

The last word

FR RONALD ROLHEISER

Our own Good Friday

When the Romans designed crucifixion as their means of capital punishment, they had more in mind than simply putting someone to death. They wanted to accomplish something else too, namely, to make this death a spectacle to serve as the ultimate deterrent so that anyone seeing it would think twice about committing the offence for which the person was being crucified.

So crucifixion was designed to do a couple of other things beyond simply putting someone to death. It was designed to inflict the optimal amount of pain that a human body could absorb. Hence, they sometimes gave morphine to the person they were executing, not to lessen his pain, but to keep him conscious to feel more pain. Perhaps most cruel of all, crucifixion was designed to utterly humiliate the body of the person being executed. So the person was stripped naked. Is there a humiliation worse than this?

Well, there are, I believe, human sufferings that approximate to or equal that; and sadly these are common. There are daily instances of violence in our world (domestic violence, sexual violence, torture, heartless bullying and the like) which mirror the humiliation of the cross. You sometimes see this kind of humiliation of the body in death by cancer and other such debilitating diseases, too. The person here doesn't just die; she dies in pain, her body humiliated, its dignity compromised, that immodesty exposed, as it was for Jesus when dying on the cross.

I suspect that this is why God allowed (though not intended) for Jesus to suffer the pain and humiliation he suffered in his death. Looking at how Jesus died, it's hard for anyone to say: "Easy for him, he didn't have to suffer the way I did!" The humiliation of the cross puts Jesus in real solidarity with anyone who has ever known the pain and shame of humiliation.

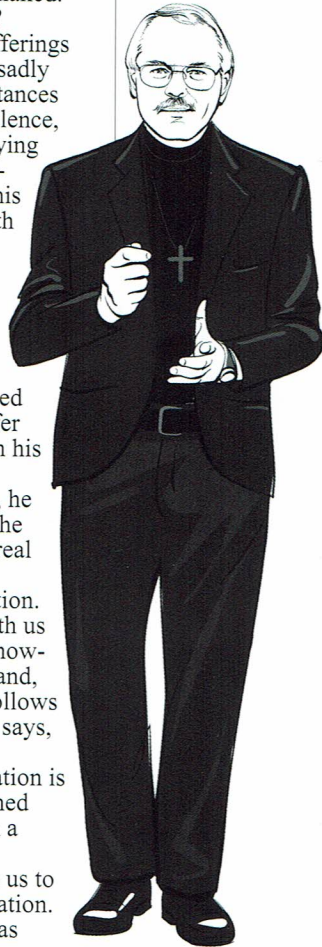
But the fruit of Jesus's solidarity with us is not just having the consolation of knowing that Jesus felt our suffering first-hand, it's also that we get to share in what follows after crucifixion: namely, as Scripture says, a share in his consolation.

Curious words, really. What consolation is there in being humiliated? What's gained through this shameful kind of pain? In a word, what's gained is depth of soul.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, pushes us to depth of heart and soul as does humiliation. Just ask yourself this question: what has



Will suffering our own humiliation make us deep in compassion, or deep in anger and bitterness?



given me character? What has given me depth as a person? What has given me deeper understanding? The answer in every case, I suspect, will be something that you'd be ashamed to talk about, some stinging humiliation whose pain and shame pushed you to a deeper place.

The Gospels, I believe, teach that. When the Apostles James and John came to Jesus and asked him whether he could arrange that, when he came into his glory, they would be given the seats at his right and left hand, Jesus didn't take the opportunity to lecture them on humility.

He instructed them instead as to their lack of understanding both of what constitutes glory and what constitutes the road to glory. They had confused the notion of glory with everything that's antithetical to humiliation, vulnerability and solidarity.

Glory for them – and I suspect for us too – was understood instead as being set apart from the crowd, above it, the most valuable player, the winner of the Nobel Prize, the movie star with the body everyone envies, the attractive one who is invulnerable to humiliation, the one above the rest. And so Jesus asks James and John whether they can "drink the cup" – and that cup, as we see from Jesus's own struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, is the cup of humiliation.

Drinking the cup of humiliation, accepting the cross, according to Jesus and according to what's most honest in our own experience, is what can bring us genuine glory: depth of heart, depth of soul and depth of understanding and compassion.

However, as Jesus warns, drinking the cup of humiliation, while assuring us of depth, doesn't automatically assure us of glory ("that glory is not mine to give"). Humiliation will make us deep, but it might not make us deep in the right way. It can also have the opposite effect.

This is the algebra then: like Jesus, we will all suffer humiliation in life, we will all drink the cup, and it will make us deep; but then we have a critical choice. Will this humiliation make us deep in compassion and understanding or will it make us deep in anger and bitterness? That is in fact the ultimate moral choice we face in life – not just at the hour of death but countless times in our lives. Good Friday, and what it asks of us, confronts us daily.

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