



PROPOSITUM

April 2024

THE MEANING OF SUFFERING IN THEIR OWN LIVES AND IN THE WORLD

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace and all Good!

On January 5th of this year, members of the Franciscan Family gathered at the Sanctuary of LaVerna for the solemn opening of the 800th anniversary of St. Francis receiving the Stigmata. The ceremony, “From Wounds to New Life,” which was held in the Basilica of the Sanctuary, included readings and prayers remembering St. Francis’ encounters with: the Crucifix of San Damiano that shaped his life, the Seraph who conformed St. Francis to the image of Christ and Brother Leo to whom he extended his blessing. Throughout this year, Franciscans of the First Order, Second Order and Third Order Secular and Regular will be remembering how St. Francis’ love for Christ was so great that he was graced with bearing the wounds of Christ and how the suffering from those wounds brought even greater depths of love.

Suffering has been a test of faith for most of us and we are often confronted with the questions that it brings. How can we make sense of suffering, our own and that of the world? What lessons can it teach us? Where can it lead us?

The last Propositum presented the views of three experts on Franciscan life reflecting on the meaning of suffering in the world considering the wounds of Christ and the Stigmata of St. Francis. For this edition of the Propositum, we invited members of the IFC-TOR to reflect on the meaning of suffering in their own lives and in the world. As you read their reflections, we hope that you will be enriched and that these reflections may lead you to understand suffering in your own lives and in the world today.

May the peace of Christ and the peace of St. Francis fill your lives!

Sr. Frances Marie Duncan, President IFC-TOR

Sr. Daisy Kalamparamban, Vice-President

Sr. Beatriz Vásquez Mayta, Councilor

Sr. Maria Luisa García Casamián, Councilor

Sr. Rute Almeida Guimarães, Councilor

Fr. Brian Terry, Councilor

EMBRACING SUFFERING TO BECOME LOVE

Sr. Mariella Erdmann, OSF

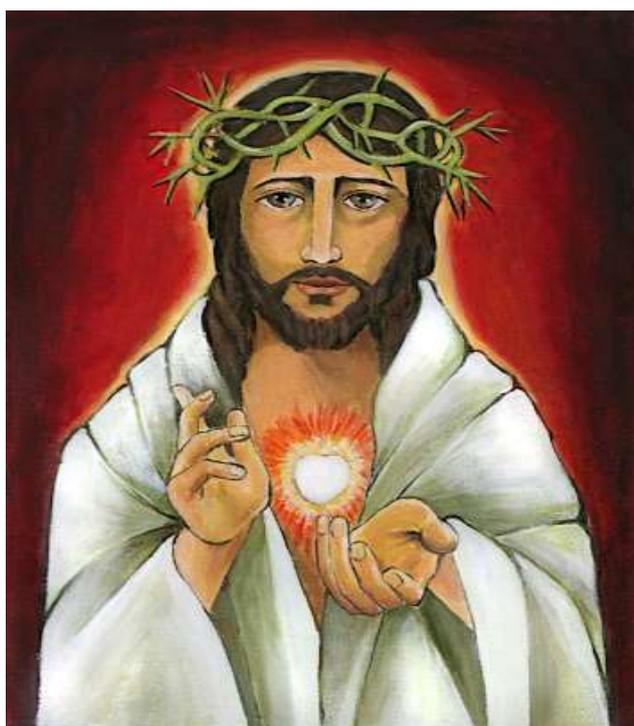
*Franciscan Sister of Christian Charity
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Original language: English



Let us not believe we can love without suffering. I am not talking about masochistic kind of suffering but rather suffering that is motivated by love of Christ Crucified. St. Francis was so in love with Christ crucified that his whole life became an imitation of Christ to the point of his receiving the stigmata. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Jn 3:16

Sanctity and suffering seem to go hand in hand. The words of the song, *Holy Darkness* come to mind, “I have tried you in the fires of affliction; I have taught your soul to grieve, In the barren soil of your loneliness, there I will plant my seed.” Today more than ever we need God to plant that seed in our hearts in order to embrace suffering that will transform us into true His disciples of love.



In this Ecce Homo that I painted, I tried to emphasize God’s tremendous love for each of us. God’s love is shown to us through Christ. The painting shows Christ with a crown of thorns symbolizing his passion. Christ’s eyes are sad but very loving and compassionate. He is sad because of the lack of so many to accept his sacrifice for our salvation. He was sent by the Father and is longing to bring us all back to his Father so we can enjoy the fullness of life in God. His hands are extended in invitation and blessing and his heart is white and aglow with love. It is Eucharistic; it becomes a monstrance. He has given us his body and his blood – the perfect sacrifice that we can with him offer each day

to the Father at Mass as well as receive him in the Eucharist. Our God lavishes us with his love but he does not oblige us to accept it.

We all experience suffering in the world around us. such as addictions, emotional and physical sickness, jealousy, injustice, family problems, sexual abuse, hate, war and so on. I have experienced two very painful personal tragedies: the loss of a niece to suicide and another niece to a heroin overdose under suspicious circumstances. These painful losses brought me to my knees in prayer. I have chosen to allow the grace of the Spirit to work through me to transform pain into love making me more into a true disciple of Christ. This choice did not take away suffering but freed me from its hold. Suffering must be faced and excepted if it is to be life-giving and efficacious. Through daily conversion, suffering does open our hearts to the broader world where so much suffering exists amidst the good.

But why is there so much suffering in our world today? Christ came out of love to free us from the chains of sin and death. Still, today suffering seems to be escalating. So many people in our post-Christian era, do not seem to need God or even believe in God, but rather make themselves gods. I, also, wonder if possibly many people do not know how to deal with suffering and become angered, embittered and revengeful; which only leads to conflict and all sorts of evil. All the more need for God in our lives who heals our wounds! Instead, many turn to false gods of drugs, sex, power, revenge, control, and prestige to name a few. These lead ultimately to human destruction.

All this said, there is great hope amidst the sufferings in our Modern World. This all comes down to that one word, LOVE. Like Francis we are called to love God above all and identify with Christ crucified. God is Love and we are asked to cooperate with the grace of the Spirit and become love for one another in order to bring ourselves and others back to the God of Love who longs for us to share in the fullness of his life.



FROM SUFFERING TO SACRIFICE

Sr. Myra Jean Sweigart

Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity
Wisconsin, USA

Original language: English



A common image of the young Francis is that of a partier, a son favored by his mother, a citizen who longed for the prestige of knighthood. Seemingly a typical young man from a rather well-off family, he went his merry way, enjoying life and thinking mostly of himself.

A later image is built on God's desire for Francis. This portrait of the Poverello was rooted in love for others, marked by the care of those in need, and fed by the richness of God's word in the Scriptures. He certainly did not think mostly of himself. Francis portrays a sacred image.

A simple and yet profound glance at God during the time of Francis' illness and pain, isolation and despair led Francis to the sacred act of offering himself, without reserve, to follow the will of the God.

The journey from that glance at God to the full embrace of God's intimate love is wrought through suffering. Francis' lack of enjoyment when with his merry friends, the kissing of the leper, the time hidden away from his father, the denial of his inheritance before the Bishop, the later rejection by his own; each is one moment of suffering that builds the bridge allowing him to cross from the common to the sacred.

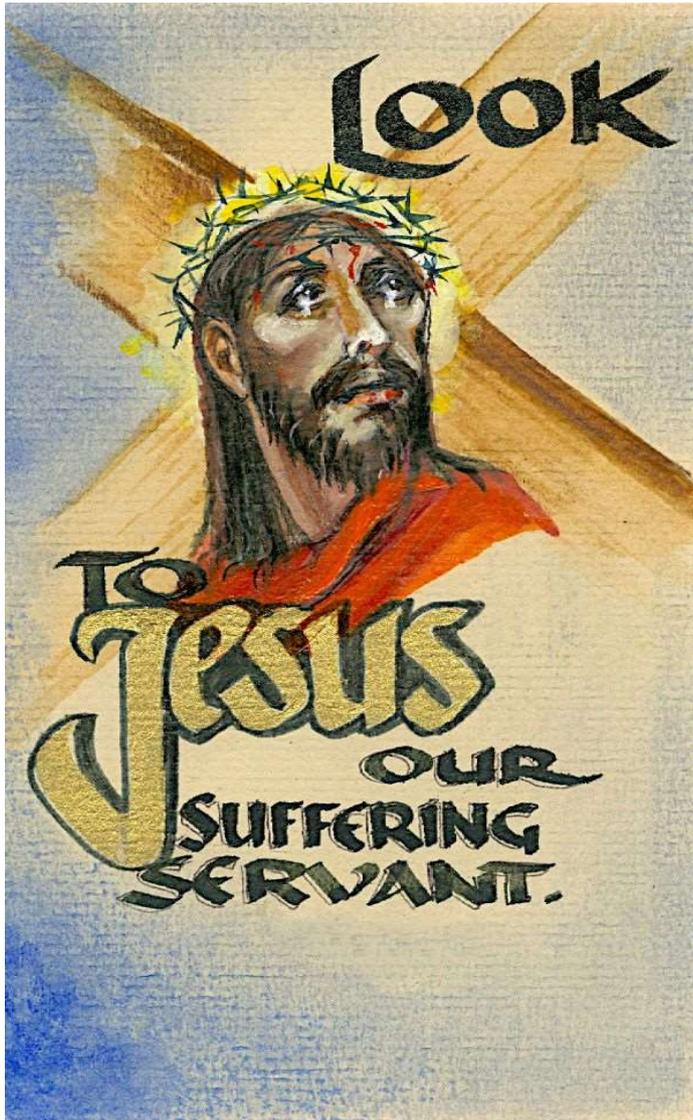
Yet, in the midst of such suffering, the saint is known as a man who praises God, who gives glory and exultation to his Lord. At the height of his bodily misery, when nearing death, he composes *The Canticle of the Creatures* in which he repeatedly cries out, "Praise be you, my Lord."

So, let us look back and change the word *suffering* to *sacrifice*. Sacrifice: to make holy. We are challenged to take on the sacrificial attitude of St. Francis. We are called to turn suffering into sacrifice, making holy that which is difficult, that which calls us out of our old patterns and walks us across the bridge from the common to the sacred.

Hebrews 13:15, speaks of a sacrifice of praise. How do sacrifice and praise even fit in the same thought? Praise is rooted in humility, born of the truth that I am not God, I am not the greatest, even among the least I am lowly. I am a loved sinner who, undeservedly, has been given the gift of a glance at God. When we are aware of the greatness of God, we come to know how little we are. Francis was profoundly humble. In his Letter to

the Faithful he writes, “...we are all wretched and corrupt, disgusting and worms.” Prayer taught him to recognize perfect joy in sacrifice, suffering and rejection.

Today, we seem to do all we can to avoid suffering. We are offered convenience and efficiency on every level. Has this led us to forget the humbling truth that we are loved sinners, called to give glory to God? Do we fully join Francis in a sacrifice of praise and say, “My God and My All.”?



The work of an Artist continues to inspire.
Sister Victoria Masil, O.S.F. (d. 2008)
Franciscan Sister of Christian Charity
United States of America

THE REDEMPTIVE MYSTERY OF PAIN

Sr. Karen Berry

*Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate
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Original language: English

When the new liturgical year began last December, we were reminded that Jesus came to bring light into the darkness of our world. Believing that Jesus continues to live among us, we feel called to join him in being that light...to provide hope for a sometimes very dark world as we act with justice, compassion and love.

St. Francis was enamored of the Incarnation, loving the idea that God desired to live among us. He wanted to feel in himself the suffering Jesus endured as a consequence of living in a broken world and trying so hard to make it better.

Our world today is filled with suffering, and those of us who see it, feel it, and want desperately to alleviate it are faced with the mystery of it. How do we find meaning in the pain that all of creation is experiencing? First, I have to start with myself. I became painfully aware last year that loss was dominating my life. I felt overwhelmed by it as it continued to appear in many forms. First came the loss of finances through fraudulent hacking that left me feeling vulnerable and victimized. Then came the loss of my community's retirement/nursing home through our inability to maintain it or to sell it. I saw my future stability disappear. Quickly following that were the deaths of many of our Sisters who had been moved to alternate facilities because of the closing. By the time we had lost sixteen Sisters in 2023, the number included my close friend and classmate, a victim of cancer. I was swimming in grief.

So what about finding meaning in all that pain? From the financial loss, I learned wisdom; from the closing of our retirement home, I learned how beautiful my Sisters are in their acceptance and resilience; from all the deaths, I felt a unity that carries us over beyond this life. When I look at our world and all the suffering in it today, I marvel at the examples of wisdom, resilience, and unity that still prevail. In the midst of wars, political upheaval, natural disasters, subversion of truth, greed, hatred and violence, there is still goodness. That Jesus redeemed us by his suffering says to me that those who suffer today can move us all toward healing by calling us to love. I think St. Francis understood this. He entered willingly into the mystery of suffering so that he too could reach out to the world with greater love.

We don't have to understand the reason for pain. It simply is a fact of life, overtaking us unaware, sometimes the consequence of evil and cruelty, sometimes unintentional and beyond our control. But it's there, in all its redemptive mystery, and Love embraces us through it.



JESUS AND FRANCIS - "WOUNDED BY LOVE - MARKED FOR LIFE"

Sr. Mary Burke

*Franciscan Missionary of the Divine Motherhood
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Original language: English



The year is 1205 and Francis has returned from war and exile. Called to embrace the image of Christ in the poorest and most rejected of his day, Francis, after a huge internal struggle, embraces the leper. In doing so, Francis, embraces the suffering Christ and overcomes his greatest fear. Much of Francis' life would be spent in suffering. He suffered when he saw the plight of the poor and when he was faced with the destruction of life by war. Francis' encounter with the suffering and sorrow of his brothers and sisters scarred him for life, scarred him in a way that left him no option but to allow his heart to be broken, to allow his tears to fall, to allow his hands to heal others and his feet to walk alongside those whom society had left behind.

The year is 1224, Francis, broken by illness, nearly blind, alienated from many of his brethren in disputes over the Rule, comes to seek Christ in the lonely mountain cave of La Verna. Here, Francis' body is scarred with the marks of Christ's crucifixion. Francis, now receives the imprint of Christ's greatest act of love, his death on the cross.

The year is 1996, and I am standing in a small hospital in Karakush in Northern Iraq. I have by now spent over five years working with Palestinian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan. In a small, poorly kept ward, I meet five or six women sitting or standing by the beds of their dying babies. These young children are woefully malnourished. There are no antibiotics, no sheets on the beds, very little food and no hope for most of these children of God. I have nothing to give, only a word of comfort and my own tears. But I know in this moment that my heart is being broken, that I am being scarred for life, and called to love Christ in the least and most forgotten of our world.



The year is 2024, the temperature is below zero. As I walk through my local town, I notice a poorly clad, young man lying on a bench. Rather like Francis, before his encounter with the Leper, I pass him by. Prompted by the Spirit I go back. I ask the man his name. It is Jack. I ask, if Jack is hungry? He is very hungry. So I buy Jack some food and enquire at the local homeless café where he can be further helped.



This year 2024, we celebrate the centenary of our Father Francis receiving the marks of Christ's Passion on his body. Following in Francis footsteps I realize that I am also called in some small way to bear the marks of Christ's suffering to our world today. I can do so this by offering to those around, like Jack little drops of kindness, the balm of compassion and seemingly insignificant moments of love and encounter. In offering these small gestures in Christ's name, like Francis, I can begin to answer the call to heal the wounds of Christ in every suffering face and in every lonely place in our world of today.



RECEPTION AND CARE

Sr. Edna Hugaioir Djata

*Franciscan of Our Lady of Aparecida
Guinea Bissau*

Original language: Portuguese



Love in the midst of suffering, a question of faith

I would like to share my experience in one of the works carried out in our mission in this land: the care of pregnant women, mothers and their children, and the care of epileptics at the Nutritional Recovery Centre in Cacheu.



We take care of a large group of people with epilepsy, and each year we hold a meeting during which the following activities are carried out: an educational session on the disease itself and what to do during a crisis. We also promote moments of recreation and fun.

In our sharing with them, we perceive that many feel excluded from their families when they are facing such crises, and this causes suffering, because as a precaution measure epileptics are prevented from working. We have cases of severe burns in epileptics who had a seizure and fell into the fire while cooking or doing something similar. I wish to emphasise that even in our communities there is a certain bias against people affected by epilepsy, who have no voice and find no place in society. But they do their best to earn their bread for their livelihoods, with great difficulty also due to illiteracy and other reasons.



It is difficult to live and be separated from other human beings, it is a suffering that as far as I am concerned wounds human dignity. Francis was an example of an advocate of inclusion when he embraced the leper (LTC Chapter IV). Solidarity with those who suffer is a great witness, and placing oneself in the other's shoes is medicine for the soul. Indeed, God's love is also manifested in the lives of these people. I see in everyone's face the physical presence of a God who cries out, who asks us to come out of ourselves to meet those in need of care.

Pregnant women bring with them incredible stories. Behind a woman who comes here, there are signs of resilience. They are often wronged, some get pregnant and are abandoned, and their children are born without a father. In the end, the blame falls on the woman. In the passage of the condemned woman (John 8), Jesus teaches us that love must prevail in our relationship

with the other, and that we must look within ourselves before condemning the other and be careful about the laws we impose on them, believing that they are doing wrong. We must offer mercy, not condemnation.

When speaking of love in the midst of suffering, I am reminded of a lady, a grandmother, who was taking care of her granddaughter because the mother of the child, her daughter, had been hospitalised since she had had the baby. This grandmother had become a mother again and was taking the child to our centre and, if necessary, to hospital. One day I was informed that the mother of the child, who was ill, had died. The grandmother became very discouraged, she looked transformed, her face sad and gaunt. One day she came to weigh the child, she was very distressed and also told her companions what had happened. It was good to see how they all encouraged her to be strong, and I told her that it was very important not to lose hope, that she had to be strong for the sake of that little girl, because the only reference for her would be her grandmother. That if she fell ill, the child would have no one to protect her. Crying, she agreed, and no one could hide her tears. I asked myself many times: how can you love in the midst of suffering? She had to do just that, carry the cross, love in the midst of hardship.

For me, these situations are a great testimony to the mystery of God's love, because I imagine that people on their own would not have the capacity to endure so much suffering. This grandmother was now without strength, but the support of her companions represented the hand of God that motivated her to rise and continue her journey.



To manifest God's love, Christ had to go through suffering. He faced the mighty, endured pain on the cross, to teach us that with Him life has meaning and the journey becomes bearable (Mt 11:28).

SUFFERING, THE PATH TO SANCTIFICATION

Sr. Victoria Hernández

Hermanas Capuchinas de la Madre del Divino Pastor

Community of La Unión

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Original language: Spanish

Christ, the suffering servant, taught me that pain is the school of purification to attain sanctification.

"A man of suffering, and familiar with pain, (...) Yet Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering" (Is. 53:3 and 4). This text invites me to accept suffering as a grace; as the Christian that I am, I realise that the soul is given the opportunity to experience its purgatory on earth, so that when the gift of death is granted to me, I may fully take delight in the Lord.

There are two sentences from the text of Isaiah that I have quoted which deeply resonate in me:

1. **"A man of suffering"**. The world, human beings, live in eternal suffering. The Lord has shown solidarity and always accompanies us in our sorrows. But we do not recognise this, because we think that pain is a misfortune and not an opportunity offered to us to improve and sanctify ourselves.
2. **"[He] bore our suffering"**. And not only does the Lord takes up our pain, but he bears our suffering, and helps us bear it. In Matthew's Gospel we find this precious invitation: "Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11: 28). If we were to follow the words of Jesus in all their radicalism, we would realise that this suffering is always accompanied by an enchanting oasis.

Francis of Assisi made good use of this gift, when in the midst of his frustrations and illnesses, he listened to the voice of the Lord and abandoned himself to his mercy. He rejected all social and family trappings and this caused him enormous suffering, but he took advantage of this to praise, to bless his Lord, and he accepted suffering as a



grace through which he sanctified himself. This sanctification transformed suffering into service, into solidarity with his brothers and sisters and the whole of creation.

Pain and suffering urge me to contemplate the Crucified One, and the following verse comes to mind: **"And I only ask not to ask for anything, just to be here, next to your dead image, and learning that suffering is only the key to your holy door"** (PRAYER TO CHRIST OF THE CALVARY – by Diego Velázquez and Gabriela Mistral). Contemplating Christ on the cross, is a way to see my suffering with serenity, realising that next to me there are many suffering people to whom I can give some comfort to mitigate their pain. This opportunity is given to me by the mission the Lord has entrusted me with, that of accompanying my brothers and sisters in their soul and bodily needs.

I managed to overcome a very aggressive cancer. This experience that I have lived and continue to live has been a school of new learning for me; I have had to unlearn to learn to live in a new way. I am very grateful to the Lord because everything He does is good. And all to the glory of God and for the good of our souls. Amen.



STIGMATA SPIRITUALITY
THE SUFFERING OF THE WORLD IS IMPRINTED ON US



Sr. M. Angela Siallagan

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Original language: English



Sr. M. Evifania Sinaga

In history, Francis became the first stigmatist (stigmata recipient) recognized by the Catholic church (hidupkatolik.com, 2018). He saw the grace of the stigmata as a pearl and the beauty of God's deep love. The suffering and wounds of the world were felt by Francis in the form of the stigmata. In many of Francis' writings, even in his will, he never mentioned the stigmata. The word "stigmata" never came out of his mouth, but his life has shown how much he suffered from the pain of this world. God said that thanks to the power of the stigmata, he would free all the souls who were there, who belonged to the three orders of St. Francis of Assisi and all those who had great devotion to him (ofsindonesia, 2010). We clearly see how precious the stigmata of St. Francis is to us his followers, but what is the relevance and meaning of the stigmata of Francis for me, for us?

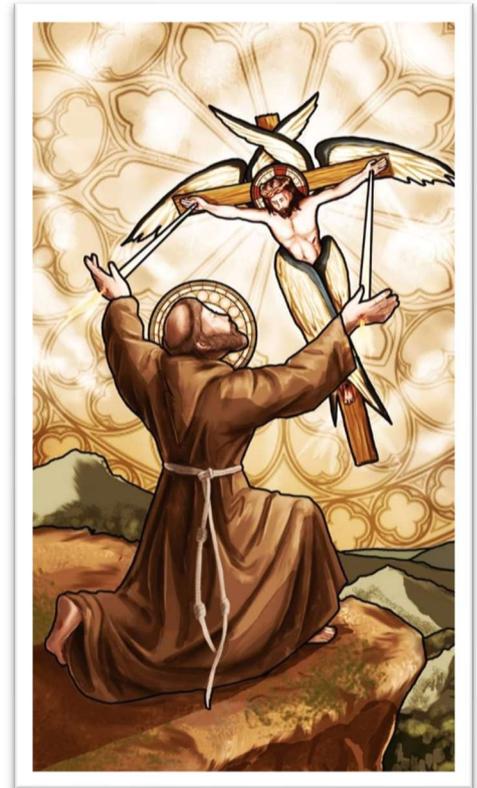
The world is becoming more and more sophisticated and technological, and we, as followers of St. Francis, are also enjoying the benefits of this new era. However, this development can be a double-edged sword that brings both positive and negative impacts to our lives. Our ministries can develop quickly, vocations are fertile, and we can collaborate technology with ecclesial work. However, despite these conveniences, the culture of silence, meditation, contemplation, and prayer often becomes difficult. The hustle and bustle of this world is more dominant than the desire to seek God in silence. We are often preoccupied with smartphones and other technological tools, forgetting to pray, eat, and recreate in brotherhood. Over time, our lives become more and more empty. On the other hand, we also read from many media about corruption, abuse of power, corruption, destruction of nature, and many other irregularities that even cost lives. The suffering of the world is nailed to

our bodies, which means it should be our prayer offering. Jesus said "I am sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (cf. Matthew 15:24-28). Thus, Jesus does not want anyone to go astray from this world.

Francis' surrender to God was so total that he was granted the sign of the stigmata. For the Church, the stigmata is not a gift to be desired or asked for but the main thing to recognize is the willingness of humanity to unite and suffer with God. This happens when there is an intimate relationship with Him in the Word, Sacrament, Reconciliation, and Eucharist. The fruit is seen in the reality of our lives as people who are willing to suffer and repent. The more the world sins, the more our suffering increases. Sometimes, we as religious act as majors. In our ministries, we are eager to eradicate poverty by building magnificent orphanages. St. Francis himself never built a home for a leper, but he embraced him.

From this we can see that the leper was not considered an object, but he shared his suffering with love. Francis was not doing, but being. Jesus too, did not want to eradicate or banish poverty from this world. He did not build special houses for the poor and lepers, but he visited and embraced them. What about us, we may have many works and spend a lot of time and energy until we are exhausted, but what does it mean for us?

The stigmata symbolize total identification with this world and simultaneously with God. Francis' life became a total stigmata to God. He was willing to be small and despised, in the eyes of his friars and many people. He was called a lowly brother, a minor. We too are known as poor and humble brothers and sisters. Where is our minority? Total fraternity and solidarity (you are precious to me) is where our minority lies. I am a minor, a lowly brother and sister.



FRANCISCANS BEFORE THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

Sr. Elise Saggau

OSF

Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls

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Original language: English



Toward the end of Francis's life, he received the stigmata of the Crucified Christ. While this was certainly a climactic event, St. Bonaventure makes it clear that Francis's conversion was still in process. "After the imprinting of the sacred stigmata, . . . he was brought to perfection under the hammering blows of many tribulations" (LM 14:2-3). In addition to bodily afflictions, Francis suffered greatly from distress of mind and heart.

The Order was not developing according to his wishes. It had departed from the original dream so that



it might fit needs envisioned by the pope. The little band of itinerant penitential preachers was developing into a strong "army" of educated clerics. Francis had to surrender his vision. He experienced this as failure. He felt rejected, profoundly disappointed, angry, and depressed. Yet, by the time of his death, he had been gifted with a wonderful peace. He had prayed to share in Christ's sufferings, and

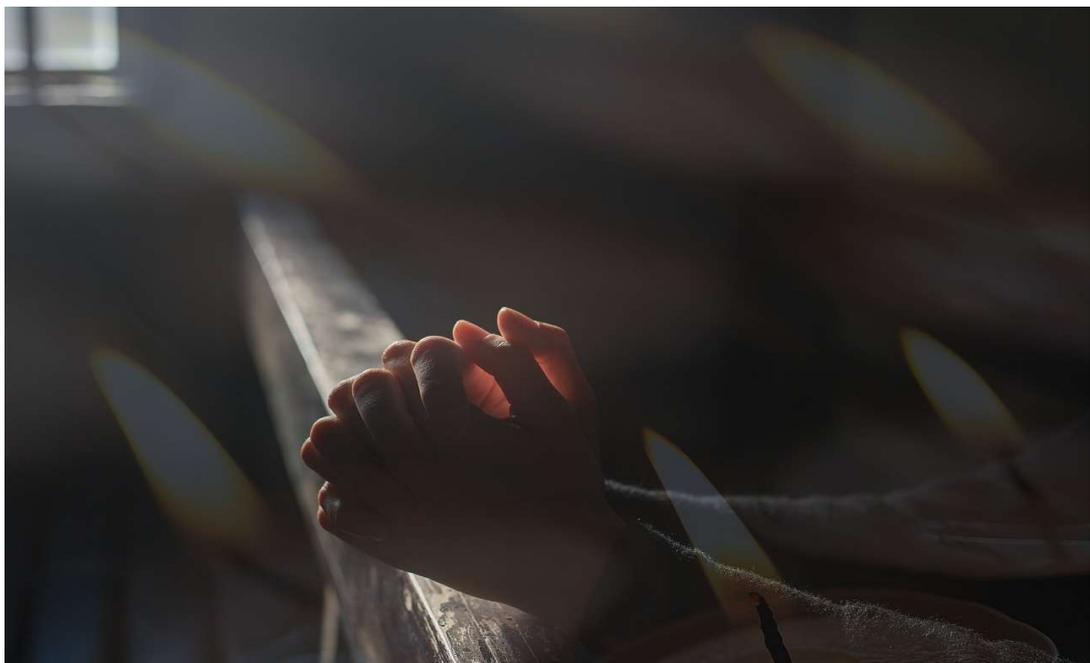
he did indeed suffer. And Christ transformed him into an instrument of redeeming activity for others.

Human beings seek meaning and do have profound experiences of hope, joy, and gratitude. Nevertheless, suffering is also deeply imbedded in our lives. Christ himself entered into the mystery of human suffering in such a way as to render it redemptive. Nevertheless, while it is universally experienced, suffering remains a mystery. It is not willed by God, but is an aspect of the unfinished character of creation.

Deep in the Christian psyche is the conviction that God receives us into glory when our time has run its course. Sickness, pain, sorrow, loss, discouragement, fear, a sense of powerlessness, even perhaps, some level of despair—all seem inevitable consequences of our human condition. Nevertheless, humans tend to seek meaning in these experiences. According to the Christian scheme of things, in the shadow of Christ’s cross and resurrection, suffering is not for nothing. Equally deep are convictions of meaning,

In spite of these persuasions, it is tremendously challenging to maintain faith and hope in the face of the unspeakable suffering that seems to engulf not only the human community but the community of creation itself. Humans come to the point where only silence can be the response, since rational explanation escapes us. With Job we put our hands over our mouths knowing that, like him, we have no answer and that it would be presumptuous to believe we did (see Job 40:4-5).

Nevertheless, for those who have gazed with compassion, awe, and love on the face of a crucified Lord as Francis did, there is the inexpressible belief that, through darkness and pain, new life is already beginning to take place—an unimaginable freedom and glory that shares the very life of God, who wants for us only what is good.





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