

# Suffering – a mysterious divine pedagogy: its positive role in our lives

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## **Abstract:**

*Many times this question is vividly present in our conscience or persists in our mind: what is the positive role of suffering in our lives? Logically or philosophically speaking, the fact of suffering is neutral. What is relevant indeed is its purpose – both from the perspective of our understanding of it and also of the manner in which we permit it to affect us. Under this aspect, Orthodox Spirituality provides us with the means to perceive suffering in a positive light, as an instrument for our spiritual progress in Christ and not as something that is devoid of any sense. We may entrust our suffering to God, with the unfailing hope that He knows how to valorize it and let us then supplicate Him for support in finding its meaning. We are prompted by the Fathers of the Church to offer our suffering to God, being assured that He can and will employ it to take us to a new profundity of faith and of worshipping Him in love.*

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## **1. Suffering may be entrusted to God and valorized**

In Christianity, we are exhorted to follow the models of saints' lives – followers of Christ who did not seek sickness and suffering, but, every time they endured them, they did not ask for swift healing and deliverance from them; they did not murmur against them and did not rail against them, but, through patience, they worked out their own salvation. Christ's Cross should be our model in suffering. It reminds us how God can *frame* an episode that seemed tormenting and humiliating to our sinful human nature and how He can transform it into something positive. Thus, we may not only endure pain, allowing it to fill our bodies, not pretending this experience will not affect and change us but we shall give God the opportunity to "talk" to us through this experience. We can experience its beneficial and expiatory potential.

### Suffering removes

the illusion of invincibility and immortality that seem to prevail outside the Christian faith. It takes down the varnish of safety that might act as a strong barrier against the Gospel message. By weakening the body, suffering strengthens the action of the soul, *inflamed with* the memory of its lost purity. (McGrath 1992: 80)

We should meditate on how suffering might often represent a path to the Christian faith for those who have not been born again through “the divine immersion” of Baptism. Many times, the funerals of friends prove to be a turning point in a person’s spiritual journey, when all the pieces of a complex puzzle begin to find their place in that person’s life and cause him or her to meditate profoundly on existential or metaphysical matters. The faithful, in particular, should be those who progress spiritually by experiencing suffering, understanding the way it could be offered to God and valorized.

Suffering might lead to the improvement or the perfection of faith. We only have to open ourselves to God, to explore what meaning He is trying to convey to us through the painful experience that we are having at the time of suffering. We should have positive thoughts, we should think creatively and piously about how we live and our hope in God’s Providence should not be shaken by anything. Suffering is not an absolute detriment, a harm that isolates, separates and alienates us, but, on the contrary, it can result in solidarity between people and communion with our neighbors.

## **2. Experiencing sickness is a trial and a gift from God**

A man who is resolute in not considering the meaning of suffering, will not learn anything from his experience. Yet, those who believe that God can use suffering *for their benefit*, who pray during it, they will be open to seeing God’s hand working in this adversity. For Christians, God works equally through failure and through success, equally through suffering and through happiness. The pious fathers, suffering many illnesses, praised God and considered these to be “God’s ways to love.” From this perspective, Father Porphyrios the Pious states:

I thank God for having given me so much sickness [1]. So many times I tell Him: ‘O, my Christ, Your love is boundless!’ How it is wonderful that I still live. Among other sicknesses of mine, I suffer from pituitary cancer. There is a tumor

there that is growing and it presses on the optic nerve. This is why I cannot see now. The pain is immensely intense. And, yet, I pray bearing Christ's Cross patiently. Do you see how my heart is? It has enlarged, it is not normal anymore. This is also because of the tumor in my head. The more time passes, the worse it gets. It will become even larger and I will not be able to speak. It hurts me, I suffer, but, how beautiful is my sickness. I feel it as the love of Christ. I pierce my heart and I praise and thank God. This is because of my sins. I am a sinner and God seeks to cleanse me from my sins [2].

When I was sixteen, I was praying to God to give me a serious disease, a cancer, that would cause pain to me for His love and to make me praise Him in pain. I prayed like this for a long time. But, my Spiritual Father told me this was selfishness in that I was compelling God to do so. God knows what He will do and I did not persist in praying for this. You see, God has not forgotten this prayer of mine and He bestowed on me this benefaction after so many years!

Now, I pray to God not to take away from me that for which I have asked Him. I am so grateful I suffer, that I shall partake in Christ's Passion, from my plentiful love. This is a trial from God. 'For whom the Lord loves He chastens' (Heb. 12, 6). This sickness of mine is God's exceptional benevolence and He calls me to come in the mystery of His love and through His grace and I will strive to answer Him. But how unworthy I am. You will then tell me: 'Do all these, that He is revealing to you, not make you worthy?' These are the measure of my judgment. Those are through God's grace. None of these is mine. God has given me many charismas and I have not responded, I was unworthy. Yet, I continued with my endeavors. I hope God will bestow on me His help to be able to devote myself to His love.

This is the reason why I do not pray to God to be healed. I pray to Him to make me better. I am convinced that God knows I pray, but I pray for my soul to be cleansed from my sins. I do not take medicines, I did not undergo surgery, I did not have any medical tests. I just wait for God to arrange things for me. The only thing I am doing is to endeavor to become good. So, do pray for me for that. God's grace keeps me alive and it strengthens me. I strive to devote myself to Christ and to get closer to Him, to unite with Him. This is what I want, but I have not reached that stage – and I am not saying this out of humility. Yet, I shall remain audacious. I persevere. I pray to God to forgive my sins. I have heard many people saying: 'I cannot pray.' This has not happened to me. Only in that moment of disobedience I had on the Holy Mountain.

Whether and how long I shall live is not a matter that troubles me. I entrusted this to God's love. Many a time one might not want to remember death. This is because one desires life. From a certain point of view this is a proof of the immortality of the soul. Still, let us not forget that 'Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's' (Rom. 14, 8). Death is the bridge that takes us to Christ. The moment when we close our eyes, we shall open them in eternity. We shall stand before Christ. In the next life we shall experience 'a more firmly embedded' grace of God. (*Ne vorbește părintele Porfirie s.a., 367-369*)

The venerable fathers considered that God allows the trial of suffering and sickness because this is a divine endeavor and gift. “Once an old monk said: Being ill is a divine trial. Sickness is the greatest gift from God. Man can offer one single gift to God and that is experiencing pain.” (Ioannikios 2000: 408). A multitude of saints, who endured suffering while experiencing sickness, would not complain about this painful state of their bodies, but they would render their belief that if we knew how salutary suffering for the soul is, we would accept it as the greatest of gifts. *The Egyptian Paterikon* mentions an elder who “would often suffer and become ill. And one year he did not take sick and he felt great sorrow and he was crying saying: ‘God has forsaken me and He has not tried me!’” (*Patericul ce cuprinde...* 1999: 479). Yet, not only monks who became spiritually nourished and blessed through spiritual and bodily endeavors have understood this mystery, but also the ordinary faithful have achieved this understanding and this made some of the monks wonder. In connection with that

one of the fathers recounts: One day, as I was in Alexandria, I entered a church whose Patron Saint was a martyr. There I saw a woman who had profound love for God and seemed to be a widow and she was accompanied by men-servants and women-servants. Hanging onto the iron railing surrounding the place where the martyr was, she was telling him in a loud voice: ‘You have forsaken me, God, have mercy on me, my Beloved Lord!’ and she was talking in such a loud voice that because of her tone and cries I had to cease my prayers and take care of her because her words moved me deeply.

I presumed she was a widow who had been aggrieved by somebody and as I knew some of the officials ruling the province, I waited until she finished her prayer to give her some help. I called one of her servants and I told him: ‘Call your mistress here.’ When she came near to me I told her what I had thought. And she once again burst into tears and said: ‘You do not know, father, what my concern is? God has forsaken me and He has not tried me. It has been three years since I, my servants or any of my house has become ill and I think God has turned away His face from me because of the sins I have committed. For this reason I am crying, to be tried by God according to His mercy.’

As I was deeply impressed by this soul filled with wisdom, I prayed for her and I left that place praising God (*Pagini necunoscute de Pateric* 2011: 16-17).

The Fathers of the Church recommend us that when God allows various illnesses to come to us, we should accept them with gratitude and praying to God, with patience, without complaining, as a divine blessing. Because

the way of God is bearing the cross every day, because no one has gone to heaven because of complacency (with easiness). We know very well where is the end of the way of easiness and he who dives into God will not be left by Him without any concerns. Yet, that man's concern should be the truth. And moreover, it is known that this one is also in His care as He will always send suffering to him (Saint Isaac the Syrian 1991: 42).

### **3. The therapeutic impact of suffering upon the saints**

The attitude of Orthodox Spirituality toward sickness is to subsume it within God's plan to redeem man. And whether God considers it is necessary and redemptive that some men *earn* the Kingdom of Heaven especially through enduring sickness and suffering, good Christians will not murmur, will not object to it, will not be filled with resentment, but they will praise God for this occasion to be cleansed and redeemed. They wish to cleanse their souls of spiritual impurities through suffering in this life, to be delivered from the eternal and *unbearable* torments in the life to come. For this reason in *Paterika* and the *Lives of the Saints* we read about certain venerable fathers who, in their profound humility, considering they had not done anything worthy of appreciation on Earth and that they were still filled with weakness and imperfection, assumed suffering sent by God was to expiate their sins. They were even praying to God that, in case only suffering could have redeemed and cleansed them, to be sent or to be gifted by God this suffering together with the strength to endure it. These venerable fathers, true martyrs of patience, believed it was better to suffer here for their sins and to wash away their trespasses on earth by being freed from them and by being redeemed through their suffering and to earn the Kingdom of eternal Light and rejoicing rather than having them enumerated by their conscience before the Righteous Judge at the Last Judgment. For instance, St. Paisus Velichkovsky, in one of his writings (Saint Paisus Velichkovsky 1996: 48), refers to a venerable monk, Arkhip of Konec, whose radical attitude disconcerts us who live today. His bedding was made of sharp stones and he was exhausting his body during long vigils and he would never rest saying to himself:

O endure, endure my soul and let every moment add more suffering because you will want to weep and there will be no time for you to exert!" The historian Cassiodorus accurately renders the words of a hermit of ancient times, Stephen,

who confessed: “Everything God made is useful. Nevertheless, I know that such suffering is the consequence of sins. And we would better cleanse ourselves from our sins in this world than to endure after death endless torments (Cassiodorus 1998: 322).

In the book of Orthodox spirituality whose title is *Paterikon* (*Pateric. Ziceri inedite...* 2009: 90), we are told that there was at the Cells a brother who was so profound in his humility that he would always pray like this: “Send me, God, an illness, because when I am healthy I do not listen to and I do not obey to You.” Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov recounts about another Abba whom he attended when the latter was sick.

I found him suffering severely from his illness. As he saw I was saddened by his sickness, he told me: ‘Being so severely tormented by this disease, I remembered the bitter hour of my death. This recollection would have been impossible if my body had been healthy’ (Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov 1996: 26).

Another brother who was living in solitude in a monastery in the desert used to pray as follows:

God, I do not have fear of You (in the sense that he had not acquired completely the fear of God - AN)... I know it is beyond consideration that You could bestow on me Your forgiveness because I have sinned against You, Lord; but, if it were possible, by Your great mercy, forgive me and, if this is not possible, then chasten me here on earth, O Lord, not there in Heaven. And if this were also impossible, allow some of my punishment here and make it less intense there; this would be only an insignificant portion of this chastening; begin punishing me in this very moment, but not in Your wrath, O Lord (*Pateric. Ziceri inedite...* 2009: 119-120).

Another father, Hieronymus (of Aegina – AN), who is a contemporary of many of us, said:

I have lost my hand. God allowed it to be taken from me. Apparently I did not need it. I still have my other hand. If He wanted to take this one too, so be it. And if I were given to suffer from cancer, I accept it wholeheartedly. If it is God’s will, may He give me the strength to endure it.

The Greek author Petros Botsis writes that the father was wholly devoted and faithful to God. It was not the suffering that was dismaying him, but the possibility of becoming alienated from his Creator. This was his major concern and preoccupation. Father Hieronymus was a saint and this was proven by his entire life. Klitos Ioannides wrote:

I remember how patiently he endured the cross of sickness. I tell you that he suffered greatly. The cancer he had was causing him terrible pain but he would

never complain. He used to repeat 'I praise the Lord.' He was praising God ceaselessly (Ioannides s.a.: 423-424).

As he was suffering from rheumatism, the most venerable father Damian Țâru (1892-1964) from Secu-Neamț Monastery was once asked by his disciple if he wanted to undergo balneological procedures to relieve his pain. The father answered as follows: "You see, father Nicodemus, this sickness of mine is because of my sins. If I get cured, I shall still have my sins. So, I shall endure patiently everything God bestows upon me." (Bălan 2001: 622)

In the *Athonite Paterikon* it is recounted the dialogue between a priest and a monk suffering from sickness:

"How do you feel, father?"

'Just fine. Now that my body bears even a more serious sickness, I shall not go to my Father empty-handed'" (Ioannikios 2000: 411).

Many of the spiritually improved venerable monks would not pray to God to exempt themselves from suffering and pain, because enduring them earned them heavenly crowns, and to have always with them the comfort and the strengthening of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, these eminent souls devoted to God and *inflamed with the longing* for their transformation and transfiguration into the divine image, received the therapeutic impact of suffering. This is accomplished either by receiving martyrdom, when they sacrifice their lives, or by denying themselves comfort and not satisfying their most basic needs as hermits. It is possible for them, when they suffer severely from a chronic disease that makes them unfit for such heroic voluntary acts, to offer, as a sacrifice or an offering, their steadfast faith and thanksgiving. The extent to which bodily suffering may restore the primordial nature even where this voluntary sacrifice is not present becomes manifest in the parable in the Gospels of poor Lazarus (Lk. 16, 20ff). Saint John Cassian takes notice of this fact when he writes:

How it is sometimes beneficent to suffer from the weakness of the body as Lazarus, that poor man full of sores. The Scripture does not mention any other virtues in this man, beside the fact he endured with great patience poverty and bodily weakness, which brought him the blessing of being accepted into Abraham's bosom (Saint John Cassian 1990: 399).

If these trials of life were so necessary for the venerable, so that they did not forget God and not extinguish their love for Him, the more these trials are of need in the redeeming of us Christians today, who are so sunk in numerous sins and the passions of worldly delights.

We will highlight this fact as well: love for God finds its successful completion in this willingness to suffer. For this reason, the Fathers of the Church assumed all the trials which they considered signs of the divine goodness.

#### **4. Suffering does not denote that God rejects us**

Suffering is perceived differently by every man who endures it and its results vary from person to person. The time interval of suffering may be converted by he who suffers into a time of awareness, of getting closer to God, of the evaluation of one's own freedom, of introspection, meditation and of the acceptance of receiving God Who is Love in one's soul.

Others, such as those maligning comforters of Job, will always consider that suffering is a sign of divine punishment or of being rejected by God. For them suffering, seems to be, undoubtedly, bad news. It appears that God has forsaken them. Nevertheless, suffering is seen in Christianity as a potential seal of God's benevolence, love and presence.

Job's three friends talked to him about God. Commentators on the Bible underline the fact that only Job, who spoke to God and even defied Him, "spoke what is right" (Job 42, 7). He did not speak *of* God, as his three friends, but *to* God. And as he was speaking, he met God, discovering Him as a *Thaumaturge*. Job cried to God and he was sincere in his cry. This is the significance of prayer as communion with God. "This manner in which the righteous Job assumed suffering and his faithfulness in God have a prophetic dimension" (de Souzaenelle 1994: 34) because he anticipates prophetically the suffering of Jesus the Savior as well as overcoming it through rejoicing in the morning of the Resurrection

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me (Job 19, 25ff).



Suffering does not necessarily mean that we have turned away from God; it may mean that we are drawn even closer to Him and that we are allowed to go through an experience that will eliminate the last barriers or obstacles between us and Him. Through the poignant experience of his “thorn in the flesh,” St. Paul learned a most important spiritual *lesson* – that God’s grace is sufficient for him, that God’s strength is made perfect in man’s weakness (2 Cor. 12, 7ff). Suffering is an *instrument* through which God can blot out our self-content and conceit and He can help us stand up to our weakness through His strength to confess together with St. Paul that “I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me” (Phil. 4, 13).

### **5. Twelve benefits of physical suffering and of the trials of life**

Suffering is a positive act and it does not represent a defeat. The man who is troubled by suffering will not surrender to it, but will confront it, not only to defeat or to relegate it but, in particular “to make good use of the possibilities and spiritual richness it offers and to amplify and widen the work of God on earth, through him/her” (Boegner 1955: 36).

On the basis of the treatise attributed to Pierre de Blois, *De duodecim utilitatibus tribulationum* (Petrus Blessensis 1855: col. 989-1006), we shall enumerate below the benefits of trials in one’s life, without making a distinction between physical suffering and moral trials.

1. Any trial in one’s life is the inestimable support sent by God to recover one’s soul from the hands of enemies; they are a false rejoicing in the disconcerting success of this world: “in time, imperceptibly, you have come to realize that it was the Savior Who, for your benefit, was putting you to the test, causing you distress through some suffering from which He was relieving and protecting you;” (Saint Basil the Great 1857: col. 365B)

2. It brings the evil to silence;

3. It purifies the one who endures it;

4. It enlightens man’s heart to become more self-aware;

5. It opens the way for us to get closer to God: “distress makes the wise man to remember God and to grieve according to the extent he has forgotten God;” (Mark the Hermit 1999: 242)

6. It expiates some of our deserved chastening; suffering and trials are the expiation for the sins we have committed;

7. It makes man capable to receive God's grace;

8. Through it God removes from man earthly consolation and prepares him for the heavenly solace that is to come;

9. It establishes a mutual consideration between God and the man who loves Him by suffering; "any unwilling suffering should teach you to remember God; in this case you will have the occasion to repent;" (Mark the Hermit 1999, 242)

10. It makes man pray more and more fervently to God;

11. It protects and it nourishes man's heart;

12. For man it is the absolute proof that God loves him, it is that part that Christ chose as well.

Sickness is a favorable occasion for a prodigious renewal. This "physical misery" that befalls man represents "a chamber for experiments wherein is about to be elaborated, under unprecedented temperatures and levels of pressure, a new man" (Gadenne 2006: 149).

Franz Müller-Lyer, a psychiatrist and a sociologist, in his work *Sociology of Suffering*, summarized the benefits of physical suffering:

- Suffering enhances the vitality of human nature because frequent pleasures can cause it to degenerate and would enfeeble its moral and physical strengths; suffering, on the contrary, scourges human nature so that it becomes stronger and more vigorous;

- Suffering improves one's character: the man who has experienced suffering becomes wiser and more modest, he will deepen consciousness and fill it with wisdom and goodness;

- Suffering enlarges the sphere of human sympathy because after having suffered yourself you understand better one's neighbor's suffering;

- Suffering valorizes happiness; we appreciate better rejoicing when we compare it with moments of suffering;

- The painful acknowledgement of a certain lack sparks the light of invention in man's mind, in all fields of culture and civilization (Fernea 2005, 152-154);

- Suffering is a continuous spiritual crucifixion, a permanent taking and bearing of the Cross to follow Christ, as He Himself was the example to us. Yet, the image of Christ suffering death on the Cross and

“trampling down death by death” is itself a symbol of how formidable is triumph through and in suffering.

**Notes:**

- [1] The translator of the book we quote notes that the father suffered from: myocardial infarct, chronic kidney failure, ulcer niche (with recurrent gastrointestinal bleeding), cataract, herpes zoster on his face, staphylococcal dermatitis on his hand, inguinal hernia (with recurrent strangulations), chronic endemic goiter, pituitary adenoma – A.N.
- [2] From this we see the profound humility of this spiritually improved venerable and blessed with charismas father – A.N.

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