

' WELCOME SISTER PAIN '

By

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'WELCOME Sister Pain,' sang the Seraphic Father seven centuries ago, and his words did not sound so strange in the ears of those around him, as they would have done today. For this is an age that regards pain as in itself an evil thing, something to be avoided at all costs, something ugly, something to which death itself is preferable, even if by death the materialist means darkness and annihilation. Even many Christians take up this attitude to a certain extent, and the majority outside the Catholic Church are vastly perturbed at what is termed 'the problem of pain.'

But the Catholic child, brought up as he is to 'offer up' his toothache and the sting of his grazed knee or his cut thumb, finds less difficulty, as he grows up, to face the 'problem of pain.' It all fits into the scheme of things, so to speak, and he has learned, if not to understand and even puzzle about it, at least to accept it and use it.

There is, however, a very grave danger which exists among many Catholics with this somewhat unconsidered acceptance of pain. They are apt to speak with an air of resignation about it which gives the wrong impression of the true philosophy of pain to the non-Catholic. The impression thus so often given is that the Catholic regards *pain*, and therefore *disease*, as something sent by God to discipline the soul. 'It is the will of God,' a man may say, when he or someone he loves is stricken by cancer or tuberculosis or some other painful disease; as if God had actually planted the germ in the body of the poor victim, and was watching him suffer with sadistic appreciation.

Disease is the outcome of *sin*. God Incarnate, in the perfection of his human body, knew *pain*, but never *disease*, because he, being sinless, could not even in his flesh know the fruits of *sin*, which is *disease*. Only sin-stained and tainted humanity knows *disease*, not as a gift from God, God forbid, but as the fruits of *sin* in the race. Francis said, 'Welcome Sister *Pain*.' He could never have said, 'Welcome Sister *Disease*.' That would have been impossible for any lover of God and Truth.

God does not send *disease*; he allows it as the logical outcome of disobedience and *sin*. As we are all tainted with the stain of original *sin*, so are we all prone to the fruits thereof, to *disease*. What God *wills* is the reparative bearing of such *pain* as *disease* may bring, by his redeemed children, as part of their share in his Sacrifice, for the sins of poor stricken humanity.

But all *pain* of course is not the outcome of *disease*, and it is with *Pain* I want to deal in these few pages.

In considering Pain, I find it best to divide it into three classes or divisions, and these into certain sub-divisions:

(a) Physical Pain, (b) Mental Pain, (c) Spiritual Pain.

Such a division is bound to overlap, but it does I think help to throw some light on the problem. In dealing with *physical* pain, I would divide it as follows:

(a) Pain caused by disease which is the direct outcome of sin, i.e., lust, drunkenness, gluttony.

(b) Pain caused indirectly by sin: viz. most diseases which can be traced to the sins of past generations, or the sinfulness of mankind in general.

(c) Pain of a physical nature which is quite untainted by sin; this of course includes pain suffered through exhaustion or sacrifice in the service of others.

Now can we say, ‘Welcome Sister Pain’ in all the degrees of physical pain? Yes, even in the lowest degree, that is, in the pain which is the outcome of disease caused by deliberate sin, for it can be salutary and even reparative. The man who suffers pain due directly to his own deliberate sin can, if he is penitent, if he owns it is *mea culpa*, accept it as a salutary warning of what his soul must endure of the pains of hell should he persist in his evil life. More than this, he can accept the pain as a definite purgation, and offer it up in deep humility on behalf of fellow-sinners, especially of those tempted and sinning in the way he has sinned.

But the pain which causes most perplexity, especially to the non-Catholic, is the pain of disease suffered by seemingly innocent people. We must, however, be clear in our term ‘innocent.’ As all humanity shares in the Fall, so all humanity can share in the Redemption. We are all tainted by our very humanity, even if there is no active sin going on in our lives. Sin in the bulk has produced disease in the race, and as members of that race we all share in its sinfulness, and so in its probable consequences. In this sense the pain of disease can have a redemptive value. If I am stricken, I can see in it my share in the burden of the accumulative sin of mankind, which Christ bore in his body on the Cross.

Why ‘A’ is chosen, or allowed this, and not ‘B,’ is the mystery. ‘A’ may or may not be very holy, and yet this burden has fallen upon him. He may a Simon of Cyrene, *compelled* to carry the Cross. But if he accepts it willingly, wholeheartedly, he is doing a redemptive thing, is literally sharing in that great act of redemption which still goes on, and must, until sin is eliminated from the human race. The mystery of why this person and not that is one of those infinite mysteries which cannot be solved by finite minds, any more than why one should be beautiful, or gifted, or clever, and another plain, or dull, or stupid. Personally, I am content to leave it as a mystery too great for man to solve. I do know that God did not put that germ which causes the pain into that person’s body. That germ was the seed of sin in the race, and

because that person is a member of the race, he is liable to catch or develop any germ. But the pain itself can be consecrated, and become the nails and spear of the Crucifixion.

The most perplexing and devastating thing to witness is the pain of very young children, tiny babies, who apart from their humanity have no sin on their souls. Perhaps it is a child of a few months, baptized, and yet suffering from some painful disease. Of course, pain in very young children, as in animals, is not as acute as in the more developed man and woman. Pain is very much a thing of the nervous system, the mental side of the nervous system, and the more highly developed the brain, the memory, the faculty of anticipation, the more intense the pain. So the suffering of a very young child can never be as acute as at a later stage of development. But it is a terrible thing to witness, and again can only be explained by the fact of sin, poisoning the very life-blood of mankind. One has only to see babies born with syphilis, blind, deaf, dumb, horribly diseased, to see the horror of sin, wreaking its vengeance on the innocent.

And it was the Innocent, the Lamb without blemish, who was offered up for the redemption of the world.

But, as I have already said, there is pain, physical pain, due to sacrifice and not to disease. This is the pain our blessed Lord knew in his body on earth. The pain of intense fatigue, exhaustion in the service of others. The pain of the lash of the scourge, the crown of thorns, the weight of the cross on torn and bleeding shoulders, the nails through flesh and muscles and sinews, the tearing of the wounds—the death agony. All these can be shared by those who spend themselves in the service of others; the ache and weariness of the limbs of those who nurse and watch by the sick; the struggle to carry on hour after hour through weariness and anxiety, in order to win back souls to God. The tired, torn bodies of firemen and A.R.P. personnel in raids during the war; the wounds of those who fell in battle in a cause they regarded as a veritable crusade.

'Welcome Sister Pain'; yes, there the cry can be one of exultation. Those do in very deed 'bear in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus.' Such pain is sacrificial, and contains no problems. Here too we must not forget the pains that may be self-inflicted by scourings and disciplines by those who desire to share more fully in the pain of our Lord's body, in order to discipline their own bodies, and make acts of reparation on behalf of the sins of others. Some are called to such acts without doubt, and probably more are called than answer the call.

One thing is certain: all physical pain is meant to be reparative and sacrificial. Every sufferer, whether lying on a bed of sickness, or dragging a weary suffering body through life, or offering a healthy body in the service of others, or inflicting discipline on himself, all can make of his pain an act of reparation to God,

and, in so doing, an act of union with the infinite love of the Sacred Heart.

Mental pain as distinct from physical may be divided as follows:

(a) *Human Sorrows*, that is, such things as bereavement, frustration, failure, disappointment, loneliness.

(b) *Spiritual Conditions*, such as isolation, aridity, desolation, darkness, and insatiable hunger of the soul. I include these spiritual sorrows under mental pain, rather than under spiritual pain, because they are *sorrows*, something under which the soul groans and from which it would, being human, be relieved. Whereas spiritual pain, as we shall see later, is wholly beautiful and desirable, and is sweet, not bitter, and something in which the soul delights.

In all types of mental pain, the ‘link up’ with the life and Passion of our blessed Lord should be quite easy to see and understand, once it is realized that the Passion is an eternal fact, and not merely an episode in history.

Bereavement, the loss by death of those we love; here is a pain most poignant, but most uplifting, if viewed from the right angle, that is, from the Christian and Catholic view-point. The loss of their human presence, all it meant to us of love and companionship, is shared fully by our blessed Lord himself. For did he not grieve at the death of his friend Lazarus? Was not his heart touched with deepest pity at the grief of the Widow of Naim, and of Jairus? So, in the pain of bereavement, we can turn to him for the solace we long for, but more than this, we can unite our sorrow of heart with the sorrow of the Sacred Heart, and this not only in his Sacred Manhood, grieving as it did on earth for human loves and losses, but in mystical union with the sorrow he knows at the irreparable loss of the souls who turn from him, and who are lost not for time, but for eternity. The sorrow and pain of our bereavement can also be offered up on behalf of the beloved, and all souls in Purgatory.

Frustration, disappointment, failure—how can we see the usefulness in such pain which in itself seems so baffling and unfruitful?

We all know lives in which there is *frustration*, the inability to go forward, to press on, to achieve: lives which seem to fail in all they set out to accomplish. Gifts which seem to be wasted, unused, through no fault of the would-be giver, but through circumstances outside their control; through what the world calls ‘bad luck.’ This is the pain that burns deep in the human heart, that leaves so many in a state of bitterness, hopelessness, defeat. Yet, was there ever anyone who knew so much frustration, disappointment, and failure as our blessed Lord and Master knew? How often it was written that he could not do this or that ‘because of their unbelief,’ their stupidity! His plans were continually frustrated by evil circumstances. His life terminated in what from the world’s point of view seemed like utter and complete failure. *Frustration*,

the nails that fasten us to *our* cross, that hold us when we would move forward.

Disappointments, in those we love, who fail us, and in ourselves, who fail God, and when our highest ambitions crumble into dust—surely that is a pain we can link up to the pain of the Sacred Heart, and so share in his disappointment, when his friends fail him, again and again.

Then *loneliness*, in the human sense of the word; the lack of congenial companions to share our ideals, to understand us. This is a pain in the heart of many, especially in the young; but again it can be very fruitful. He was so lonely when he was on earth; so few people, even of his friends, understood him or shared his ideals. And that supreme loneliness in the Garden, when his closest friends failed him, and slept, when he was in agony, desiring their prayers and sympathy; and finally actually deserting him, and running away. The lonely of heart have a real sharing in the loneliness of Christ, and are bearing in their lives the marks of his Passion. If they will only accept this agony of heart, and link it up to the loneliness of Jesus, they will be doing two wonderful things. First, they will be ministering to him in his loneliness; for the Passion is an Eternal Fact, not just an episode in history, for it was God who suffered through the Sacred Humanity, and God is timeless. Secondly, they can offer their loneliness on behalf of other lonely souls, who are probably in worse plight than themselves.

So frustration, disappointment, failure, loneliness, are fruitful in their pain, if accepted, linked up to his pain, and offered up on behalf of suffering humanity.

Lastly, the very experience of such suffering can, if we will let it, draw us into closer union with Christ, by making us more like him, bearing in our lives the marks of his suffering.

(To be concluded).