

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Serving Well Those Who Suffer

The call to serve in diaconal ministry often requires that we serve those who suffer, whether it be physical, psychological or spiritual. Recently, I had the opportunity to reread Pope Saint John Paul II's 1984 encyclical on human suffering entitled, *Salvifici Doloris*. It's a powerfully insightful document that not only enables me to bear my own suffering well, but help in the sufferings of those I'm called to serve. Because of this, I'd like to share some insights with my brothers in the diaconate.

Saint John Paul begins by acknowledging the universal experience of suffering and its significant impact on human existence. He emphasizes that suffering is an integral part of the human condition, a reality that touches all individuals regardless of their background or circumstances. The Pope notes that despite humanity's advancement and progress, suffering remains an unavoidable aspect of life.

The encyclical delves into the mystery of human suffering, examining its various dimensions and effects. John Paul highlights the unique ability of suffering to reveal the deepest questions about human existence and the search for meaning. He emphasizes that suffering is not without purpose but has the potential for spiritual growth and transformation.

The saint then turns his attention to the redemptive value of suffering in light of Christ's passion and death. He explains that Christ's suffering and death on the cross were not merely an unfortunate event but a deliberate act of self-giving love for the salvation of the world. Through His own suffering, Christ demonstrated the ultimate victory over suffering, transforming it into an instrument of redemption and divine grace.

From here, John Paul explores the relationship between human suffering and the suffering of Christ, emphasizing that the sufferings of individuals can be united with our Lord's own sufferings. By uniting their sufferings with His, individuals can participate in the redemptive work of Christ and contribute to the salvation of others. This understanding provides meaning and purpose to human suffering, elevating it beyond mere pain and hardship.

The encyclical also addresses the problem of evil and the role of suffering in the context of God's providence and free will. John Paul acknowledges the difficulty in reconciling the existence of suffering with the goodness and omnipotence of God. However, he asserts that God's love and mercy are manifested in His solidarity with humanity's suffering and His redemptive plan.

Beyond this, John Paul emphasizes the importance of compassion and solidarity in the face of suffering. He calls upon individuals and communities to embrace those who suffer, offering them comfort, support, and love. He encourages the Church and society to develop a culture of compassion and to work towards alleviating the causes of suffering in the world.

In the concluding sections, John Paul highlights the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints in the context of suffering. He emphasizes that Mary, as the Mother of Sorrows, holds a unique place in the communion of saints and can provide solace and intercede for those who suffer.

In short, John Paul's teaching explores the profound nature of human suffering, its redemptive value in light of Christ's passion, and the call to respond with compassion and solidarity. The encyclical provides a theological reflection on the mystery of suffering, offering insights and guidance to individuals seeking meaning and hope amidst their own trials.

Without integrating these profound truths into our lives and our ministries, the foundation of our pastoral work is robbed of its soul and, with it, the power of Christ's redemptive love. This divine love, expressed in sacred ecclesial service (*diakonia*), is the measure by which all loves are measured, giving diaconal ministry its salvific quality and its own unique contribution to the mystery of salvation.

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