



Chapter – 10 March 2021 Suffering and God's Glory



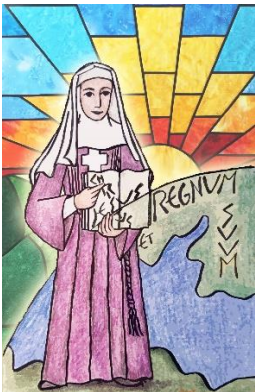
Very dear Sisters and Friends:

I wish you all a Happy Feast of Saint Marie Eugenie!

What does it mean to celebrate the feast of Saint Marie Eugenie this year during the season of Lent coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic? Since the pandemic began in March of 2020, fear has gripped all of us, causing anxiety leading to much suffering. We have been experiencing, in one way or another, storms of uncertainty and helplessness, unemployment and financial crisis, inter-personal relationship issues, and loss of beloved ones. In spite of having vaccines, we still do not know when and how this pandemic is going to end. The impact of new virus variants and the unequal rollout of the Covid – 19 vaccines are also of concern. Moreover, many peoples are contending with natural disasters and we are grappling with shocking events such as human rights violations, massive protests, and political unrest in different parts of the world. Lastly, we have our own personal problems as well as difficulties in our communities or families. In spite of advances in medicine and technology making our life easier and more comfortable, there is no lack of suffering and pain in today's world.

Saint Marie Eugenie and Jesus's Passion and Death

Saint Marie Eugenie considered “meditation on our Lord's Passion” to be one of the “most useful” practices for Lent.¹ Such meditations, she believed, help us “have the dispositions of Jesus towards suffering”. She invited us to “learn to see what makes us suffer as a gift from God.” I was pleased to see that with Saint John's Gospel, Marie Eugenie interpreted Jesus' passion and death as the “supreme proof of his love” for us. So, the questions for our consideration include: How do we understand Jesus's passion and death? What does it mean to “have the dispositions of Jesus towards suffering”? What helps us endure pain as God's gift? How do we bring more grace into our lives in these troubling times of the pandemic? I hope such reflections help us better cope with the many hardships we witness and endure today.



In John's Gospel, the verb – “to lay down” (τίθημι/ *tithēmi*) refers to the passion and death of Jesus. Jesus is presented as the Good Shepherd who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11) and the Good Shepherd does this to “give life and life in abundance” (10:10). The same verb is also used in the context of Jesus' love for the disciples as his friends: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (15:13). The Fourth Evangelist interprets Jesus' death on the cross as a powerful manifestation of Jesus' friendship love, shepherd's self-sacrificing love giving life in abundance to the sheep. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus' death is presented as the most powerful revelation of God's unconditional love (3:16), God's redemptive power (3:14-15) and God's glory (δόξα/ *doxa*; 12:28-34). Here God's glory stands for God's loving-kindness (ἡζεδ; *hezēd*; Ex 34:6)

¹ Marie Eugenie, *Meditation on Our Lord's Passion*, 9 March 1873.

and God's gracious presence (כְּבוֹד / *kābod*; Ex 16:10) in our midst. If we understand Jesus' death this way, the suffering Jesus on the cross is our Hero – our Friend, our Good Shepherd, our Saviour and Lord. Jesus' death on the cross reveals the prophetic power of God's saving love. Today, Jesus does not want just sympathizers or mourners, but he needs radical followers who would suffer with him and sacrifice themselves in order to ensure "life in abundance" for all especially our less privileged brothers and sisters. When we try to enhance the life of everyone and build up communities of friends, we shall also make God's glory more visible in our changing world.

Our Suffering and God's Glory

Suffering is part of being human. How can we become comfortable with afflictions, problems, or the so-called crosses of everyday life? As the Book of Job highlights, each human being – from the moment of birth until the moment of death – experiences surprises, both joys and sorrows, securities and insecurities, success and failures, certainties and uncertainties. We have two distinct choices in life. In the words of Job: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (Job 2:10b). In these trying times, let us make a wise choice and reveal God's glory by making God's loving-kindness more and more visible in our communities and families. Let us learn to live with pain and distress; let us live through misfortunes in the light of faith, as Job did. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). We are invited thus to make ourselves more human by seeing things through the eyes of God.

Our life consists of experiences that can be pleasant or unpleasant; joyful or painful. We cannot always determine the exact nature of these experiences, but we can definitely decide the nature of our responses to them. We can try to avoid suffering as something negative or try to embrace it as an opportunity for growth. The decision is ours and ours alone. When we try to evade distress, we actually suffer more. As Thomas Merton put it, "The more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer, because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you, in proportion to your fear of being hurt. The one who does most to avoid suffering is, in the end, the one who suffers most."² On the other hand, as Marie Eugenie suggested, when we receive difficulties as gifts of God, we have another attitude and mindset towards life and its challenges. This is what spirituality does in our lives. Spirituality helps us to become free and secure people as we trust in God's providence. A mindful awareness of the truth that our life – each breath that we take – is a gift from God, will definitely enable us also to accept the adversities of life as God's gift. Our lives will be enhanced when we accept troubles, disappointments, and failures not as unfortunate experiences but as opportunities for deeper love at the service of greater life. We might then find ourselves more available to the surprises of life, and God's grace infinitely more available to our lives. This is Saint Marie Eugenie's Way, the Assumption way!

We do not seek suffering for itself, but we suffer in view of life in abundance. Inbuilt in human suffering are the hidden powers of healing and transformation. Suffering accepted with a purpose is a strength that transforms. The endless forms of difficulties in life can be transformed into a source of life-giving sacrifices and surrendering love. We learn to embrace the wider horizons of our reality. Our suffering becomes a source of new energy and dynamism, and it generates a new purpose for new life. Let us thus create a "welcoming space" for the surprises of insecurity, the surprises of

² Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain – Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (London: Harcourt, 1998), page 92.

sickness, the surprises of the obstacles that come to us. And let us share in the dispositions of our Lord Jesus toward suffering and experience the grace that they bring. Just as there is no resurrection without passion and death, so also there is no new life without pain and hardships. Suffering has a new meaning when it is embraced as an expression of greater love for the sake of greater life for others – one’s friends, neighbours, family or community members. The experience of enduring pain has the potential to become an experience of God’s healing presence, leading to the building up of a community, family, and society. This experience is a gift from God and it gives us a glimpse of God’s glory revealed in Jesus.

The Pandemic reminds us more than ever before our mortality and the need for preparedness on all fronts. Let us continue our “Lenten journey of conversion” through prayer and sincere soul-searching. Let us fast and reach out to the poor and needy in solidarity. Let us fast from indifference and from being judgmental and be open to dialogue for encounters and communion. Let us fast from anger and animosity and enjoy the peace and grace of God. Let us fast from negativity and rejoice in a new life full of hope. More importantly, let us fast from the tendency to avoid hardships and celebrate them as opportunities to bring forth life and reveal God’s glory. We will be then better prepared to rejoice and receive the blessings of the Risen Lord.

On her feast day, let us celebrate our life with all its joys as well as sorrows and make Marie Eugenie smile!



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