

LONGSUFFERING

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INTRODUCTION

Longsuffering which is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is no longer an everyday word. When people hear this word, they immediately think that it means “*to suffer long*” or “*long on suffering*.” Certainly, this is an easy way to remember the basic concept. It is translated in many versions as simply “*patience*”, but this does not do justice to the full meaning of longsuffering – it is only PART of it. The fullest understanding goes a long way further than the image of someone patiently waiting for an expected good thing to happen.

THE EXPLANATION OF LONG SUFFERING

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition defines longsuffering as “*patiently enduring wrongs or difficulties*”. WorldNet defines longsuffering as “*patient endurance of pain or unhappiness*” and “*capable of enduring hardship or inconvenience without complaint*” This is translated in Filipino as “*matiisin*” or “*hindi iniinda ang sakit o paghihirap*”. The essence of longsuffering here is “*how we bear and endure DIFFICULTIES and TRIALS*”.

Let us try to look at the Hebrew word for long suffering as Wikipedia presents it. The word is “*אַרְוֵכָה*”- it means “*slow to anger*”. Its Greek counterpart, “*makrothumia*”, literally means “*being long-tempered*”; the “*opposite of short-tempered or having a short fuse*”. In Filipino we often hear people saying “*di agad napupundi*” or “*napakahaba ng pasensya*”. Vine’s Expository Dictionary notes that “*longsuffering is that quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish. It is the quality that does not surrender to circumstances or succumb under trial; it is the opposite of despondency, and is associated with hope*”. Further, the Greek Analytical Lexicon notes that the concept carries with it the idea of the “*patient enduring of evil*” and the “*slowness of avenging injuries*”

Long suffering is a virtue needed more than ever when impatience, intolerance, oversensitivity and impulsive anger are prevalent. Without “*makrothumia*”, we lose our cool and tend to be temperamental and irritable, impulsive and excitable. **This helps us to be reminded how we are to behave. It is not blowing up and exploding with emotion in response to difficult situations. It is not snapping at people when we feel they are in the wrong or speak out of turn. It is not giving a litany of curses when things do not turn out the way we expect them to be.**

With these definitions we can therefore say that long suffering is outlived in two ways: a) the internal frame of mind that we possess or inward attitude (how we bear and

endure the trials we are going through) and b) the external demonstration in word and deed or outward reaction towards another (being long tempered in dealing with another's failings).

If we don't have the right attitude on the inside, then we are not able to display the right reaction on the outside. We can only be truly patient and long suffering through the grace of God because God, himself, is long suffering.

LONGSUFFERING IS A MAJOR ATTRIBUTE OF GOD

Long suffering is that quality associated with mercy, and is used of God. No greater demonstration of longsuffering can be found than that shown by God toward his people. The Lord time and time again, throughout His Word, has shown longsuffering towards, the Israelites. The Lord had miraculously and wonderfully made a way for them to escape the oppression of the Egyptians. He had led them out by "His mighty hand" from their enemies. But, right from the start, they complained and moaned about nearly everything! "We don't like the route you are taking us", "we don't like the food you have given us", "we are thirsty" and on and on it went. He could have struck them down in an instant, for questioning His wisdom and power. But, He didn't. He was longsuffering. He gave them ways to repent and return to follow Him instead of their own ways. He continually forgave them, and supplied their every need despite their complaining.

Ex. 34:6-7;

And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

How much sin the Israelites displayed, but YET, how longsuffering God was towards them, his people! The long suffering that God demonstrated is more than just waiting, putting up with. As Edward Bulwer puts it, "*Long suffering is not passive; on the contrary it is active; it is concentrated strength. It is enduring love.*"

LONG SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

The ultimate expression of God's longsuffering is Christ's suffering and death on the cross. Christ himself was longsuffering in the face of persecution and ridicule. Throughout His years of preaching and teaching, he faced numerous assaults, both verbally and physically. His ultimate example of longsuffering was His final day of suffering. He was mocked, falsely accused, spat upon, and beaten. And His reaction – nothing. He didn't say a word – "and *like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.*" (Is. 53:7) He didn't react violently or attempt to retaliate in any way. He just patiently endured His afflictions. What was His motivation? It was love – it

was obedience to His Father's will – it was joyfully redeeming His people from their sins and bearing their punishment. Long suffering is indeed enduring love!

1 Peter 2:21-24

“For to this you have been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps: He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused, he did not return abuse, when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body and on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness, by his wounds you have been healed”.

Blessed Pope John Paul II in his homily at mass in Los Angeles Coliseum on September 15, 1987 said, *“Christ took upon himself the whole of human suffering and radically transformed it through the Paschal Mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection. The triumph of the cross gives human suffering a new dimension, a redemptive value.”* Jesus is the first to give manifest credibility to the notion that suffering can have salvific value, not in and of itself but placed upon it by the free decision of a person enduring it for a purpose. Paul Feider wrote, *“It seemed to be important to him that people experience the value of his decision to endure suffering before they proclaim him as the anointed of God”.*

THE STORY OF JOB, THE LONG SUFFERER

In the Book of Job, we see how Job endured the hardships that he would have to face. In other words, he showed that patient courage under affliction. Looking at Job's life everything was great. He was a wealthy man and had achieved financial security. He wanted to live a life pleasing before God; he was a righteous man. So how did Job, a man of God, handle this issue of long suffering?

Job's initial response was not to blame God. Though he wanted to plead his case directly to the Lord Himself because He wanted to hear directly from God why things were the way they were, he still trusted God throughout the calamity. Job witnesses to the reality of pain, but also to gaining a new sense of joy and freedom and restoration of soul.

In one of the masses I attended, a priest shared in his homily the lessons we can get from the life of Job. He gave the following points:

1. Don't react abruptly to the initial crisis
2. Trust God throughout the calamity

3. Learn from the situation for problems often provide us with greater opportunities to grow.

God did not allow Job's suffering to go on indefinitely. If it is so, then, He won't let us either if we turn to Him. Job's story is a call to all of us to place faith and trust radically in God alone.

OUR SUFFERING

Nobody is exempted from suffering, it is a universal experience. Everyone goes through times of pains and sorrow, depression and darkness, stress and suffering. Every day we see on television the suffering of the poor, the anguish of those crying for justice, the affliction of those who are under the mercy of the powerful and influential, the agony of bearing the pain of a an illness and the torments of standing for truth.

I had my own share of this suffering when just more than a month before my perpetual profession, I was diagnosed with Cancer and had an immediate surgery. I found myself questioning God for allowing this painful ordeal. I was at lower ebb, so low that I felt betrayed by my God to whom I am ready to be committed totally. Sr. Adele, my Directress, brought me to our community in Tagaytay to be able to cry and pray. I did nothing but to ask the Lord many Why's. "Why me? Why now that I am committing myself to you? Are you testing my love for you? Don't you want me to serve you?" In short, I started questioning God's love for me.

It was in the middle of my endless tears inside the cave that I experienced a God who suffers with me; a God who carries my burdens and who has wept for me even before I started weeping. It was a concrete experience of the Emmanuel. The Paschal mystery became so real to me. I realized that what I was experiencing was only a small fragment of Christ's suffering and the suffering of all those who are in pain in different forms. That realization graced me with the capacity to befriend suffering and not to fight it.

I went back to the Priory House after some days of prayer with inner strength, with a readiness to undergo chemotherapy and bear all the side effects of the treatment with courage and positive disposition. I kept telling myself that there is a loving God who suffers with me and keeps me going. I may face situation beyond reserves but never beyond God's resources.

There is grace that comes along with getting sick or being sick. It has transformed me to become more sensitive to the sick, more compassionate to those who are suffering, more patient and tolerant with those who are weak, helpless and in pain. Suffering became a source of transformation and growth. It also led me to a

deeper connectedness with myself and I discovered a God who is beyond the definitions I formerly have of Him. It was a call to a deeper level of trusting God's love for me and entrusting myself totally to Him.

"When we have striven to alleviate or overcome suffering, when like Christ we have prayed that "the cup pass us by"(cf Mt. 26:39), and yet suffering remains, then we must walk "the royal road" of the cross. Christ's answer to our question "why" is above all a call, a vocation. Christ does not give us an abstract answer, but rather he says, "Follow me!" He offers us the opportunity through suffering to take part in his work of saving the world. And when we do take up our cross, then gradually the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed to us. It is then in our sufferings that we find inner peace and even spiritual joy"

*Homily at Mass in Los Angeles Coliseum
September 15, 1987 (Blessed Pope John
Paul II)*

THE CHALLENGE TO BE LONG SUFFERING

Col. 3:12-13

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.

We are all challenged to practice long suffering in our own journey and daily encounter with people. May the points below help us develop this virtue.

1. The purifying flames of trial and difficulties have the power to transform us from within and draw us closer to Christ. Through suffering, we- like Him- take part in saving the world. Let us unite our suffering with Christ, offer our pain for the salvation of all and find inner peace and joy.

2. When we become too immersed in our own sufferings, we fail to see the sufferings of others; that there are people who suffer more than we do. All concern for the sick and suffering is a part of the Church's life and mission. The Church has always understood itself to be charged by Christ with the care of the poor, the weak, the defenseless, the

suffering and those who mourn. Let us turn our eyes to those who need our gentle powerful comfort that brings the strengthening aid in time of trouble and suffering.

3. We have to “**have compassion**” – if someone in our community is going through a trial, then be sympathetic. Sometimes people are not at their best when things do not go well, and it is a perfect opportunity to be patient with them.

4. “**Be courteous**” – be gentle in how we respond to others – harsh words never help a situation, only hinder it especially if someone else is already causing us hardship. Be civil and polite in how we respond to difficult community members, demanding students and parents and exacting teachers and employees. What we say and do should be shown with kindness. We can outlive our love by being forgiving towards others when they cause us suffering.

5. “**Or railing for railing**” – this is a term not in common usage today, but is with reference to WHAT we say – slander and bad-mouthing. If someone says something bad about us, let us be long tempered. Don’t say something nasty in return. “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” – what is in our hearts, is what will come out – get our hearts to the right place, and hopefully, we will not be tempted to speak in an unkind way.

CONCLUSION

Let me end with this story and reflection that Joan Chittister shared in the book “*Becoming Fully Human*”

There are two monks, one somber, one joyful, each belonging to a different tradition, living miles apart. The first monk prayed all day long in deep motionless silence. The second monk would sing and dance his praises to God near a huge tree in the monastery garden.

One day an angel appeared to the first monk and said, “I have come from God and you have been given permission to ask God one question. What is your question?” The somber monk looked up and said, “How many more lives must I live before I will attain self- realization?” The angel left him and reappeared miles away to the second monk who was singing and dancing before God. The angel said, “I have come from God and you have been given permission to ask God one question. What is your question?” Without hesitation, the joyful monk asked “How many more lives must I live before I will attain self- realization?” And with that the angel disappeared.

One week later the angel returned to the first monk and said "I have the answer you seek. You must live three more lives before you attain self-realization". With that, the monk fell dejectedly into heavy sobbing. "Three more lives, three more lives, Oh, no", he cried "three more lives!" The angel left immediately and appeared to the second monk. "I have your answer. Do you see that tree around which you have been dancing and singing your praises to God?". "Yes", said the joyful monk. "You must live as many more lives as there are leaves on that tree before you will attain self realization". The angel said. The monk looked up the tree and said." Why, there must be ten thousand leaves on that tree. Only ten thousand lives? Only ten thousand more lives and I will attain self realization". And he began to sing and dance joyfully before God. Suddenly a voice thundered from heaven. "My son this day, you have attained self-realization".

It is not always possible to rejoice in our struggles, in our sufferings, but it is always possible to trust them. Then we may surely give thanks not for the blessings we have but for the blessings we cannot see. In every struggle, in every suffering, there is a hidden blessing.

*Somehow in the midst of tears;
a gift is hidden.
Somehow in the midst of mourning
the first steps of the dance take place.
And somehow the cries that well up from our losses
belong to our songs of gratitude. (Henry Nouwen)*

Let us stay on the vine - the pruning process may make us scream, but the fruit that results is the sweetest in the land. I pray that if we are in the season of pruning, let us allow the fruit of longsuffering to come forth. May the Lord help us to be long suffering to those around us.

That In All Things God May Be Glorified!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Madelein L. Engele in her book, "The Irrational Seasons", writes about the "Noes of God" She says that God will sometimes say "No" to us only to lead up to a greater "Yes" later. We must learn, she says, to be calm when God says "no", confidently expecting a "yes" to come.

Looking back at your own life can you discover times when God say “no” to provide you with a beautiful “yes” later. Did you find meaning in the suffering that led to a discovery of a deeper meaning?

2. Have you ever experienced a time where you became so confused, so discouraged and so disheartened that you just wanted to let go, give in and give up?

3. What are your present struggles or crosses that demand a practice of the virtue of long suffering?

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