

Pruned for Holiness: Suffering and the Growth of Grace

As our regulars know, today is the final week of a homily series on the universal call to holiness. A very brief review of the previous four weeks. In the first week, we talked about what holiness is. Holiness is being set apart by God for God: God has chosen you for a particular purpose. As Christian believers we are called to be in the world but not of the world—we are set apart by the Lord. In the second week of the series, we talked about what happens at Baptism: when you are baptized, God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in you—and through Him the Father and the Son as well. In addition to the divine indwelling, we are given sanctifying grace: the divine life within us that we are called to tend—our treasure in heaven, so to speak—and that grace is meant to grow throughout our lives.

Over the last two weeks (and today) we have been asking how sanctifying grace grows. In the third week we looked at the first way it grows—through devotion—using Carlo Acutis: frequent Holy Communion when able, frequent confession, Eucharistic adoration, cultivating relationships with the saints (especially the Blessed Mother), and acts of charity. Last week, using St. Thérèse’s parents, the Martins, we considered the “little way,” which teaches that whatever we do, if we do it with love, is worthy of God and increases sanctifying grace. You can grow in sanctifying grace and holiness by mowing the lawn, by taking a walk, by playing with your kids, by giving your spouse a back rub. It’s not the things we do, but the love with which we do them.

If those two ways of growing in grace are active—devotions and “little things with great love”—today’s final way is more passive. It is something we should not seek, but it happens to us: suffering. Within what happens to us in suffering, we are able to grow immensely in sanctifying grace. In many ways, this is the crux of how we reach sanctity in this life.

Think of it this way: holiness; sanctifying grace (divine life); devotion (rootedness); the little way (growth); and today, suffering (pruning). Like a plant, we need life, rootedness, growth—and pruning. Pruning hurts, but it is necessary for full flourishing.

What Counts as Suffering; Purgatory and Purification; St. Kateri’s Witness

When I speak of purification through suffering, I do not mean suffering always produces it. Depending on our heart, suffering can turn us away from the Lord. Yet the sufferings we face, united to Jesus, become the food for growth in holiness. This connects to All Souls Day: we pray for the dead, and we remember that whatever purification is left undone in this life will be completed before the beatific vision. That is purgatory: the completion of purification before we reach the vision of God. We should emphasize our opportunities to grow now—ideally we would skip purgatory and go straight to heaven. That is the ideal,

though many of us may not make it. Properly understood, purgatory is not a sad doctrine; it is beautiful. God is for us, not against us, and if God is for us, we need not be afraid.

Suffering is much broader than physical pain. All of us suffer every day. Suffering is any experience of evil we undergo—any experience of lack, deprivation, limitation, loss, injustice, even guilt and anxiety, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, mental health struggles. It is not just physical pain. We all experience evil daily; therefore, we all experience suffering.

Our saint this final week is St. Kateri Tekakwitha. She was born in the latter half of the seventeenth century in New York—her mother an Algonquin Christian, her father a Mohawk, and it was not a marriage her mother chose. At age four, smallpox struck, killing both parents; it scarred Kateri's face and greatly impaired her vision. She was adopted by her father's relatives, who were not Christian and did not permit her to practice the faith. Even so, she somehow had enough formation to seek the Lord—spending long periods alone in the woods to pray.

At thirteen her uncle arranged a marriage, which she refused, saying she was espoused to Jesus Christ. Without outside influence it is unclear how she conceived consecrated virginity; one suspects the Lord revealed it to her as a young teen. Providentially, the Mohawk entered a treaty with the French that allowed Jesuits to minister to those who desired it. She met a priest (Father de Lamberville) and began earnest catechesis. At eighteen she became a catechumen, and a year later she was baptized. This was unpopular in her village. Because she would not work on Sunday, they said, "You don't work, you don't eat." Children threw rocks at her for being Christian, and some threatened her with torture or death—though the treaty prevented martyrdom. About a year after Baptism, Father de Lamberville urged her to leave, encouraging her to make her way about two hundred miles north to the mission of St. Francis Xavier, outside Toronto. She traveled for two months alone in the wilderness and arrived at the fort.

There, for two and a half years, she attended Mass most days, spent much of her free time in the chapel, and loved praying the Rosary. Known for exceptional kindness, she made a private vow of perpetual virginity on March 25, 1679, with the priest's help. She had hoped to found a community for Native women, but her health would not permit it; she seems to have had tuberculosis. About a year after her consecration, she died; immediately the scars on her face vanished and her skin appeared beautiful and radiant. Many miracles followed at her grave. There is a Seattle connection: her second canonization miracle occurred in our archdiocese about fifteen years ago, when a young boy at Seattle Children's Hospital—after all treatments had failed—was suddenly healed through her intercession.

Kateri was not a martyr, but she experienced great hardship—some by circumstance (like illness), some because she was Christian (loss of social standing, unpopularity, hostility). We also can suffer for being Christians; if we live the faith, there will likely be areas of opposition. There is also the world’s ordinary suffering. The question is: what do we do with it? Do we waste our suffering, or do the trials that come enable us to orient ourselves more toward God?

How to Use Suffering: Union with Christ and Its Fruits

For those really struggling—even in common, daily difficulties—the move is to talk honestly to Jesus: “Lord, I don’t like this.” The Lord does not respond from a distance, “It’s your cross—bear it.” Rather, He says, “I don’t like this either; but together we can get through it.” That is how to bring any suffering into union with Christ for our purification.

Suffering, united with the Lord, is a massive help for the purification of sin, the purification of ego, and the stripping away of the illusion that we are in charge or self-sufficient. It grows compassion for others. Our experience of disorder draws us into union with the One who is the source of order and orients us toward eternity. Suffering is not fun, but it will come to us. If we bring it to Jesus, it will likely become one of the greatest instruments of our sanctification. That is the teaching of the Church; that is the witness of the saints. Finally, suffering is not isolation; rightly oriented, it becomes a place of deepest communion with the Crucified One.

Dear friends, as we close this homily series and receive Holy Communion today, let us be consoled by the promises of eternal life. As we pray for those who have gone before us, let us aim at the highest holiness, so that we may experience greater joy and glory with the Lord who loves us.