

The Meaning of Suffering

Talking Points for Discussions with Young People

The Catechism of the Catholic Church guards us against sound bites – there is no quick answer which suffices to respond to the question of suffering. It is only our Christian faith as a whole which provides the answer (cf. CCC309). The following are some talking points for beginning or deepening discussion of suffering.

The Framework: *The following excerpt from the Catechism of the Catholic Church offers a framework for understanding suffering. Talking points are elaborated below.*

“God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil. He permits it however, because he respects the freedom of his creatures and mysteriously knows how to derive good from it (CCC 311).”

1. **God Does Not Cause Evil:** “God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living...It was through the devil’s envy that death entered the world” (Wis 1:13, 2:24)

Natural Disaster: Suffering as a Consequence of Original Sin

The harmony that man had with creation was broken when sin entered the world. The Catechism tells us that visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. Due to man’s sin, creation is subjected to bondage and decay (cf. CCC 402 and Rom 8:21). This makes sense when you consider the profound relationship between God and man. Man (read: humanity) is created intelligent and free. Man can receive and recognize the great gift of creation and as its steward can praise God in thanksgiving. When man sinned, this profound relationship between God and man was broken, and all of creation became subject to the same forces of death that man is.

2. **God Permits Evil because He Respects Creaturely Freedom:** In order to offer to humanity the ability to love, God gave freedom. This freedom is exercised toward its rightful end when we choose to love, but God will not force us to love. The choice we have to freely is one God will not take away. When we sin (that is, when we choose against love) God permits the evil and suffering that come from our sinning because He refuses to overpower, control, or destroy our freedom (and consequently, our ability to love).
3. **God Derives Good from Suffering:** “God writes straight the crooked lines.”
 - a) Suffering has New Meaning in Christ: Because our God has become man and suffered, all suffering has taken on a redemptive value: “Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus” (CCC1521). We are not passive in the drama of salvation – God gave us the dignity of being involved in our own salvation and that of others. We can offer up our suffering in reparation for our sins and those of the whole world.
 - b) This Life is Not All: Many people will suffer greatly in their earthly life, and if there were no afterlife it would scarcely be possible to understand co-existence of God and suffering. But, not only does God draw good out of misery, He also points us to a future life where inequalities are rectified and sorrows come untrue. We are not to set our hopes entirely upon this life, but to live this life *with an eye toward the eternal happiness we are called to in the afterlife.*

Take courage...

“The world we live in often seems very far from the one promised us by faith. Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice, and death seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it” (CCC164), but take courage for each person is held gently in the palm of the Father’s hand.