor and "offering up" their suffering. They went to the doctor and allowed God to work through their suffering in the way he desired. We can also go to the doctor and ask the Divine Physician to intervene in his way.

What is redemptive suffering anyway? It is simply the powerful way that Jesus works through our suffering to heal

us and those around us. I am reminded of a story of a young girl, Francesca, who was in my daughter Carrie's confirmation class many years ago. This young girl had cancer and suffered greatly. She eventually died from cancer, but along the way she inspired many with her love and courage. After she died, her father gave a beautiful testimony about her faith. He said whenever she began to hurt terribly, she would offer her pain in prayer for those she knew who were also suffering physically. Each time she did, her own pain would lessen. She was not only helping others, but she herself was receiving a measure of relief from her pain. Her intercession was both redemptive suffering and a form of healing through prayer.

Over the years, I have tried to remember Francesca's example when I am sick or in pain. One time in particular, I remember experiencing severe shoulder pain while I was in adoration. As I focused my attention on Jesus hanging on the crucifix (behind the monstrance), I noticed the contortion of his shoulder and began to realize the intense pain he must have felt in his shoulder while on the cross. As I saw his pain, I remembered Francesca and offered my pain to Jesus and interceded for others in their pain. I have no way of knowing what happened for those for whom I prayed, but I noticed when I left the adoration chapel the pain in my shoulder was completely gone. Nothing is wasted with Jesus. He is our Divine Physician who heals us body and soul.

In ending this section on physical suffering, we will now turn to address emotional suffering and healing in part III, where Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, is our model.

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18 CCC 1509.

19 Alfred Hebert, *Raised from the Dead* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1986).

20 See Mary Healy, *Healing* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015); Fr. Matthias Thelen, *Biblical Foundations for the Role of Healing in Evangelization* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017); Damian Stayne, *Lord, Renew Your Wonders* (Word Among Us Press, 2017).
21 CCC 2616 (emphasis added).
22 CCC 1504.
23 CCC 1507.
24 CCC 1508 (emphasis added).
25 Pope Benedict XVI, *Magnificat* 19, no. 12, 71.

PART III

EMOTIONAL SUFFERING



CHAPTER 5

ATTACHMENT AND LOSS

Most, if not all, of our emotional suffering results from the traumatic losses in our life and *how we respond to them*. The majority of these losses concern broken attachments, whether through death, divorce, or any kind of rejection or separation. Since our emotional life is intricately interconnected with all of our relationships, even natural events like graduations and moving away from one's home or neighborhood can be difficult to navigate.

Overall, the more central the relationship, the more influence it has in shaping our inner world. Our connection with God is by far the most important relationship any of us will ever have. He is the source and sustenance of our life. Apart from him, we would literally cease to exist. Sin separates us from God. It also violates our human nature and creates much of our emotional suffering. Second to God, the intimate bonds we have with our primary relationships (parents, children, spouses, siblings, grandparents, relatives, lovers, and close friends) exert the greatest impact on our emotional well-being. As my mother-in-law used to say, "A mother is only as happy as her least happy child." While this may be a bit overstated, it reveals the profound love and emotional bond between mother and child. St. John Paul II called the bond between mother and child the greatest communion possible in human

relationships but noted that all relationships inside and outside the family are intended for love and communion.[26]

LOVE SEEKS COMMUNION AND COMPANIONSHIP

The Holy Trinity is a family of self-giving love. The relationship that exists among them is one of blessed communion.[27] Since we are made in God's image and likeness, we, too, are created to have intimate relationships marked by self-giving love and holy intimacy. We can't thrive without these kinds of relationships. Even in Paradise, where Adam possessed everything he could ever need or want, including an intimate relationship with God, there was still one essential thing missing: *human companionship*. After God had blessed everything he created, he spoke to this most fundamental need of every human being. His words have echoed down through human history: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gn 2:18). While the reference here is for a marriage partner, the words apply to the entire human race. We all need friendship and companionship with others with whom we can share the joys and sorrows of life.

Our emotional well-being depends, in large part, on how well we fulfill the two great commandments: loving God and loving our neighbor. But to give love, we first have to receive it and be nurtured by it. St. John Paul II spoke often of this fundamental need for love that is the birthright of every human being: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it."[28]

In his insightful book *Befriending the Stranger*, Jean Vanier elaborates on this fundamental need for communion that is endemic to human nature: “Human beings are made for communion. If there is no communion, we close up on ourselves; we are unable to communicate, to enter into the flow of life.”[29] Have you ever noticed this effect in your intimate relationships? Think about a time when you felt deeply loved and emotionally safe with someone you cared about. Your heart most likely opened in greater trust. As a result, you were able to freely communicate your intimate desires, unmet needs, and daily concerns without being paralyzed by the fear of rejection. Trusting relationships like this allow us to express ourselves vulnerably and thus grow in intimacy.

Now think of other relationships where trust is currently lacking and you are not free to express yourself. In circumstances like this, the exchange of love breaks down and you naturally pull back and withdraw from communion. As a result, the flow of communication is suppressed. We all know this experience. It is “normal” in our fallen world, where trust is often broken through sin. These broken relationships are the primary cause of our emotional suffering. On the other hand, when relationships are nurturing and encouraging, we thrive. This is because love is the language of our hearts.

LOVE IS THE LANGUAGE OF OUR HEARTS

Our human emotions, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, express the movements of our hearts either toward love or away from it.[30] Our positive emotions affirm the presence of love, reflecting a deep sense of peace, an increased desire for closeness, and an abiding joy. Our negative emotions, in contrast, signal that love is lacking in our relationships. For

example, when there is a violation of love, we naturally experience anger. Similarly, fear and anxiety arise in us when our love relationships become threatened in some way. Loss of love is universally reflected in sorrow, often accompanied by grief. And finally, when the love we desire is out of reach, we may experience feelings of hopelessness. All these emotions move spontaneously in us, often without our consciousness.

A personal experience of mine this past Thanksgiving helped me realize how much can be going on emotionally below the surface, without our full awareness. Years ago, several of us in our family got tired of superficial interaction when we came together for the holidays, so we decided to develop a family tradition where we could spend some concentrated time sharing more personally with one another. This particular occasion marked the first time our family gathered after the deaths of my wife Margie and our dad, which had occurred two months earlier.

As three generations of the family gathered in my living room (the same room we kept vigil during Margie's dying process), my initial feeling reflected peace and gratitude for our family support. I was also aware of a bit of apprehension, not knowing what to expect. Within a few minutes of intimate sharing, tears began to flow freely around the room as each of us expressed our sorrow over missing our loved ones. Until that gathering I had been feeling exhausted and shut down emotionally, but in our mutual sharing, my heart came alive again. I had no idea how much my grief had remained hidden in my heart. The love and heartfelt sharing of family members created a safe environment for my buried sorrow to come to the surface. I was reminded once again how much our hearts need communion and that our human passions reflect the deeper stirrings of our souls.

HUMAN PASSIONS REFLECT OUR INNER WORLD

We can think of the word *emotion* (e-motion) as “energy in motion.” Our emotions are spontaneous electrical reactions coursing through our bodies, often responding to our thoughts and relational experiences. Perhaps this is why St. Thomas Aquinas refers to these internal reactions as “human passions,” because they are, at first, passive in nature. These visceral responses pass through us and act upon us without our consciously willing them. In that sense, emotions do not necessarily have a moral value. The Church teaches: “In themselves passions are neither good nor evil. They are morally qualified only to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will.”[31] As physical pain indicates that our bodies are in distress, emotions signal the unseen inner workings of our souls.

Because our emotions contain releases of energy, they can also have physical effects in our bodies. If we could observe our emotions traveling throughout the neuro-pathways in our brains and bodies, we would see uniquely organized patterns of energy. With the advances in brain scanning, researchers are now actually able to observe these reactions visibly manifested in different parts of the brain. Recently, researchers at Duke University’s Center for Cognitive Neuroscience found that emotions are constantly being processed in our brain waves. What I found most interesting is that these patterns of electricity in the brain affected different regions. Sorrow was recorded in one region of the brain, anger in another, peace in another.[32]

When our emotions are not expressed in a healthy manner, they can become trapped in our bodies and cause undue emotional suffering for ourselves and others. Over years of accompanying people in my role as a family therapist, I realized how important it was to help people first

identify their emotions and then learn to express them in a constructive way. Failing to effectively communicate emotions frequently resulted in greater separation and emotional distress. I also noticed patterns of how people hold emotions in their bodies when communication was not flowing well. Many would begin talking about unresolved feelings of rejection and put their hands on their chest around their heart area. Those having a difficult time expressing their sorrow would put a hand up to their throat or mouth as if to stop the expression. These unresolved emotions are often indicative of the trauma we experience due to loss and have a profound influence on our relationships.

TRAUMATIC LOSSES INFLUENCE OUR RELATIONAL CAPACITY

You would think as a former family therapist I would be attuned to my own emotional state, but as the recent example of Thanksgiving demonstrates, I still lack awareness of my emotions in those areas where loss has created some level of trauma. When I look back over my life, I can see many different kinds of losses that affected my capacity for communion and my overall emotional well-being. Some of these losses were less obvious, but all were traumatic to one degree or another. The loss of my grandparents and our home at age six (fire); the loss of my relationship with my dad and the breakdown of our family when I was thirteen (divorce); and the losses of my wife, dad, and brother (illness and death) were the most traumatic losses that I can identify. All of them overwhelmed my emotional system and incapacitated my emotional awareness and relational communion to some degree.

But there are many other losses along the way that also impacted my relational capacity profoundly. These include broken trust in relationships with friends and girlfriends during my teenage years, the deaths of other loved ones, and geographical moves that took me away from friends and family. Have you ever examined the ways you have experienced loss throughout your life? Can you identify which of your losses were traumatic and had lasting influence on your ability to trust and to form healthy attachments?

I believe that every broken or severed relationship causes us traumatic emotional suffering in some way. Some of the effects of these losses are temporary and easy to overcome, but others have a lasting impact on our relational capacity if we don't grieve them well. Each loss in some way is a little taste of death, preparing us to let go so that we have the ability to deal with the more traumatic experience of death that we will all inevitably face at some point in life.

LETTING GO AND LETTING GOD

Most of us are familiar with the phrase "Let Go and Let God." It is a key to both spiritual growth and emotional health. Letting go is a way of surrendering our control and our will so that we can trust God and follow his blessed will. Through surrendering, we develop trust in God's presence, protection, and provision, enabling us to receive the grace to face the more difficult losses in our life. On the other hand, fear leads us to increase our control, which then hinders our ability to surrender.

I like to think of trauma as fear and powerlessness in the face of loss, overwhelming our normal capacities to process our emotions. The greater the perceived loss, the more that fear and helplessness engulf us. And yet, as we learn to

trust in God's presence, provision, and protection, our fear and powerlessness diminish. For most of us, this is a slow and gradual process. Learning to trust and let go in the smaller losses throughout our life enables us to face the bigger losses with more peace, knowing that God is present and fully capable.

When my parents divorced and my dad left, I felt emotionally overwhelmed. To survive, I unconsciously took control of my emotions and bottled up my grief. It took me nearly twenty years and a lot of spiritual growth to face that trauma and grieve my dad's leaving. Looking back, I can now see God's hand preparing me (and all of us) to deal with the trauma of my brother Dave's sickness and death. Similarly, in Margie and Dad's dying process, there were many losses along the way that helped each of us learn to let go. This additional grace enabled us to surrender with peace when they died. None of these losses were easy to deal with, but each one strengthened our trust in God.

Margie's neurological illness provided many opportunities for our family to practice letting go because it involved many traumatic losses along the way before she died. At first, she began losing her short-term memory. Then, slowly, she lost her capacity to walk on her own. Eventually, she lost some ability to control her arm movements and could not feed or bathe herself. All these were difficult losses where she and each of us had to learn to surrender our capacities at a deeper level. While each of these losses was difficult and traumatic in its own way, each one also increased our capacity to trust and depend upon God.

Probably the most traumatic loss was the day Margie lost her ability to communicate clearly. When she woke up that morning about two weeks before she died, she tried to speak, but her words came out garbled. I sat there on the bed trying my best to hear what she was saying, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't comprehend what she was trying to say. I was devastated both for myself and for

her. Not being able to know what she needed and how to help her left me feeling cut off from her emotionally.

The sudden realization that she would have no way of being understood and would feel completely alone in her emotional suffering made me very sad. Feeling totally helpless and overwhelmed with sorrow, tears sprang to my eyes. Later that morning as I spent time in prayer, I poured out my sorrow to Jesus. I sensed his compassion and understanding and intuited this simple message from him in response: “You can still communicate with your eyes and touch.” A little while later, my sister Kathy called and affirmed the same message. That was all the encouragement I needed in that traumatic circumstance to bring my heart back to peace and to regain my trust in God. From that point forward, Margie and I had a beautiful non-verbal communication that in some ways increased our intimacy and communion right up to the time of her death. From the first days of our dating, I always loved holding Margie’s hand, but in those last days, we both experienced a sweet tenderness as we maintained our communication through touch.

Though difficult, there is something beautiful about the declining self-reliance that occurs when people get sick or age. Their need for extra care brings us back in touch with our earliest experiences of bonding and the non-verbal ways of expressing love that set the foundation for our earliest attachments. Simple gestures like gazing, holding hands, and touching are profoundly intimate experiences that are increased during these times. Additionally, basic caregiving activities such as feeding, bathing, and clothing bring us in touch with our early experiences of attachment. During Margie’s last days, as well as those for my dad and brother, we were able to re-experience these intimate ways of communicating. With Margie, it reminded me of the early days of our dating. With Dave and my dad, it brought me

back to my childhood, when these primary attachments were being formed.

PRIMARY ATTACHMENTS: SECURE LOVE AND TRAUMATIC LOSS

Attachment is an enduring emotional bond that influences our capacity for relationship across time.[33] Some of the most important attachments are formed early in life with our primary caregivers (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and others entrusted with our care). These healthy attachments enable us to foster life-giving communion throughout our life in all our subsequent relationships. They provide us with an underlying sense of being securely loved. But when these early attachments are not secure, we often struggle throughout our life, finding it difficult to establish stable and intimate bonds in any of our relationships.

Traumatic loss can happen very early in life, even in the womb. Some children experience traumatic loss before they are born, when their parents have some ambivalence or fear of having a child. I have encountered many people who intuitively knew they were “not wanted” by their parents. This knowledge has remained with them throughout their life in the form of a deep and pervasive sense of rejection. This wound of not feeling wanted or accepted subsequently influenced future relationships by making it hard to trust love and kindness when it was offered. I also know many who have experienced traumatic wounds of abandonment early in life; some lacked healthy intimate communion with one or both parents, while others were given up for adoption or placed in foster care. Even when placed for adoption in good, loving families, adopted and foster children frequently

have trouble forming healthy attachments throughout childhood and later in life.

This communion between parent and child is so vital that any kind of separation may cause traumatic emotional suffering. Even when children have healthy attachment with their parents, the birth of the next sibling can be a difficult adjustment. Though I don't remember the event personally since I was just a toddler, my mom told me that I had a jealous reaction when my sister Kathy was born. Apparently, I wasn't ready to give up my favored position of being "the baby." I see this same kind of reaction in my grandchildren as their next sibling displaces them. It seems to threaten their favored place as the primary receiver of love and nurture. Though it is a natural transition, it still constitutes a loss during a time when we are relatively helpless to deal with the internal consequences. For some, these early losses in childhood are easily negotiated. For others, they can be traumatic and leave wounds that may affect us for a lifetime.

Some of the best research in the field of psychology shows how vital early attachments can be in forming patterns of relationship throughout life. Attachment researchers have identified several different attachment styles developed in early childhood which exhibit very different kinds of responses to loss. Primarily, these styles have been grouped into three categories: secure attachment, anxious attachment, and defensive detachment.[34]

> **Secure attachment** is present when children receive healthy nurturance and develop a secure bond of love and trust with their parents and other caregivers. They normally exhibit some distress when their parent or caregiver leaves but they are able to quiet themselves, trusting that their caregiver will return. As they grow and develop,

those with secure attachments are able to grieve losses later in life in a relatively healthy manner. Not getting stuck in grief or mistrust, they are able to establish bonds of trust and intimacy in future relationships.

Anxious attachment is evident in children when they are not securely attached due to inconsistent care by their primary caregivers. When their parent or other primary caregiver departs for any time, they become extremely anxious and emotionally upset. They have a hard time quieting themselves. They may remain angry, clingy, or inconsolable when their parent returns. Unless healing occurs somewhere along the way, these children grow up to form unhealthy relationship bonds, often becoming angry or overly dependent when confronted with uncertainty or relational stress. When children grow up with this attachment pattern, they may find it difficult to fully trust in relationships and can become highly anxious later in life during times of traumatic loss. Their grieving process is often complicated and heightened by their insecure attachments. They may have more trouble letting go than those with secure attachments.

Defensive detachment is manifested in emotional disconnection from their parents or primary caregivers. Infants or young children with this attachment style are often deeply wounded by early loss and abandonment. As a result, they will avoid or ignore their primary caregiver and show little or no emotion when their caregiver departs or returns. Left unhealed, people growing up with this kind of detachment can go through

> life finding it difficult to develop a healthy interdependence in their primary relationships. As a result, they may remain emotionally cut off from intimate relationships throughout life. Losses later in life may seem to have little effect, as they never formed an attachment in the first place. Their grieving process is often hidden, even from themselves. But relational losses may still affect them by causing them to withdraw and isolate even more. In some cases, traumatic losses can begin a healing process by bringing them back in touch with their earliest traumas.

As you can see from these three very different kinds of attachment, how we respond to loss in relationships can vary considerably from person to person. The inevitable trauma of loss can be increased or decreased depending on our attachment styles as well as our own personality and individual choices. Because we live in a fallen world, no one is completely secure in any relationship and thus any of us may exhibit all three kinds of attachment styles in different relationships and at different times. Even those relatively secure early in life may exhibit elements of one or both insecure patterns of attachment (anxious attachment or defensive detachment) later in life.

It is also possible to experience changes in our attachment styles as time goes on. Much of this is dependent on the health of our ongoing relationships and our experience of God’s healing love. In my life, I can see aspects of all three attachment patterns. I suspect the same is true for you in your history of dealing with losses. As we examine our life history, we can see the source of much of our emotional suffering throughout our lifespan.

EMOTIONAL SUFFERING THROUGHOUT OUR LIFE HISTORY

As you reflect back over your life, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you will be able to better understand your attachment patterns and how you responded to losses. This information will be valuable in coming to terms with your emotional suffering and seeing where you are in need of more emotional healing. I offer my personal history of dealing with losses as a way for you to consider your own development of attachment patterns and how you responded to losses throughout your life.

As I look back over my personal life history, I see evidence that I felt relatively secure in my early childhood attachments with both of my parents and with my extended family. I loved my parents and knew they both loved and cared for me. My jealousy over the birth of my sister is an example of me exhibiting some diminishment of security, though this reaction is also a healthy emotional reaction when secure attachments are threatened in any way.

Later, when we lost our home and relatives in the fire, I now see that I detached my heart in some ways as a way of coping with the trauma of that event. It’s difficult to tell how much of that came from the trauma directly versus the result of my father’s subsequent detachment and the partial loss of communion I felt with him. In either case, I notice in family photos a significant change in my countenance and posture from before and after the fire. I can see in the photos that my sense of emotional well-being changed significantly after that traumatic event.

For most of the years through grade school, my attachments remained relatively secure, but as conflicts intensified between my parents, I began to feel more anxious in my attachment with my father. When he later moved to another city, I would lay in bed feeling waves of

fear and anxiety, wondering if he was alive or dead and missing him terribly. During that same time in late grade school and early high school, I experienced some painful betrayals from my first two girlfriends, my closest friends, and from my coach and teacher in grade school. All of this led to me to harden my heart to protect against the pain, resulting in more defensive detachment.

I was mostly unaware of the damage these traumas caused to my capacity to give and receive love until after I met Margie and fell in love with her. Before marriage and while dating her, I was constantly afraid of losing her and too easily closed my heart in the face of a threat or conflict. Several years into our marriage, anxiety over losing her (shadows of my parent's divorce) triggered a panic attack, which then led me into therapy. This in turn prompted me to finally start dealing with my wounded and well-defended heart.

During my time in therapy, I realized that I had never grieved my dad's leaving and my parent's divorce, or worked through the betrayals with my ex-girlfriends, friends, and coach. Therapy was very beneficial in helping me identify and begin to express my buried emotions. It prepared me for even deeper healing later on. This healing came through a spiritual retreat and subsequent healing experiences with my dad and family. By the time my brother Dave became sick about five years later, I was able to grieve freely. I am grateful to God that during his sickness and dying process I could more readily express my emotions as I gave and received love. I finally understood what Jesus meant when he said: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt 5:4).

As we will see in the next chapter, *Our Lady of Sorrows* is the most blessed of all mourners. She shows us how to walk through our losses in communion with Jesus while continually trusting the Father and relying on the abundant graces from the Holy Spirit.

26 Pope St. John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 7.
27 See CCC 221.
28 Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 10.
29 Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005).
30 See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 22-48.
31 CCC 1767.
32 Ashley Strickland, "This is what emotions look like in your brain," CNN, http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/06/health/spontaneous-emotions-brain-scans/index.html.
33 See John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss, vol. 1* (New York: Basic Books); See also M. D. S. Ainsworth, "The Development of Infant-Mother Attachment," in B. Cardwell and H. Ricciuti, eds., *Review of child development research*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 1-94.
34 See Ainsworth, "The Development of Infant-Mother Attachment."

CHAPTER 6

OUR LADY OF SORROWS

Most of us naturally turn to our mothers for emotional support during times of loss. This is especially true during our formative years if we have a secure attachment with our mom. One example in my personal life stands out. It was my first day of school, only three months after losing our home and family members in the fire. Anxious about leaving home for the first time and going into a strange environment, I held tightly to my mom's hand as we walked down the long corridor to my classroom. Just her warm presence comforted me and gave me the courage to face my fears of encountering a whole new world. With my mom's support, I was able to overcome my fear of leaving home and quickly adjust to my new surroundings.

At the time, I failed to recognize this event as a kind of loss or consider what my mom might be going through. She was simultaneously experiencing separation from me, her son, who was leaving home for the first time. It must have been an extremely difficult time in my mom's life, having just lost family members, our home, and all our possessions in the fire. I would learn many years later that these losses were complicated by my mom's deeply rooted attachment wounds which made it more challenging for her to let go in the face of any kind of loss.

As a young child, I had no awareness of the many painful losses my mom had endured in her childhood. I would

discover much later that she experienced traumatic losses growing up, beginning at six months old, when she was put in an isolation ward in the hospital due to contracting diphtheria. Being completely separated from her parents for six weeks during that most crucial time of parent/child bonding must have been terrifying for her. I can now see how this abandonment wound made it difficult for her to let go of loved ones throughout her life. This time of loss must have touched into her deeper wounds, yet she remained present to me in that moment and gave me strength. I am grateful for her selfless love and support.

Sending me off to grade school was a relatively minor loss for my mom, as she still had other children at home to care for throughout the day. It would prove to be much more challenging for her as the years passed, sending us each off to college and experiencing the loss when we left home and started our own families. These are all normative separations that must be navigated by most every family. But for my mom they were complicated by her unresolved attachment wounds from childhood and by her difficult emotional trials as an adult. She experienced some pretty life-shaking losses, including some childhood abuse, my dad abandoning her with seven children, my brother Dave's illness and premature death, and her father's death. I can only imagine how painful those losses were and continue to be for her at some level. From what she has shared over the years, each one of them was excruciatingly difficult. Thank God she has had a strong faith and good support system to get her through each one of these traumatic losses.

My mother's devotion to Jesus and his mother, Mary, throughout her life has been her biggest source of strength and consolation. Through all her trials and traumas, Mary has been a shining example showing my mom and all of us how to respond to loss while remaining in communion with Jesus.

MARY IS OUR MODEL FOR FACING LOSS

Mary is the first and most faithful disciple of her son, Jesus. Therefore, she is our best role model for how to face emotional suffering while remaining securely attached with him. As Simeon had prophesied, Mary's heart would be "pierced by a sword" at the cross and at other times in her life (see Lk 2:34–35). During Jesus's crucifixion, she was not an idle bystander to her Son's suffering but an active participant in it. John Paul II expresses this clearly: "After the events of her Son's hidden and public life, events which she must have shared with acute sensitivity, it was on Calvary that Mary's suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view but which was mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world."[35]

St. John Paul II's insight about Mary's suffering with Jesus is mirrored in many families. As my mother-in-law said, mothers naturally suffer as their children suffer because of their intimate communion. My experience seeing my mom's emotional suffering gives me a little window into what it might have been like for Mary to stand at the foot of the cross. My mom held it together for us during the day but cried herself to sleep for months after my dad left. I saw how painful it was for her to see my brother Dave suffering and then die. These personal events provide at least a small window into what it must have been like for Mary to stand at the foot of the cross. She stood there and helplessly watched her beloved son endure intense cruelty and unspeakable suffering. Have you ever really pondered what she experienced watching Jesus suffer and then holding him in her arms after he died? The magnitude of her emotional suffering would be off the charts in any measure of traumatic events.

Knowing the comfort and reassurance my mother gave me at different times in my life provides the smallest of insights into how Jesus must have been comforted by his mother's presence at the foot of the cross (though obviously there is no comparison between my suffering and his). Jesus's anguish must have been intense beyond compare. Yet he remained deeply aware of his mother's love and presence. At the same time, he actively cared for her in her suffering.

Can you remember any life situations where you saw your mother suffer with and for you or your siblings? Or if you are a mother, have you realized how intensely you have suffered while your children undergo any kind of suffering? Maybe the suffering came with an injury, an illness, a broken heart, or even a tragic death. Whatever the reason for your loss, there is no suffering like a mothers suffering, because there is no earthly communion like the bond between a mother and her children. A child's suffering is shared by his mother in ways that the rest of the world can't totally comprehend.

My brother Dave seemed to have an intuitive sense of my mom's suffering throughout his illness and in anticipation of his death. I saw just how much he felt her pain one day when Dave and I prayed the Stations of the Cross on Friday during Lent. It was almost exactly a year before he died. The Stations were especially meaningful to us that year because the reality of Dave's sickness and suffering enabled us to connect more directly to Jesus's passion.

As we journeyed from station to station sharing in Jesus's passion, Dave stopped and spent an inordinate amount of time at the fourth station where "Jesus meets his mother." When I started to move on to the next station, Dave remained firmly planted before the carved image of Jesus and his mother on the road to Calvary. As I looked over to see why Dave wasn't following my lead, he seemed lost in

deep contemplation. I noticed a tear rolling down his face and looked at him with an inquisitive glance. Until that moment, I hadn't remembered seeing Dave cry since childhood. He simply said in a soft voice, "I don't know how I am going to face mom while I am dying." Dave's words touched my heart. There was nothing I could say. I could only nod my head and move on to the next station. But in that moment, I gained a greater appreciation of the painful sword that would pierce both mother and son as they intimately shared this sorrow together. I was thinking of two pairs of mothers and sons: Jesus and his mother along with Dave and our mother.

I realized in that moment that Our Lady of Sorrows was not just a pious devotion. It became more real to me that Mary's only Son's traumatic suffering and death involved an unspeakable emotional suffering for her. From this insight gleaned praying the Stations with Dave, I came away with a greater appreciation for why our Blessed Mother has been referred to throughout history as Our Lady of Sorrows. It is because she accompanied her Son in all of his sufferings and is ready to console us in ours as well.

OUR LADY OF SORROWS CONSOLES US IN OUR SUFFERING

Over the centuries, Mary has been recognized by many titles. The one title that best captures the depth of her emotional suffering and compassion is Our Lady of Sorrows. Church Tradition formally identifies seven sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, including these traumatic events: the prophecy of Simeon (see Lk 2:34–35), the flight into Egypt (see Mt 2:13), losing Jesus in the Temple (see Lk 2:43–45), Mary's meeting with Jesus on the way to the cross,[36] Jesus's crucifixion (see Jn 19:25), taking Jesus down from the cross

(see Mt 27:57–59), and Jesus's burial (see Jn 19:42). All of these events involve the intimate relationship between mother and Son through all the trials they walked through together.

"Our Lady of Sorrows" undoubtedly experienced other sorrows throughout her life as well, in addition to these seven sorrows with her Son. Sacred Tradition speaks of Mary's separation from her parents as a young girl and the death of her beloved husband, Joseph. She would have also grieved when her parents, Joachim and Ann, died. Mary's suffering throughout her life also prepared her to be the most compassionate mother for all of her spiritual children. "The word compassion derives from the Latin words *cum* and *patior* which means to suffer with."[37] That is why Our Lady of Sorrows is also known as Our Lady of Compassion. She knows intimately all the ways we suffer emotionally. In experiencing many traumatic losses throughout her life, she feels heartfelt compassion for us in all the ways we suffer. Let's examine just a few of those ways.

Having been separated from her parents at a young age, Mary identifies with all children who have lost their parents for any reason as well as the parents who have lost their children. She offers hope and comfort to orphans, foster children, adoptees, children of divorce, and those sent off to live with relatives or in boarding schools. She extends her motherly care to all but with a special closeness and compassion to those who have lost their mothers for any reason. Mary flourished during this time of separation from her parents because she constantly worshipped God. She teaches all children to do the same. St. John Paul II and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who both lost their mothers at a young age, learned to love Jesus passionately in part by claiming Mary as their mother and following her example.

Mary, along with Joseph, had to leave home to flee to Egypt when Jesus was a baby. As a result, she has intimately

experienced the multiple losses inherent in the life of refugees. She lost family and friends, the security of her home, country, and possessions. Thus, she remains close to all the refugees and all those who have lost home and community from natural disasters such as fires, hurricanes, or tornadoes.

When Jesus was twelve, Mary and Joseph lost Jesus for several days (when he remained in the Temple). It was the beginning of a deeper letting go for all of them. Anyone who has gone through painful separations with their children knows what Mary experienced in those days of anxiety until she located him. Thus, she identifies with all mothers and fathers who go through the process of losing their children for any reason, including those surrendering their children to God as they become independent. Our Lady of Sorrows teaches all of us how to let go with an abundance of grace.

We don’t know when, but Mary also lost her husband, Joseph, to death and experienced not only her own grief but accompanied Jesus in grieving his earthly father. I can too easily imagine her grief, having recently lost my spouse to death and feeling the pain of our children and grandchildren. As a result of her suffering in this way, she is close to all widows and widowers and their children and grandchildren. Our Lady of Sorrows gives us all courage and a beautiful example of hope in the midst of our grieving.

Mary also lost both of her parents, Anne and Joachim, when they died. At whatever age, the death of a parent is a huge loss. I am seeing this pain in the lives of my children right now. And having recently buried my father, I know the void Mary must have felt in the loss of her parents. Mary, along with the Holy Spirit, comes to comfort us in all our mourning.

And finally, during Jesus’s passion and death, Mary endured tremendous emotional suffering watching her Son undergo all his physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. She would experience the helplessness of watching him be

tortured, mocked, and ridiculed. She would experience great loss in not being able to protect him from abuse, and later, she would watch him die a horrible death and then hold him in her arms and bury him. Our Lady of Sorrows remains close to all of us as we see our family members go through any kind of torment and trauma. She identifies fully with every parent who has lost a child.

In all these ways and more, she is truly our compassionate mother who shares in our sorrows and has a tender heart for us in our suffering.

“I AM YOUR MERCIFUL MOTHER”

During an apparition in the sixteenth century in a Mexican village, Mary (Our Lady of Guadalupe) revealed her identity to Juan Diego and to the whole world: “I am your merciful Mother, the Mother of all who live in this land and of all mankind. I will hear the weeping and sorrows of those who love me, cry to me, and have confidence in me, and I will give them consolation and relief.” These words of comfort from Our Lady, spoken directly to Juan Diego, also speak to each of us when we are experiencing emotional hardship. Read them slowly and allow her words of comfort to “penetrate your heart” in any area where you are currently undergoing emotional difficulties:

> Hear and let it penetrate your heart, my dear little one.
> Let nothing discourage you, nothing depress you.
> Let nothing alter your heart or your countenance.
> Am I not here, who am your Mother?
> Are you not under my shadow and protection?
> Am I not your fountain of life?
> Are you not in the folds of my mantle?
> In the crossing of my arms?

> Is there anything else that you need?
> Do not fear any illness or vexation, anxiety or pain.[38]

These are beautiful and touching words from a mother whose heart is totally dedicated to caring for her children. Notice she identifies herself as the mother of Juan and "all who live in this land and of all mankind." Along with Juan Diego, you and I are her "dear little ones" whom she desires to comfort as only a loving mother can. We all need to hear and receive these words of consolation from our Blessed Mother. Yet at times our emotional wounds, and the barriers we use to guard our hearts, can make it difficult to trust and receive this kind of tenderness and compassion. That is why she urges us to "let it penetrate your heart." Are we too proud, doubting, or wounded by past experiences to receive her motherly love?

Our Lady of Sorrows is compassionate beyond any capacity of our earthly mothers (or fathers for that matter) to show us compassion. She suffers everything with a pure heart of love, which enables her to be with us in all of our emotional distress. She hears our cries, nurtures us, and protects us. She admonishes us to keep our hearts steady and shows us that we don't need to be afraid. Her presence reassures us that everything will be OK. In some mysterious way, she even holds us in her arms. ("Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms?")

We each have had different experiences with our mothers and motherly figures. For some of us, our mothers have been compassionate and have shown us a good image of Mary. For others, our mothers have not been there for us in our suffering and losses in the way that we need. Sometimes our mothers can give us a poor model of courage and of a mother's love. But in whatever way we have experienced motherly care, good or bad, none of us

have been loved the way our Blessed Mother is capable of loving us.

My mom is generally very compassionate. She has been especially present and suffered with me during this time of Margie's illness and death, and for the rest of our family with our dad. She recently was on the verge of tears as I spoke to her on the phone, sharing her compassion for our family and me. But she knows she is not able to comfort me the way that only the Blessed Mother is able to. I also appreciate that my mom is giving me space to grieve and has turned her compassion into prayer. She told me she has been praying the Rosary for my family and me twice a day since she first heard of Margie and dad's illnesses. She came to both of their funerals and has walked the journey with us every step of the way, though she herself is also grieving.

Despite all this compassion and prayer from my mom, I still find myself a bit guarded with her and even have a hard time freely receiving the tenderness of the Blessed Mother. My pride, past wounds, and broken trust have all contributed to layers of self-protection around my heart. Past wounds from my mom, when she looked to me to meet her emotional needs, have made it harder for me to trust her compassion and have also been a filter through which I see the Blessed Mother. I want to open my heart to them, but something still gets in the way.

I do not say this with bitterness or resentment but with compassion for my mom, as I have worked through my hurt and resentment for the ways my needs weren't met. I now realize my mom was merely passing down what she had received from her mother and father. Margie and I have done the same with our children; we have passed on to them both our love and our brokenness. All parents do the same. The chain reaction actually started with Adam and Eve; we all descend from a fallen race. Remember Sister Miriam's maxim? "Suffering that is not transformed is

transmitted.” We all have emotional suffering that has not yet been transformed. Unfortunately, we transmit this unresolved suffering to our children and to all our loved ones. As a result, many of us are poor examples of how to deal with loss.

The Blessed Mother is the lone exception to this pattern of mothers transmitting emotional baggage to their children. She is the consummate mother because her heart is filled only with purity, tenderness, and compassion.

MARY’S BEAUTIFUL, PURE, AND TENDER HEART

Mary’s motherly heart is beautiful in ways beyond that of our earthly mothers’. Having been spared original sin in advance through the grace of her Son’s death, she remained pure of heart through everything she suffered. As the angel Gabriel pronounced at the Annunciation, she is “full of grace” (Lk 1:28), which means she fully participates in God’s life of self-giving love. Mary’s strength and compassion come from her intimate communion with God, which is unparalleled in human history. She is the beloved daughter of the Father, the receptive spouse of the Holy Spirit, and the immaculate mother of the Son. This intimacy with God fortified her throughout her life, enabling her to face all her losses with the same fullness of grace. This was not just a momentary state.

Through her *fiat* (meaning “let it be”) at the Annunciation, when she said yes to God, she surrendered to his will in the midst of all the joys and sorrows that would come across her path, including the willingness to allow her heart to be pierced by her Son’s suffering. Her trust, hope, and courageous love enabled her to readily let go and surrender in the face of all her losses. At the cross and

throughout her life, she responded to each loss with the utmost graciousness. When she went to Egypt and left behind her home and everyone she loved except Jesus and Joseph, she responded with trusting obedience. When she lost Jesus in the Temple, though deeply concerned, she was able to give Jesus over to do the Father's will. At the foot of the cross, her presence strengthened her Son as well as the rest of her spiritual children accompanying her there (John, Mary Magdalene, etc.). Though she must have been overwhelmed with anguish, she kept her heart open in love and kept her comforting gaze fixed upon her beloved Son. Even in times of deep sorrow and suffering, she was able to maintain the joy of the Holy Spirit as her strength (cf. Neh 8:10). This strength gave her the ability to mourn with hope.

"YOUR GRIEF WILL BECOME JOY"

Before entering into his passion and death, Jesus gathered his disciples, as well as his mother, into the *Cenacle*, or Upper Room. Preparing them for what was about to take place, he spoke these sobering words filled with both deep sorrow and undying hope: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (Jn 16:20). He then went on to elaborate using the analogy of labor and childbirth: "When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (Jn 16:21–22).

As I read those words, I can't help but think of Mary as the "woman in labor." She anguishes in birth pangs because her hour has arrived. This is the hour that has been

prophesied since before Jesus was first born into the world. Now he will be reborn into eternal life. Her heart, like her Son's and all the disciples', is filled with grief. No one desires to go through this labor, but it is worth it because it opens us to precious new life. Though we have no record of Jesus's intimate conversations with his mother alone, we at least know of this promise to her because she was present in the Upper Room: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

In calling her Our Lady of Sorrows, the Church doesn't mean that Mary walked around in misery and sorrow all her life. We believe she was always filled with the Holy Spirit, the source of love and joy. Thus, she remained full of love and experienced joy throughout her life. This love and joy is what gave her strength in times of great suffering. Though she spent much of her life without her parents, her husband, and her only child, she did not turn in on herself in self-pity, or angrily blame our heavenly Father for taking them away from her. Instead, her grieving was filled with hope (see Rom 5:3–5; 8:18, 28; 1 Thes 4:13). This hope and trust in God's goodness and faithfulness helped to expand her heart in love for others.

Mary would have been intimately familiar with the entirety of the Old Testament. And she would have regularly prayed the psalms, including these verses from Psalm 30:

> You have turned my mourning into dancing;
> You have loosed my sackcloth
> and clothed me with gladness,
> that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
> O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.
> (Ps 30:11–12)

Can you imagine the depths of Mary's weeping as she watched her Son die? But even more so, can you envision her immense joy and dancing in beholding his face again

after the Resurrection? Even now in heaven I believe her heart is overflowing with joy and gladness, being with him forever in all his glory. This is a joy that no one can take away, just as Jesus promised.

The hope of resurrection life allowed Our Lady of Sorrows to withstand her immense suffering and all the torments of watching Jesus die on the cross. Like him, she was only able to endure the cross because of the joy of the Holy Spirit living within her and the joy to be revealed at seeing her Jesus after the Resurrection (cf. Jn 14:16; Gal 5:22; Heb 12:2). She shows us through her *fiat* how to turn our mourning into joy.

LIVING MARY'S "FIAT" IN OUR LIVES

Mary becomes our model in dealing with emotional suffering because she teaches us to mourn and let go with love, peace, and joy. Her *fiat* shows us how to say yes and trust in the face of all our losses. I saw this happen throughout my brother's sickness and death. The Blessed Mother played a significant role in his life and especially in his dying process. Dave began his life by sharing a birthday with Mary, September 8. He always cherished a relationship with the Blessed Mother, even during those years he ran away from Christ and the Church. Once he turned back to his faith, his devotion to her helped sustain him through his illness. He would regularly pray the Rosary and ask for her intercession.

Every time we would care for him when he was sick, by feeding him, bathing him, or offering to bring him to the bathroom, he would simply put is right thumb up and say, "Fiat." We could never figure out what an Italian sports car had to do with our desire to offer him help. But he seemed

willing to do what we were asking, so we took it as a sign of acceptance. Through it all, he maintained a joyful attitude.

Dave ended up dying on the Friday before Palm Sunday, which I just recently discovered was also the original feast day of Our Lady of Sorrows. The actual date the year Dave died was March 25, the feast of the Annunciation.

As our family gathered in commemoration of Dave's death a year later on the feast of the Annunciation, the priest gave his entire homily on Mary's *fiat* and how her unconditional yes to God should become the model for all of us in our trials and difficulties. In that moment of revelation, we all looked at each other and smiled. Our smiles were a mixture of joy at the Divine Providence and a tinge of embarrassment that we didn't understand before now how closely Mary had walked with us through Dave's dying process. How could we have missed it all these months? Dave was giving his own *fiat*, just as Our Lady of Sorrows had done. This *fiat* was the key to Mary's peace and joy through everything. Dave was simply following her beautiful example till his last breath.

Like Mary his model, Dave remained open to God during his suffering. He had a crucifix over his bed, keeping his eyes fixed on Jesus's passion in the midst of his own pain, and he would regularly pray the sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary, accompanying Our Lady of Sorrows at the foot of the cross. He remained strengthened in hope by Mary's compassion and love received through the prayers and love of family and community. He was firmly grounded in the knowledge that his body and soul would one day be fully restored in heaven. And with all of this, Dave experienced deep emotional healing and was able to reveal God's love to all who crossed his path. As a result of Mary's example and Dave's *fiat*, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (cf. 1 Thes 4:13). We find joy in the assurance that we will be reunited again in heaven, where "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither

shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more (Rv 21:4).

Heaven is the ultimate healing. But as we pray the Our Father, we ask him to bring heaven to earth so that we can do his will here "as it is in heaven." As we will see in the next chapter, our own *fiat* leads us to imitate Mary by remaining open to God's merciful love and emotional healing.

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35 Pope St. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 25.

36 While this is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, we do know from Scripture that she was present at the crucifixion and likely followed his journey up to Calvary, as Church Tradition tells us.

37 William Saunders, "The Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows," *Arlington Catholic Herald*, 2000, https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-feast-of-our-lady-of-sorrows.html.

38 Suzie Anders, "With St. Juan Diego to the Merciful Mother," *Catholic Exchange*, Dec. 9, 2015.

CHAPTER 7

EMOTIONAL HEALING

During my thirty-five years as a family therapist, I met with hundreds of individuals, couples, and families who experienced intense emotional suffering and were seeking relational healing. Though they came in with varying issues to address, it didn't take long to realize that most of them were suffering from emotional pain that originated in deeply rooted and unhealed emotional trauma. Many of these wounds involved a significant loss of relationship somewhere in their family history. At times the problem started in a previous generation, or in a relationship outside the family, but almost always the effects were being lived out in a way that kept the trauma alive in their current relationships. The wounds may have originated in the past, but they were causing emotional havoc in the present.

Some of the relational suffering resulted from attachment wounds starting in the womb, in infancy, or in early childhood.[39] Others were traumas that occurred later in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. The sources of the trauma were myriad: abandonment, rejection, betrayal, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, abortion, alcohol or drug addiction, pornography, rape, adultery, death, divorce, break-ups, etcetera. In each distressed person and family, I discovered that their hidden traumas were being reproduced in their current relationships through broken

attachments. From this awareness, I realized I needed to help people see and face not only their current struggles but the deeply rooted wounds that resulted from the different kinds of traumas they experienced throughout their lives. I also came to appreciate I needed this understanding in my own life as well.

TRAUMATIC LOSSES EXPERIENCED THROUGHOUT LIFE

Every significant loss is a traumatic event, and not all of these are obvious. In *The Life Model*, psychologist James Friesen and his associates identify several different kinds of traumatic losses that affect our emotional health and relationships throughout our development. They classify these traumas into two main categories: “Type A” traumas and “Type B” traumas.[40] Type A traumas are often more difficult to identify. They come as a result of the absence (“A” for absence) of the relational connections that we all need to develop emotionally secure attachments. These Type A traumas include deprivations of our basic human needs. We all need to be affirmed, to belong, to be understood, to feel safe, to receive affection, and to be nurtured and disciplined so that we can grow and become our true selves. When these basic human needs are not provided adequately for us throughout our life, we experience a kind of emotional loss, though the effects are often hidden from our sight. We don’t often think of these unmet needs as traumatic, but they are, because they impair our ability to trust and experience life-giving communion in relationships. When we don’t receive the love we need, we naturally close up and withdraw from intimacy. These in turn affect our attachment styles mentioned in chapter 5.

Type B traumas are the more obvious kinds of losses that we all recognize as overwhelming our capacity to cope. They are the bad things (“B” for bad) that happen to us, usually later in life. Deaths, divorces, accidents, and betrayals are the most obvious kinds of Type B traumas. But we can also experience debilitating trauma through verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. In some of these situations, we may not entirely lose relationship with the person who hurt us, but we inevitably lose some degree of trust and communion with them. All of these events and many others injure our souls and eventually result in the guarding of our hearts.

Because we live in a fallen world, every one of us has experienced Type A traumas, and many of us have also experienced Type B. Both kinds of traumas wound us and affect our current relationships. They can also impair our ability to trust God from the depths of our hearts. Fr. Michael Scanlon describes how this can happen by illustrating the effect of father wounds distorting our relationship with God the Father: “The scars of an unloving father relationship are so much at the root of other problems. Normally children are introduced to God as Father. If ‘Father’ means judgment, punishment, distance, and abandonment, then the child accepts God as such. Therefore a lifetime of spiritual activity can be built on a sick foundation…. The person neither accepts that God loves him, nor that intimacy and union with God are possible.”[41]

As I pondered these insights from Fr. Scanlon, I saw how much my image of God was confused by the traumatic wounds I experienced when my father left our family. My relationship with him was secure and life-giving during my pre-teen years, but his infidelity and subsequent abandonment of the family during my teenage years left me (and all of us) feeling betrayed and abandoned. God seemed far away too. This Type B trauma left me and all of

our family deeply wounded, causing much emotional suffering in each of our lives. My once secure “love bond” with my father and with God my heavenly Father degenerated into a “fear bond” that deeply affected not only the relationships in my family of origin but also my relationships with my family of procreation.

UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF FEAR BONDS VERSUS LOVE BONDS

As we have noted from the beginning of this book, we are created in love and for love. But the impact of sin, and the wounds caused by sin, can too easily get in the way of our *experiencing* love. James Friesen and his associates, who developed the Life Model, observe that traumatic losses may create fear bonds (unhealthy attachments) that interfere with our love bonds (healthy attachments): “There are essentially two different and incompatible types of bonds—one based in fear and the other based in love. Fear bonds are formed around negative feelings and pain. Love bonds are formed around desire and seeking to be with people who are important to us. Fear bonds energize people to avoid pain—like rejection, shame, humiliation, abandonment, guilt, or even physical abuse. Love bonds motivate people to live in truth, closeness, joy, peace, perseverance, kindness and authentic giving.”[42]

Can you see how these two different kinds of bonds profoundly influence our lives and relationships? When we approach relationships with an attitude of fear and mistrust (fear bonds), we perceive God and people as threats to our safety and well-being. We remain guarded and conditional in relating to God and to people. Deep down, we carry around shame, not believing we are lovable, and then hide our inadequacies with a mask of pride. We believe we have to

strive for others' approval. Our fear gives way to control and anger; then we too readily turn to addictions to comfort us and soothe our emotional suffering.

In contrast, when we have secure love bonds, these become the mindset through which we view God and the world around us. We come to see God as an intimate and loving Father, Jesus as our friend and healer, and the Holy Spirit as a real and present Comforter. We feel at peace knowing we are deeply loved and accepted by God and by others. These love bonds enable us to be affectionate, open, and self-giving. We can express our emotions vulnerably. From this foundation of love and openness, we can cultivate trust and intimacy in our relationships.[43]

The following table is a composite of insights from the authors of *The Life Model*, from Jack Frost's book *Spiritual Slavery to Spiritual Sonship*, as well my own work as a family therapist. Notice how the quality of our attachments (Love Bonds versus Fear Bonds) affects the way we perceive God, ourselves, and the people around us. All of us have fear bonds and love bonds, so don't be surprised if you can identify yourself in both categories. No matter how many fear bonds we have established, we can develop love bonds by cultivating emotional vulnerability and trust through healthy relationships in the present.

Relationships	**Love Bonds**	**Fear Bonds**
How We Perceive God	Intimate, Loving, Father, Friend, Healer, Comforter, Lord, Savior, Redeemer	Distant, Judge, Punisher, Frightening, Unloving, Angry, Unmerciful, Unjust
How We Perceive Ourselves	Beloved Sons and Daughters of God; Sinners With Weaknesses;	Unlovable. Distorted Images Based in Pride and Shame.

	Emotionally Vulnerable	Perfectionist or Unworthy
How We Perceive Others	Loving, Trustworthy, Fallible, With Weakness and Strengths Like Us	Mean, Threatening, Not Safe, Either Better than Us or Less than Us

CULTIVATING EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY AND TRUST

We live in a culture that is rife with fear bonds, which are both the cause and effect of the traumas pervading our lives and throughout our society. As a result, we tend to value control over vulnerability. If you don't believe me, I invite you to listen to Brene Brown's "Ted Talk" on "Emotional Vulnerability" which received over thirty-two million views on the Internet.[44] Her reflections about her own need for control apparently struck a chord with many others. As she discovered in her life, it's difficult to cultivate intimacy and heartfelt connections without emotional vulnerability. You can't be perfect and messy at the same time. But more than a few of us have trouble expressing our emotions and revealing our needs because we don't want to be out of control and risk being hurt again. Some of us even become uncomfortable when people around us begin to cry or lose emotional control. Many of us are threatened by emotional expression and vulnerability.

Our Lady of Sorrows is the perfect model for how we can be emotionally vulnerable and still remain secure in our love bonds. She shatters our image of perfection. She is perfectly merciful and pure and yet is not afraid to be vulnerable. Her *fiat* is an expression of her emotional openness and receptivity, which are rooted in a deep trust and love for

God. Mary's vulnerability at the foot of the cross and throughout her life bears witness to all of us. Her grieving gave permission to those around her to grieve. Many of us don't have that permission or don't feel safe enough with those around us to open our hearts in that way. But as love bonds replace fear bonds, we become safe enough to be emotionally vulnerable and to grieve our many losses.

GIVING OURSELVES PERMISSION TO GRIEVE

If you remember from chapter 1, my family had a long history of avoiding emotional pain over many generations. As a result, much unresolved emotional suffering was passed down (transmitted) through the generations. After the fire that destroyed our home and took our loved ones, I don't remember anyone grieving in front of me or asking me how I was feeling about losing my grandparents and our home. To this day, I have not yet been able to unlock the grief associated with that time in my life. I do remember crying at times during my childhood for minor things, but this stopped as I neared adolescence.

The one major exception occurred when I was fourteen and learned my parents were getting a divorce. I remember sitting in a big easy chair watching television when I received the news from my mother that my dad wanted to end the marriage (he had already been gone for a year). I began to sob uncontrollably for several minutes. Then just as quickly as it started, my grief stopped. I got back into control emotionally and wouldn't cry again for twenty more years. Even at beautiful events like our wedding and the birth of our children, I was not able to cry tears of joy. I remained emotionally bound up from the unresolved trauma and unexpressed grief.

Twenty years later, a panic attack (a symptom of my fear bonds) propelled me into therapy, where I slowly discovered that I had a lifetime of unresolved emotional pain. That began a process of thawing my frozen heart. In one memorable breakthrough session, my therapist began to cry, feeling my pain that I couldn't feel. I felt her compassion and it unlocked something in my heart. It let me know at an unconscious level that I was emotionally safe (love bond) and that I could cry in her presence and feel my pain.

From that small beginning, my emotional expression unfolded in stages. At first, I was only able to shed one tear, reliving the memories of saying goodbye to my dad at the airport. Then later a whole flood of tears came during a healing experience, reliving the time when my dad left. Grieving from the depths of my being for the loss of my dad was truly a *watershed* moment in my life. I believe this grieving, along with an experience with the Holy Spirit on a spiritual retreat, saved my marriage. After those healing experiences, I could finally feel love and joy again in the depths of my heart.

Can you see from my experience how powerfully fear bonds and love bonds influence our relationships and our emotional well-being? All of us have developed both love bonds and fear bonds that influence our relationships. The love bonds develop from our healthy attachments, while fear bonds are the result of the wounds we experience throughout life through Type A and Type B traumas. Emotional healing is simply the process of experiencing powerful love bonds in the place where fear bonds have kept us bound. Love heals us because "God is love.... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:16, 18).

GOD'S LOVE IS HEALING

God's love is the source of all of our healing, whether that healing results from natural or supernatural means. Since grace builds upon nature, there can be no inconsistency between natural healing approaches and prayers asking for God's direct intervention to bring about our emotional healing. Love is the key element in both natural and supernatural healing. My therapist's empathy showed me it was safe to be emotionally vulnerable and grieve over my traumatic losses. Multiple studies comparing different methods of psychotherapy found that the treatment approach was much less important than the caring attitude of the therapist offering the treatment.[45] Whenever we have an encounter with God's love, healing is always occurring. This is true whether the encounter is in prayer, through the sacraments, or through the love of another person. I believe my experience in therapy prepared my heart for the more direct healing experience with Jesus that occurred soon after on my spiritual retreat. I was wounded by trauma which closed my heart, but love allowed me to open it again.

Jesus still heals today in the same way he did back in the Holy Land when he walked the earth two thousand years ago. This was the conclusion of Fr. Emiliano Tardif, who lived in the latter part of the twentieth century and ministered God's healing love to thousands. In his small but power-packed book *Jesus Lives Today*, Fr. Tardif testifies that distorted "love" is the cause of our emotional problems and God's merciful love is the only true source of our healing:

> In the healing ministry we are not dealing with the symptoms, but with the cause of problems. We shouldn't spend too much time on the symptoms, since they are only the surface of the problem.... Wounds caused by a lack of love, or a distortion of

> love, are often at the root of our brokenness. That is why we call it “healing broken hearts”… healed by a positive experience of love. It is not enough to discover the root of the conflict. We must fill the emptiness with the merciful love that flows from the heart of Jesus.[46]

Jesus came for this express purpose: to reveal the Father’s love (cf. Is 61:1–2; Lk 4:18–19). His healing love is the only medicine that can reach the depths of broken and imprisoned hearts to heal us of our emotional suffering. After years of treating symptoms as a therapist, this understanding radically transformed the way I approached healing in my personal life and for those I serve in ministry. In our “Healing the Whole Person” conferences, I now ask people to pray and reflect on how their hearts have been broken and imprisoned. Any broken relationship results in a broken heart. Any area of spiritual oppression is an area of imprisonment. These may be wounds caused by a lack of love (Type A traumas) or from distortions of love (Type B traumas).

All people instinctively want relief from their suffering. This is healthy and normal. But in our culture, we too easily look to control our pain through a quick fix, which only deals with the symptoms (like trimming the weed, which allows it to grow back, rather than ripping it out of the earth at the roots). Many treatment approaches in the mental health field, while well intended, focus on managing the symptoms through medications, behavioral therapy, self-analysis, etcetera. While these therapies may have a place in the overall treatment of emotional suffering, they will never bring full healing. As Fr. Tardif highlights, only the “merciful love that flows from the heart of Jesus” can ultimately heal us. This reality is beautifully illustrated by Patrick, an attendee of our conferences at the John Paul II Healing Center.

PATRICK’S STORY: ENCOUNTERING JESUS’S MERCIFUL LOVE

Patrick came to one of our healing conferences with his wife at the recommendation of his pastor, but he really didn’t want to be there, at least not at first. He figured he would just be there to support his wife, who was being asked to help establish a healing ministry in their church. Patrick couldn’t muster up hope that he would find relief from his debilitating depression. But he ended up being shocked by how powerfully Jesus reached him at the very roots of his suffering, where his heart had been broken by a Type B trauma. The healing experience at the conference ended up releasing him and his family from a deeply entrenched fear bond which had been affecting the family for three generations.

This is how Patrick described his experience of encountering Jesus’s merciful love during the conference:

> As the prayer began [after a teaching], a woman in the pew in front of us turned round and offered us a box of Kleenex. “You may need this during the prayer,” she said. My wife and I exchanged a glance, and I scornfully demurred on the use of tissues, saying, “I think we’ll be okay.” Twenty minutes later, I was reaching for them, my eyes streaming with tears.
>
> What happened to me was that the Lord put into my mind a scene from my childhood. I think I was about eight or nine years old, and my younger brother and I had been playing on the street outside our home. At some point, a teenager who lived round the corner appeared, lured us up to the apartment his family lived in, and after a brief and embarrassing exchange, took

us individually into a cupboard and showed us pornographic magazines belonging to his older brother. I remember feeling rather uncomfortable with the whole thing, and eventually, my brother and I managed to extricate ourselves and left but not before promising that we would say nothing of the incident to our parents.

When we got home, my mother was standing waiting for us at the front door. “Where have you been?” she said. “Your father is driving round the neighborhood looking for you! This was the worst news she could possibly have imparted. We knew we were going to be punished for wandering off, and we stood nervously waiting at the front door for our father to return. When he eventually arrived, ten minutes later, we thought at first that his mood had softened a little because his face did not seem angry but curiously blank as he walked up to the front door. We were wrong. He seized both of us by the hair and dragged us upstairs. He then proceeded to interrogate us individually. Predictably, my brother told the truth about what had happened. Regrettably, I did not. I concocted some vague story about playing soccer nearby and eventually ground to a halt when I realized he wasn’t taken in at all.

He explained that he was going to punish us but that I would get a much more severe punishment for telling lies. He first soundly beat my brother and then it was my turn. Using a leather belt, he began what would turn out to be the most severe and prolonged beating I had ever received. At one point, I was sure I was going to pass out with the pain, and then he eventually stopped. I found out years later that, during that beating, he had worked himself into such a fury

that, afterwards, he went down to the bathroom and threw up.

That was the scene that the Lord brought to my mind during that time of prayer at the retreat. As I pictured the event in my mind, it seemed to me that Jesus entered the room where the beating was taking place, separated me and my father, placed one hand on my head and the other on my father's head. At first, I was confused. I wanted to be defended. I wanted to be protected. I did not want Jesus to place his hand on my father's head. It seemed too kind, too caring, for someone who was the aggressor. But then, it suddenly occurred to me that by sinning against me in that way, my father had also somehow wounded himself and needed healing from that terrible event too.

As I stood there in the church in Texas, my cheeks stained with tears, I found myself looking back on the incident, not with resentment and anger as I had done ever since, but with compassion for my father. He, too, had had a difficult relationship with his own father. His father had been stern and had used beatings as a way of punishing wrongdoing and keeping control.

To understand what happened next, it is necessary to explain some background. Fourteen years ago, I was forced to give up work because I was suffering from deep and debilitating depression. For a long time, I was unable to do anything. Relating to people simply in the normal course of a day was torture. I felt constantly emotionally exhausted. I had years of therapy with a good Catholic therapist, who helped locate some of the painful experiences of the past, but very little healing occurred. I was sent to the Mayo clinic in Minnesota, and after numerous tests and

interviews, I was told that I was suffering from an unusually complex form of depression that would take medication and counseling to treat. After fourteen years of treatment, the depression had become a little more bearable, but what I was left with was a simmering level of depression that from time to time got immeasurably worse, and I was still easily exhausted by life's ongoing events.

So a week after we got back from that retreat in Texas, I realized that I was no longer depressed … at all. At first I thought that it was a rather pleasant anomaly and that, before long, I would sink back into the pit. But the following week I was still not depressed. A week after that, same thing. As the weeks and months went on, I realized that I had somehow been miraculously cured of depression. It seemed that at that retreat in Texas, God had done in twenty minutes what years of therapy and medication couldn't. I went to see my doctor, and we agreed that I should come off one of the antidepressants I was on.

A few weeks after the retreat, in May, my wife and I attended the prayer ministry training course in Florida, where we learned a new way of praying with people for healing, which made it possible to locate and pray into the real source of someone's distress rather than simply focusing on the symptoms. When we came back from Florida, we began to pray with people in our parish for relief from distress of every kind and, to our astonishment, started to witness the Lord touching people with physical, emotional, and psychological healing; in other words, the Lord was truly ministering to the *whole* person.

A few months after the retreat and the prayer ministry training, during a Skype call with my

parents, I told them about my miraculous healing (I didn't mention the memory that had been healed), how my wife and I had begun to pray with people, and about the amazing results we were seeing. I expected my dad to be guarded and to warn me about dabbling in weird new movements or practices. But what he said was, "That's really interesting. And are there special prayers that you say with people?" I told him that we had several pages of prayers that we could say depending on what was troubling them. He said, "Well, bring the prayers with you when you visit in October because I want you to pray over me." I was a little taken aback by his positive response but assured him that during our planned visit in October, we would find time to pray with him.

The trip went ahead, and toward the end of our time there, my dad took me aside and asked me if I had time to pray with him. So we went upstairs to his study and sat down to pray. I told him just to relax and let the Lord do all the work. He told me he was a little nervous, so I did whatever I could to allay his fears. As we began the time of prayer, I asked him what was distressing him. Almost the first thing he told me was this: "You probably don't remember this, but years ago when you were young, there was a boy round the corner from us who took you to his apartment and showed you pornographic magazines, and I punished you severely for telling lies about it. I've always felt really bad about that and it's bothered me ever since."

I was stunned. I told him that that was exactly the same incident that God had healed me of and I believed that God wanted to heal him of it too. His eyes filled up with tears. We then prayed

together and God healed him of a chronic feeling of dread and desolation related to his own rough and turbulent upbringing. I told him I loved him. He told me he loved me. We hugged, amid tears. Afterward, he told me that he felt great relief and felt lighter in heart.

The past fourteen years have stripped me of much of the pretense of my life. They have pared me down and hopefully loosened my hold on worldly pursuits and made me much less concerned with appearances and prideful posturing. The years of depression have made me realize the extent of the Lord's mercy to me by continuing to love me even though I had nothing to give back. The healings I experienced have brought about a breakthrough in my own relationship with Jesus, and I now know him as a loving, active, and powerful presence in my life in a way I had never felt before.

I thank and praise God for his graciousness to me and for leading me out of darkness into his own wonderful light.

GOD'S GRACIOUSNESS IS FOR EACH OF US

Isn't Patrick's healing experience amazing? Only God could providentially orchestrate circumstances like that for him and his family. Patrick's heart had been broken as a young boy by his father's abusive violence. He experienced an earthshattering loss of connection with his father and closed down his heart in depression. His love bond with his father had become more of a fear bond. But in his prayer experience, Jesus showed up and revealed to him that he was not the only one wounded. Both he and his father had

hardened their hearts and lost intimate communion with God, with one another, and with practically everyone else in their lives. Jesus restored both of them from the emotional suffering and fear bonds that had been weighing them down for years! After Patrick received his healing and established a new bond of love with his family, Jesus then moved through Patrick to heal his father.

I can relate to Patrick's experience because Jesus also healed me of my deeply rooted father wounds and later worked through me to show his merciful kindness to my father as well. At one point after my own healing, which I describe in my book *Be Healed*, I had an opportunity to spend four hours praying with my dad for his inner healing. Like Patrick, I discovered that my father had been wounded in many of the same ways that I had been. His unhealed emotional suffering was transmitted to me and to all of our family. But then God providentially allowed my healing to be transmitted to my dad for his transformation, which helped bring healing to the rest of the family. Isn't that a beautiful image? This suffering was being passed down through my family, but as soon as Christ stepped in and allowed me to heal, his grace then reversed the flow of pain, washing over all that hurt not only in me but in the generation before me. This is how God's mercy works. "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20).

Like Patrick, I left that experience praying with my dad filled with gratitude. I am deeply thankful for Jesus's healing love and compassion that touched our broken hearts and healed all the members of our family of our longstanding emotional suffering. I believe Jesus desires this healing for all of us, including for you and your family.

As you will see in part IV, *Spiritual Suffering*, our deepest suffering is separation from God and the guilt and shame that we carry as a result of our sin. Spiritual healing begins with the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of our hearts

back to God. Simon Peter is the prime example of this kind of healing.

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39 For many people, the idea that attachment wounds could occur in the womb is a foreign idea, but it is not uncommon. I discovered this first in praying with people, seeing time and again the Holy Spirit highlight attachment wounds from the womb and then heal them. I then discovered that this was common knowledge among those in the healing ministry and has become the subject of medical research. See for example, *Praying for Your Unborn Child* by Francis MacNutt and *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* by Thomas Verny and John Kelly.

40 James Friesen, James Wilder, et al., *The Life Model* (Manila: Shepherd's House, 2000).

41 Michael Scanlon, *Inner Healing* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1974).

42 James Friesen, et al., *The Life Model*, 31.

43 Jack Frost, *Spiritual Slavery to Spiritual Sonship* (New York: Destiny Image Publishers, 2006), 213-14.

44 Brene Brown, "On Vulnerability," https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability/transcript.

45 Robert Elliott, et al., "Empathy," *Psychotherapy* 48, no. 1 (March 2011): 43–49. B. A. Farber and E. M. Doolin, "Positive Regard," *Psychotherapy* 48, no. 1 (March 2011): 58–64.

46 Emeliano Tardif, *Jesus Lives Today* (Greenlawn Press, 1990).

PART IV

SPIRITUAL SUFFERING



CHAPTER 8

GUILT AND SHAME

We all know that our lives, however good or bad they may seem, do not come close to expressing the fullness of love, joy, and peace that God intended from the beginning when he created us. The Bible uses words like *paradise* to describe the bliss and fulfillment that marked God's creation before sin began wreaking havoc in our souls while also causing degeneration in the world at large. The ecstatic vision of paradise portrayed for us in the book of Genesis reveals an intimate communion between a man and a woman made possible only by their pure hearts before God. Before sin, there was no stain of guilt or shame to rob humanity of peace and happiness. "The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gn 2:25).

In his teaching on the theology of the body, St. John Paul II refers to this sinless condition of the human person as "original innocence." He describes it as a state of purity and integrity, which he contends is "always at the root of every human experience."[47] What he means by this, I believe, is that every human person is created to live in this same kind of purity and integrity that our first parents enjoyed. St. Paul underscores this notion that spiritual purity and peace are the birthright of every human being: "[God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1:4).[48]

We were created to experience the fullness of life and love and to embody God's unblemished purity in the depths of our hearts. But, by our own misguided choices, we have forfeited our original innocence. We are no longer living in the fullness of God's love. "Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it."[49]

DESTINED FOR LOVE BUT HIJACKED BY SIN

God's essence is pure love. As the *Catechism* so aptly explains: "By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange."[50]

Allow this most fundamental truth of our existence to sink into your heart. You and I are *destined* to participate in the same ecstatic love that permeates the communion within the Most Holy Trinity. That is awe-inspiring, isn't it? And yet from the very beginning, sin has robbed us of our birthright. The original sin of Adam and Eve is oft repeated in our own personal histories each time we give in to the seductions of the father of lies. St. John Paul II offers profound insight into this reality:

> As a rupture with God, sin is an act of disobedience by a creature who rejects, at least implicitly, the very one from whom he came and who sustains him in life. It is therefore a suicidal act. Since by sinning man refuses to submit to God, his internal balance is also destroyed and it is precisely within himself that contradictions and conflicts arise. Wounded in this way, man almost inevitably causes damage to the fabric of his

> relationship with others and with the created world. This is an objective law and an objective reality, verified in so many ways in the human psyche and in the spiritual life, as well as in society, where it is easy to see the signs and effects of internal disorder.[51]

This internal disorder is the loss of personal integrity. The Bible refers to this state of consciousness as “shame,” an inward knowledge that we have moved from grace to disgrace. Notice how Adam and Eve experience shame immediately after disobeying the Father:

> And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.” (Gn 3:8–13)

In rupturing their relationship with God, Adam and Eve intuitively realize that something is drastically wrong. They have lost their original grace and glory. It has been replaced with guilt and shame. But notice that instead of taking personal responsibility for their sin and acknowledging their guilt, they immediately project the blame somewhere else (first accusing God, then each other and the serpent). To

make matters worse, they hide themselves out of fear in order to cover up their newly discovered deficiencies. Can you see yourself in this scene? Don’t we all have the tendency to do the same things (to hide, blame, and accuse) when we fail to humbly repent of our sin.

HIDING OUR SHAME AND GUILT

As I look back over my own history, I can see how much of my spiritual suffering has been self-imposed. Starting at a young age, I absorbed layers of guilt and shame to hide my sin, (without being conscious of it most of the time). Though I have blamed others, I now realize I can’t fault my upbringing. I made my own choices. In fact, I had more advantages than most. From the beginning of my life, I learned about my faith at home and in Catholic schools. We prayed regularly. My parents brought me to Mass every week. I recited the Ten Commandments and heard the Word of God. I knew right from wrong and have no excuses for my sin.

As I examine my life, I see how my sin and shame mirrored that of Adam and Eve. Like them, I easily gave into the temptations to sin and then hid my guilt behind a cloak of shame. I blamed others and accused them rather than accusing myself of my sin. Starting when I was in first grade, my brother Dave and I walked a mile to and from school every day. One afternoon on the way home, Dave invited me to smoke cigarettes with him. At first I was confused and afraid, but after a little coercing, I readily consented. I chose to be accepted by my brother rather than follow my own conscience. Dave assured me that our parents wouldn’t find out, and to make sure they didn’t, he swore me to secrecy. I quickly learned how to suppress my

guilt and ignore the self-condemnation that accompanied my disobedience.

Two years later, my closest friend found *Playboy* magazines in his older brother's closet and subsequently shared his discovery with me. As soon as I saw the naked woman on the front cover, I knew what I was doing was wrong. But just as quickly, I rationalized away my guilt. I told myself the only thing that mattered was to avoid being caught. So we started a secret club in the woods near our Catholic school and invited a few friends to join us. Not only did this act of sin skew my perceptions of women and inflame my lusts, it also increased my steadily growing shame and guilt. By now I felt accomplished in the art of keeping secrets.

Shortly after this incident, I began stealing. Whether stealing from a local grocery store, or later from a huge mall, the thrill of not getting caught overwhelmed the guilt and shame of my sin. Looking back, I find it remarkable that I didn't confess these sins to our priests in confession, though I had many opportunities. I confessed other sins like disobeying my parents or lying but never recognized that these unconfessed acts of sin and secrecy were very particular ways of lying and dishonoring my parents.

This pattern of hiding my sin and burying my guilt continued for many years. In sixth grade, Dave and I began stealing beer and drinking while our parents were out teaching at church. This occurred for a couple of years before our parents separated and divorced. Once dad left, my fear of getting caught and being punished diminished significantly. But I continued to maintain the same pattern of secrecy while drinking, crossing boundaries with girlfriends, and eventually, by the end of high school, having sexual intimacy with my future wife. I could rationalize everything until committing this mortal sin of sex outside of marriage. I knew it was wrong and my conscience shouted loudly in protest. But by then, I had become proficient at ignoring my

conscience and rationalizing my sin. In doing so, I didn't realize that I was silencing the voice of God who continued to communicate with me through my conscience.

THE VOICE OF GOD IN OUR CONSCIENCE

Our conscience is the sensitive part of our spirit that allows us to live intimately and blamelessly in communion with God. The *Catechism* describes this most vital part of our spiritual awareness: "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man's most sacred core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths (GS 16)."[52]

Christian morality is not a set of constraints imposed upon us from the outside. Rather, it is a "law written in our hearts." St. Paul speaks about this in his letter to the Romans, showing that even before the law came to Moses, mankind was without excuse because "although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct" (Rom 1:21–23, 28).

God has given each one of us a sensitive conscience. Once Baptism wipes away original sin, we become pure and innocent. But each unconfessed sin chips away at our integrity. We learn how to rationalize our sins and justify

ourselves in our own eyes. No matter how much we suppress the truth in our hearts, we cannot totally deny God's standard of justice. With everything I did, I knew it was wrong before I did it. My Christian education helped form my conscience, but even without it, my heart knew right from wrong. And the same is true for every other human person.

At first, God's voice comes in the form of a gentle whisper guiding our conscience, telling us the way we should walk in love and truth. If we do not heed that voice, but rather follow through with our wrong choices, we will experience the second prompting, which is conviction of our sin, commonly referred to as guilt. Contrary to the world's opinion, which sees all guilt as bad, there is such a thing as a healthy sense of guilt. It is the awareness that we have done something wrong. If we try to silence this voice, our heart becomes hardened and our conscience grows less sensitive over time. Even with our guilt buried, we still carry within our consciousness an awareness of shame, a sense that we have separated from grace and fallen into dis-grace. Guilt tells us that what we did was wrong. Shame internalizes these bad actions and turns them into a false identity. Deep down we come to believe that we are bad and unworthy of love.

During my years as a therapist, I discovered how powerful God's voice can be speaking through our consciences, even when we have suppressed this voice for many years. One striking example came while working with a few people who were brought up to worship Satan. Though they were completely brainwashed, then raped and tortured by the satanic cult to instill fear and humiliation, they still knew in the depths of their hearts that what they were learning and doing was wrong. Through the process of therapy, they learned again how to listen to their conscience. They reclaimed their innate ability to discern good from evil. When they finally came to trust the truth

they had long known in their hearts, they inevitably sought a relationship with God and broke their ties with Satanism.

Another example that illustrates the strength of God's voice in our consciences came repeatedly in therapy sessions with those men and women who had participated in abortion. Most of them initially came for other reasons and didn't acknowledge the abortion until they learned to trust that they would not be condemned by me, or by God. As therapy proceeded, they learned to listen to God's voice in their hearts. Eventually, the guilt and shame they carried from having had an abortion would come to light. Whether the person identified as radically pro-life or staunchly pro-choice, the process usually unfolded in a similar way.

Those who totally justified abortion as well as those who knew it was wrong struggled to face the truth of what they had done. At first, they would justify their actions and rationalize what they had done. Then after a time, they would begin to face the reality. During this phase, they would often feel paralyzing guilt and intense shame over their choices. Many believed what they did was unforgiveable. Once they encountered the love and mercy of God, and his forgiveness, they could then forgive themselves and any others who participated in the abortion. Once clearing their guilt and shame and coming to peace with God and themselves, they could finally grieve the painful loss of their child and offer him or her to Jesus in heaven.

As these examples illustrate, our consciences are a built-in means of guiding us throughout life. Just as physical pain and distress are warning signals of physical and emotional suffering, guilt and shame are the internal warning signals of our spiritual suffering. We can choose to continue to ignore these signals emanating from our consciences, but we do so at our own peril. In the end, if we reject God's voice speaking through our conscience, we will find

ourselves listening to other voices, inevitably with disastrous results.

THE PERIL OF LISTENING TO OTHER VOICES

During my childhood, I learned to tune out God's voice in my conscience when I justified my sins. I thought I was living in freedom by making my own choices, but without realizing it, I was quickly becoming a slave to my human passions and to the evil forces lurking behind these seductions. At the time, I did not realize I was listening to and obeying other voices that were in opposition to God. It started when I listened to the voice of temptation through my brother and friend, but eventually those tempting voices emerged from within my own mind and heart. I discovered how quickly we can be seduced by our own passions, the seductions of the world, and by the deceiving voice of the father of lies. These other voices are constantly presenting before us false illusions of distorted love and a counterfeit happiness which will never satisfy our deepest longings for genuine love.

These seducing voices gradually pull us out of communion with God, often imperceptibly. We may still be going through the motions of religious worship with our mouths, but our hearts have drifted away from genuine intimacy with God (cf. Mk 7:6). We become more like the Pharisees, the ones Jesus refers to as hypocrites (the word literally means "actors on a stage"). Like the Pharisees, we may find ourselves projecting our guilt and shame onto others, judging them mercilessly for their sins and condemning them for not measuring up to our self-righteous standards. Inevitably, the measure we use to judge and condemn others comes back like a boomerang to become

our judge. We end up condemning ourselves (cf. Lk 6:37–38). Self-condemnation in turn increases our feelings of shame and unworthiness.

In the long run, listening to these deceiving voices only serves to increase our buried guilt and shame, resulting in a more intense spiritual suffering. As our sins accumulate, our minds become darkened to God's truth. Our hardened hearts then are unresponsive to his love. We slowly lose our God-given capacity for spiritual and emotional intimacy and instead become addicted to sensual pleasures in our search of counterfeit happiness. Over time, the seven deadly sins[53] become our replacement for authentic joy. We worship created things because we have lost the capacity to enjoy intimacy with our Father and Creator (cf. Eph 4:17–19; Rom 1:18–24).

By disrupting our relationship with God, sin eventually causes disintegration in every area of our lives. We suffer physically, emotionally, and spiritually due to its effects. Sin, and the unresolved guilt that accompanies it, wounds our souls and hampers all our relationships. Sin is the source of every vicious force in the universe, including all of our personal vices. Through our weakness, we continue to actively participate in its cancerous spread. Eventually, if we have any remaining conscience, our guilt catches up to us and awakens in us a sense of remorse. We then lament over our moral weakness, allowing us to finally acknowledge our guilt.

ACKNOWLEDGING OUR GUILT BEFORE GOD

Unacknowledged guilt and shame are the cause of much of our spiritual suffering. We may make jokes about "Catholic guilt" or "guilty pleasures," but the reality masked behind

these jokes isn't a laughing matter. Think back over your own life for a moment and consider how much damage you have done to yourself and those you love by ignoring the gentle prodding of your conscience.

Running from guilt is a losing battle. Sooner or later, every human being will be brought to his knees in the presence of Ultimate Holiness (God). If we do not acknowledge our sin on earth, we will surely face judgment when we die. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Cor 5:10).

Running from a guilty conscience is not just eternally dangerous; it has temporal consequences as well, perhaps even adding to our physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. After suppressing his guilt, King David realized: "When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away / through my groaning all day long. / For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; / my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Ps 32:3–4). Eventually, he acknowledged his guilt in the presence of God, calling on his mercy and grace: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your merciful love; / according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. / Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, / and cleanse me of my sin!" (Ps 51:1–2). God, in his mercy, took away David's guilt: "I acknowledged my sin to you, / and I did not hide my iniquity; / I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'; / then you forgave the guilt of my sin. / Therefore let every one who is godly / offer prayer to you; / at a time of distress" (Ps 32:5–6).

It seems clear from these biblical accounts that there is such a thing as "healthy" acknowledgment of guilt. It tugs at our conscience when we sin and is taken away when we confess our sins. Guilt is a way of taking responsibility for our sins and being honest with ourselves. But not all guilt is helpful or based in truth. There is also a false guilt which is based in deception, over-responsibility, and scrupulosity.

RECOGNIZING TRUE GUILT VERSUS FALSE GUILT

If you were to look up the word *guilt* in the dictionary, you would find various definitions. Most of them have this common thread: “the awareness of wrongdoing.” If I acknowledge my guilt in humility, then I take responsibility for my wrong actions and desire to right the wrongs that I am accountable for. Once these have been acknowledged (confession) and made right (reparation), then my conscience is clear and I can be freed of the spiritual burden that I have been carrying.

But sometimes guilt does not go away no matter how hard we try. We all know people who are bound by scrupulosity and feel guilty for everything. Many of us can find that tendency in ourselves, feeling guilty for things even when we didn’t do anything wrong. A perfect example of this is a mother I met who didn’t make it in time before her son died. He was in South America on an expedition and died from a disease communicated through an insect bite. When she heard he was sick, she made the arrangements to get to him as soon as she could. But right before she arrived at the hospital, she found out he had died. For months afterward, this woman was plagued with guilt. But hers was a false guilt based on a false sense of responsibility. As she faced this guilt, she discovered it was actually an attempt to gain some control when she felt completely helpless. It was a part of her grieving process, not a genuine conviction of sin. She had a difficult time letting go and facing the sorrow of losing her son. This kind of guilt can also be present when a family member or friends are co-dependent and assume responsibility for others’ actions.

Even when we have truly done something wrong, guilt can remain after a good confession and making things right. This, too, is false guilt. It is often a symptom of not receiving

God’s mercy (of doubting his mercy) and failing to forgive oneself. In these cases, we can internalize a pervasive sense of shame that lingers long after we have been forgiven.

FACING OUR SHAME IN GOD’S PRESENCE

Throughout this chapter, we have been speaking about two kinds of spiritual suffering: guilt and shame. Although they usually go together, they are not exactly the same. Guilt is the awareness of wrongdoing, while shame is the consciousness of being defective in some way and unworthy of love. As with guilt, shame can be based in truth or in deception.

The account of Adam and Eve hiding from God is a perfect illustration of the kind of shame that is based in truth. Before their sin, they were “naked and not ashamed.” After the sin, they hid, consciously aware of their deficiency and unworthiness before God. They moved from a state of grace to a state of *dis-grace* (a synonym for shame). They realized that they had lost some of their dignity and compromised their integrity. They felt the need to cover up their impurity.

I did a similar thing when I hid my unworthiness from my parents, from the priests in confession, and from God. Whether I was fully aware of it or not, I carried around a sense of unworthiness, believing deep down that I was bad. I compensated for this by trying to be good in other areas of my life, as an attempt to compensate for my underlying sense of shame.

I have come to believe that before God’s holiness, all of us experience shame and unworthiness. The prophet Isaiah is a good example of having our shame exposed when we come face to face with God. When he encountered the utter holiness of God in his vision of heaven, he cried out in

awareness of his own unworthiness: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Is 6:5).

We can discount this story as unique to Isaiah because he lived in the Old Testament before Christ’s sacrificial death for our sins. But we see a similar response from the apostle John when he experienced his heavenly encounter with Jesus: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, ‘Fear not’” (Rv 1:17). Why do you think John was afraid when he saw the glorified Jesus? I believe it was because he was in touch with his own unworthiness in the presence of Jesus’s holiness.

I know several people who have had similar experiences of being overwhelmed in the presence of God’s holiness. In each case, they relayed to me how overwhelming it was to experience God’s holiness in light of their lack of purity and how they were utterly filled with shame and fell on their face before God as though dead, reminiscent of Isaiah and St. John. They said they felt like they were going to die of unworthiness in God’s presence, but his love and mercy overpowered and eventually healed their shame.

As we will see in the next chapter, Simon Peter had a similar experience encountering Jesus. He provides an example for all of us who desire to seek and receive God’s mercy in the midst of our guilt and shame.

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47 Pope St. Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* (Boston: Pauline, 2006), 170.
48 See also Eph 5:27; Col 1:22; 1 Jn 5-10.
49 CCC 1850.
50 CCC 221.
51 Pope St. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 15.

52 CCC 1776.

53 The seven deadly sins are pride, envy, greed, gluttony, sloth, lust, and anger. See chapter 6 of *Be Healed*.

CHAPTER 9

SIMON PETER'S EXAMPLE

As the first head of the Church, Simon Peter represents all of us who are followers of Christ. Unlike Jesus and Mary, who are without personal guilt or shame, Simon Peter was an experienced sinner. In that regard, he is like the rest of us. He exemplifies our fragmented relationship with God and the frailties and weaknesses of our human nature. If that were all, he would not be much of a role model for us. We can find millions to show us how to wallow in sin and shame. But thankfully, there is much more to Peter's example than his failures. He is the prototype of spiritual redemption, showing us how to face our guilt and shame in light of God's boundless mercy.

The various Gospel writers emphasize different aspects of Simon Peter's story, but they all agree on a few important facts: Simon was a fisherman. He worked his craft alongside his brother Andrew and their partners James and John. The Gospel of Mark opens with Jesus calling the four of them to follow him, leaving behind their nets to become "fishers of men" (Mk 1:16–18). Out of all of his many followers, Jesus specifically chose Simon to be the leader of the community and renamed him Peter (which means "Rock") to affirm his role as the stalwart of the Church (see Jn 1:42; Mt 16:18). But prior to Jesus's resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, this "Rock" proved to be less than reliable. During the three years of walking with Jesus, he

seemed to receive Jesus's rebuke more than any of the other disciples (see Mk 14:37; Mt 16: 23).

What I find most intriguing about Peter's life is his struggle to come into the fullness of his God-given identity. Like each one of us, he vacillates between living from his true identity (given to him by Jesus) and his shame-based identity (formed over years of sin and weaknesses). Simon Peter's true identity is emphasized early in John's Gospel when Jesus first calls him. "Jesus looked at him, and said, 'So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)" (Jn 1:42). That must have been a strange first meeting. Can you imagine someone walking up to you, asking you to drop everything to follow him, and then immediately changing your name? I wonder what was going through Simon's mind as all that was taking place. I imagine he was struggling to understand what was meant by this new identity Jesus had given him.

THE BATTLE OVER IDENTITY

St. Luke adds an important detail in describing this first encounter between Jesus and Simon (see Lk 5:1–11). Unlike the account in John's Gospel, Luke underscores Simon's shame-based identity. We all have these shame-based identities constructed over time through an accumulation of our sins and weaknesses. This false identity is a way of seeing ourselves through the lens of our wounds and shame. Yet, like Peter, each of us has a new name in the kingdom of heaven personally given to us by Jesus and tailored to our unique gifts and life experiences (see Rv 2:17). This is our true identity. Most of our lives we live in the tension between these two identities. Like Peter, we must be freed of our shame-based identity in order to live

ever more fully our God-given identity so that we can fulfill the calling Jesus has in store for each one of us.

Luke's account provides a classic example of the clash between these two competing identities. Through the story, we are provided a glimpse of the larger battle operating in Simon Peter's life: between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. This spiritual battle takes place in each one of our lives as well. It is the underlying cause of much of our spiritual suffering. Satan comes to attack our identity just as he challenged Jesus's identity in the desert before he began his ministry (see Lk 4:1–12).

As we examine Luke's narrative with Jesus meeting Simon Peter for the first time, I want to encourage you to enter into this scene contemplatively, identifying with Simon or with one of his partners. Here is how the scene unfolds. After teaching from Simon's boat, Jesus tells Simon to "put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch" (Lk 5:4). Simon said in reply "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets" (v. 5). Can you feel the tension beginning to mount? Jesus, a carpenter, is telling these experienced fishermen how to fish. Moreover, it comes after a long and discouraging night of fishing with nothing to show for it. How would you feel if you were in the boat as one of these fishermen? They must have been tired, in addition to being discouraged. The last thing I would want to do is to go back out fishing again, especially at the command of this stranger. I can imagine Simon and the other disciples thinking, "Who is this guy telling *us* how to fish?" And yet Jesus speaks with enough authority that Simon obeys. The results were shocking. "When they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink" (vv. 6–7).

This is truly a miraculous turn of events. But what comes next is the point I find most compelling: “When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’” (Lk 5:8). Do you see what’s happening in this moment? Like my friends from the last chapter, in God’s holy presence, Simon falls to his knees. The miracle stripped Simon of his pride; he is left naked and exposed before the all-knowing and all-powerful God. Simon is suddenly confronted with an overwhelming sense of his unworthiness and shame. His response is reminiscent of Isaiah’s: “I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5). I believe we are all more like Simon and Isaiah than we realize. Confronted with God’s holiness and power, our masks of pride come off and our underlying shame is exposed.

Can you imagine telling Jesus to get away from you and leave you alone? That is Simon Peter’s response. He chooses distance from Jesus rather than facing his shame. And so it is with us. Our guilt and shame is what ordinarily distances us from God. All of us, marred by sin and steeped in shame, tend to keep a safe distance when in the presence of his utter holiness. I understand Simon’s reaction. I have often wondered how I would respond if Jesus stood before me in all his glory and majesty. When I have asked others this question, some have told me they would go up and give Jesus a big hug. That’s a nice sentiment, but I don’t believe any of us would be capable of standing on our feet in his presence. Rather, I believe we would all be overwhelmed, like Simon Peter and like my friends that I mentioned at the end of the last chapter. They immediately fell on their faces in the presence of his holiness and glory. Perhaps we would do the same and speak words like Isaiah’s: “Woe is me! … I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5).

This insight into our own reactions is critical in understanding Simon and his shamed-based identity. At this point, Simon is nowhere near ready to face his shame and

confess his guilt. His proud and hardened heart is far from prepared to enter into a humble repentance. That will come much later around the events surrounding the cross. In reality, that is the only place any of us can come to terms with our sin and unworthiness. Until then, we just manage our shame and tell Jesus to go away, just as Simon did. We do everything we can to distract ourselves and put on our facades that tell the world we're OK. But no matter how many achievements or accolades we have earned, all of us have a shame-based identity that causes us to run from intimacy with Jesus. We are afraid we will be seen in all our unworthiness and then be rejected.

But notice that Jesus neither rejects nor abandons Simon in his shame. Nor does he seem especially focused on Simon's shame-based identity. Rather, Jesus sees him in his wholeness, with the eyes of love, while calling out his true identity. Jesus knows that Peter has a calling that he can't even imagine. He tells him, along with James and John, "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men" (Lk 5:10). From that point on, after bringing their boats to shore, they "left everything and followed him" (v. 11).

LEAVING EVERYTHING TO FOLLOW JESUS

Have you ever wondered why some people give up everything to follow Jesus while others hold on to their worldly identity and existence? It is one of the great mysteries of our faith. I wonder what motivated Simon Peter to let go of his entire life and livelihood in order to follow Jesus. Was it because of the miracle he witnessed? Did he catch a glimpse of heaven? Was he so moved by Jesus's love and mercy that everything else became secondary and unimportant? We may never know the answers to these questions about Simon Peter on this side of heaven. But we

can still ask ourselves: Why do *we* follow Jesus? And how much are we willing to give up in order to do so? Is our faith just a cultural religion? Or is there something so compelling about Jesus that we are willing to surrender everything to follow him wherever he leads us?

Jesus knew that not everyone would follow him until the end. He told the parable of the sower to describe the four different levels of faith responses that people have to God's Word (see Lk 8:4–15). Some people hear God's Word, but their faith is quickly stolen away. Others are shallow in their faith and run away as soon as things get too difficult. A third group allows God's Word room to grow, but worldly concerns choke out their spiritual life. It is only the fourth group that bears great fruit as faithful disciples of Jesus.

Many people in Jesus's time heard him preach and were moved by his miracles, but in the end, most people did not really allow the message to take hold in their lives. They are like the first group in the sower parable. We see the second kind of response from many of Jesus's fair-weather disciples after he multiplied the loaves and fish. Apparently they were awed by his miracles, but his teaching got too hard to accept. In the end, they "drew back and no longer walked with him" (Jn 6:66). When Jesus asked the rest of his disciples if they also wanted to leave, Simon Peter's responded in faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (v. 68). This explains why Peter stayed with Jesus and became one of those few who would produce a great harvest of fruitfulness. Simon Peter's shame notwithstanding, he is a great example of following Jesus until the end. He is a prime representative of this fourth group in the sower parable. He would first have to pass through many trials, however, including overcoming his shame-based identity.

OVERCOMING TRIALS AND FACING OUR SHAME

As we study Simon Peter's life throughout the Gospels, we see at times as a man with strong faith and amazing courage. He was the only one to get out of the boat and walk on water when Jesus invited him (see Mt 14:29). Though Jesus chastised him for losing trust, at least he had enough faith to step out. In other Gospel accounts, we see this same struggle in Simon Peter, starting out boldly in faith and then falling on his face over and over again. This pattern of alternating faith and failure reaches a climax during Jesus's passion. Peter's professed loyalty to Jesus and his confidence in himself are on full display: "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus responded, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter answered back, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you" (Mt 26:33–35).

I have little doubt that Simon Peter spoke these words of loyalty from the conviction and desires of his heart. His words convey a deep love for Jesus and an unwavering faith. But they also reek of pride and ungodly self-reliance. Like many of us, Simon Peter overestimated his own abilities. Jesus, however, could see where Simon remained blind to his own weaknesses. We all know how the story unfolds. Simon Peter did exactly as Jesus had predicted. When the cock crowed, he would publicly deny ever knowing Jesus.

Before that harrowing moment of denial, Simon Peter kept falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, leaving Jesus alone in his anguish. Jesus came to him and the others and said: "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"(Mt 26:40–41). Simon Peter's spirit was indeed willing, but like the rest of

us, he didn’t account for his own moral weakness. Soon, he would come face to face with that weakness in denying Jesus: “After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, ‘Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.’ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know the man.’ And immediately a cock crowed” (vv. 73–74).

Each of the Gospels provides a little different insight into Peter’s denial. I love Luke’s account because it adds an interaction with Jesus that is missing from the other Gospels. To me, this represents one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in all of Scripture. As soon as the rooster confirmed Jesus’s prophecy, Peter caught Jesus’s gaze: “And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:61–62).

I am struck by the phrase “*the Lord turned and looked at Peter*.” Can you imagine Jesus’s facial expression as his eyes engage with Simon Peter’s? I don’t believe for a moment that his gaze conveyed a “see I told you so” sneer that many of us are all too familiar with from friends and family. Rather, as I envision that moment, I sense Jesus’s deep anguish and heart-felt compassion for Simon Peter. Jesus loved him. Jesus was not surprised by Peter’s sin any more than he is shocked by our sins. He knew what was going to happen way before Simon Peter did.

This is Peter’s moment of truth. He has come face to face with the Author of truth and love. He is no longer capable of hiding his shame. No amount of rationalization or self-defense will save him from the shame and guilt of his moral failure. The depth of his sin and weakness has been exposed, laid bare in front of the Judge of the living and the dead. His sin is beyond the scope of his own self-justification. For the first time, he is confronted by the fact

that he can’t save himself. Like the rest of us, he realizes he needs a Savior.

As we are about to see, Peter is our model for spiritual healing because he acknowledges his brokenness and humbly turns back to Jesus. His betrayal of Jesus is tragic, but it is redeemable. This stands in stark contrast to Judas, who is arguably the most tragic figure in all of Scripture. Judas is the anti-type for spiritual healing because he refuses to repent of his betrayal.

PETER AND JUDAS: GODLY SORROW VERSUS WORLDLY SORROW

The parallel and contrast between Peter and Judas in the Passion narratives is obvious to even a casual reader. As central figures during the Last Supper and throughout the Passion, they are each highlighted in all four Gospels. Jesus predicts that both of them will betray him in a big way. But their destinies couldn’t be more dissimilar. Peter, as Jesus foretold, will become the head of the Church. Jesus prayed for Peter during his time of “sifting.” He then exhorted Peter to strengthen his brothers once he is restored to grace (see Lk 22:32). Judas, on the other hand, has a part to play like no other. If anyone in the Scriptures seems destined to hell, it would be Judas, although we know that God desires for all men to be saved and does not predestine any to hell (see 1 Tm 2:4).

The key difference between these two apostles is not the nature of their sins, as both betray and deny Jesus in their own way. *The thing that separates them is their response*. They make very different choices when it comes to facing their guilt and shame. Apparently, both deeply regretted what they had done (see Mt 26:75; 27:3–10). Yet Judas’s regret drove him to despair and to his horrible suicide.

Simon Peter's conviction, on the other hand, led him eventually to be fully restored and reconciled with Jesus. These are two very different kinds of responses to guilt that result in two very different outcomes: one brings death while the other brings life and transformation. St. Paul describes these two kinds of responses as "worldly grief" and "godly grief":

> As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter. (2 Cor 7:9–11)

Judas is the poster child for the "worldly grief that produces death." When he discovered that Jesus had been condemned, Judas "repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.' They said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself" (Mt 27:3–5). Those are among the darkest words in the Gospels. What a senseless tragedy! Judas was a chosen disciple of Jesus, one of the Twelve. He spent three years with Jesus. Even after his sin, he did a lot of things right, including acknowledging his guilt and wrongdoing and then going back to return the money he received for handing Jesus over to the Jewish leaders. But when the leaders didn't accept the "blood money," his pride got the best of him. Judas didn't realize in that moment of greatest

darkness that Jesus would have forgiven him too if he would have come back to Jesus with a humble heart, like Peter did. This is worldly sorrow in full display.

Simon Peter, on the other hand, is the model of “godly grief,” a kind of repentance that brings about healing and restores innocence. Peter did not give into despair or let his pride keep him from being forgiven and forgiving himself. Instead, Peter demonstrated an earnestness and zeal to make things right again. In the end, he trusted God’s mercy to triumph over the true judgment of his sin (see Jas 2:13). He knew what he did was horribly wrong and wept bitterly over his sin. I imagine he, too, was tempted to despair and shame, but he didn’t give into the seducing whispers from the father of lies. Rather, like the prodigal son, Peter stood up and headed back home to be reconciled to the Father. In doing so, he would have his true identity restored. Peter was indeed sifted by Satan. He fell into grave sin. But in the end, he got back up and headed to the only one who could make things better. Peter’s godly sorrow led him to true repentance and a deeper yearning for Jesus. He recognized that only Jesus could restore peace to his soul.

JESUS OFFERS PEACE AND RESTORATION

In his darkest moments, Peter may have remembered Jesus’s parting words, offered as consolation during the Last Supper, as he was about to enter into his passion: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give it to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). Peter may not have realized the full impact of these words at first. But I imagine they had to be deeply consoling when Jesus spoke them again in the Upper Room after the nightmare of betrayal was over and Jesus rose from the dead. “Peace be with

you.” This brief phrase is actually one word in the Hebrew language: *shalom*. Used as a common form of greeting and farewell, the word is packed full of meaning and emotion. It connotes peace, harmony, safety, wholeness, and forgiveness all in that one word.[54]

Judas died without peace, without receiving forgiveness, and without being restored to wholeness. Peter, on the other hand, must have basked in Jesus’s greeting. It represented the beginning of his healing process, standing there in awe with his brothers and friends in the presence of Jesus, crucified and resurrected. What a difference three days can make, not only in Peter’s life, but in each of ours as well. How tragic that Judas could not have waited two more days to see Jesus conquer death and the grave. If only he could hear these words of peace and restoration from Jesus’s mouth, he, too, might have been restored.

When Jesus offered *shalom* (words of peace and forgiveness) to Peter, he stood in the same room where he had predicted Peter’s denial (during the Last Supper). The parallel would not be lost on Peter. I believe this marked the beginning of Peter’s healing. His full restoration would come shortly after, this time at the Sea of Tiberias (also known as the Sea of Galilee). Jesus brought Peter back to the same place where he first called him to be a “fisher of men” after performing the fishing miracle. If you remember that first encounter, Peter’s shame was exposed and he told Jesus to leave him alone. Do you think it is any coincidence that Jesus led Peter back to this particular scene to bring him deeper healing and restoration?

Just like the first time, Jesus commanded the fishermen turned disciples to cast their nets into the sea after they had caught nothing. “So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity fish” (Jn 21:6). This time after seeing the miracle, Simon Peter’s response was totally different. Rather than run away from Jesus, avoiding his

shame like he did the first time, Peter “jumped into the sea” and made his way to Jesus on the seashore. John notes that he was almost naked, calling up images of Adam and Eve at the beginning of creation: “naked and not ashamed.” Jesus would soon restore his innocence and true identity.

After breakfast, Jesus led Peter to forgive himself. Jesus invited Peter to reaffirm his love and faithfulness three times, once for each of the three denials. Then Jesus commissioned him to feed his lambs and tend his sheep (see Jn 21:15–16). No longer the proud and self-reliant fisherman, he realized his own weakness and utter dependence on God’s grace and mercy. Finally having shed his shame-based identity as a sinner unworthy of Jesus’s love, he realized he is more than his sin and shame (see Rom 8:1). Jesus never lost sight of Peter’s true identity and calling, even in the midst of his sin. Through Jesus’s mercy and forgiveness, Peter was restored to his full identity and mission as the chief shepherd. He was then able to strengthen his brothers. At last, Peter, the “Rock,” was able to live up to his calling as the foundation stone of the Church.

Peter is the model for all of us. In him, we see that we do not need to be afraid of our weaknesses or failures. Even before we sin, Jesus sees our failures. But he also sees our true identity and calling and promises to intercede for us until we are restored to wholeness (see Heb 7:25; Rom 8:26–27). Perhaps this is what St. John Paul II meant when he spoke to the youth of the world: “We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures. We are the sum of the Father’s love for us and the real possibility of becoming the image of his son.”[55] Jesus alone sees our true identity, and the unique mission he has called each one of us to fulfill.

In the next chapter, we will explore how Peter’s example applies to each of us in the areas where guilt and shame

have kept us bound or where pride has blinded us from our need for a Savior.

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54 James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), "Shalom."

55 Pope St. John Paul II, Closing Mass at World Youth Day Toronto, 2002.

CHAPTER 10

SPIRITUAL HEALING

On the shores of Lake Tiberias, Peter let go of his shame-based identity. He no longer needed to hide his sin and guilt behind a façade. After several life-transforming encounters with the resurrected Jesus, he could now freely live according to his true identity and fulfill the personal mission which God had ordained from the beginning. Peter became a new man.

We see evidence of his transformation almost immediately in the opening chapters of the book of Acts. After receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter went outside and began to exhort the people to repent. Through his inspired preaching, the people were “cut to the heart.” When they asked Peter what they should do, he responded without hesitation: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:38–39).

In replying to the people, Peter was simply passing along the spiritual healing he had received directly from Jesus: the gift of repentance, the forgiveness of his sins, and the promise of the Holy Spirit. As the leader of the Universal Church, he was uniquely qualified, along with the other apostles, to share these gifts with all people (see Mt 28:19;

Jn 20:21–23). Notice that Peter directed the people to “be baptized.” It is through the sacraments, beginning with Baptism, that we can receive the healing of guilt and shame. This promise, he assured the crowd, is for all generations.

THE HEALING POWER OF THE SACRAMENTS

Ever since Pentecost, the Church has taught and practiced the holy sacraments as healing remedies given directly by Jesus himself. As encounters with the Living Christ, they supernaturally communicate the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit flowing from his Mystical Body.[56] The Church herself is a sacramental sign of Jesus’s ongoing presence in the world.[57] Practically, this means that Christ is physically and spiritually *re-presented* in every era of history and in every place on earth where the Church is visible. Jesus first entrusted this power and authority to Peter and to the other apostles (see Mt 28:19; Jn 20:21–23). They, in turn, have transmitted this authority with unbroken succession down through every generation.[58] The sacraments are tangible evidence of Jesus’s presence with us today. They offer to each one of us the same healing power that Peter experienced in his encounters with Jesus and subsequently offered to the people on the day of Pentecost. Each sacrament calls us personally to repentance, cleanses us from our sins, and communicates the Holy Spirit into our spirit. Whenever they are approached in faith, they bring healing and restoration to all who receive them.

I didn’t always have a good understanding of the sacraments. Even though I had been brought up in the Church and received these sacred mysteries throughout my life, it took me well into my adulthood to appreciate their

holy essence and healing power. Like many others in the Church, I took the sacraments for granted for too many years of my life. Worse yet, I abused them by receiving them without heartfelt repentance while in grave sin. As I grew older and my sins grew more serious, I lost sensitivity to the graces inherent in the sacraments. My heart became hardened through the deceit of sin (cf. Heb 3:13).

Eventually, I became numb to the reality of Jesus's presence in and through the sacraments. I didn't realize how much I was hurting myself spiritually at the time. I had drifted away from the sacrament of Reconciliation in high school and stayed away for about ten years. During that time, I would still receive the Eucharist but without entering into true repentance in preparation for receiving Jesus. I also entered into the sacrament of Matrimony without a cleansing confession. As a result, I brought my whole history of sin and guilt into our marriage. It would be many years before I realized the damage I was doing to myself and others and how I was desecrating the Lord's presence by receiving his body and blood without a pure heart:

> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Cor 11:27–32)

These words from St. Paul about the Eucharist are deeply convicting. To this day, they inspire me to be mindful of my

spiritual condition when I receive Holy Communion. I believe many in the Church need to heed these words as well. In many ways, we are a sick Church. The same medicine (the sacraments) that is intended for our health can also make us sick if not received properly. Unless we examine ourselves and prepare our hearts, we cannot fully receive the healing power that flows from the Eucharist or any of the sacraments. This is why repentance is so important. We need to prepare our minds and hearts before receiving the sacraments.

REPENTANCE: PREPARING OUR MIND AND HEARTS

Peter exhorted the people gathered on Pentecost to repent. Their repentance actually began when they heard the truth through Peter's fervent preaching. They were "cut to the heart" because the Holy Spirit had convicted them of their sins. This marked the beginning of their repentance. But acknowledging our guilt is not enough by itself. Even Judas regretted his actions and felt guilty. It is not enough to feel a worldly sorrow for our sins. Only godly sorrow leads to true repentance. We need to change the way we think and act by bringing our thoughts and actions in submission to God's divine law.

Catholic theologian Ulrich Lehner offers insight into how godly repentance heals us spiritually:

> The Christian tradition conceived repentance as a form of self-healing of the soul, a way to regain its lost powers.... In repentance we acknowledge that we could have acted differently.... Repentance enables us to disown the powers of guilt. In the act of repentance we intentionally move our mind

> toward our guilt and thus cease its controlling power.... This process begins by accusing oneself of the bad actions one has done, as well as the good actions one has not done.... God asks contrition of us, because it is the rejuvenating well of transformation.[59]

As Lehner observes, true repentance involves facing our guilt squarely and agreeing with God's judgment about sin and righteousness (cf. Jn 16:7–11). When our spiritual eyes and hearts open in this way, we see sin for what it is: an offense against God and a violation of his love.[60] We come to understand, at the most fundamental level, that sin wounds us, our neighbor, and, most importantly, our relationship with God. As a result, sin distorts our true identity and brings us deeper into our shame-based identity.

In repentance, we are convicted of our sin and invited to turn our hearts and minds back to God and his love. In doing so, we also restore the broken relationship with ourselves and our neighbor. This is fundamentally what the prodigal son did when he "came to his senses" and turned back to his father's house to be restored in his identity as son. In repentance, we are invited to let go of our worldly way of thinking and see all of reality from God's perspective. Acquiring a new way of thinking, we also seek reunion with our heavenly Father.

For me, this process of heart-felt repentance began in my late twenties after a neighbor invited me to join him at a Bible study. Almost immediately the Holy Spirit began convicting me of my sins, showing me how my self-reliance had cut me off from a vital relationship with Jesus (cf. Jn 15:6). I realized in that moment that I had become lukewarm in my faith (cf. Rv 3:15–16). This conviction of my sin and repentance initiated a season of increased prayer, Scripture reading, and self-examination. I remember closing the door to my room at night, getting on my knees, and

imploring the Holy Spirit to transform my life. During this time, I would receive new depths of revelation of my sin. This process of self-enlightenment occurred almost daily. The Holy Spirit gently led me into the truth, showing me how I had buried my guilt throughout the years and how I needed to repent. I had hidden my shame behind an exterior façade of pride, but during this season of heightened repentance, he was calling me to humble myself and come out of hiding.

Though this process of facing my guilt and shame seemed threatening at first, I soon came to treasure this season of deeper repentance. It proved to be a time of greater intimacy with the Holy Spirit, which gradually brought about significant spiritual healing in my life. The graces of this season later spread to other members of my family. Eventually, the Holy Spirit led me to return back to the sacrament of confession. I was like the prodigal son being restored to my true identity. I confessed my sin, exposed my shame, and actively received the Father's forgiveness.

CONFESSING OUR SINS AND RECEIVING FORGIVENESS

During my teens and early twenties, I had lost sight of my true identity: the fact that God created me to embody his image and likeness and that Jesus came to restore me (and all of us) into the fullness of joy. I was living more from my shame-based identity (covered by pride). This is our common human condition in a fallen world. Many times in our life, we act more like the prodigal son wandering away from the Father's house. We end up carelessly squandering our spiritual inheritance in dissolute living. At other times, we are more like the older brother, joylessly performing our

duties while mercilessly judging those around us who don't live up to our standards. Whether we give in to self-indulgence (like the prodigal son) or self-righteousness (like his older brother), the result is the same. We remain distant from our heavenly Father. We fail to love God with our whole heart and mind, and we fail to love our neighbor as our self (Mt 22:38–39).

Though we may wander far away from God, he never stops loving us and reaching out to us. Like the father running out to meet the prodigal son, Jesus actively pursued Peter to restore him to spiritual health. He then sent Peter to reach out to his chosen people at Pentecost to bring the same spiritual healing to them. Today, he continues to offer his love and mercy through the Church to restore each one of us. This is why he gave us the sacraments, and in particular the sacrament of Reconciliation (cf. Jn 20:22–23). In the process of honestly confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness, Jesus removes our guilt and restores us to fellowship. The apostle John describes the many benefits of confession and forgiveness.

> If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 Jn 1:6–10)

Confession is simply agreeing with God, acknowledging that we have sinned, and being honest about how we have violated his divine law in our thoughts, words, deeds, and in

failing to act in his love. Confession heals us spiritually in multiple ways. It exposes our guilt and shame. It brings our soul out of darkness and into light. It cleanses our soul from sin. It frees us from the demonic powers attached to our sin and shame. It restores our true dignity and brings us back into a state of renewed grace where we can love more freely. Finally, the sacrament restores our communion with God and our capacity to have genuine fellowship with others.

Confession to a priest requires humility. It breaks through our pride and leads us out of hiding. I have found I can still hide in some ways in confessing my sins to God on my own. But when I am required to sit in front of another person and humbly acknowledge my lack of love and distortions of love, I have to be vulnerable and honest at a different level. This helps to dissipate my shame and open my heart to the outpouring of God's grace. Ultimately, in the sacrament of Reconciliation, I am confessing to Jesus directly as he is sacramentally represented by the priest. While there can be advantages to confessing our sins to friends and family, only the priest has been granted the authority by Jesus to speak his words of absolution and to offer forgiveness for our sins (see Jn 20:21–23).

Jesus alone knows the depths of our sin, guilt, and shame. He understands how these have robbed us of our peace and joy and inflicted great suffering on ourselves and others. And yet he does not condemn us, though we often condemn ourselves. His sole desire is to restore our fellowship with him, along with our peace. In the sacrament of Reconciliation, he offers each of us personally an application of the universal forgiveness he spoke from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Just as Peter needed to receive forgiveness from Jesus personally, we also need to know that God forgives each one of us. It is important that we understand God's forgiveness by reading about it in the Scriptures. But

it only becomes real to us personally when we hear it with our own ears and receive it intimately in those areas where our guilt and shame have left us feeling cut off and unworthy of his love.

This is fundamentally what happens in the sacrament of Reconciliation when the priest speaks these words of absolution: “God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”[61]

These words of absolution spoken by the priest emphasize the full participation of all three members of the Trinity. The Father, filled with compassion, pours out his mercy upon us. Jesus, who paid the price of our reconciliation through his sacrificial death and resurrection, is officially represented by his priest. The Holy Spirit infuses into our hearts his pardon and peace. How is that for spiritual power?

When we confess our sins in our rooms behind closed doors, Jesus is certainly listening. Long ago he forgave us from the cross, but something remains incomplete until we bring our sins to the priest in confession. Confession enables us to come out of hiding and face our shame. We feel the lifting of our sin and guilt and our relationship with God and the Church is restored. According to Pope John Paul II, our reconciliation with God in the sacrament effects many other reconciliations:

> It must be emphasized that the most precious result of the forgiveness obtained in the sacrament of penance consists in reconciliation with God, which takes place in the inmost heart of the son who was lost and found again, which

> every penitent is. But it has to be added that this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations which repair the breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his own true identity. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way attacked and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.[62]

I can testify to the truth of these words. After finally confessing my sins to a priest on a retreat weekend, I had a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit. I received the grace of being forgiven and cleansed. Soon after, I felt the joy of Jesus's intimate presence after receiving him in the Eucharist. A few hours later, I experienced the Holy Spirit fill my spirit in a way that forever changed my life. I left that retreat with a renewed love for Christ and the Church and went home to love my wife and children with renewed zeal and dedication.

In the months and years to follow, I saw God pour out similar graces to other members of my family. They, too, received profound spiritual healing as they repented from their sins, received God's forgiveness, and experienced a deeper outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This began many miracles of spiritual healing that occurred over the years, touching each member of the family in some way. I discovered that even though sin is contagious, spiritual healing is even more contagious.

SPIRITUAL HEALING IS CONTAGIOUS

I spoke in the first chapter about how the sin and brokenness in our family had become like a cancer spreading throughout our entire family. None of us were

spared the ravages of sin, guilt, and shame. We all experienced deep brokenness and perpetuated that destructiveness through our sins against God and one another. In the years following my parents' divorce, each one of us, parents and children alike, became enslaved by grave sin. We all needed spiritual healing, but most of us didn't realize how much we had separated ourselves from God and his way of living. When I compared my lifestyle to my brother Dave's and my father's, I mistakenly thought I was in pretty good shape. The rest of the family may have been living under a similar delusion.

Once the Holy Spirit began opening my eyes to my sin, guilt, and shame, I could see more clearly and with compassion my brothers' and sisters' and parents' need for spiritual healing. As my deeper conversion began to bear fruit, I saw God move powerfully in each of their lives, one at a time over many years. Each of us experienced the love of God in significant ways. Each repented of our deeply rooted patterns of sin. Each of us turned to God and the Church for forgiveness, and each received a tangible manifestation of the Holy Spirit that brought deeper communion with Jesus.

In my book *Be Healed*, I shared my brother's amazing conversion and his subsequent healing experiences through the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. His holy dying process affected our entire family.[63] Around the same time, my brothers and sisters also went through their own spiritual healing. One at a time, they repented of unholy relationships and established chaste, holy ones before getting married to Christian spouses in the Church. My dad also underwent a pretty dramatic conversion during this time. He later revealed that a priest he didn't know found him in a bar and heard his confession. This miracle of spiritual healing led him back to the Church. From there he worked through a thorough process of

repentance, regarding his marriages to my mom and to his second wife. Eventually both those marriage were declared annulled, enabling my dad to marry again sacramentally in the Church. He was delighted to be fully restored and able to receive Holy Communion again. We were delighted with him and could see real changes in his life.

After his major season of repentance, he lived his faith authentically. He allowed the Holy Spirit to permeate and heal the various areas of his life, including his past broken relationships with our family. He went to Alcoholics Anonymous and worked through the twelve-step spiritual healing program that is based on the spirituality of St. Ignatius. After surrendering his addiction to God, he wrote out a detailed spiritual inventory of the sins he committed throughout his life and the ways he hurt his loved ones as a result. In composing this inventory, he was able to squarely face his guilt and shame for the first time. After confessing all this to a priest, he wrote a letter to each member of our family, humbly acknowledging the specific ways he had hurt us and asking for our forgiveness. In that letter to all of us, he acknowledged how his addictions and actions hurt us and destroyed two families. He then followed up on his letter by speaking with many of us, sharing his sincere sorrow, and asking us to forgive him.

In the years following, many graces flowed from my dad’s spiritual healing. He worshipped often and received Holy Communion again regularly. He remained grateful for God’s mercy and forgiveness, often sharing his gratitude with those around him. He became more tenderhearted in his love for his wife and children. He helped others reach sobriety in AA and through his multiple ministries at church. He treasured the Word of God and enjoyed proclaiming it in his ministry as a lector. He also served as a Eucharistic minister for the homebound, bringing Jesus’s love to those who couldn’t come to church. Later, he joined the core team for his local Life Teen program and shared the Gospel with

youth, hoping to direct them on the right path. He and his wife took in teen mothers and their babies through the Gabriel Project. He also helped start a soup kitchen and served the poor regularly and helped the impaired elderly get social security (we only discovered a few of these ministries at his wake).

After losing some measure of trust and respect for my father during those trying years following the divorce, I learned to admire him again in the latter years of his life. His newfound peace spread to all of us and brought healing to us as well, right up to his last days. Sixth months before he died, his wife, Paula, had to be hospitalized and there was no one to take care of dad. By now, he was suffering from memory loss and needed vigilant caregiving. My brother Rich drove from Florida to West Virginia to pick my father up. As a result, all nine of his children, and most of his grandchildren and greatgrandchildren, were able to enjoy quality time with him. The visit brought closure and a deep sense of peace for each of us. Even my mom had good quality time with my dad, nearly fifty years after their divorce. It brought the final healing she needed to say goodbye in peace. During our visit, several of us had the sense that it might be the last time we saw dad in this world. We said goodbye and, with deep gratitude, thanked our heavenly Father for the gift of his redemption of our earthly father. We received this grace-filled time as a personal kiss from the Father in his providential care for our father and each of us.

In reflecting on this time of grace, the aforementioned insights from St. John Paul II tell the story: “This reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations, which repair the breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his own true identity. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way

attacked and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation."[64]

In these few words, St. John Paul II sums up the process of spiritual healing and points us toward our heavenly homeland where all things will be healed and everything will be fully reconciled. All that remains is a few final reflections.

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56 See CCC 1116.
57 See Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 48.
58 See CCC 859–62.
59 Ulrich Lehner, *God Is Not Nice* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2017), 117–19.
60 See CCC 1849.
61 CCC 1449.
62 Pope St. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 31.
63 See chapter 8 on redemptive suffering and chapter 9 on sacraments and healing of *Be Healed* (Ave Maria Press, 2014).
64 Pope St. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 31.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

My desire in writing this book has been to convey the real hope and healing which is readily available to each one of us as we face our own personal suffering and try to make sense of the suffering that is all around us. In each chapter, I drew upon the wisdom of the Scriptures, Church teaching, and personal life experiences to show how God's grace reaches to the depths of our physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering.

Our lives only make sense in light of the paschal mystery. Jesus's passion, death, and resurrection stand as the centerpiece of all of human history as well as our own personal histories. I organized the book around three main figures in the passion narrative: Jesus, Mary, and Peter. They serve as the model for how to respond to the inevitable suffering we face in each area of our lives.

Jesus suffered physically throughout his life and endured intense physical pain during his passion and crucifixion. He is our model showing us how to embrace our *physical suffering* while trusting in the Father and offering it as a

sacrifice of love for the sake of others. His resurrection is firm evidence that our physical suffering is temporary and cannot be compared to the glory which will be revealed in us (see Rom 8). In the meantime, we are called to look to Jesus as our Divine Physician, to heal us in every area of our physical suffering.

Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, knows the depth of our *emotional suffering*. As our model, she teaches us how to keep our eyes on Jesus through all of our traumatic losses. In this lifetime, we will always experience some degree of loss, so we must learn to grieve well and find healing in our communion with Jesus. In heaven there will be no more tears or sorrow because our relational attachments will be secure and everlasting. There we will experience the fullness of joy, with no more heartache.

Peter is the prototype of *spiritual suffering and healing*. He models for us how we can shed our shame-based identity and embrace our true identity and mission in Christ. As head of the Church, he administers the sacraments for our spiritual healing, teaching us how to release our guilt and shame through repentance, forgiveness, and yielding to the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the book, I shared experiences from my own suffering and particularly around the life and death of my wife, as well as my father and brother. Our entire family experienced significant healing in the midst of these experiences of walking with them in their suffering. I trust that Margie, Dave, and Dad are now enjoying the ultimate healing of being in heaven.

Facing the reality of death and eternal life has a way of putting all our suffering into proper perspective. I would like to end by sharing touching moments from each of their funeral Masses as an illustration of how God is at work in our suffering.

During Dave’s funeral Mass nearly twenty years ago, our family stood together and gave his eulogy. We spoke about

the story of the prodigal son and about Dave's years of drug addiction and his return to the Father's secure embrace. All of heaven celebrated his return. At communion, I had a sense of heaven and earth joining with Dave and our family. The closing recorded song, "Back on My Feet Again" sung by Michael Bolton, expressed our firm hope in Dave's physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness.

At my dad's wake and funeral earlier this year, God arranged for our entire family to go to West Virginia to celebrate his life. This time, children from my father's *three families* joined together to give the eulogy at his wake, each sharing about how God continued restoring our relationships with him right up until the end. During his funeral Mass, an amazing and spontaneous event occurred. For the first time, my dad's wife, Paula, reached out to my mom and Susan and the three expressed genuine love and peace during the exchange of peace. All nine of the children joined in. The moment left us all in tears, realizing how much emotional and spiritual healing God had accomplished over the years.

Two weeks later, we celebrated Margie's life with a beautiful wake and funeral Mass. Over six hundred people came, many traveling from other states to support us and honor Margie. Even now, remembering the outpouring of love and support from so many beautiful and caring people brings tears to my eyes. Margie's wake and funeral were unlike anything I have ever experienced. At her wake, family, friends, coworkers, and patients shared heartwarming stories of how Margie's love and care touched their lives.

The following day, the opening song at Margie's funeral Mass was one that my four-year-old granddaughter Elle had sung as a lullaby to her grandmother during Margie's last weeks. As all of us joined in singing "Holy Spirit You Are Welcome in this Place"; the Holy Spirit filled the church. His presence was so powerful throughout the Mass that almost everyone commented on it afterward. People came up and

talked about how they received deep healing just by being in that environment. Even today, we continue to hear from people about the impact that the celebration had on their life.

Finally, I want to close by sharing the eulogies my daughters gave at the end of Margie's resurrection Mass because they summarize the things I have been trying to communicate throughout the book. In the midst of my daughters' suffering, I hope you can hear their love for their mother and their gratitude to God for all the beautiful graces he poured out throughout it all. I also pray that they speak to you of God's tender love for you in the midst of any suffering you are going through.

KRISTEN'S EULOGY

> For those of you who don't know me, I'm Margie's youngest daughter, Kristen. My mom would laugh at me even trying to attempt this—she knows I'm a crier. In fact, as we know, mom didn't always have too much of a filter—and when she was sick, that was still the case. One day, I was crying in frustration about all the red tape in trying to get her seen, and she looked concerned, so I told her how I was frustrated. She looked at me and, in jest, said, "crybaby." So here I go, mama; bear with me.
>
> As many of you know, our family is super close, and we spend a lot of time together. I had the pleasure of getting to have lunch with my mom fairly regularly. I would go to her house on my lunch break and she would feed me—definitely one of her love languages was food! When I walked in the door, she would light up and smile

and say, “Hi, sweetness!” She’d hug me warmly, and with such love. I knew I was so deeply loved by her!

Even when she got sick and her memory was failing, if one of us left the room for just a minute and then came back in, she would say, “Hi! You’re here!” with such excitement and joy, as if she hadn’t seen us in a while. We knew we were loved. What we didn’t *fully* realize was it wasn’t just family members that she loved so well. Since she’s been sick, we’ve heard this from at least one thousand people! She made everyone feel so important, and so special, and so very loved!

We heard the same sentiments over and over: “Margie made me feel so comfortable in her presence,” “I never felt judged or looked down upon by her,” “She was so real,” “She was so caring and compassionate,” “She was our light,” “She was the glue that keeps us all connected,” “Her love was unconditional.”

My mom really did love so well. As my husband, Stephen, said, “Wow! What a legacy to leave. If only we could all love so well.” Mom was someone that you could bring your troubles to. She listened well and with such compassion. She would help encourage you, bring you hope, and cheer you up. She was always a good cheerleader and someone you would want in your corner for sure! She was also someone you wanted to share your good news with! She would get so excited and often even scream in response! Personally, she was the first person I wanted to share with because no one shared in my joy more than she did!

All of this made her a great labor and delivery nurse as well. We have heard from many that she

was with during their childrens' births. They are all so grateful for her being there with them, and I'm sure it's because of all of these qualities. She loved the relational part of nursing, and she loved her coworkers as well.

My mom was always authentically herself. It was so refreshing! Whether that was wearing the brightest color clothing, using colorful words, or telling someone off that she thought deserved it. She was true to who she was and would say it exactly how it was. But she never forced her opinion onto anyone else.

My mom loved the beach and her friends and family. But there is not much in this world that "Dodo" loved more than her grandbabies. Sometimes she feared for and about them, but in her word "geez-oh-pete," she loved them so much! As soon as they were able to talk, she would teach them all to say, "DoDo loves you to the moon." When the disease started progressing and she needed more help walking, she said to me, "I hate for them to see me like this." And I said, "I know mama, but it's better than them not seeing you at all." And she said, "It's definitely better than me not seeing them!" She was right! They were constantly her source of joy!

The progression of this disease was hard to witness and left her looking and acting not so much like herself. This was particularly hard for her little grandkids to see. I was able to have a conversation with my six-year-old niece Lily about a week before my mom passed and asked her what she thought. She said, "It's OK, I know that right now it's more important to care for DoDo than it is to play." And then she said, "She's still

the same DoDo. She's still funny, she is still so lovable, and she still loves us so much!"

Then I spoke to my three-year-old niece Elle (who had been avoiding mom a bit), and I said, "Even though DoDo looks a little different, and she can't talk anymore, she is still the same DoDo. Do you know how you can tell? Just look in her eyes and you will see how very much she loves you!" So we went over to her and Elle got eye to eye with her. Mom looked at Elle with the sweetest, softest blue eyes that were filled with such love! Tears sprung to Elle's eyes and she said, "I can see it!" From that point on, she didn't avoid mom anymore but even chose to sit next to her and snuggle with her.

My mom is an amazing woman. She's incredibly strong and brave and never once complained throughout this illness. She is so overwhelmingly loving; this was most especially evident with my dad during this time. Which, as a child, to witness your parents love each other so *fully* and *unreservedly* is a pure gift!

I love you mama!

CARRIE'S EULOGY

American humorist Mark Twain once quipped, "When we remember we are all mad, the mysteries disappear and life stands explained."

When my mom first fell ill, I sat my children down separately and tried to explain to them why their "Dodo" wasn't quite herself. My eleven-year-old philosopher said, "You know mom, in some ways Dodo is more herself than she's ever been."

Whew! Over the last couple of months, his words have echoed such truth about a reality that unfolded in my parent's living room over the course of these last weeks.

Almost daily for the last months, my dad, sister, our husbands, kids, extended family, and throngs of friends sat with her and loved on her and served her as she slowly lost her mind.

It started with small things—repeating herself, walking off balance, forgetfulness—but soon it was big things: inventing conversations and forgetting if she had breakfast or even took a shower. Then it was really big things: losing complete mobility, losing bodily functions, and eventually losing the ability to speak. Watching her lose so many capacities was heart-wrenching, agonizing, overwhelming, and, dare I say, mysteriously awakening.

Don't get me wrong, this disease is utterly devastating, but what we encountered even in this suffering was nothing short of miraculous.

I remember the first night the reality of the situation started to settle in. We had no diagnosis yet, but I had this sense that these symptoms were not going to end well. I was over at their house having pancakes on Sunday after Mass, and instead of busying herself in the kitchen serving all of us, she was laying on the floor in a heap of chaos snuggled next to my dad and all eight of our rowdy kids just beaming from ear to ear. I was in the kitchen, and she didn't yell at me once for unloading the dishwasher or wiping down the counters (before this, she had to do everything; no one could serve her). Hot tears sprung to my eyes. Not tears of sadness but of gratitude. She was letting me give and she was receiving. My

whole life she had given to us, poured herself into us, encouraged us, showered us with unconditional love, and now, at the most unfortunate of times, she was allowing us to love her back.

So that's what we did. We loved her. And we loved every second of it. Don't misunderstand me. It was hard! Hard to see her suffer. Hard to hear her mumbled and desperate sounds. Hard to feel her confusion. But it was also beautiful because, in my heart (and the hearts of many others), there were no longer barriers and pretenses or defenses. Just love between us.

This type of love is different than a feeling; it's a knowing. Like the knowing you have when you wake up six times in the middle of the night to feed your newborn baby. No one chooses to lose sleep, but you choose to nourish and cherish the vulnerable life that is before you.

In these last few months, I've experienced greater intimacy with my mom than I have in my entire lifetime. I think we all have.

When something like this happens, life has a way of ordering priorities. All the things you used to think were important became trivial.

While my heart will always ache in her absence, I'm eternally grateful for the precious time we shared.

I believe the mystery Twain referred to is love. Oh, how our minds get in the way.

"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't

> love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.
>
> "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance….
>
> "In the end three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love."

Those eulogies touch my heart in so many ways. But I'm glad Carrie ended with the passage from 1 Corinthians 13 on love. I can't think of a better way to finish not only this book but life itself. Our suffering will end. But if we keep our focus on Jesus, our faith, hope, and love won't ever end. Neither will our lives have an ending. Death and suffering do not have the final word. They are merely birth pangs giving way to a life that is no longer fragile. We are all being born into a world where there will be no more tears, no more pain, no more suffering, and no more death. There will only be glorious, unblemished love shared between all of our loved ones, who are finally whole. We will be completely healed because we will be in the presence of the Source of all Love: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have nothing to fear in our temporary suffering because his perfect love casts out all fear.

As I close, I pray for you that in your suffering you will have perseverance, grow in Christ-like character, be strengthened in hope, and that the love of God will be poured out into your heart through the Holy Spirit (see Rom 5:3–5).