

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

God takes our suffering upon himself

My Aunt Merle knew about suffering. A pediatric nurse by training, she bravely endured the painful and disfiguring effects of rheumatoid arthritis for more than 45 years, until her death in late 2009. In the midst of her battle with disease, she kept working because of her indomitable spirit, her love for nursing, and her realization that not working would be worse for her than continuing to work, despite the limitations her illness imposed upon her.

In many ways Merle and her sisters were the hub of our large extended family. They made sure we were remembered on our birthdays and other special occasions, comforted in distress and counseled in confusion, and kept abreast of family news. Our lives were the center of their attention, and we nephews and nieces always knew we had a place in their hearts and at their supper table. Our clan grew because of them, for they welcomed “adopted” nieces and nephews into our family, about whom we heard so often that we thought of them as our own.

Merle had a particularly wry sense of humor, which we enjoyed immensely; she held strong opinions; and she had a heart of pure gold. Because of her heroic suffering, however, among the members of our family she also enjoyed deep respect. It wasn't just that she suffered bravely and perseveringly. She pondered, prayed and grappled with God about her suffering, and she spent her life alleviating the suffering of children. In so doing she gained immense wisdom. In her own inimitable way, with a hard-to-replicate slow, southern drawl and typical droll directness, she dispensed that wisdom. We listened.

Just recently one of my sisters told me of a conversation she had with Merle not long before she died. My



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sister had undergone painful surgery and was commiserating with Merle about its stubborn, lingering effects. She voiced embarrassment about mentioning pain to Merle, of all people. But Merle would have none of such embarrassment.

'She suffers so'

She said, “Listen, baby. Don't ever put yourself down for hurting. Your pain is your pain, and you feel it. Don't ever feel guilty about that. Just don't start thinking that your pain is the ONLY pain in the world.”

My sister found comfort and assurance in that counsel, as we all should. None of us need go seeking pain and suffering. They are part and parcel of every human life and of the human condition itself. By the same token, none of us should deny the pain that comes our way. To do so could cause damaging physical, psychological and spiritual effects; make us insensitive or intolerant of the suffering of others; and cause us to miss great lessons God wishes to teach us.

So clearly had God seen the suffering of his people that he sent his Son to reveal his limitless compassion and healing power. For it is not just we who needed God's healing, God's mercy, God's salvation — creation itself need-

ed to be taken to the cross and saved. According to St. Paul, creation groans in labor pains.

In Romance 7, “The Incarnation,” 16th-century mystic St. John of the Cross poetically describes a conversation between God the Father and the Son, in which the Son expresses his desire to bring the Father's limitless love and healing power to us.

*I will go and tell the world,
spreading the word
of your beauty and sweetness
and of your sovereignty.
I will go and seek my bride
and take upon myself
her weariness and labors
in which she suffers so;
and that she may have life
I will die for her
and lifting her out of that deep,
I will restore her to you.*
(Romance 7, 9b-11)

He embraced us

No one knows our suffering as does the Lord, and he knows it from personal experience. He knows the pain that touches every sinew of the body, every crevice of the heart, every unbearable emotion, and every broken relationship. In his own agony and prayer to the Father about his suffering (the Gospel writers tell us he prayed Psalms 22 and 31 on the cross), he bore our agonies, every one. Discounting none of them, he embraced them; discounting none of us, he embraced us.

DO YOU HAVE AN INTENTION FOR ARCHBISHOP SARTAIN'S PRAYER LIST?

You may send it to him at Archbishop Sartain's Prayer List, Archdiocese of Seattle, 710 Ninth Ave., Seattle, WA 98104.

That is what Aunt Merle knew to the depths of her crippled, aching joints. Hers was not the only pain in the world, but it was real. In the unique way God called her to the cross, she learned many hard lessons and dispensed even more by her love. No doubt, because of her faith in the Lord Jesus who knew suffering, she worked with him to restore many to God by her extraordinary example. She learned the profound and necessary lesson that her suffering was his, that his was hers.

Paul writes to the Romans:

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom 8:18-23)

Yours is not the only pain in the world, nor is mine. When you suffer, go to Jesus. He has already been sent by the Father to meet you, for only he knows all the pain of the world.

**“Your pain is your pain,
and you feel it. Don't ever
feel guilty about that.”**