



Powerlessness, or the Hidden Power in Our Suffering?

"By spiritually embracing in God that specific path to death, our freedom is elevated to new heights; indeed, we "achieve control" in the most important way possible, through willed surrender and radical gift in our innermost depths."



In a 1999 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, patients with serious illness were asked to identify what was most important to them during the dying process. Many indicated they wanted to achieve a "sense of control." This is understandable. Most of us fear our powerlessness in the face of illness and death. We would like to retain an element of control, even though we realize that dying often involves the very opposite: a total loss of control, over our muscles, our emotions, our minds, our bowels and our very lives, as our human framework succumbs to powerful disintegrative forces.

Even when those disintegrative forces become extreme and our suffering may seem overwhelming, however, a singularly important spiritual journey always remains open for us. This path is a "road less traveled," a path that, unexpectedly, enables us to achieve genuine control in the face of death. The hallmark of this path is the personal decision to accept our sufferings, actively laying down our life on behalf of others by embracing the particular kind of death God has ordained for us, patterning our choice on the choice consciously made by Jesus Christ.

When asked about the "why" of human suffering, Pope John Paul

II once stated, with piercing simplicity, that the answer has "been given by God to man in the cross of Jesus Christ." He stressed that Jesus went toward his own suffering, "aware of its saving power." The Pope also observed that in some way, each of us is called to "share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished." He concluded that through his only-begotten Son, God "has confirmed His desire to act especially through suffering, which is man's weakness and emptying of self, and He wishes to make His power known precisely in this weakness and emptying of self." The Holy Father echoes St. Paul's famous passage: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

The greatest possibility we have for achieving control, then, is to align ourselves in our suffering and weakness with God and his redemptive designs. This oblation of embracing our particular path to death, actively offered on behalf of others and in union with Christ, manifests our concern for the spiritual welfare of others, especially our friends and those closest to us. We are inwardly marked by a profound need to sacrifice and give of our-

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elves, a need that manifests our inner capacity to love and be loved.

As no one had ever done before, Jesus charted the path of love-driven sacrifice, choosing to lay down his life for his friends. He was no mere victim in the sense of being a passive and unwilling participant in his own suffering and death. He was in control. He emphasized, with other-worldly authority, that, “nobody takes my life from me: I lay it down, and I take it up again.”

Yet we see that his life was, in fact, taken from him by those various individuals and groups who plotted his death and sought his execution. His life was taken from him by evil men, even though, paradoxically, nobody took his life from him, because nobody had power over his being, unless granted from above.

We experience a similar paradox in our own deaths: while it may seem that our life is being taken from us through the evil of a particular ailment or the ravages of a particular disease, we can reply that nothing takes away our life, because nothing has power over our being, except what is ordained from above. In his providence and omniscience, years before the fact, God already knows and foresees that unique confluence

of events that will constitute our death, whether it be by stroke or cardiac arrest, liver failure or Alzheimer's, or any other means. By spiritually embracing in God that specific path to death, our freedom is elevated to new heights; indeed, we “achieve control” in the most important way possible, through willed surrender and radical gift in our innermost depths.

Jesus foresaw that his greatest work lay ahead as he ascended Calvary to embrace his own powerlessness and self-emptying. Although we may feel condemned to our powerlessness as we receive help from others in our sickness, and although we may feel supremely useless as we are “nailed” to our hospital bed, our active, inward embrace of the cross unleashes important graces for ourselves and others, and reveals a refulgent light beyond the obscurity of every suffering. Jesus' radical embracing of his Passion - and our radical embracing of our own - marks the supreme moment of a person who achieves control over his or her destiny through immersion into the hope-filled and redemptive designs of God.

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