

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SO MUCH PAIN AND SUFFERING?"

Q: As a Catholic, I am often asked why God allows so much pain and suffering in the world, especially when it involves innocent children. What is the most beneficial way to respond to this question, particularly to those without a firm faith foundation, to promote hope and healing and avoid despair in the midst of so much sorrow? Finding the right words to comfort and console can be most difficult. -T.G., New England

Answered by Fr. Edward McIlmail, LC:

A: Indeed, finding the right words in this moment can be hard. Seeing suffering in others, especially, can be heart-wrenching. Yet it can also be an opportunity for sharing the faith, a moment of grace.

When this kind of question arises, express sympathy for the sufferer and thank the person for his concern for the one who is in pain. You might reassure the person that he is not alone, that the problem of suffering and evil has pained people for millennia. Questions about suffering often point to fears lurking in the human heart: Does God really care about us? And does suffering have any meaning?

St. Augustine said that God "would not allow any evil in his works, unless in his omnipotence and goodness, as the Supreme Good, he is able to bring forth good out of evil" ("On Faith, Hope, and Love," iii, 11). Maybe the best example of this was how God took the suffering of Good Friday and brought forth the Resurrection of Easter Sunday.

God the Father's sending of his only Son to suffer and die for our redemption shows his deep love for us. That alone should remind us (and maybe even those without a strong faith) of God's love for mankind.

Jesus' passion and death also gave meaning to suffering. Suffering and death were not part of God's original plan for the world. They came along as fallout from the sin of Adam. Jesus never promised to rid the world of suffering. But he did show us that suffering can be embraced and offered back to God the Father as a kind of atonement for sins.

Still, the presence of evil and suffering can baffle us. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 309, acknowledges this point:

"If God the Father almighty, the Creator of the ordered and good world, cares for all his creatures, why does evil exist? To this question, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice. Only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer to this question: the goodness of creation, the drama of sin and the

patient love of God who comes to meet man by his covenants, the redemptive Incarnation of his Son, his gift of the Spirit, his gathering of the Church, the power of the sacraments and his call to a blessed life to which free creatures are invited to consent in advance, but from which, by a terrible mystery, they can also turn away in advance. There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil.”

The case of suffering children can be particularly heart-wrenching. Significantly, the suffering of little ones was closely linked to the coming of Our Savior. The venerated Holy Innocents of Bethlehem were the first to be slain “on account of Christ.” Still, Our Lord’s love for children is undeniable. “Let the little children come to me ... for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matthew 19:14).

Seeing suffering in others, especially the smallest and weakest, should prompt us to action. We can offer our prayers and material support. We can also help a person to see his suffering through supernatural eyes. Illness, says the Catechism in No. 1051, “can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is.” (For further reading, consider *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, by Peter Kreeft.)

Suffering is the anvil on which we can be forged into more-compassionate people. Suffering can make us more humane and more sympathetic to others. In the process we discover our own capacity for love. A silver lining in a dark cloud, if ever there was one.