



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

Fr. Martin de Porres Walsh, O.P., Director Lesley Warnshuis, Office Manager Nancy Keating, Finance Manager

2506 Pine Street P.O. Box 15367 San Francisco, CA 94115-0367 415-931-2183 www.dominicanmission.org

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A Moment of Reflection



Dear Mission Friends:

You've all heard this many times before: *"Throughout Lent, we have been preparing ourselves to share spiritually in the suffering and death of Jesus on Good Friday. It is only by commemorating Good Friday that we can fully partake in the glory and joy of the Resurrection, celebrating the victory of Jesus over sin and death."*

But what does all that mean? Every year we hear these same words, but do we ever stop to contemplate them? Do we ever wonder why Jesus couldn't have just been born and grown up and spread his teachings and established the Church and died a natural death? **Why did he have to suffer so?**

Alan Paton (1903-1988), the South African who strove to call world attention to the cruelty of the apartheid system in his novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, wrote:



Our Lord suffered. And I have come to believe that he suffered, not to save us from suffering, but to teach us how to bear suffering. For he knew that there is no life without suffering.

Concentration camp survivor and author of *Man's Search For Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, found that, ***"In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning."*** OK, then what does it all mean?

More of Paton's beliefs as well as those of two other influential thinkers who were, like Paton, long-time educators and prolific authors, will be presented here for your reflection.

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) is best known for his work in comparative mythology and religions, exploring many aspects of the human experience and their seemingly cohesive threads. And C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), an Oxford-Cambridge scholar and professor, examined morality, Christianity, and the imagination in over thirty books reaching audiences of all ages.

Interspersed with the notions of these thinkers are pictures from our Dominican parish of San Jacinto de Polonia (St. Hyacinth of Poland) in Ocosingo, Chiapas, depicting some of the ways that its 100,000 members customarily venerate Holy Week. *(Above, Good Friday procession.)*

Joseph Campbell poses the question,

“Why could the savior not have just come? Why did he have to be crucified?”

“As Paul writes in his Epistle to the Philippians, even though Jesus Christ ‘was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (2:6-8).’ God’s willing acceptance of the cross, that is to say, of his participation in the trials and sorrows of human life in the world, [shows] that he is here within us, not by way of a fall or mistake, but with rapture and joy.”

“The Son of God came down into this world to be crucified to awaken our hearts to compassion for the suffering of life, and thus to turn our minds from blind commitment to the goods of this world and the gross concerns of raw life to the specifically human values of self-giving in shared suffering.”



Left, parishioners bringing their palms to be blessed at Palm Sunday Mass, celebrated by Fr. Joel outside the church (below) to accommodate the thousands who joined this day’s procession.



“There is only one way in which one can endure man’s inhumanity to man, and that is to try, in one’s own life, to exemplify man’s humanity to man.”

~ Alan Paton



C.S. Lewis sees the deeply grieved soul of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as signaling the onset of his Passion. Even though he had long foreseen his death, he contemplates here a way of escape.

“The [human] torments of hope...were at the last moment loosed upon Him—the supposed possibility that, after all He might, He just conceivably might, be spared the supreme horror.” Lewis imagines him thinking that, *“There was precedent. Isaac had been spared: he too at the last moment, he also against all apparent probability. It was not quite impossible. He prays, ‘Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done (Luke 22:42).’ An angel then appears, providing strength to endure what he knows must be endured.”*

Each of the next events in the Passion likewise contains an element common to the sufferings of us all. Lewis calls it, **“the human situation writ large.”**

“First, the prayer of anguish; not granted. Then He turns to His friends. They are asleep—as ours... are so often, or busy, or away, or preoccupied. Then He faces the Church; the very Church that He brought into existence. It condemns Him... [just as] ...in every institution, there is something which sooner or later works against the very purpose for which it came into existence. But there seems to be another chance. There is the State; in this case, the Roman state... It claims to be just ...Yes, but only so far as is consistent with political expediency... But even now all is not lost. There is still an appeal to the People—the poor and simple whom He had blessed, whom He had healed and fed and taught, to whom He Himself belongs. But they have become over-night (it is nothing unusual) a murderous rabble shouting for His blood.”

Indeed, the feelings of sadness, anxiety, betrayal, abandonment, pain, suffering, and loss are common to us all, and inescapable. But *“like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the Passion of Christ.”* And when we find ourselves feeling abandoned and alone, *“We are not on an untrodden path. Rather, on the main road ,”* a road he walked alone, and will walk again and again, by our side.



Fr. Raymundo greeting parishioners during Good Friday procession in Ocosingo.

In an essay entitled, “Why Suffering?” **Alan Paton** recalls an event in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, whose conversion to Christianity was greatly influenced by his encounter and subsequent relationship with a community of lepers.

*“When Francis of Assisi ... embraced the leper, he solved the problem of suffering for himself. And what was more, he was later able to accept and use his own suffering, and to sing his way to death. He did not curse leprosy, nor did he curse God for making or allowing leprosy; he got down from his horse and kissed the leper ...From that time onward, lepers became for Francis what the untouchables became for Gandhi—Narijans, ‘the children of God.’ What was loathsome and terrifying became a source of sweetness and strength. ...Although I have contemplated this miracle for many years, it has never ceased to fill me with wonder. For in that moment Francis shed all doubt and anxiety and uncertainty, and all grief over the unsolvable mystery of pain and evil and sorrow, and put himself and his life into God’s hands to be made the instrument of God’s peace, so that he might ease pain and conquer evil and give comfort and strength to the sorrowful. **He was no longer one to suffer and endure; he was one to love and to do.** We no longer agonize over the problem of suffering; we make of ourselves instruments for its alleviation. ... This is, so far as I know, the only way in which one can solve for oneself the problem of suffering.”*

*Who indeed knows the secret of the earthly pilgrimage? Who knows for what we live, and struggle and die?
Who knows what keeps us living and struggling, while all things break about us?
Who knows why the warm flesh of a child is such comfort,
when one's own child is lost and cannot be recovered?
But this, the purpose of our lives, the end of all our struggle, is beyond all human wisdom.*

~Paton

Our hope and peace comes from knowing that, while Jesus did not take away suffering, He entered into it himself as a way of sharing our suffering with us. He understands our suffering and accompanies us in our trials and tribulations.

How do we respond to the mystery of the suffering of Jesus? How do we respond to the mystery of suffering in our own lives and in the lives of those around us and throughout the world? Our Dominican missionaries' response to the mystery of suffering in the lives of the poor, sick, and oppressed people whom they serve abides by that of St. Francis as described by Alan Paton: "to love and to do."

It is through our active response to human suffering that we can bring to fulfillment the words of Jesus: *...your sorrow shall be turned into joy* (John 16:20).

Comfort and health to you and your loved ones,

Lesley Warnshuis



*Left,
Easter Sunday
altar in rural
village outside
Ocosingo, lovingly
bedecked with
local flowers and
offerings.
Below, the sweet,
joyful voices of the
children singing
of Christ's rising
and spreading
hope.*



Jesus Christ, you traveled through towns and villages "curing every disease and illness." At your command, the sick were made well. Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of the coronavirus, that we may experience your healing love...Whether we are home or abroad, surrounded by many people suffering from this illness or only a few, Jesus Christ, stay with us as we endure and mourn, persist and prepare. In place of our anxiety, give us your peace. Jesus Christ, heal us. Amen.

~from "A Prayer Amid an Epidemic" by Kerry Weber