



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Priests Wives
April 2020

Our Pain

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

When I was a child, I was most afraid of getting a shot. Imagine with me a seven-year-old girl wrestling with the nurses, screaming and crying, to avoid a vaccine. Overall, it was a traumatic experience.

Recently, I went to draw blood as an adult. I still hate needles, but I looked away and tried to remind myself to breathe and to be brave. I was shocked when the technician told me it was over already. I had barely even felt the prick.

Now, people had told at age seven that it doesn't really hurt. But it was hard for me to fathom as a child that sticking something sharp into your body was a good idea, that there was a benefit to taking it calmly.

That, my sister, is the problem with pain. Too often we spend effort wrongly trying to avoid it and end up making the experience worse than it needed to be. Too often we fail to see it as the opportunity that it is, and because of that, fail to grow in our faith and fortitude.

PAIN IS UNAVOIDABLE

The world around us is broken and fallen. It is far from the original plan God had for us. He warned us that pain and hardship would be unavoidable parts of this earthly life.

To Eve, He said, *"I will greatly multiply your sorrow"* and to Adam *"Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it"* (Genesis 3:16, 17)

Sometimes we're desperate to get the rewards of heaven, the easy life of heaven, now.

When we try to avoid something that is a natural part of the reality of earthly living, we make life even more miserable. When we refuse to do what's hard and try to drown out pain with false pleasures, we inadvertently cause ourselves even more hardship.

Just like fighting against receiving a vaccine and getting nicked by the needle and bruised by hands holding you down.

Imagine that you are in a conflict with someone. You feel angry and betrayed. You can try to work through your feelings independently, but sometimes you need to have a conversation with that person. Now imagine you know that you need to have a conversation, but you avoid it. You put it off. You make excuses to not see them because you're trying so hard not to face your feelings. This story cannot end well.

Or imagine that you're in pain over a traumatic incident. Instead of paying attention to your feelings, facing them head on, talking to a counselor, therapist, and spiritual advisor, and praying to God to lift them, you instead start doing something you shouldn't.

You start to overeat, or you start to watch television obsessively, or you get on the phone and gossip incessantly. Anything to keep from looking at your pain and working through it.

In the long run, you create for yourself more pain than if you had turned inward, turned to God, sought out help, and unwound the source of the problem. You cannot "*[cast] all your care upon Him*" (1 Peter 5:7) if you're busy pretending you have no cares at all, bandaging your life with temporary solutions.

Pain is an unavoidable part of life. The sooner we accept that, the sooner we can start to see pain as an opportunity.

PAIN IS AN OPPORTUNITY

Imagine a person who is living in this broken world but cannot feel physical pain. This would be very, very dangerous. There is a rare hereditary disease called CIPA that makes a person insensitive to pain. A child with CIPA can break a bone or get seriously burned and not notice at all. Even minor cuts can become very problematic infectious wounds because they lack the instincts to take care of their injuries. A person with CIPA is in constant danger.

Now imagine a life where we can't feel emotional pain? It would be the same problem. If someone around us is hurt or in danger, instead of running to help, we would feel nothing. When someone we love dies, we would not cry or miss them—not because the peace of God is guarding our hearts but because we're sociopaths!

Pain is a gift from God to protect us, to guard us, and to guide us. He allows us to have these feelings for our benefit. He makes them redemptive—part of His overall plan to restore us to His image.

Think of Christ on the Holy Cross, suffering for our sake. In order to redeem us, He took on our pain and allowed Himself—God the I AM—to feel what we feel: beaten, scorned, and abandoned. "*By His stripes we are healed*" (Isaiah 53:5).

God turns our pain, inevitable in this broken world, into an opportunity.

GROW IN ADVERSITY

Our response to pain makes all the difference. Will we shrink from it and wither away, living smaller lives of fear and avoidance? Or will we dig deep, hold on to Christ the Pantocrator, and grow?

Let's make the time needed to process our pain. Accepting pain and releasing our resistance to it is often the first step towards healing. Through it, God can make our pain useful.

A tomato plant needs to be supported as it grows. Wooden stakes and string are used to guide the vine. Sometimes sickly parts of the plant must be cut off, and fruitful parts must be pruned to give the maximum harvest. God, who knows all, can turn our pain into stakes and string, so we can fulfill His purpose in our lives. Though He never intended for us to live in pain, the pain we will face, He will make good of.

A friend of mine recently faced a crisis in her family. All she wanted to do was hide from the pain and pretend it did not exist. Instead, she sat in silence with God, praying to Him. She heard His voice assign her a specific task, a mission, to be helpful in this time.

Though facing the crisis head on was like the welt of a whip, with God's grace, she was able to turn towards it and not away from it. In accepting the pain and obeying His will, the wound healed faster, and she learned to hope in her hardship.

We know and have faith in God's promise, that in the end, when the broken world is restored and the Kingdom of Heaven come to all, He *"will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."* (Revelation 21:4). Until then, we will believe that He will make "all things work together for [our] good" (Romans 8:28), even our pain.

Your sister in Christ,

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