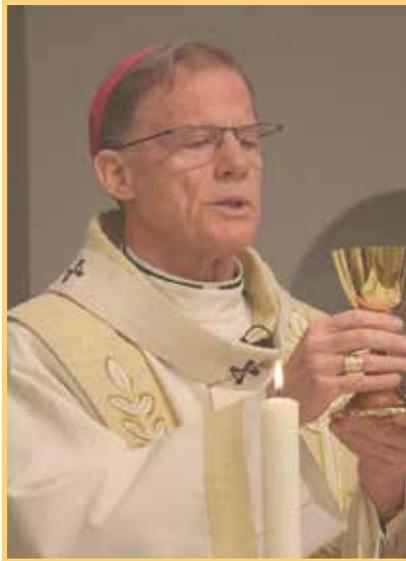


# Abide in Christ

## Embrace the Cross



Archbishop John C. Wester

In 1978, M. Scott Peck published what became a blockbuster of a book, *The Road Less Traveled*. I will never forget the first sentence, which was only three words long: "Life is difficult." His book went on to explain the various neuroses we develop to avoid this basic truth instead of accepting our suffering as a necessary part of growth. Looking at life's difficulties in this way is not easy since our society and the omnipresent commercials that bombard us each day do their best to convince us that suffering and pain are the enemy, conditions that should be avoided and eradicated at all costs. Billions of dollars are spent each year by persons wishing to alleviate pain through pharmaceuticals and through self-medication that usually takes the form of alcohol and illicit drugs. Despite this messaging and our response to it, Dr. Peck advocates that pain is not the enemy. Indeed, pain and suffering are neither good or bad but rather are simply a part of our existence. There are times when pain is not good for us and should rightly be attenuated and if possible, alleviated. There are other

times when pain and suffering are part of the growth process and can be seen as very beneficial. Indeed, as Christians we believe in redemptive suffering which comes from surrendering ourselves to the call of Christ. The tricky part is having the prudence to know the difference between beneficial suffering that leads to new life and needless suffering that has no redeeming value.

This Lent found most of us engaging in some form of penance as a way to remind us that through our Baptisms, we have been made one with Christ in His suffering, death and Resurrection. United to Christ, we have an opportunity to give of ourselves to God and others in order to embrace new life. Joined with Christ's cross, the individual crosses we bear lead us to a deeper union with our Lord as he becomes more and more the center of our existence, bringing us new life as only He can. It is not easy to "suffer" this loss of self for the sake of the other, but it is a path worth taking. It is counterintuitive but true: the more I give of myself, the richer and more fully alive I become. As Jesus promised, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:29)

How does all this play out in my day to day life? Although there are many ways of looking at this mystery, I look at it this way: suffering has the potential to bring me face-to-face with the reality that I need God in my life. When things are going well and I am enjoying great success, it is very easy for me to think that I am the master of my ship. Filled with my own ego, it is difficult for me to accept Christ into my life. Suffering, on the other hand, clears a space within me so that Christ can get to me. Leonard Cohen, in his famous song, *Anthem*, refers to this as the crack that lets the light in. His refrain puts it this way:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in (that's how the light gets in, that's how the light gets in)

As we realize our dependence on God and our helplessness to avoid suffering, we grow in humility and in our ability to clear a space for the Lord. Our next step is to surrender to Christ's grace and love, allowing Him to lead us to new life. Our faith teaches us that the cross always leads to the resurrection for the person of faith. This implies a deep trust in Jesus who is the giver of all good gifts and who will always lead us to new life if we embrace Him and allow Him to show us the way. Not even death can frustrate Christ's power in our lives because Jesus conquered death once and for all in His Resurrection. It is not easy to take up our cross and perhaps the heaviest cross of all is to allow our egos to diminish, or as St. John the Baptist put it, for us to decrease and Christ to increase.

When we refuse to take up our crosses and follow Christ, that is, when we seek to avoid or alleviate suffering, then we inevitably fail to grow and miss an opportunity for new life. So often, our attempts to avoid suffering diminish life and in some cases destroy it. As a practical example, suppose I wake up with a headache. I could take a few pills and be rid of the pain. Or, I can "take up my cross" and embrace the suffering, the pain, of my headache and see where it is leading me. Listening to my body might bring me to conclude that I should drink less or eat less or avoid stress in my life, thus bringing me to a better state of health in the long run. This "new life" only comes when I embrace the cross of suffering and not when I anesthetize myself to it. I was thinking along these lines in our latest legislative session in Santa Fe. In the case of the assisted suicide bill (HB 90), Mr. Allen Sánchez, Executive Director of the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops, rightly commented that the law proposed to eliminate suffering by eliminating the sufferer. Another bill (HB51) sought to eliminate difficulties brought on by an unwanted pregnancy by eliminating the life within the womb. In other words, very often in our society, our failure to embrace

# His Mercy Endures Forever

a certain cross leads to death whereas by taking up our crosses we can find new life. The dying process is not easy, but the terminally ill patient can actually encourage life and deepen hope as he or she seeks forgiveness for past sins, strives to heal broken relationships and draws closer to Christ by remaining open to God's grace during this sacred process. In the case of the abortion bill, new life is obviously embraced by the birth of a newborn. At the same time, new life is fostered within the woman and her partner as they take responsibility by bringing a new life into the world, becoming better persons as they sacrifice their own convenience for the sake of another human being.

There is no question that these are very complex and difficult issues among so many others we must face in life. That was Dr. Peck's point: life is difficult. But Christ's point is that if we take up our cross, He will be with us throughout the process and His grace, love and mercy will assist us and bring us new life. Eventually, our final cross will bring us to eternal life where we will be one with Him forever in heaven. An ancient poet, and a non-Christian one at that, put it this way: "Even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our despair and against our will, comes wisdom by the awful grace of God" (Aeschylus). According to Scripture, that "wisdom" personified is Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a courageous Lutheran pastor whose prophetic voice led to his death at the hands of the Nazis, famously wrote that there is no such thing as cheap grace. He wrote that "cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." He contrasted this with costly grace which above all, "...is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God." Indeed, even grace is difficult but it is worth the price, especially when one considers that we have here no lasting city; our destiny belongs to the fullness of the Kingdom where we will be one with Christ forever.

As we celebrate Easter this year, I pray that life's difficulties will lead us all to new life and that our celebration of Christ's Resurrection from the dead will make life's crosses easier to bear, difficult as they may be. May God bless you all this Easter and always.

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord

+ John C. Wester

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