

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

Freed by the power of life

I once saw a TV commercial claiming that a certain mattress would provide “a lifetime of temporary relief.” I laughed out loud. This mattress would ease your suffering for a lifetime, but only a few hours at a time. Forever temporarily — isn’t that an oxymoron?

The commercial reflected a deep-seated cultural dynamic to which we can easily fall prey: the search for a quick fix to human suffering. In its extreme, this search leads to the misuse of alcohol, painkillers, sleeping pills, sex, money, gambling and relationships, among other things.

The reckless search for relief in the wrong places is a disaster in the making. Left unchecked, it spirals out of control, as one method of relief after another inevitably plays itself out, exposing its worthlessness. The search for temporary relief becomes an addiction, more powerful and more insidious than the original pain.

One of the tragedies of our cultural mindset

is that many people do settle for a lifetime of temporary relief. If they do not get lost in the reckless search, they may live in relative tranquility and never fall into serious sin; but they will never know what it means to be fully alive.

Suffering a mystery

Only God can bring the kind of healing, meaning, integration and fulfillment for which we thirst. The Bible uses such words as “save,” “redeem,” “ransom,” “rescue” and “free” to express what God has done for us. There is no mention of temporary relief, for that is far inferior to what God wants to give.

Modern medicine’s capacity to cure many diseases and ease debilitating pain, both physical and emotional, is a true blessing. The fallacy inherent in the relentless search for temporary relief, however, is that any suffering is a hopelessly fruitless intrusion into otherwise carefree lives.

In other words, the fallacy suggests, once we get past all suffering, we can get back to living. Suffering is a mystery, to be sure, but it does not have to be fruitless. It can be a source of strength, a vehicle of love and an experience that helps us see how intimately Jesus has joined himself to us.

In “Crossing the Threshold of

Hope,” Pope John Paul II wrote, “God is always on the side of the suffering. His omnipotence is manifested precisely in the fact that He freely accepted suffering. He could have chosen not to do so. He could have chosen to demonstrate His omnipotence even at the moment of the Crucifixion. ... The fact that He stayed on the Cross until the end, the fact that on the Cross He could say, as do all who suffer: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mk 15:34), has remained in human history the strongest argument. If the agony of the Cross had not happened, the truth that God is Love would have been unfounded.”

Suffering and death entered the world as a result of sin, and only freedom from the power of evil can transform them.

‘The power of life’

The Holy Father continued, “To save means to liberate from radical, ultimate evil. ... Through the work of the Redeemer death ceases to be an ultimate evil; it becomes subject to the power of life. ... The world, which is capable of perfecting therapeutic techniques in various fields, does not have the power to liberate man from death. ... Only God saves, and He saves the whole of humanity in Christ.”

No Christian’s life is without pain or suffering. But because of the cross and Resurrection, suffering and death are no longer enslaved to the power of evil; they are freed by the power of life.

Suffering can be a means of giving oneself to God, with Jesus, and it can bear fruit for others in him. Death is no longer an end but a means to ultimate union with God. Jesus shows us the way to the fruitfulness of suffering, to

life in union with God: complete and childlike trust that God, who seems to have forsaken us, will give us the healing we seek ... and more.

We must be on guard not to treat God as just another pain reliever, withdrawing to him only in times of trouble. God is not an analgesic or a Band-Aid. His grace does not kick in when the pain begins. He does not take up where our strength leaves off. He does not fill in the gaps we are unable to bridge.

Proof of his love

God is Life itself, and giving ourselves to him we find, not temporary relief, but peace, even in the midst of suffering.

St. Paul writes that because of baptism, we are “in Christ Jesus.” We are now subject to the power of life, not to the power of death. Everything — including our pain and suffering — is in Christ and will be used by him for good. “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Those searching for a lifetime of temporary relief will not find it in God.

But those searching for God will find salvation, peace and hope of the eternal brand, “in Christ Jesus,” the kind nothing can shake or destroy. The proof of the depth of his love, a love that is not temporary but eternal, is his sacrifice on the cross.

“I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33).

Happy Easter! May Christ’s victory over death bring you hope, and may you find in him the fulfillment of your deepest longings.

