

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Compassion and Communion of Love** Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time Monday,  
September 15, 2014 8:15 AM **Heb 5:7-9; Stabat Mater; Lk 2:33-35 Our Lady of Sorrows** (Suffering has way a way of breaking down that little prison, breaking down those walls, if it is accepted in a spirit of love.)

This morning you heard the sequence of today's memorial. It's an ancient sequence going back to the Middle Ages, and it expresses an appreciation of **the role of suffering in life, which is very non-modern.** The modern world has been very much influenced by the writings and the thinking of Sigmund Freud. **Freud said that the basic goal of life is to seek pleasure and avoid pain.** That's a twist on the idea of the purpose of life found in, for example, Thomas Aquinas or even Aristotle, where **the goal of life is to seek what is good and avoid what is evil.** That's very different. Once good is associated with pleasure and evil with pain, you have a very different purpose involved. And the Freudian, the modern, is too narrow. It does not understand how **suffering itself can be redemptive.**

Now it can't be redemptive just in itself. Pain isn't redemptive in itself. But **what suffering can enable is a breakthrough from one's very little self,** the self that we actually construct for ourselves out of whatever is given to us at birth: our bodies, our talents, our families, our fortune or lack of same, whatever. Whatever is there we develop something, **an idea of who we are,** for better or for worse. But whatever it is, it's too small. **It's way less than what God intends.** It's way less than what God wants for us.

**For us to get where God wants us to be, we have to grow and we have to break out of** the prison of ourselves, our self-made prison, our self-created constrictions, our self-developed habits of thinking and feeling and reacting to life, some of which can be very unhealthy, but even in the best of circumstances is not all that there is, because **we are created to be in communion with** God and to know ourselves as images of God and

likenesses of God. And that means **full of love, both receiving and giving love in a communion of love**. And that cannot happen as long as we are living in a walled-off space afraid of pain, afraid of danger, afraid of whatever. **When we are motivated by an anxiety to preserve this self we have developed, we cannot grow into what God wants for us**. As long as we are angry not simply at injustice—which would actually be a proper use of anger, a rational use of anger—but if we are angry because life isn't what we think it should be, then we are living in this tiny, little prison and we can't grow into what God intends us to be. Well, **suffering has a way of breaking down that little prison**, breaking down those walls, **if it is accepted in a spirit of love**. As I said, pain itself is not redemptive, but suffering in love is. And in a certain way a certain amount of suffering is needed in order to breakdown the natural barriers that we erect, barriers of protection, of self-preservation, of identity even.

Now **Mary** is the first of all disciples, and she is first also in her compassion, meaning her **sharing with her Son in his suffering and his death**. She is the model the Church has always held for all disciples. We need to learn from her how to follow. We cannot learn from Jesus exactly how to follow. The Scripture says, Hebrews says, that “Son though he was, Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered”—true enough. But **Mary leads the way as a simple human being following the way of her Son**, following the way of compassion, shared suffering, openness to love in every circumstance and, therefore, open to the transcendence of God and the communion of love that we are all meant to dwell in—even now.