

## Pentecost XV

Dearly Beloved,

In the month of September, in the first two weeks, the Church has her clergy read the book of Job, the difficult and lengthy account of the providence of God, diabolic activity, and the tremendous sufferings and restoration of a holy man. In today's Gospel, we have a similar account, though much briefer, of the great sorrows of a woman and her salvation in Christ. Both Job and the unnamed widow give us much to think about, especially in relation to one of the greatest evils which we must face in this fallen world: the death of children.

Among the many evils that Job suffers, the greatest is the deaths of all his children in a windstorm which destroys the house of his eldest son. Though it is clear that Job's sufferings move from those most exterior to him to those most interior, ending with his own body, any parent who has lost a child would say that they would rather have their own body destroyed rather than lose a child. In this way, Job's sufferings do not culminate in his skin disease, but they had already reached their climax in emotional intensity in the deaths of his ten children. In his commentary on Job, Thomas Aquinas poignantly adds that Job's suffering over his children was even greater because he did not know the disposition of their souls at death: they died while feasting, and so perhaps their hearts were not in the right place when they expired.

In regards to the widow of Naim, we know very little. What we do know is that her husband was dead, and she had only one son, meaning that in him rested all her hopes for life on earth. Women did not have the right to inherit in Jewish culture, and so whatever her husband had possessed would pass to the nearest male heir, who could take her in and care for her, or if he was an unjust or greedy man, he could repudiate her and put her on the street. With the death of her son, the widow's very life was at stake. But for the widow, as with Job, the central heartbreak was not over her future, but over his. If she was a good Jew, she may have believed in the afterlife, perhaps only in Sheol. Either way, her son was dead, the one whom she had carried in her womb and nurtured at her breast, and now she had to live without him.

Both the book of Job and the widow of Naim should provoke in us questions regarding God's providence. Why does He allow the death of children? Why does He allow their sudden or unexpected death? How much of both evils is a punishment for sin? These are questions with which we must wrestle our entire lives, so I cannot do them justice, but at least I can provide some parameters for how we should, as Catholics, consider these questions.

First of all, is sudden or unexpected death a punishment for sins, either for the person who dies or for the persons whom they leave behind? The answer is twofold: first, we can always accept adversity as penance for our sins, and since our sins are so many, there is always something to atone for. On the other hand, however, such a death is not a sign of punishment, either for the one who dies or the family: we know of many saints who died sudden deaths and yet were most certainly holy and pleasing to God.

For example, Isaac Jogues, who had suffered so much to spread the Gospel in present day Quebec and Ontario, was tortured mercilessly, and even returned to North America after escaping to France, died by way of a tomahawk as he went for a walk one morning. He had no time to prepare for his death, and to his enemies, his death surely seemed a punishment. Yet he was righteous in God's sight. Another example is St. John Berchmans. He had joined the Jesuits at a very young age and had lived a very upright life, yet he suddenly died of a fever at age 22 just as he was to start his third year of priestly studies. As the book of Wisdom says, "the souls of the just are in the hand of God, and the torment of death shall not touch them. In the sight of the foolish they seemed to die: and their departure was taken for misery: but they are in peace."

As far as those left behind, God does not use one person against another, as if He would destroy a life to punish someone else. And we must remember that the end does not justify the means, either in human morality, nor in God's providence. It is true that, as Aquinas says, "It would not please God that someone should suffer from

adversity unless He wished some good to come to him from it.” But it is also true that the child who dies has a purpose with the Lord, and is not merely a pawn in His eternal plan; the child also has a destiny willed by God.

The story of Job also offers a very useful lesson in this regard: the bulk of the book is taken up with a debate between Job and his friends—they insist that his misfortune must have been the result of his sins; Job insists he did nothing to warrant such evil. As Aquinas points out, Job and his friends agreed on one point, that “not only nature but also human affairs are subject to divine providence”; but they disagreed on another point: “they thought that man is rewarded for the good which he does with temporal prosperity by God and is punished for the evil which he does with temporal adversity by God, as though temporal goods are the rewards for virtues and temporal evils are the proper punishments of sins.” This was not the case before Christ’s coming, and it is most certainly not the case in the time of Christ. Our deeds, both good and evil, are rewarded and punished with eternal rewards and punishments. That is why all prosperity and adversity can be considered as neutral; it does not reflect upon either our moral goodness or our wickedness. What does reflect our inner state is how we react to bad circumstances—either with bitterness and rejection of divine love, or with greater faith, hope and charity.

Why does God allow the death of children? In the case of baptized children who die, or of baptized adolescents and adults whose innocence resembles that of children, there are three principal reasons. The first is negative: the child may have fallen away later in life, had not God taken him or her now. There are surely many of us here who were innocent in our youth and turned bad in our adolescence or young adulthood; had we died at that time, we may have gone to hell. So there are some children who are saved by dying when they have yet to commit a sin. Again, the book of Wisdom instructs us, “There was one who pleased God and was loved by him, and while living among sinners he was taken up. He was caught up lest evil change his understanding or guile deceive his soul. For the fascination of wickedness obscures what is good, and roving desire perverts the innocent mind.”

A second, positive reason is that the world is not worthy of them. Though we ought not think on it very often or for very much time when we do, our world is unspeakably corrupt: it is perverse, unjust, deceitful, selfish, disgusting. There are some souls that are so pure that they should not spend much time in this world, not because they would be tainted by it, but because the world is not worthy to, even for a moment, benefit from the person’s holiness. And where does a child’s holiness come from? From the grace of God, who has chosen that child to be sanctified in a special way from all eternity.

A third, positive reason is for the sake of those left on earth. A child who dies after baptism but before reaching the age of reason is most certainly in heaven; and many children and adolescents who reach the age of reason retain their innocence by divine grace, and so we have good reason to believe they too enjoy the beatific vision. This being the case, they die so that they may lead their families and friends to heaven. They do so by creating in us a longing to see them again, and to strive to grow in holiness so as to merit heaven and to dwell with them forever. They also do so by praying for us, by being present in our lives in a way in which they could never be had they remained on earth. We think of persuasion as being the most powerful means of bringing someone to heaven; but the power of prayer and of grace is far more powerful. And the soul that sees God knows all that pleases Him and precisely what to ask to procure the salvation of his or her family. To have a child in heaven is not a sign of divine disfavor; it is actually a sign of His blessing and love: He does, in fact, love the child as the parent does, only more, and sees all the beauty of soul which He Himself has caused to be, and He takes that to Himself. But not only that—He has made the child’s death a cause of blessing for the family, and a more intimate connection between them than could have been possible on earth.

A special case for consideration is unborn babies. Despite the doctrinal confusion of the past many decades, and the rash and unhelpful speculations of some, the Church still teaches that unbaptized children go to limbo, a place of natural happiness, where they delight in God’s truth, goodness and beauty. If limbo is indeed the eternal destination of unbaptized children, and not just a temporary one, the Lord is still present to them, though it may seem cruel to us. There are different ways in which human beings can praise God: some by the mind,

and some by the mind and by grace. Though they do not know Christ as we know Him, as God made man, they do know Him as the Word of God, through whom the world was made. Just as there are different grades of beauty in the natural world, so there will be in the afterlife: different degrees of holiness and different intensities of union with the Lord. We ought not wish away the beauty of the butterfly because we feel that each flying thing should be a songbird. Each is pleasing to God and adds to the beauty of the world to come.

Despite all of this reasoning, or perhaps because of it, we may still ask, where is Christ? If He brought the widow's son back to life, why did He not do so for the one we loved? The answer is that He has done so; He has raised the baptized child to new life in heaven; He has called the unbaptized child to rejoice in His natural goodness always. Before the coming of Christ, there was no hope in the afterlife, there was only despair. Even the Jews considered Sheol to be a place of sadness and disappointment. But if we truly believe that the life to come is better than this life, then it is fitting that Jesus sometimes calls souls to that life before their earthly life is complete or mature. Yes, He could work miracles and restore the dead to earthly life, but He does far better in welcoming them into eternal life.

On this fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, then, let us grapple with these difficult truths and circumstances. Let us ask Job and the widow of Naim to pray for us, that we may know the goodness and beauty of the will of God and that we may accept, however hard it may be, with trust and gratitude. And let us pray especially for those who have suffered the death of a child, and for those mothers who have suffered miscarriages. May the Lord console them all, until the time when all shall be clear and we shall fully rejoice in the providence of God, in the world to come, in the New Jerusalem.