

THE SUFFERING OF JESUS CHRIST

A CATECHETICAL MATERIAL FOR PARISH-BASED BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES

PART I: Introduction

Topic: The Suffering of Jesus Christ

Kind of Material: Catechetical Material for BECs

Audience: Parish-based Basic Ecclesial Communities

Situation: Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) is indeed a new way of becoming church. Most of the parishes in the Philippines have BECs as their Parish Trust. While there are definitely good things the BEC can lead the parishioners to, we need to be aware of the fact that there are also significant details in their becoming Church that is also neglected and at times misunderstood.

BECs are most often than not a gathering of a small group of believers in a common activity called “*Faith-sharing*”. While we recognize that human experience is truly necessary not only in the interpretation of Sacred Scriptures but also in the strengthening of one’s faith life, we must not forget our intrinsic vocation and mission of reaching out to others, most especially those forgotten by society. We must not allow the BEC structure to limit or restrict us within its own confines. We must go beyond these small circles that have, in one way or another, become our comfort zones with respect to our social lives. Instead, we must envision and build a community where various small groups or BECs work together in order to work for the mission Christ entrusted to His Church.

Being confined to a particular group eventually develops in us camaraderie among the members of that same group. However, this becomes a problem because exclusivity is formed. This means that a small world is created where nothing outside of that group shall benefit from its camaraderie. To a certain degree, we not only lose the sense of community, but likewise fail to live out

the love Christ has commanded His Church to live out. Clearly, such exclusivity is unbecoming of the Church of Christ.

Today, we are very much exposed or immersed in a life of instants. Whenever we want to eat, we barely need to wait for food. In fact, we no longer need to prepare our own food because we can simply go to any fast food chain and order for food. There is simply too much comfort or convenience that is at our own disposal, and it simply becomes troublesome, if not foolish, for not choosing and enjoying the easier way today. As such, it is no longer surprising that even our relationships today with people around us, our desire to love and sacrifice for others, including all our personal experiences of suffering, no longer find significance or meaning in our daily lives. Most of the time, we only seek our own comforts, even at the expense of others’ well-being. Hence, we constantly hear the call and face the challenge to mirror Christ’s love which openly embraces in love all peoples – His Church.

Problem:

Our day to day life surprises us with new experiences and challenges. Many types of suffering come across our paths. As we face them, though we are very courageous in facing them, we often come to a disturbing point of asking these following questions: Why do I have to suffer? Or rather Why do I even suffer? How can we see ourselves deeply in love yet suffer for others as Christ has done for us? How can we truly reconcile human suffering with a God who is love?

Scope and Limitation:

This catechetical material will focus only on the love expressed in the passion narratives of Jesus Christ which as manifested in the sorrowful mysteries of the holy rosary. These passion narratives in the Gospel of Mark include the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, the

scourging at the pillar, the crowning of thorns, the carrying of the cross, and finally the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Each passion narrative in the sorrowful mystery will reveal an underlying principle of love behind the suffering that Jesus felt during his passion.

This material will not include topics about the love of God as revealed in His childhood, His public ministry, as well as His resurrection. In other words, the focus of this catechetical material is the sufferings of Jesus Christ as enumerated in the five sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. Likewise, it is important to note that the target audience of this catechetical material is intended for parish-based Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs).

Methodology:

This catechetical material follows the RE methodology of multiple integrations. It considers the context of the sufferings of Christ vis-à-vis a person’s experience of suffering in the light of Filipino Catholic tradition and sensibilities. In the context of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), the faithful shall experience a development towards a fuller understanding of the sufferings of Christ and its true relevance in our human lives by using various materials, such as the sorrowful mysteries of the holy rosary and the video clip on “*Dwells God*” by Himig Heswita. Through their Faith-sharings, this catechetical material seeks to lead the faithful to a genuine communion with God and neighbor through the very sufferings of Christ.

This paper will follow the following **outline**:

I. Opening Prayer

II. Introduction

III. Video Presentation

IV. Exposition

a. Discussion: The Sorrowful Mysteries

b. Disclosure: Small Group Faith-sharings

c. *Deepening: Plenary Synthesis*

V. **Integration**

VI. **Summary of Main Points**

VII. **Closing Prayer**

This catechetical material is intended to cover for only around three to four hours, excluding the celebration of the Holy Eucharist which shall serve as the culminating activity and closing prayer for this particular session.

Part II: The Material for Parochial BEC's

I. Opening Prayer

Prayer in Time of Suffering¹

*“Behold me, my beloved Jesus,
weighed down under the burden of my trials and
sufferings,
I cast myself at Your feet,
that You may renew my strength and my courage,
while I rest here in Your Presence.
Permit me to lay down my cross in Your Sacred Heart,
for only Your infinite goodness can sustain me;
only Your love can help me bear my cross;
only Your powerful hand can lighten its weight.
O Divine King, Jesus,
whose heart is so compassionate to the afflicted,
I wish to live in You;
suffer and die in You.
During my life be to me my model and my support;
At the hour of my death,
be my hope and my refuge.”*

II. Introduction

A brief introduction by the facilitator shall be provided. Afterwards, he or she may already divide the attendees into several small groups for sharing. Instructions

regarding the sessions' activities may likewise be given during this stage.

III. Video Presentation

Video presentation of the traditional Filipino practices during the Holy Week (i.e. self-flagellation and crucifixion as forms of “Panata”)

Guide Questions:

1. *What are the different stages of the suffering of Jesus Christ?*
2. *How does the video presentation depict human suffering?*
3. *What does the suffering of Christ tell us of our own sufferings?*
4. *What are the common sufferings do we experience in our daily lives?*
5. *How do we normally see human suffering in our lives?*

IV. Exposition

A. The Sorrowful Mysteries:

1. Agony in the garden (Mk. 14:32-42)
2. Scourging at the pillar and crowning with thorns (Mk. 15: 16-20)
3. Carrying of the cross and the Crucifixion (Mk. 15:21-41)

1. THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN:

“Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with Him Peter, James and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch.’ He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; he said “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will.” When he returned he found them asleep. He said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing. Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes

open and did not know what to answer him. He returned a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough. The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. Get up, let us go. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

~ Mk 14:32-42

We know that there is suffering in the world, this cannot be denied. The question always seems to arise, "How do we reconcile all the suffering in the world with a God who is love?" After the Last Supper with His apostles, Jesus together with Peter, John and James went at the foot of the Mount of Olives in order to pray. Jesus asked His disciples to keep watch and pray with Him. The thought of his impending Passion filled Jesus with mental anguish, inner dread, and sorrow. Three times he sought the comfort of his friends, but they were asleep, overcome by their own weaknesses. His only recourse proved to be his heavenly Father. In His prayer, Jesus accepted his Father's will. Jesus did not intend to suffer and die YET, He did not seek His will but the will of the Father, "Father let this cup pass from me BUT not my will but your will be done". God did not intend the suffering of His Son Jesus, but Jesus suffered as a consequence of His overwhelming love for all of us. God as well did not intend for us this suffering for we are in fact created to enjoy everlasting happiness with Him for all eternity.

The agony of Jesus shows us that Jesus was truly like us in all things except sin (GS 22). He feared pain and death; he was gravely troubled. He sought human comfort, yet he gave Himself fully to God's will in prayer and deed.

2. SCOURGING & CROWNING WITH THORNS:

“So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified. The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorium, and assembled the whole cohort. They clothed him (Jesus) with purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, place

¹ <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=873>. Accessed May 12, 2012.

it on him. They began to salute him with, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and keep striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak."

~ Mk. 15:16-20

The biblical account of the scourging at the pillar and crowning of thorns narrates about the flagellations made by the soldiers to Jesus Christ. Jesus experienced the pains from lashes, whips, and crown of thorns. These excruciating pains were viewed by Jesus with the eyes of love and not as suffering alone. It did not mean that while looking at these pains he did not experience the penetration of whips and thorns in his body since Jesus has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin (GS 22).

The scourging at the pillar and the crowning of thorns remind us of our own daily experiences of sufferings. We have our own scourging at the pillar every day. They can be in various forms of today such as our pains, fears, and anxieties.

Given these experiences, we inevitably ask ourselves: "Does God want us to undergo these kinds of suffering?" At first, it may seem that we cannot eradicate human suffering entirely. Nonetheless, the message of these two sorrowful mysteries is never to glorify human suffering as a normal way of life which we must blindly accept as God's will.

It is complicated to address or even solve the problem of human suffering. There is clearly no easy solution in order to remove human suffering from the world. But the most edifying or reaffirming message in these two passion narratives is the solidarity of God even in human suffering.

The message is about a God who loves and is love. Even though human suffering may appear to be an inseparable element in human life, the person and mission of Jesus Christ, particularly His passion and death, assures and comforts us by providing us with an image of a God who intimately understands our depressing situations, and in a profound sense joins us in these seemingly hopeless experiences. Given such an awareness, we are given hope to muster our courage and strength to endure them. In this way, our sufferings become more bearable.

Our faith tells us that God never leaves us and continuously gives us the grace to endure these scourges and thorns in our lives.

3. THE CARRYING OF THE CROSS AND THE CRUCIFIXION:

"They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. They brought him to the place of Golgotha. They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews'."

~ Mk. 15:21-41

The account of the carrying of the cross and the crucifixion dramatically narrates to us the last stage of Jesus' suffering in His Paschal Mystery. These accounts lead us to the climax of Jesus' Passion to save us from sin and death.

The common, and perhaps the most significant, image in these two accounts is the image of the cross. The cross, at least for Filipino Catholics, indeed strongly and closely symbolizes human suffering. In fact, it has vibrantly permeated several religious rites and celebrations in our

country. It has employed the image of the Suffering Christ as its central figure. In particular, we have devotions such as the Way of the Cross or "Via Crucis", as well as the devotion to the Black Nazarene or "Itim na Nazareno".

We, Filipino Catholics, have easily associated the suffering Christ with the cross. To a certain extent, the picture that we can imagine describing the various dealings we have with our own problems is Jesus carrying His cross. As a result, we normally treat our problems as our personal "crosses" which we carry in life.

These two accounts on Christ's sorrowful mystery echo two central themes in our salvation. The first is that the inseparability of the person of Jesus Christ and the symbol of the cross remind us that it is not God's will for us to suffer, and therefore suffering in itself is not redemptive. The second is that God never leaves us to handle suffering by ourselves. He is always with us to help us endure all these sufferings. It is only in the person of Jesus that we realize that God is always with us.

On one hand, we eventually discover that the cross strongly represents the reality of human suffering. This same cross seems like a contradiction to the image of God who is love. On the other hand, we realize that it is only when we separate the image of the suffering Christ from the cross do we fall to this misconception. In other words, there is clearly a danger when we glorify suffering by itself without the person and mission of Christ who loves us, even unto death. Therefore, we must never separate the person of Jesus Christ from the image of the cross.

This very act of Christ embracing the cross invites and challenges us to understand suffering not as an end in itself but as a means to a genuine communion with God and our neighbor. This same act likewise teaches us that

it is only through the power of love that we truly gain the strength to meaningfully carry our own crosses in life. It is with this same love that we can truly make sense of our own daily sufferings in life.

Oftentimes, the cross radically reminds each one of us that we were once like Simon the Cyrenian, who finds himself thrown into servitude or empty suffering. We are forced by external situations to make difficult decisions and in turn experience suffering on different levels or dimensions of our human lives. These accounts consequently remind us that we should never look at the cross without Christ. We need to include or involve Christ in our experiences of suffering because only then do we realize that God does not leave us alone to deal with human suffering. His love makes us endure all things (1Cor 13:7).

We need to embrace our suffering like Jesus embraces His cross. Following Jesus commandment to take up our crosses and follow Him, we embrace these “crosses” in solidarity with God and neighbor as we journey towards fulfillment of life.

B. Small Group Faith-sharings

Guide Questions:

1. Which among the sorrowful mysteries struck you the most? Why?
2. How do you identify yourself with your chosen mystery?
3. What does this passion narrative convey regarding human suffering?

C. Plenary Synthesis:

Video of “Dwells God” by Himig Heswita

Guide Questions:

1. How does the story in the video presentation depict human suffering?
2. How is the suffering in this story different from that of Jesus’ Passion?
3. What are the various human sufferings that I experience today?
4. How should I properly address my own experiences of suffering?
5. How can I truly reconcile human suffering with a God who is love?
6. How can our own experiences of suffering build up the Church of Christ?

V. Integration

DOCTRINE:

Clearly, it is not the very sufferings and death of Christ that save us, for this would make His torturers and executioners our saviours. Rather, we are saved by Jesus’ perfect self-giving love for His Father and for us, a love lived out to the death (CFC 558).

MORAL:

Christ tells us: “If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow in my footsteps (Mk 8:34)”, for “[t]his is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you (Jn 15:12).”

WORSHIP:

The Eucharist is a sacrifice because Christ is present precisely as “offering himself for us as a sacrifice to the Father”. Thus, the heart of the Eucharistic celebration is Christ, our Lord’s perfect saving LOVE. (CFC 1690)

VI. Summary of Main Points

A. SUFFERING IS NOT GOD’S WILL

Today, it is no longer surprising to discover that most people accept suffering as a normal, if not indispensable,

part of their lives. In fact, they become very familiar with suffering that they conceive of it as the will of God in their lives. In fact as an example, the various human sufferings caused, for instance, by the rampant spread of poverty in the Philippines lend credence to the belief that suffering itself is a necessary, if not essential, part of human life.

This alarming orientation, unfortunately, brings to light the very problem that traps Filipino Catholics nowadays, most especially the elders of the community, who consider suffering per se as an authentic religious experience. We, Filipinos, have allowed ourselves to be engulfed by the suffering of the world in such a way that this radical acceptance of or “surrender” to human suffering molded our fundamental worldview of human life as inevitably bound to suffer. As such, this same disposition embraces the notion that suffering is indeed God’s will for humanity.

Given the devotional - sometimes bordering fanatical - practices found in the Philippines, most people encounter the divine through their own self-inflicted sufferings, particularly through self-flagellation and crucifixion rites performed during the Holy Week. This religious expression reflects the widespread misunderstanding of many Filipino Catholics that suffering is indeed God’s will. In this sense, we place suffering itself on a glorious pedestal as something salvific or redemptive. With this, the danger lies with the misconception that suffering is something inescapable since such is God’s will for humanity. Many, if not most, Filipino Catholics who, in one way or another, experiences human suffering surrenders to their state of life because of this same misconception that it is God’s will for humanity to suffer.

In Filipino society today, we consequently create a tradition that blurs, if not destroys, the very sense of the Paschal Mystery of Christ in our lives. This sad truth runs

counter to the real meaning of Jesus' suffering in God's salvation plan. For indeed, it is not God's plan for human beings to suffer.

Be that as it may, a closer and intimate look at the sufferings of Jesus Himself awakens us that it is not God's will for human persons to suffer.

B. LOVE: SELF-EMPTYING YET LIFE-GIVING

The suffering of Jesus Christ expresses to us God's faithful love for each one of us. This same love, which inexhaustibly seeks the good for all of us, is the very core and spirit of Jesus' suffering, and therefore God's will, for everyone. From this point onwards, it is important to stress that it is never God's will for humanity to suffer. It is important to note that Jesus Himself suffered not because God wanted to show us that suffering is integral to human life, but instead because God's love must be expressed in suffering since the world in Jesus' time, and perhaps even today, demands so.

To love does not mean to suffer. God's love, in this sense, does not necessarily bear suffering as fruit. It is the context of our time, which is deeply immersed in sin, that stubbornly demands suffering as an expression of love. Suffering, hence, becomes a consequence.

Even so, it is important to dwell on the nature of love itself. As we witness in Jesus' *kenosis*, we are reminded that love is necessarily self-emptying. Love is, in this sense, best understood as an act of service or sacrifice, which is deeply associated to suffering. With this, we need to be careful not to easily and totally equate self-emptying to suffering. There is clearly a danger when we reduce the notion of self-emptying with suffering, for suffering itself, which pertains to a suffering devoid of love, is not life-giving.

As much as love is self-emptying, it is simultaneously life-giving. The sufferings we experience today, as well as those we normally surrender ourselves to, are normally not expressions of a life-giving love. For instance, our surrender to the human suffering of poverty is never an act which gives life (life-giving). When we blindly embrace poverty as God's will, and therefore consider it as the only way of life for us, we refuse to participate in Christ's love that seeks to transform and give life to society through human development, economic growth, etc.

Human suffering, as we witness in Jesus' suffering, must become an expression of love. Jesus' suffering, as structurally depicted in the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, consistently reminds us that the love which Christ bears in His passion unto His death is that which saves us from sin and death, and therefore transforms us into a new life of love.

There is no doubt that this love that we are talking about arises from Christ's love for all of us. It is precisely for this reason that we need to understand that there must be a change in our understanding of human suffering as something burdensome. Rather, we must carefully look at suffering as an avenue for grace. It is true that Christ's love for us may not instantly remove suffering in our lives, but it definitely makes suffering something bearable. Despite the overwhelming suffering that we experience today, we find consolation in Christ's love for us, which then hopefully empowers us to bear our sufferings with love like He did.

At this point, we need to understand that Christ suffered and died to save us from sin, but it is not the suffering per se that saved us. Rather, the love that endures all His suffering is what saved us. It is this same love that we must live out amidst the overwhelming suffering in our lives, for if we allow suffering itself to remain glorified

and misunderstood as God's will, we in fact hinder our growth in our relationship with ourselves, others, and God. As such, we impede the building of our local communities because we lose sight of, and therefore fail to practice, that love which is redemptive yet transformative, self-emptying yet life-giving.

C. COMMUNION: THE GOAL OF SUFFERING

Today, given for instance the reality of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), who toil and suffer abroad in order to sustain their families in the Philippines, many, if not all, Filipino Catholics will find it difficult to reconcile the idea that communion is in fact the point of suffering.

Moreover, we alarmingly discover that this type of suffering experienced by OFWs in fact worsens the relationships within the family unit. It is undeniable that when the OFWs leave their families back home, they inevitably create gaps in their relationships with their loved ones. As such, it may seem impossible to see the point of communion as the goal of suffering in this manner.

Nonetheless, we need to highlight that the end goal of suffering - a suffering that is empowered by love - is clearly communion. This communion, however, does not refer to a mere physical gathering or union. On the contrary, this refers to a profound communion that is essentially bound by the virtue of love - a love lived out by Christ that is both self-emptying and life-giving. It is this same love which effectively binds people into a genuine communion with God and their neighbor.

In parish-based Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), we find small gatherings of the faithful that participate in the life of the church more actively by engaging in spiritual activities, such as bible reading and faith-sharing. In this context, the faithful are able to bring together their various human experiences, particularly that of suffering,

and thereby able to interpret such experiences in light of Sacred Scriptures. In this way, we find them to be in a delicate position where they may be able to fully discern the real meaning of the suffering of Jesus Christ vis-à-vis their own personal human experiences of suffering.

At the end of this BEC session, it is important to discover that the loving communion, which our various human sufferings should bear, must further be channeled not only to our own small groups or BECs, but must likewise overflow to our entire local community. This same love arising from the love of God must empower us to love others as well. In this manner, we draw the strength to love our neighbors from the love of Christ as found in the sorrowful mysteries. By doing so, we direct all our suffering into a constructive element in society which builds up our community into a Church of Christ.

VII. **Closing Prayer:** Eucharistic Celebration

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