

# THE AFFLICTION OF CANCER

## An Essay On A Christian Perspective

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October 1, 2010

*Cancer of itself is not a gift, but the grace to accept it, embrace it, and give thanks for it, is the greater gift of God within me, so that Jesus may continue his passion in me, so that Jesus may continue to glorify His Father in me, so Jesus may testify to His great love in my life, so that we may realize that a greater life awaits us. .—J.T.S.*

<b>Prologue</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>A Brief History of My Cancer</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Brief Reflections on the Blessings and Lessons of Cancer</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Beyond the Ordinary Blessings—Prayer reflections</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Food for Thought and Prayer</b>	<b>16</b>

## PROLOGUE

**T**rust in God's providential and merciful love is at the root of our Christian faith. Everything in our lives is a gift of God, even the tragedies, pains and sorrow. Sometimes we may be conscious of God's love in the midst of suffering; other times we just need "blind" faith. "Blind" faith is a gift of God itself, to have total trust though one does not understand the "why" of suffering. This essay will hopefully help anyone going through cancer, or who has a loved one going through cancer, reflect on this suffering in light of God's great providential and merciful love.

For those without faith in a loving God it is impossible to realize that suffering can be understood as a gift of God, and it would be impossible to experience that inner joy and peace that absolute trust in God's providential love alone can bring us, no matter in what situation we find ourselves. It is only with faith in Jesus as the Son of God, who has shared our suffering that we are able to find meaning in suffering. I have often reflected on what the famous dramatist and diplomat of France, Paul Claudel, said with such wisdom and faith: "Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with His presence." Often it is only long after the suffering has passed, that we begin to understand more fully God's loving hand in our lives even at that time.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MY CANCER

Different people react differently to the same news. For some it can be devastating news that one has cancer, especially for those who are younger and may have a family dependent on them. It may not affect older persons in a such a devastating way, but everyone is going to have anxiety as we have no idea what it may mean in our lives. It is also devastating for the whole family and for all their loved ones. Our thoughts go immediately to persons we know who have had or have cancer and have suffered so much. Perhaps we have known persons who have had radiation treatments and chemotherapy, with many different consequences such as nausea, loss of energy, susceptibility to infections, loss of hair, and so many other noticeable effects. We also may know persons who had an operation to take out the cancer. Some lived many years afterwards; others have had the cancer return.

There can be great anxiety not knowing what is ahead, especially before a full diagnosis and treatment plan has been determined. Once that diagnosis and treatment plan is explained by our physician at least we have some idea what may be ahead in our lives. But, the anxiety and fear is still present in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones.

For many, as for me, when one learns that he or she has cancer, they may feel no pain, weakness, or suffering in anyway and it is difficult to admit that one has cancer. One automatically wants to deny it as they feel no different. Speaking for myself, I discovered I had cancer only because I began wheezing at night, and I finally went to the doctor, not giving it much thought. I just figured it was just another medical problem that comes and goes, and I did not consider it a serious problem.

After different tests and an X-ray of my chest, the doctor advised me to have a cat scan of my chest, as something appeared in my lungs that was not normal. I was not concerned at all. No way could I have cancer as I feel so well. With the cat scan I discovered that there is a tumor in my right lung which could be cancerous, and I was directed to have an “I needle biopsy” of my right lung. Again I did not think that much about it. After the needle biopsy I even drove down to Southern California from Fresno to begin my vacation. Two days later the doctor called me to confirm that it was cancer, and that I needed to return to Fresno to have a pet scan and speak about a treatment plan. I still did not give it much consideration. I just felt too good to have cancer.

As I was driving the three and a half hours back from Southern California to Fresno, I began to think that maybe I need to admit that I do have cancer. One does not even want to believe it, even when the medical results are clear. As I drove I began to think how I would respond to having cancer, and I started to reflect on something that I have long believed very much: that

everything in this life is a blessing and gift of God. I then started to think of the blessings that cancer can bring as well as the lessons that one can learn from cancer. I started brainstorming these ideas as I drove, and I then thought of writing a short booklet on “a Christian perspective when one is afflicted with cancer.” I knew God was about to teach me about his great love in the midst of any suffering that was to come, and that perhaps my thoughts and reflections could help others who also suffer with cancer, as well as their loved ones.

I suppose all those who have been diagnosed with cancer go through three basic stages or phases: denial stage, acceptance stage, and suffering stage. I remained in the denial stage for a good amount of time, as I just felt too good to have cancer. Only after I received a fair amount of treatment did I finally come to accept the fact that I must “live” with this cancer.

I know people are praying for me. When they tell me this I often simply thank them. For those who are closer and who would understand, I tell them to pray, not that God take away the cancer, but that he gives me the grace to witness all the more to his love and goodness in my life because of the cancer and the suffering He sends me. It’s all part of God’s plan, to be like him, to bear our cross with Jesus, to witness His love, to get to heaven, to be with Him for all eternity.

## BLESSINGS OF CANCER

It is only natural to have fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, and so many other emotions on finding out that one has cancer, or that one's loved one has cancer. This is especially true if the cancer comes to one's spouse, or even more devastating that it comes to one's child. That fear and anger may even lead to anger towards God. How could He allow this? How can He be a God of love and allow even a child to suffer? There is so much suffering in the world in so many forms. We will never understand the reason for all the suffering in the world or in our own lives.

But above all, if we have faith in Jesus as the Son of God, we are called to have trust in God's love, no matter what. Trust like this is a gift of God. We cannot achieve it on our own. We must simply believe in Jesus, thank Him for his suffering and death that brings us the hope of forgiveness of our sins and hope for eternal life, and trust in God's love in the midst of the suffering of this world. Because of the gift of faith and the gift of trust we know somehow that our Lord Jesus is with us and with everyone in this world, loving us in the midst of it all. The greatest gift of all when suffering comes into our lives is to have the gift of total, absolute trust in God's love and presence in our lives.

"Lord, I believe, I trust. Help me in my unbelief and in my lack of trust." May I truly believe the words of St. Paul, not knowing the "how" or the "why" of so many things in our lives: "For those who love God all things work out unto good." These blessings can only be understood if one has faith in a loving God, even when pain and suffering comes into our lives. Only from this Christian perspective can cancer, or any suffering, be seen as a blessing and gift of God.

For those diagnosed and who struggle with cancer, I offer some reflections on those blessings, mainly to stimulate more thoughts from the personal perspective and experience of the one who may be reading this essay. We often cannot understand the "why", but with faith we can understand God loving us in the midst of any suffering that comes into our lives.

### 1. We come to know how much so many care for us and love us.

In our busy lives, we get so involved in so much activity, that sometimes we do not reflect a great deal on the joy of having family and friends. We so easily take for granted those around us. As more and more people express their concern for us and pledge their prayers for us, we begin to realize just how important our family and friends are, as is the Christian community. And, we come to realize all the more how important love is in our lives.

We also learn to express our appreciation for those around us and come to be able to express our love in ways we would not have even considered when we were in good health. We also come to realize how many people we have touched in our lives, and how blest we have been through the many people our lives have touched.

### 2. We grow in humility, allowing other people to care for us when we are most sick.

We want so much to be independent in our lives, and we hold onto that independence. We do not like to be dependent on others. We like to think that we are self sufficient. This can lead to a form of pride, that we are willing to help others so many times, but we would reject the help of others. How hard it can be to allow others to help us. As we find ourselves getting sicker or weaker, we become dependent on others around us, to care for us at home, to drive us to the doctor, to do the shopping that needs to be done, to pick up our medicine, and on and on.

Being sick and becoming debilitating can be a curse for some, but a blessing for others, as we can grow in humility, acknowledging not only our need of God but our need for others in our lives. Another blessing is that we come to express our thankfulness and appreciation for what others do for us, God blessing them through us.

### 3. We are led to greater prayer in our life, realizing our need for the Lord and our absolute dependence on Him.

Suffering can lead us either farther from the Lord, or closer to the Lord. Hopefully our faith enables us to realize God's love for us and our weakness enables us to realize our total, absolute dependence on God, for life itself and for everything in our lives. Suffering can lead us to greater faith and prayer. Even though at times we do not feel like praying, we simply put ourselves into the hands of God, without words, but simply with faith and trust in our hearts.

We come to realize that we do not have control of our lives and that we must hand our lives over to God. Suffering can lead us to surrender our lives to God, seeking only to fulfill his will. Suffering also becomes the means of purifying our faith, so as not to be dominated by self will and self pleasure. Our faith becomes much stronger and more meaningful in our lives.

#### 4. We come to reflect on the blessings we have received throughout our lives.

We appreciate more the joys of our life, our friends, the many wonderful people in our lives, the travel we have experienced, the beauty of nature, of everyone and everything around us. As we reflect more on eternal life, we begin to look back at our lives. We all have regrets but also our lives have been filled with a great deal of joys, of relationships, of friendship, of love, of family and friends.

We should at this time be giving thanks for the gift of life, for the gift of the years that the Lord has given us, and thanking him for the many blessings we have experienced throughout our lives. Even in the hard and difficult times, we begin to understand how the Lord was with us through everything, helping us to pass beyond the hurt and the pain to understand all the more His hand in our lives.

#### 5. We are able to be united even more in the suffering of Christ.

Our Lord takes pain, suffering and death, which is all a result of sin, and uses the very effects of sin to overcome sin and death. The cross of our Lord Jesus is at the center of our salvation and it is the cross that gives meaning to our lives. There is no Christianity without the cross. St. Paul tells us that we make up for the sufferings of Jesus Christ. By this He is saying that we share in the work of redemption, leading others to repentance and conversion. Jesus continues to unite the suffering of His followers with His own suffering in His passion, for the redemption of the world.

“The suffering of Christ became a life-giving suffering, just as His very death was life-giving. Jesus tells us we are one with Him, as He is one with the Father. But giving our suffering over to the Lord, by uniting our suffering with that of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus within us continues to offer that suffering that enters our life, just as Jesus offered his own suffering that we might have forgiveness of our sins and come to eternal life. Just as the suffering of Jesus is life-giving, so our suffering becomes life-giving, not only for us but for others.



## 6. We are able to make atonement for our own personal sins and for the sins of those we love.

“Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone.” Each of us realizes our own sins throughout our lives. The suffering of cancer enables us to make atonement for those sins. Better to suffer here than after death. How fortunate we are that God gives us time to make atonement for our sins of the past, and to grow closer to him now in our lives. This time is a gift in itself.

There are many cancer survivors, and others who are told they do not have long to live. This is a tremendous blessing in itself, that we are able to prepare ourselves for death, whenever it may come in our lives. We can also unite ourselves with the Lord in making atonement for the sins of others, for those we most love as well as for those souls most forgotten or those most in need of prayer.

## 7. We are able to give witness to the Lord Jesus.

By the way we respond in faith, expressing our thanks to a loving God, even in the midst of suffering, we testify that faith in God’s love is more important than life itself. The way we respond to suffering in a Christian way helps others to understand the importance of their faith. We are able to give witness to the inner joy and peace that only God can give to us, even in the midst of suffering and pain. Each day is an opportunity to show God’s love.

Only in Christian revelation does suffering take on a positive meaning, becoming a means of proclaiming life in abundance, not only in the one suffering, but also in all those around the suffering person. Those who are around the suffering person are called to a life-giving response—the response of care, concern, love, compassion, service and prayer. Jesus presents Himself to us in the one suffering and, we bring Jesus to the one suffering. Through this Christian response, both the suffering person and those who seek to serve the suffering testify all the more to the love of the Father and Son, which is leading and guiding them to respond with faith and trust in God’s love, just as Jesus did through his life in the midst of pain, rejection and death itself.

### 8. *Our suffering unites us to everyone in the human race.*

Throughout the world there are many who suffer, not simply physical pain, but also those who suffer injustice, poverty, sickness in its many forms, mental sickness, and those who are hurt by the very people they love so much. Jesus died for us all. In some way our Lord Jesus continues to suffer in us and in everyone in this world.

Suffering and pain are very much a part of our lives and it is only with faith in our savior, who has suffered so much, that we can understand that suffering can have purpose, as it had purpose in the life of Jesus. We find meaning and purpose in our suffering, and realize that we are united with the suffering of those throughout the world. In some way we are in solidarity with all those who suffer. Our suffering affects others throughout the world. When one person suffers we all suffer. When one person unites his or her suffering with that of Jesus, everyone throughout the world benefits. This is the whole mystery of the Body of Christ. We are one Body in Christ, our Lord Jesus in us and through us offering the suffering in our lives for the salvation of all.

### 9. *We come to appreciate the great gift of science and of medicine and the gift of those who care for us.*

We appreciate all the more the healing power of doctors, and of the advances in science and medicine. We also come to realize that the greatest healing is not physical healing, but the inner healing that God's love brings to us, his mercy and peace and joy. How blest we are through the doctors and nurses, and nursing assistants and technicians who take care of us in so many ways. Through their concern, care and smile, how they show to us the loving compassion of our Lord Jesus. Our Lord really comes to us not only through our friends and family but also through all of those who care for us.

### 10. **Added Thoughts:**

- **We come to realize that our spiritual life is more important than physical life.**
- **Give thanks to God each day for another day in our lives.**
- **The joy of being alive another day.**
- **Begin to realize what life is all about: eternal life and our own mortality.**

## BEYOND THE ORDINARY BLESSINGS—Prayer Reflections

I totally believe that the Lord is leading me and loving me in my life, with the knowledge of cancer and the effects it has and can have in my life. These reflections came to me at various times after being diagnosed with cancer and come from my own experience of God's great love through the years, and can only be understood through one's own personal relationship with the Lord.

## ENTER MORE DEEPLY INTO THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS

O Lord, I truly believe you have been preparing me all these years to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of your suffering and death. How blest I am that you have chosen me to share in a greater way in your suffering. I know you are calling me to unite my suffering with that of your suffering on the cross, to have the privilege to share even more in your redemptive mission in leading people to conversion and to come to your great love. Thank you Lord.

## NOT SIMPLY ACCEPTING GOD'S WILL BUT THANKING HIM FOR HIS WILL

(To understand the following reflection, one has to understand the difference between God's permissive will and his active will. God created us out of love to live in his eternal life and love for all eternity. Because of sin, evil has entered into this world, and with that evil comes suffering and pain, war and crime, and on and on. God allows this (permissive will) as he has given us the gift of free will. It is this free will that makes us different from every other life form in this world. We are free to love, but we can abuse that freedom by living in sin and selfishness. This is true of all mankind. God permits suffering and evil and its logical consequences because He has given us the gift of free will. God created us to love Him, but He does not force us to love. The wonder of God's power, wisdom and love, is that he uses the very evil and suffering that comes into our lives because of sin, to bless us and enable us to be one with his active will of His total, complete, and infinite love. The evil of the cross leads to the glory of the resurrection. And so it can be for us. This is what faith in God's love is all about: trust in his love; acceptance of his love, thankfulness for his love, even when we do not understand this whole mystery of suffering and evil in this world, or in our lives.)

O Lord, something you taught me long ago is that it is a great difference between accepting your will and giving thanks to you for what your will brings into my life. For many things in my life, I accepted your will, even begrudgingly, as I wanted to love you but did not understand fully your love for me. I did not understand how everything that comes into our lives is a gift from you so that you may use us all the more for your glory. This includes the suffering that has come into my life, that is now with me, and as it shall be in the future. Only you can give me the grace to constantly thank you for your will, no matter what happens in my life, trusting that good can come from it. And I know that this thanking you for your will is what brings to me your inner peace and joy that no suffering or set back can take away from me. But it must be you doing it in me, as I am powerless to accept your will or thank you for your will, without your grace and power in my life.

## GOD ENABLES ME TO ATONE FOR MY OWN PERSONAL SINS

O Lord you have been so good to me in my life, and I have sinned so much against you. I deserve nothing. Yet you continue to bless me so much in my life. There is no way I can make up for my sins of my own power. Of myself, there is nothing I can say or do that is sufficient to atone for my sins. It is you who brings to me the merciful love of your heavenly Father. It is your Spirit within me that enables me to be one with you in asking your heavenly Father for forgiveness, and to

make atonement for my own personal sins. The suffering you send me is so little to atone for my many sins. Thank you for this opportunity to express even more my sorrow for having offended you. Help me never to offend you again. Thank you Lord.

### **GOD USES ME TO REACH OUT IN LOVE TO THOSE WHO HAVE FORGOTTEN HIM, IGNORED HIM, DENIED HIM**

**O** Lord, in many of the apparitions of your Blessed Mother, she calls us to pray for the conversion of sinners. One of the things that I could not understand and yet admired in so many of the saints, is that they offered their prayers, suffering and sacrifice, not only for their own sins but for the sins of others. St. Therese of the Child Jesus dedicated her prayer and suffering not only for priests, but also for the worst sinners of this world. In a way she gave her life so that others may have eternal life. This is what you, O Lord, did for us on the Cross. This is what you now ask of me. Help me, Lord, to give my life, to offer my suffering and weakness, that others may have life, eternal life, especially those who have most forgotten you, ignore you, and deny you, and would fight against you. Thank you Lord. Only you can make this possible through your grace. Fill me with your love and it is enough for me.

### **MY SUFFERING IS A PROLONGATION OF THE SUFFERING OF JESUS**

**O** Lord, you bore your suffering in your passion with such great love. Help me to bear the suffering you send me with that same love, with your love. I realize through this that you continue to suffer in this world in me and through me, continuing the whole mystery of our redemption, now in my life. What an honor, a blessing, a gift this suffering is in my life. Thank you Lord.

## FEAR OF A MIRACLE

Early morning, August 24, one day before I am to see the oncologist, I was still in the denial stage but beginning to come to the acceptance stage. I woke up early in the morning, and I noticed that I was not wheezing, even though I was laying on my right side. I would normally wheeze lying down, and wheeze even more when I was on my right side. The first thought that came to my mind was “Did our Lord cure me of the cancer?” Then I thought, rather than having joy at the thought of being cured, I said to the Lord: “Would you, O Lord, deny me the blessing to suffer for you and with you.” I got up and still had no wheezing. I believe in miracles, but why would the Lord take away from me the opportunity to share more deeply in the mystery of his passion and death? Whatever God wants. His will be done is all that is important to me, whatever that will may be. “Thank you, Lord, if you took away the cancer but also thank you Lord if you let it remain. Either would be a gift from you, so that your glory and love may be known all the more through my life.”

## EMBRACING THE WILL OF GOD

One night as I was reflecting on how the cancer did not greatly affect my attitude towards God or towards life, I began to realize that one of the great gifts that God has given me, is leading me through the years not only to accept his will but to embrace his will. This undoubtedly is why I do not fear cancer or what it may bring. Our Lord has given me the grace not only to accept cancer, but to embrace it and give thanks to God for it. For this also, as everything in this life, is a gift to enable God through me to proclaim all the more his great love. Cancer of itself is not a gift, but the grace to accept it, embrace it, and give thanks for it, is the greater gift of God within me, so that Jesus may continue his passion in me, so that Jesus may continue to glorify His Father in me, so Jesus may testify to His great love in my life, so that we may realize that a greater life awaits us. Again it is living out the mystery that Jesus truly becomes one with us and that Jesus is truly present to us in all the circumstances of life continuing to proclaim the truth and love of our heavenly father. We do this by allowing the evil that enters our life, to become the very means to overcome the evil of the world. This is truly the mystery of the cross in our lives, exactly what Jesus did for us in his suffering and death. What a privilege, a joy, an honor, to be one with the Lord in all things in this life, especially, with God’s grace to embrace the suffering and use it as a means to continue the very mission and saving work of Jesus.

## ALL FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

I simply pray that these reflections will help those who pass through suffering in any way whatsoever may realize all the more the hand of God in their lives, loving them, comforting them, consoling them, leading them in the midst of that suffering.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND PRAYER

- ❖ *Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence (Paul Claudel)*
- ❖ *If you must suffer, suffer at least with joy. (Thomas a Kempis, The Imitation of Christ)*
- ❖ *No one is so deeply touched by Christ's passion as he who has experienced like sufferings. (Thomas a Kempis, The Imitation of Christ)*
- ❖ *To endure the cross is not tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)*
- ❖ *He who seeks not the cross of Christ seeks not the glory of Christ (St. John of the Cross)*
- ❖ *Suffering for God is better than working miracles (St. John of the Cross)*
- ❖ *How good God really is. How He parcels out trials only according to the strength He gives us. (St. Therese of Lisieux)*
- ❖ *Suffering in and of itself is useless, but suffering that is shared with the passion of Christ is a wonderful gift and a sign of love. Christ's suffering proved to be a gift, the greatest gift of love, because through his suffering our sins were atoned for.. Suffering, pain, sorrow, humiliation, feelings of loneliness, are nothing but the kiss of Jesus, a sign that you have come so close that He can kiss you. (Mother Teresa, No Greater Love)*
- ❖ *The Cross is not a sign of death, but of life; not of frustration, but of hope; not of defeat, but of victory. (John Paul II, Angelus message, March 14, 1999)*



- ❖ *Which is nobler in the eye of God To be mission-ed to a bed of pain or to touch lepers in alien lands? God has but one scale to judge which note is sweeter and that is He Who does His Holy Will. (Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, "See my Scars")*
  
- ❖ *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Still, let it be as you would have it, not as I." (Matthew 26:39)*
  
- ❖ *"Mary said: 'I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say.'" (Luke 1:38)*
  
- ❖ *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me." (John 14:1)*
  
- ❖ *"...We even boast of our afflictions. We know that affliction makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, and tested virtue for hope. And this hope will not leave us disappointed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)*
  
- ❖ *"I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us." (Romans 8:19)*
  
- ❖ *"We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his decree." (Romans 8:28)*
  
- ❖ *"Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)*
  
- ❖ *"Praised be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all consolation. He comforts us in all our afflictions and thus enables us to comfort those who are in trouble, with the same consolation we have received from him. As we have shared much in the suffering of Christ, so through Christ do we share abundantly in his consolation." (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)*

*“Even now I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you. In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church.” (Colossians 1: 24)*

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*What a privilege, a joy, an honor, to be one with the Lord in all things in this life, especially, with God’s grace to embrace the suffering and use it as a means to continue the very mission and saving work of Jesus.—J.T.S.*



## ALL FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

*Feast of St. Therese*

October 1, 2010