

HOMILY PALM SUN 2012 (B) 1 APR 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

I think one distinguishing mark of a middle age is a heightened awareness to the widespread presence of suffering, a fact sometimes passed over in the excitement of youth. As I've gotten older the inescapable nature of human suffering has become more evident. Being a priest necessarily has accelerated the learning process for me. Ministry involves rather frequent contact w/ this aspect of the human condition because priests must minister to people who suffer. Folks come to us w/ their complaints and crises, their struggles w/ evil and sin. We visit the infirm and aged in institutions and private residences. We accompany the deceased and their bereaved loved ones to their final resting place. Suffering is ubiquitous. Everyone goes through it at every stage of life. Granted, some undergo this sad fact of life w/ greater intensity, but no one avoids it altogether, even those who manage to mask the sorrow rather effectively w/ bright smiles and cheerful demeanor.

People have an instinctive aversion to suffering. We don't like to suffer. We don't even like to be around people who are suffering. There's a contagious quality about it. When we see someone in pain, we start to feel distressed too. So there's an unhappy human tendency to segregate the suffering away from the rest of us--be it in the leper colonies of yesteryear or the nursing homes of today. I see this evasiveness in the difficulties had in recruiting lay ministers: I mean it's relatively easy to get folks to volunteer as CMs and readers at Mass; but it's rather hard to get folks to bring Communion to the homebound--visiting people who are sick or dying makes most of us uncomfortable. This collective discomfort which suffering induces also helps explain the mindset promoting euthanasia, assisted suicide, eugenic abortions, and the like. As life has become more comfortable due to technological advance--think of air-conditioning, indoor plumbing, assorted medical advances, and so forth--we've become less capable of tolerating suffering when it does come. So we try to cheat the process by terminating life when it becomes hard for either the subject or the caregivers to endure it.

From a religious perspective, suffering can be understood fundamentally as the gap between God's will and our own, between the way things shall be, and the way we want them to be. Our dear Maker didn't ask our opinions before he fashioned the world, nor does he bother to consult with us much as he works out its future. And we don't appreciate this at all. We adults like to think we have outgrown childhood, but for all our advances, we want to have our way just as much as any tiny tot; as grownups, we just tend to be louder and more insistent about the matter. Within the Christian perspective, the Passion of Christ casts new light on the mystery of human suffering. For in the Passion, our Lord himself, the divine Son of God, underwent suffering to the ultimate degree. He endured every type of suffering imaginable: he was rejected as a blasphemer by the leaders of his own religious tradition and condemned as a criminal by the political authorities; he was betrayed by one of his closest followers and deserted by the rest; he was stripped of his clothes, nailed to the cross, and strung up naked to be mocked by every passerby; finally, he died an agonizing death protracted over several hours. It is this mystery of faith that is commemorated on Palm Sunday, aptly called Passion Sunday as well. We hear the account of the Lord's Passion, in which Jesus confronts the terrifying gap between his will and that of his Father and voices that memorable prayer: not my will, but thy will, be done. The Son of God enters completely into the depths of human suffering, enduring utter desolation upon the

cross, to the point where he cries out from the bottom of his heart: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The good news in all this talk of suffering is that in Christ human suffering has been redeemed. Suffering has been transformed into a place where God is present, in some mysterious way God alone knows how. So when trials and troubles come our way, God is with us. When we have troubles in the family home--God's there. If there are difficulties at work, or difficulties finding work, God's there. When we are sad or angry, betrayed or belittled, persecuted or rejected, alienated or alone--God's there. When those we love are in agony--God's there. If we're naked, impoverished, imprisoned--God's there. When we're sick or dying--God's there. God is with us in the person of Christ crucified all the way, from the moment of Baptism through the worst ordeals of life to the final deathbed Viaticum, all the way through to blessed eternity where there is no more suffering and pain, where every tear shall be wiped away. May this Eucharist be food for life's arduous journey, may it sustain us along every step until we arrive at our Father's heavenly home.