



# *Pastor's Column*

*St. Peter Catholic Church*

*August 26, 2018, Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time*

## *Suffering With (and Without?) a Purpose*

Question: "Why would a good God allow physical evils like suffering and death?"

Answer: "We do not have full answers to the problem of evil in this life, but we can see that at least *some* physical evils actually are helpful."

God can tolerate some physical evils because good comes from them. According to Pope Saint John Paul II: "Certain forms of physical 'evil'...belong to the very structure of created beings, which by their nature are contingent and passing and, therefore, corruptible. Besides, we know that material beings are in a close relation of interdependence as expressed by the old saying: 'the death of one is the life of another.' So then, in a certain sense, death serves life." (General Audience, June 4, 1986)

We see this in the natural world, such as when a lion kills a zebra so that it can eat. The death of the zebra serves the life of the lion. In the same way, the living things we humans eat (plants or animals) sustain our lives.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "With infinite wisdom and goodness, God freely willed to create a world in a state of journeying towards its ultimate perfection. In God's plan, this process of becoming involves the appearance of certain beings and the disappearance of others, the existence of the more perfect alongside the less perfect, both constructive and destructive forces of nature. With physical good, there exists also physical evil as long as creation has not reached perfection. (CCC 310)

Pain can also play a valuable role in our lives. Some people suffer from congenital insensitivity to pain, and its results can be dramatic, even fatal. Physical pain serves as warning system, and people without a proper pain response can be severely injured or even killed because they did not have sufficient warning to danger due to their absence to feel physical pain. Even emotional pain can be useful; the emotion of fear, for example, alerts us to danger and motivates us to take steps to avoid it.

But then a follow-up question arises: "Why would a good God allow innocent people to suffer and die with no clear purpose?"

Answer: "God can bring good from evil and can more than compensate us."

That which allows suffering (such as the pain receptors in our nervous systems) have a purpose, which is to help us avoid danger. But sometimes, they are triggered in situations where they do not help, resulting in apparently purposeless suffering.

Fortunately, the Lord can bring good out of every tragedy, and faith tells us that He will. (cf Rom 8:28; CCC 324) However, there is more that can be said.

For a person with an atheistic perspective, death is the ultimate end. If someone has suffered unjustly in this life, that is it. The person is just out of luck. Nothing can ever make up for the suffering that he or she experienced.

But from a Christian perspective, death is *not* the end. It is a transition, and we will exist forever. That means that no matter what we have suffered in this life or how short our earthly life was, the Lord can make it up to us; indeed, He can do far more. Saint Paul: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed to us." (Rom 8:18)

Elsewhere, Saint Paul says: "Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting

away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Cor 4:16-18)

This is part of what makes it possible to live with the mystery of evil. One might experience evil in this life, and from an earthly perspective, one might suffer therefore. But one can endure it and can persevere when one knows and has faith that death is not the end and that God will more than compensate for what is suffered innocently. We do not have to know all of the reasons why this or that evil occurs as long as we know that God will make everything right in the end.

- Fr. Lewis