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Service and Suffering in the Spiritual Life

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Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday Readings for October 18, 2009 for Cycle B:
Is 53:10-11; Ps 33; Heb 4:14-16; Mk 10:35-45

SERVICE AND SUFFERING IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Throughout the world thoughtful people seek answers to the riddles of human life. The problems that weigh heavily on the human heart are the same today as in past ages. What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behavior and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate and what purpose does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? (Vatican II, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, #1).

Probably many people do not ask such questions formally in the course of daily life. They seek the means to achieve happiness, yet need to be challenged to define it. The shadow of suffering passes over every human life, but few people consider this mystery before something tragic befalls them. It is extremely important that people be taught the principles that will enable them to choose the proper ways to promote their happiness and to sustain them in suffering. It is rather late to present these concepts for the first time after disastrous choices have been made or after someone is afflicted. How did Jesus deal with these issues?

The sons of Zebedee were among the first disciples of Jesus, so they thought that they had special prerogatives. Happiness for them would be to sit at the right and left of Jesus when he would come in glory. But Jesus insisted that there can be no crown without the cross. "Can you drink the cup I shall drink or be baptized in the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mk 10:38). The Greek term *baptizo* means "I am plunged into" something -- usually water. However, Jesus used the term as a complement to the image of a cup that represents suffering. He assured them that indeed they would share in his agony, but they should learn that happiness should not be considered in terms of rank and privilege. The pattern proposed by Jesus is for disciples to imitate his work, serving the needs of all he encountered. Moreover, they, too, must be served by him. "The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many" (10:45).

The ideal of service has been recognized, at least symbolically, by leaders in every nation with a "prime minister" and cabinet officials called "minister." However, both the sons of Zebedee and the rest of us need to accept Christ's supreme act of service in his passion and death. That is essential for understanding our own suffering and the true meaning of happiness.

The concepts of service and rescue (redemption) are linked to the Israelite experience of solidarity as a community committed to the worship of God. Not by chance is worship called a "service" and its leaders designated as "ministers." The Gospel drew upon the ancient biblical title 'servant of God' to describe Jesus, especially on passages in the second part of Isaiah (42:1-4; 50:4-9; 49:1-6; 52:13-53:12). The brief text in this Sunday's liturgy should be placed in that context. Suffering and death as part of a response to God's will are not only meritorious but possess a vicarious dimension. "Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many and their guilt he shall bear" (Is 53:11). The

assurance of victory is clear: "If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life..." (53:10).

Is the concept of vicarious suffering unique to the New Testament? No. Those who had suffered persecution (167-164 BCE) under Antiochus IV of the Seleucid dynasty are said to understand it. "Like my brothers, I offer up my body and my life for our ancestral laws, imploring God to show mercy soon to our nation..." (2 Maccabees 7:37). Supposing that the disciples of Jesus knew the prophet Isaiah and perhaps the tradition preserved in the Second Book of Maccabees, we can see that they should have been disposed to understand Jesus' teaching. Privileged to witness both the transfiguration of Jesus (Mk 9:2-8) and his agony in Gethsemani (14:32-42), they did come to know the magnitude of his service on their behalf. May we who receive the Eucharist find Christ to be strength in our suffering and the source of our happiness!