

Our Agony

As the pain intensified in the heart, drops of blood began to form on the scalp of the skin. The National Center for Biotechnology Information recounts a scientific investigation that was undertaken in India in 2017 of a 10 year old girl. This girl had been fighting with her classmates one day and the teacher intervened to prevent them from continuing. The teacher then decided that the student had to wait outside the classroom for an hour and threatened to tell her parents about her behavior. The student was so distressed that she cried for an hour and after 30 minutes the teacher discovered that she was bleeding from the scalp, sweating drops of blood.

Hematidrosis—a rare condition in which a person sweats blood—is real. The high stress combined with the increased blood pressure can rupture the blood vessels in the skin such that the blood could begin to mix with the sweat glands and could cause someone to actually sweat drops of blood. Imagine then for a moment the high duress, the intense pain and agony our Savior felt not for fear of parental discipline but because of the weight of the sins of the whole world. Imagine how the drops of blood would have issued forth from his skin!

I highlight this point not just to show that this is scientifically possible, but I want to emphasize that our Lord truly suffered in his humanity, he experienced intense agony and he shows us how to encounter God in our vulnerability.

I remember my friend telling me a story about his girlfriend and he came to visit her at her place once. He had come early and the parents had let him in. However, when he went to go visit her, he had to wait 30 minutes before he could see her because she had not put her make-up on.

I've found in my experience and maybe you do too that the constant temptation in my walk with God is that I have to earn God's love BEFORE I can receive it. Our human interactions are generally structured in this way: we love people because of the good we see in them. Yet God's love is different: he is the source of all goodness and he shares this goodness with us. He loves us so that we can be good.

But we forget this truth and so in our relationship with God we approach by putting on our spiritual make up to look good. We hold onto this mask tightly because we fear that he cannot bear to smell the stench of sin below, that he does not desire to look at our festering wounds because who could love such a thing.

He wants to encounter us as we are. So truly I tell you, God does not want to speak to your mask; he wants to speak to you.

Imagine if Jesus had put on his spiritual make up in the garden of Gethsemane: dear heavenly Father, I am so looking forward to being crucified. It is true that he does desire to undergo his passion, yet this is not done without the acknowledgement of the reality. Jesus truly saw the pain that he would undergo not just physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually.

And so he says “My soul is sorrowful even to death.” And three times he repeats “my father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” It seems like Jesus is resisting the plan of God but the Church teaches that Jesus’s human will “submits to his divine and almighty will” (CCC 475).

Therefore, the agony which he experiences is an agony that is not based on resistance to the Father but based on the natural, human resistance to suffering and death. Suffering and death are a destruction of the human nature: thus he expresses the horror that death represented for his human nature (CCC 612). Jesus was naturally repulsed by them such that he experienced an intense pain which led to hematidrosis, the sweating of blood.

The main point I am trying to get across is this: Jesus was honest with his Father, he was real. He didn’t gloss over his experiences as if the crucifixion was going to be hunky dory, he didn’t put spiritual make up on; he gave it straight to his Father.

The Father does not want to speak to your mask; he wants to speak to you.

When I had left seminary after being there for four years, I was at a point in my life where I wasn’t happy. I was not happy working at the bank, the Education program was going ok but it wasn’t what I was looking for. When I left I was hoping that I would be fulfilled, that I was going to be at peace.

So I remember praying with a friend once and feeling all this pent up anger and sadness. My friend had asked me what was going on and I told him that I felt angry at God. He told me: just let it all out, He's God; he can handle it. For the first time, I felt I was given permission to be honest with God, to take off my mask. So I screamed at the top of my lungs! Where the hell are you? Why does it feel like you have abandoned me? All this pent up rage came out, this brokenness, this woundedness came spilling forth and I was yelling and punching the floor and weeping. Why? Why? Why...

A sense of peace washed over me and it was as if the Father was saying to me: Troy, I have been with you always. In your pain and in your loss. In your confusion and your waywardness. I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WITH YOU. The pain you feel is the shrapnel of sin embedded so deep in your heart that you have been accustomed to it. In your cry from the heart, you exposed the wound so I can heal it, so I can restore you and redeem you for behold I make all things new.

The Father does not want to speak to your mask; he wants to speak to you. He wants to speak to the unpleasant, grumpy, weeping, broken, sinful human being. He wants us to be real, to be authentic with him so that he can reveal the face of mercy in the dark, broken places in our heart where we don't believe he wants to be. He wants to be with us in our agony, to unite our agony with the agony of his Son so that he can transform it into new life.

This is the significance of the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. Gethsemane comes from a Jewish word meaning 'olive press' where the olives would be pressed to make olive oil. The olive tree and the olive oil are significant because the ancient Jewish people believed that the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil was a fig tree but guess what was the tree of the life? An Olive Tree.

There is an ancient story in Jewish tradition about Adam right before he died as he is sick and suffering. He says to Eve:

Rise and go with my son Seth to the regions of paradise. Perhaps god will have mercy and send his angel to the tree of his mercy (tree of life) from which flows the oil of life and will give you a little of it with which to anoint me that I may have rest from these pains by which I am wasting away.

Adam was in the Garden of Paradise now banned from the Tree of Life because of his sin, now Christ the New Adam is in the Garden of Gethsemane preparing us for a New Tree of Life. And as the olives of the Tree of Life are crushed to produce the oil of life, so too Christ is crushed with suffering on the Tree of the Cross to produce the oil of everlasting life, the blood and water flowing from his side.

As we are crushed in our sufferings and in our pain and brokenness with Jesus on our crosses, it does not lead to despair but it too can bring us the oil of life, the oil of healing.

Now as we prepare for the Eucharist, we pray that Jesus may enter with us into those dark places in our hearts where we are afraid to enter because the pain is too great and we feel like we will never stop crying. Do not be afraid of the Divine Physician: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." So allow him to anoint your wounds with the oil flowing from the Tree of his Cross healing them and bringing new life and we shall hear him say in your heart: Behold I make all things new!