

Redemptive Suffering in Cinderella Man: A Case Study



Under the leadership and example of Jesus, we accept our suffering, our cross, and we turn it into a great blessing for others. Sickness and suffering are opportunities to die to one's self. In this way, suffering is a ratification or a seal of ones' heroic sacrificial love. A love that has been elevated and perfected through the purgative fires of suffering. The Paschal Mystery becomes something that we enter into in a bodily way as well as spiritual. We enter into Christ's suffering and death so that we may also be united to him in our own resurrection.

This is why St. Paul says he rejoices in his own suffering since it was offered, in Christ, for the sake of the Church. He says, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, which is the church" (Col 1:24).

It is so important for young people to know that when it comes to pain and suffering, the secular view is weak and empty. They need to know that in sickness and death the Church is not indifferent or without an answer. We have a God who entered into the most terrible human suffering in a comprehensive way. He knew mental and emotional pain. He knows what it is like to be hated, abandoned by his friends, betrayed and back-stabbed by his loved ones. He understands what it's like to be mocked and humiliated by his enemies. He experienced all sorts of physical pains as well in his feet, back, chest, hands, and head.

Though we understand the power of redemptive suffering, it's important to note that we do not go out of our way to seek suffering, sickness or death. It's not necessary since suffering is an inevitable, universal condition of the fallen world. It will happen. When it does we run to the Church to help us deal with it in a prayerful and courageous way.

The film *Cinderella Man* is based on a true story about James Braddock, an American boxer who became famous in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Braddock was a virtuous but simple man. He was a devoted husband and loving father. In the film it becomes clear that the source of his strength was through practicing his Catholic faith. He was friends with his priest and his wife is shown going to the local parish church to pray for Jim as he enters into various boxing matches.

The theme of redemptive suffering shared by a family and a community slowly develops. When Jim breaks his hand it looks like his boxing career is over. Through great pain, he fights with his broken hand only to make it worse. Jim has no other way to support his family during the economic turmoil of that time. Eventually, as he continues to lose fights he is mocked and humiliated. People don't know about his secret injury. At his lowest point, in utter desperation, Jim has to humbly beg for money from his boxing community. In doing this he is able to pay for electricity and keep his kids under his roof.

Finally, Jim unexpectedly gets an opportunity to fight the reigning champion Max Baer. Max Baer is known for the power of his blows which already killed a man in the boxing ring. This is where we see his wife and kids turn to the church and each other for spiritual support. Mae, Jim's wife, is seen entering a surprisingly packed church. When she sees the priest, he explains that they

were all there to pray for Jim. As they listen to the play by play over the radio, Mae seems to suffer every blow that is thrown at Jim.

She, as a baptized Catholic as well as being his spouse, is a co-sufferer which is a hallmark of redemptive suffering. In the Church we never suffer alone. Unlike most true stories we get to see the victim enter into victory and glory on this side of the veil. After a grueling fight, Braddock is crowned as the new boxing champion.

This is truly a story about the Paschal Mystery re-lived in some lesser way by a simple man of faith. Jim was a father and husband who, through tapping into the power of suffering, allowed his love for his family to be raised to a participation in the love of God. This film illustrates what everyday redemptive suffering looks like. Though James Braddock is not a canonized Saint, he truly was a holy man.

They must also know that they are capable of cooperating with God's grace to let their love be transformed through suffering so that they can love their family and friends the way Christ loves us. We always hear about the great saints and the martyrdom that they endured through amazing virtue. These examples build us up and give us a way of imitating Christ. However, we should not wait for extraordinary or prestigious displays of our effort to practice redemptive suffering. It doesn't matter how valiant it is or how many people can see what we are doing. Simple, small people with insignificant suffering or mild pain can offer it up so that it becomes a spiritually meaningful prayer.

Anywhere there is suffering, there is Christ's invitation to take up the cross. In the carrying of his own cross he allowed, in a providential way, Simon of Cyrene to be pressed into service and help Jesus bear the load. This shows us

that redemptive suffering is communal because of our communion with the Church.