Four Levels of Suffering

Suffering is part of human life. While no one wants to suffer, each of us will have to face it in varying degrees. Even though suffering is never "good" in itself, tremendous good can come from it when people rise to the occasion. In fact, every moment of suffering has the potential to bring greater love, compassion, contribution, hope, inspiration, and faith into the world.

If we fail to understand the true meaning of suffering, we will miss the positive effects that can emerge from it, and we will completely overlook the intrinsic dignity of the suffering person.

An unhealthy culture will have a shallow understanding of what it means to be "compassionate;' and will consider euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide to be caring choices. A healthy culture will reject such hopelessness and abandonment, and will respond with a commitment to be with those who suffer.

How do YOU respond to suffering?

Suffering Level 1

Suffering is to be avoided at all costs

Suffering interferes with obtaining pleasure and possession, and so must be avoided. Suffering can only end in depression, despair, and complete loss of self-worth.

Suffering Level 2

Suffering is useful if I can control it

A Level 2 view of suffering can produce some positive effects, but not long-term ones. If we think the end is in sight, we may be able to endure pain. If suffering gives us an advantage in the future, such as earning the respect of others, then it is tolerable for a while. But such effects do not last. Ultimately, suffering will cause depression, despair, self-pity, bitterness, anger, resentment, and isolation.

Suffering Level 3

Suffering is useful if I can control it.

Level 3 views suffering as an opportunity for growth in wisdom, love, forgiveness, concern for others, compassion, leadership, and humility. Suffering can encourage growth in the lives of others. When we suffer, we allow others to empathize with us, and we have the capacity to bring a depth of love and hope into the world that perhaps would otherwise never be possible.

Suffering Level 4

Suffering allows us to share in God's love

When we share in another's suffering, we share in God's love for us. Level 4 allows us to trust that even in our deepest pain, even when we cannot see it, God can bring about a good that we never thought possible, and we can look to Him with confidence, and declare with true courage: "Thy will be done."