

“Will You Accept the Cross?”

Archangel Michael Asked



It was in the fall of 1954, about two years before Our Lady first appeared to Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil under the new image of **Our Lady of America®** that the Archangel Michael appeared to Sister Mildred. She described the appearance thus:

I saw the Angel standing before me towards the left. He was dressed in a white robe or garment, which was perfectly plain and perfectly white. The whiteness of his robe stood out against the darkness about him. It was like a light in the midst of darkness. He was holding a green palm and a drawn sword in his left hand, the tips of both palm and sword resting against his left shoulder. ...The Angel said to me, “Receive the palm of victory.” I became suspicious, I could not think of any victory of mine that deserved such a reward. Besides, it sounded a bit like flattery to me. I have always been wary of words of praise; they put me on my guard. Why was the palm not given to someone else more deserving of it than I? So I shook my head and resolutely went back to my prayers. But the Angel would not go. He spoke again, “You do not believe me. Will you accept the cross?” For me this struck more nearly home. I said, “Yes, I will accept the cross.”

To this he replied, “Then you will accept the palm and the sword. With the sword the saints conquered themselves, the world, and the devil. I am the Angel of Peace. I come to those whose hearts are attuned to the Voice of God. To such as these I remain a perpetual light through blinding darkness. I was sent by Him Who said, “I am the Light of the world.” Later it was made known to me that the Angel of Peace was St. Michael.

Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil, Diary, OUR LADY OF AMERICA®, Fostoria, OH, Pgs. 7-8.)

The cross is a powerful symbol of suffering. While crucifixion as a form of punishment for crime may have begun with the Persians and spread to Phoenicia, Carthage and Greece, it was the Romans who perfected its method to ensure the greatest possible pain and suffering. It was the most disgraceful form of execution. The

cross is the most sacred symbol for Christians because the innocent Christ was so horribly crucified on such a Roman cross. Suffering has always been an enigma for mankind. We try to avoid it at all costs, yet we cannot seem to understand our nature or destiny without it. If there is an all-good God, why is there suffering at all? If there is an all-powerful and all-just God, why do good people suffer while evil people seem to prosper? Why do some people achieve great sanctity and accomplishments in spite of suffering while others end their lives in despair? Can suffering have any meaning or is it totally meaningless? Why are millions of innocent children starving to death, being abused by parents, being sold in the sex trade or exterminated in abortion? Why do so many innocent people die in wars and genocides? “Why?” we ask. “Why?” Who can answer this problem of suffering, evil, sin and death?

Great philosophers throughout human history have grappled with the question. It was prophesied Gatama Siddhartha would be either India’s greatest king or its greatest mystic, so his father forbade him to leave the “perfect” palace, lest he see the real world. He snuck outside the walls and discovered four Distressing Sights: a sick man, an aged man, a dead man, and an old Hindu mystic who had renounced the world in order to purify his soul and find wisdom and understanding of the great mysteries. Gatama chose to be a mystic but did not find wisdom through asceticism, so he chose a middle way, having only what was truly necessary. While sitting under the Bo tree one day, he proclaimed, “I am Buddha,” the “awakened one,” and formulated his 4 Noble Truths: 1) We are born in, live in, and die in suffering. 2) **The cause of suffering is desire**, for we have what we don’t want and don’t have what we do want. 3) The way to end suffering is to end desire, for to remove the cause is to remove the effect. 4) We end desire by the Noble Eightfold Path of ego-reduction, achieving the state of Nirvana. His philosophy, however rich, is flawed, for to kill the I that suffers is also to kill the I that loves. And who can live without desire or love? His philosophy promotes compassion as virtue, but it cannot grasp the concept of **agape**, an unconditional and totally unselfish love.

Rabbi Harold Kushner grappled with the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” in trying to understand why his son had to suffer a rare disease that aged him prematurely so that he died like an old man in his teens. How could an all-powerful and an all-good God allow such a thing to happen to his son and to his family? Haven’t we all had moments when we asked such a question? Kushner denied fatalism, a doctrine that dismisses everything as the will of God, thereby affirming the power of God at the expense of His goodness. Instead, he chose a naturalist God, one close to us in nature and experience and therefore still lovable, but he could not believe there can be a God of **both infinite power and infinite love**. He could not believe in a **supernatural force** that could explain suffering.

We have had many experts in all the fields of knowledge but few who have wisdom like the great philosophers of the ancient world, Plato, Socrates and Aristotle,

and the great church men like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Faulty philosophies have muddied the clarity of our minds with regard to the great mysteries and ultimate questions of life. In the Old Covenant of Scripture the question of evil is centered on the figure of Job, the long suffering, righteous one who proclaimed, when he lost all his family and all his property, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away," for Job understood nothing is truly ours; everything is gift from God, the Creator. His second affliction, however, nearly broke him and he cursed the day he was born. Yet, only when he was at his lowest and truly empty and surrendered to the mystery of God whose reasons we cannot always understand, was the Lord able to fill him again in greater measure than before.

Peter Kreeft in his book, **MAKING SENSE OUT OF SUFFERING**, lists four propositions around which the question of evil and suffering revolve: **God exists, God is all powerful, God is all-good, and evil exists**. He then outlines 10 cheap answers to the question of evil and suffering that have arisen through the years but which skirt the issue and end up being irrational, inhuman and unlivable. He shows how the cheap answers deny one or more of the propositions and fail to truly answer the question. We can only hint at each of the ten's claims and flaws. Three **deny God's objective reality, that He exists**. **Atheism** admits evil exists but argues that an all-good and an all-powerful God could not allow the horrors history records; therefore, there must not be a God, or miracles, or resurrection. But, since man cannot live in a void, the atheist creates his own god as is evident in the rise of so many atheistic dictators and rulers who assume divine rights and total power over others *without any real goodness*. They then become forces of evil, for if there is no God of goodness, anything goes. Morality, which defines us as humans and separates us from the animals, disappears. How can we be surprised then if men begin to act like animals instead of humans! Why be good if it doesn't matter or if there is no Supreme Good by which to measure ourselves or to imitate? The atheist has no answer to death but simply avoids discussing it as too morbid. It is easy to live as an atheist but very hard to die as one. They say there are no atheists in the fox holes. Who wants to worship a mere man instead of God, or live a life of suffering and injustice only to die without justice or mercy and fade into oblivion! **Demythologism**, too, denies the objective reality of God, Truth and Scripture and reduces it all to myth, nor more true than a fairy tale. **Psychologism** denies an objective God when it denies the God outside of ourselves and creates its own god within; it is purely subjective and paves the way for rationalizing away our responsibility for our own actions. We act by our own perceptions but perception of reality is NOT Reality. How can this god be our Creator if we created him?

Three of these ten cheap approaches **deny God's infinite power**. The **old paganism or polytheism** created many gods to coincide with the forces in the universe but these gods were weak and in constant conflict and full of the same errors as men. How could they answer the primal innate recognition of the creature that there has to be

a Creator greater than oneself to explain the mysteries beyond our created nature and reason? **The new paganism or scientism** claims that what science cannot detect does not exist, thereby admitting nature but denying anything supernatural. **Dualism** believes in two gods, a god of good and a god of evil but neither has all the power so the god of good can never triumph.

Kreeft then cites the philosophies that **deny God's infinite goodness**. **Satanism** is the worship of Satan as god, the enthronement of evil, of power, but evil can never be greater than good for it is in essence an absence of goodness, a diseased good. **Pantheism** is the Blob God. It is everything in general and nothing in particular, passionless and dull; in other words, nothing is forbidden and everything is divine. It resolves evil by making it part of the blob. God is not all-good but both good and evil for He is part of everything. Thus Hitler is God as well as Christ. I, too, am part of God. God has no transcendence and I have no identity or distinction from God, no individuality or real personhood, but since God cannot die and I am part of Him, I cannot die. This view is simply absurd! Then there is **Deism**, the Snob God as Kreeft calls it. It holds that God created the world, wound it up like a clock and left it to unwind. It denies God's goodness saying He is neither good nor evil, just *indifferent* to us. While admitting an aloof transcendence, it denies the immanence of God, saying God neither loves us nor hates us. And lastly, there is **Idealism** which denies the very real existence of evil. We see suffering and death all around us with our physical eyes but pretend it isn't there. Real evil, however, is deeper than the physical eye can see for it is an absence of goodness, and God as infinite Goodness is also Pure Spirit. Thus, evil is a disorder in both the natural order and in the spiritual order and, on the spiritual level, is only truly discernible by the inner eye of the conscience, which is formed according to objective Goodness, God. To deny evil with our inner eye is to deaden our conscience so we can ignore it, ignore God. We walk around with our eyes closed, physically and spiritually, and therefore cannot see God. We walk in a land of darkness. Only the pure of heart can see God.

It is God in Jesus Who gives us the answer to the problem of evil, suffering and death. When Job questioned God why these bad things were happening to him, God asked, "Who do you think you are anyway? By what right do you unquestioningly assume that you can know the answer to this question? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Are you your own creator and designer?" God is telling Job that suffering is mystery, that He has His reasons for letting bad things happen to good people but He's not telling Job and Job can't find out. Human reason can't figure it out. Sometimes God might well sacrifice our subjective temporal happiness for our objective eternal happiness; this is not an incompatible view with His infinite goodness or His infinite love for us. We are familiar with Our Lady's words to Bernadette at Lourdes: "I cannot promise you happiness in this world but only in the next." Suffering is not always

a “justifiable” punishment for sin, but may be a test of love or a call to deeper conversion and perfection, or a call to share in the work of redemption in our solidarity with the Sacred Humanity and all mankind in our shared human condition.

How do we enter meaningfully into this mystery of suffering? A story is told of a mother teaching her two year old meal and bedtime prayers and how to make the sign of the cross. One day, looking at the crucifix, the child asked, “Who is that?” The Mother replied that it was the God to Whom she prays Who had become Man and was nailed to the cross. Some days later the child asked, “**Mother, do I have to be nailed to the cross like God was?**” Another story tells of a vibrant young man crippled while climbing the Alps. Slowly the man’s own sufferings made the sufferings of Christ real to him. He began to ponder the mystery of the Son of God suffering for sin, dying for the salvation of the world, atoning for *his* sins. As he did so, his sufferings began to seem insignificant in comparison to those of Jesus. His bitterness began to leave him. He realized he had lost much, but now it didn’t matter, for all that he had lost was fleeting. He had gained much more, for he had gained God Whom he could keep forever. He was given the vision of the final goal of all Christian suffering. He saw Christ “Who had hung upon a Cross, the King of heaven and earth, Creator of all that is—the God Who was crucified by His creatures, Who gave His life to save us—His hands and feet and side a blaze of glorious wounds....” With Christ were the saints who had suffered with and for Him. Such was the vision and hope offered the cripple; such is the promise offered to us. “**If we have suffered with Him, we shall also be glorified with Him.**” Only Christ can give us a meaningful answer to the problem of sin, evil, suffering and death. God made us in His own image, with an intellect to know Him and a free will to choose Him, the Infinite Good. He designed the will to choose the Good, but free will also means we can reject Goodness, and such a rejection of Goodness is by that fact a choice for evil, the absence of Goodness, the absence of God, an absence which can only breed the consequences of sin-- suffering and death. This is the story of the fallen angels and fallen man. Original sin happened because of free will. Because of our solidarity with our first parents, the entire human race inherited sin’s consequences.

The Russian author, Ivan Karamazov, posed the question. If we were erecting the edifice of human destiny with the intent to make people happy but, in order to do so, would have to torture to death only one tiny innocent creature to found the edifice on his or her unavenged tears, would we consent to be the architect on those terms? Who could imagine such a thing? Yet, is this not exactly what God has done for us? Who can explain it? He allowed His own Son to be the one who paid the price, to be tortured to death so as to ensure our happiness and our entrance into the edifice of His eternal glory. The Father’s love for us was so great that He asked His beloved Son to do such a preposterous thing for love of us. And the Son loved the Father so much, and us so much, that He was willing to do this preposterous thing so we might be saved from

eternal death and fulfill our eternal destiny of everlasting union with Him. And the Spirit of Love between Father and Son was so great it poured itself out upon us so we might come to know a little as God knows and love a little as God loves in our solidarity and union with God in the Sacred Humanity of Christ. This knowledge is Faith that transcends all reason. No human mind can fathom or fashion such love! The saving cross of Jesus is a scandal to the unbeliever and salvation to the believer. In the words of St. Paul: "I make up in my flesh what is lacking in the body of Christ." As Christ is one with us, He suffers throughout time in us and through us and we, in turn, in our union with Him in His Mystical Body, the Church, are united with His redemptive sufferings for our own salvation and the salvation of all mankind.

On February 11, 1958, Our Lady spoke to Sister Mildred of the need for suffering to complete the work of grace in the soul in transforming it into the image of the Suffering Christ, our only Savior. In other words, we must be identified with His suffering in order to enter into His triumph over evil, sin, suffering and death. Our Lady certainly was deeply identified with Christ's passion and death as no other. Their two hearts were as one. Who could be a more perfect image of the Son than she?

"My child, nothing is accomplished without pain. Prepare to suffer much. You see the sword in the Heart of your Mother. Suffering completed the work of divine grace in my soul. He who refuses to suffer will never abide in the Spirit of Christ, will never be formed into His image. My sweet child, the Father will never recognize a soul as His own unless He sees in it the likeness of His beloved Son. Souls must attain to the perfection of the Father through the Spirit of the Son." ... There is only one true way to the Father, my child, only one way to eternal union. It is the way of the divine humanity. It is through my Son, the Only-begotten of the Father, that souls attain perfect union with the Divinity, as perfect as human nature is capable of, aided by divine grace." (Diary, pg. 23.)

The real meaning of suffering is particular to man in the sense only he can be conscious of his own experience. Only man can weep and wonder. Suffering in God's view is always one of salvific love. We do not come to this answer by way of reason but by way of Faith; it is divinely revealed. Blessed John Paul II, in his **Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Suffering, Salvifici Doloris**, #16, cites Jesus' response to Peter who urged Him to abandon this mission of suffering.

Christ severely reproveth Peter when the latter wants to make him abandon the thoughts of suffering and of death on the Cross(36). And when, during his arrest in Gethsemane, the same Peter tries to defend him with the sword, Christ says, " Put your sword back into its place... But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?(37)". And he also says, "Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?"(38). This response, like others that reappear in different points of the Gospel, shows how profoundly Christ was imbued by the thought that he had already expressed in the conversation with Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that

whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"(39). Christ goes toward his own suffering, aware of its saving power; he goes forward in obedience to the Father, but primarily he is united to the Father in this love with which he has loved the world and man in the world. And for this reason Saint Paul will write of Christ: "He loved me and gave himself for me"(40).

Love, only love can explain the mystery and meaning of suffering and its redemptive capacity to overcome evil and sin, the absence of love and goodness. It was Love that offered Sister Mildred a share in that redemptive mission and love that evoked her response. In her August 6, 1956 letter, Sister Mildred tells her spiritual director, Father Paul Leibold, that Jesus told her **He has placed her on the Altar of Sacrifice.**

Jesus came to me holding a large cross and a crown of thorns. He said to me smiling, as though He knew what the answer would be (He did of course.) "I come with My cross and My crown of thorns, will you accept Me My spouse?" You know the only answer I could give, Father. Who could refuse Jesus anything? During the night I awoke and Jesus said to me, and He said it with a profound emphasis: "I have placed you upon the Altar of Sacrifice."

On June 14th, anniversary of my perpetual union with Jesus, He asked me again: "Bride of My Heart, do you still wish to suffer all things to give Me to souls?" I answered: "Yes, yes dear Lord, I am poor and wretched, and unworthy, but you know what is in my heart." He said, "My little white dove, will you then continue to wear the Crown of Thorns, and permit yourself to be nailed to the Cross?" I told him in the best way I could, how much I desired Him to do with me just as He desired. So in this way my desires are wholly united to His.

Servant of God Bishop Fulton J. Sheen gives us equally ponderous words on Christ's sufferings.

What He has done with His human nature, we must do with ours—plant it in the soil of the cross and await the Resurrection of the Eternal Easter.... The cross is the condition; we must be nailed to it. Our Lord loved His Cross so much that He keeps its scars even in His glory. He who had won victory over death, kept the record of its wounds. If so precious to Him, they cannot be meaningless for us. In their preservation is the reminder that we too must be signed with those signs and sealed with those seals. On Judgment Day He will say to each of us: "Show Me your hands and feet. Where are your scars of victory?" ... But woe to us who come down from the Calvary of this earthly pilgrimage with hands unscarred and white!

(Fulton J. Sheen, THE SEVEN CAPITAL SINS, Alba House/St. Pauls, Pgs. 69-70.)

Have we been nailed to the cross of Jesus?

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