

**The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**  
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 18:1-10A
<i>Response</i>	He who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 5
<i>Second Reading</i>	Colossians 1:24-28
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are they who have kept the word with a generous heart and yield a harvest through perseverance.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 10:38-42

The 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through Paul's powerful letter to the Colossians. And here we look at what is arguably one of the most mysterious passages in the letter. It involves the mystery of human suffering in Christ. So in chapter one, verses 24 to 28, Paul says these words:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Okay. This passage has puzzled so many people because it appears to suggest at first glance that there's something deficient or something lacking in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. In fact, it doesn't just suggest it. It says it. So Paul says in verse 24:

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body

Now, some people are really troubled by that because if you think about it, Paul has just finished saying in Colossians 1, that all the fullness of the Godhead or divinity dwells in Christ bodily. And he's going to repeat that point in Colossians 2:9. So he's just finished saying Christ is fully divine and he's going to say it again. And so people will wonder, well, how can he say if Christ is God that there's anything lacking in his afflictions or in his sufferings or the cross, that the cross is somehow missing something in it, right? You may have sometimes heard, or you may have heard before the idea that even a single drop of the blood of Christ would be sufficient to atone for all the sins of the world, because a single drop of the blood of Christ was a drop of the blood of the Godman, of someone who's not only fully man, but also fully God. And if, as St Peter and scriptures say, love covers a multitude of sins, then the divine love, the infinite love of God made flesh covers an infinite multitude of sins. In other words, there's no way that objectively in itself there could be anything deficient or lacking in the power or the efficacy of the crucifixion of Christ.

After all, Paul has just said, just a couple of verses earlier in verse 20, that through Christ God "reconcile[d] to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." So the blood of the cross has the power to reconcile the whole cosmos to God. So how can Paul then turn around and say that anything's lacking in the cross? Well, the answer, and this is really crucial, is the difference between the objective reality of the cross and our subjective participation in the cross. So on the one hand, speaking objectively, there is nothing lacking in the afflictions of Christ on the cross, precisely because of all the reasons I just mentioned. He's fully God. He's fully man. And it's through the blood of his cross that all things are reconciled to God. So nothing objectively lacking, but Paul's not talking about the cross objectively here.

Paul's talking about his own personal subjective participation in the sufferings that Christ endured on the cross. And in that sense, there is one thing lacking in the cross. Namely, my participation in the cross, my doing what Jesus said to his disciples in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: "Take up your cross and follow me." Okay. That's really what Paul's talking about here. And if you want to see that

clearly just look at the context. Is Paul talking about Calvary here or is he talking about the mystery of the Church? It's the latter. Listen to what he says.

Now I rejoice in [what?] *my* sufferings

So there's your first clue. He's speaking about his subjective personal sufferings, the sufferings of Paul.

I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake

There's the mystery of the Church.

and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body

That is what?

the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery

Which is what?

Christ in you

Okay. So pause there for a second. What is Paul talking about? Paul is not saying that there's anything deficient in the sufferings of Christ on Calvary on Good Friday. What he is saying is that Christ never intended for the redemptive suffering that he inaugurated on Good Friday on Calvary to cease entirely. Instead, Christ intended for the afflictions that he experienced and endured on Calvary on Good Friday—and this is the mystery—to continue in his mystical body that is the church on earth.

And if that seems mysterious, you're right. That's why Paul calls it a *mystērion*. This mystery has been hidden for ages and generations, but it's now manifest to the

saints. Who are the saints? Remember, when Paul talks about the saints, he doesn't mean it in the same way we do. When we talk about the saints as Roman Catholics in the 21st century, or as any Catholic, Eastern Catholic, even Orthodox, whatever Christian denomination you might belong to, when we talk about the saints, we tend to refer to the saints in heaven, the holy ones who are already in glory, who have the beatific vision. When Paul talks about the *hagiois*, the holy ones, he primarily means it to refer to the saints on earth. He means it to refer to the baptized, to those who have been made holy through baptism and are now part of the mystical body of Christ.

So what Paul's saying to them here is that the mystery of christian suffering, and that is a mystery, is that whenever a christian suffers, whenever somebody like Paul suffers, he's not suffering in vain, and he is not suffering in isolation. He or she is actually suffering in union with Christ crucified. He or she, when a Christian suffers, is actually filling up subjectively what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church. Because although the personal body of the risen Jesus is in glory and is no longer suffering. He bears the wounds, but he's not still suffering and dying. He's risen and he's ascended into heaven and he's seated at the right hand of the Father in the glory of the kingdom. But the ecclesial body of Christ, the mystical body of Christ, which is the church on earth, that body is still suffering.

That body is still living out the Paschal mystery of his suffering, his death, and his resurrection from the death. And so what Paul's trying to explain to the Colossians is why he's in prison. One of the imprisoned epistles. How can Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ, who's chosen by Christ to be an apostle to the Gentiles, how can he be stuck in a prison? How can he be stuck in a prison cell, perhaps awaiting execution? I mean, aren't you chosen by Christ? Isn't Christ the Lord and ruler of all? Hasn't he been raised from the dead? Hasn't he ascended into heaven? How do you explain this?

And Paul said, "It's simple. I fill up in my body what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his church. I'm suffering in union with Christ for the salvation of the world." It's not just Paul's evangelization that is redemptive and efficacious and saving the world. It's also Paul's participation in the crucifixion of Jesus through his own sufferings, through being in prison, through being stoned to death, even though he didn't die. He got up and kept preaching, but he was stoned.

He was beaten. He was persecuted. He was imprisoned. Those sufferings, those afflictions are part of the mystery of Christ united to his bride on earth, the church. The church on earth, the Church Militant it's frequently called, could also be called the church suffering because she's suffering on earth.

So that's the basic point. And I can't help but emphasize here that this is an aspect of Paul that we tend to forget about. It's very popular to think of Paul as Paul, the apostle. Paul, the evangelist who brings the good news to the nations. We can also think of Paul, the teacher. Or Paul, the theologian who writes these complex theological epistles that are full of Christology and eschatology and soteriology and all these theological truths. And those are true, but Paul wasn't just an apostle. He wasn't just a theologian. He was also a mystic. This is Paul, the mystic.

Years ago when I was a doctoral student, one of the most powerful books on Paul that I ever read, even though I don't agree with a lot that's in it was a book by Albert Schweitzer. He was a Lutheran theologian and a genius. He wrote a book called *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. And that book really transformed the way I read Paul, because it helped me realize that Paul wasn't just a theologian. Paul was a man of prayer and Paul was a mystic. He saw his whole life, his mission, his personal sufferings through the lens, the mystical lens of his union with Christ, through the lens of the mystery of Christ living out his passion in the Church. Paul saw his whole life in terms of the mystery of union with Christ, as he says:

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this [*mystērion*]

What is the *mystērion*? The *mystērion* is

Christ in you.

In other words, Jesus doesn't just die on Calvary to atone for human sin. He does that. Christ dies on Calvary so that he can have union with his Church, so that he can be united to the bride. So that he can be united with you, and not just united with you, but actually dwell in you invisibly, but really and truly. And if you have any doubts that he's dwelling in you, all you have to ask is, am I suffering? Because if you're a baptized Christian and you're suffering, that's actually a sign

not that you've been abandoned by Christ, according to Paul, but that you're actually united to him. And you're filling up the mystery of the cross in your own life. That's a very powerful point. Paul, the mystic, the mysticism of Paul the apostle. Nowhere do you see that more clearly I would argue than in Colossians 1, the reading for today on the sufferings of Christ and how Paul participates in those sufferings.

But as I like to say so often, you don't have to take my word for it. You can just listen to the voice of the Church. So if this mystery of suffering is something that you've puzzled over, especially if you've suffered in your own life and tried to make sense of it, I would encourage you not only to read the letter to the Colossians and the other prison epistles of Paul, where he tends to reflect on suffering, but also to read this apostolic letter of Pope St. John Paul II, called *Salvifici Doloris (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering)*. And in this letter, John Paul II is going to... It's really more of a meditation on this mystery of what it means to suffer, not just as a human being, but in particular what it means to suffer in Christ as a Christian, and on the great liberating truth of the redemptive value, not just of the suffering of Jesus, but the redemptive value of Christian suffering, the redemptive value of human suffering that is united to Christ crucified.

So I'm going to close out with just one quotation from John Paul II's letter on human suffering. And I'm going to show you where a large part of this letter is inspired by—surprise, surprise—Colossians 1. So listen to what John Paul II wrote:

*In this Body, Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way he is united with those who suffer. The words quoted above from the Letter to the Colossians bear witness to the exceptional nature of this union... [quotes Col 1:24] The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world's redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings — in any part of the world and at any time in history—to that extent he in his own way completes the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world. Does this mean that the Redemption achieved by Christ is not complete? No. It only means that the Redemption,*

*accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all love expressed in human suffering.* In this dimension—the dimension of love—the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished. Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limits but at the same time he did not bring it to a close. *In this redemptive suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so.* Yes, it seems to be part of the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed.<sup>2</sup>

Whoa, this is a powerful text. John Paul II is saying that, although again, objectively speaking, there's simply nothing insufficient, nothing lacking, there's nothing defective or incomplete about Christ's crucifixion. However, because salvation is not just about suffering, it's about love, then by its very nature, the cross of Christ requires our participation in it. It requires the response of our love and the way we give that response above all is through willingness to suffer with Christ for the salvation of the world, for the sake of love, out of love. Because love transforms suffering into sacrifice. Love makes suffering not just evil and tragic and awful and horrible, all those things which suffering is, but love makes suffering redemptive.

And if you have any doubt about that, just look at a crucifix because that's why we put them up in our churches and in our homes. Otherwise, what are we doing? It's because the cross is a sign of love that we venerate, that we revere it, that we love the cross. And for my money, nobody makes that clearer really than St. Paul in Colossians 1. These verses are a profound window, not just into the mysticism of Paul, but into the mystery of Christ crucified and the mystery of redemptive suffering, and through redemptive suffering, redemptive love.

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, *Salvifici Doloris* no. 24 [1984].