

## 33MEM: Initial Retreat

On my tombstone, I want this inscribed: “*No hay mal que por bien no venga.*” This has been a cornerstone of my preaching. In English, it means: “*There is no bad that does not bring some good.*” This Spanish proverb expresses the central mystery of our Christian faith: The Paschal Mystery. Simply put, the Paschal Mystery is the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the ultimate proof that God does not waste our pain. On the cross, the worst possible “bad” happened, we killed God, but it brought about the greatest possible “good”—our salvation. If God can take the literal murder of Himself and turn it into salvation, then He can redeem *anything*. The Paschal Mystery tells us that suffering is not a dead end, but a passageway to new life.

As Christians, we profess five foundational truths about God. We build our faith from the foundation up:

1. God exists.
2. God is all-powerful.
3. God is all-wise.
4. God is all-good.
5. God is all-loving.

As revealed by Jesus Christ, we trust that God is a powerful, wise, good, and loving Father—and in Christ Jesus, we are His loved children. But when suffering hits, those five beliefs are put to the ultimate test.

Suffering rarely destroys a person’s faith all at once. Instead, it tears the house down from the roof to the foundation. It unravels our faith from the top down, turning the reality of our pain into a logical argument against God’s nature.

First, we feel abandoned, and we are forced to ask:

5. If God is all-loving, why does God allow hate and heartbreak?

Then, the universe feels cruel:

4. If God is all-good, why does God allow bad things to happen to us?

Then, we become confused:

3. If God is all-wise, why do things happen that seem utterly senseless?

Then, we feel completely helpless:

2. If God is all-powerful, why doesn't God just stop the pain?

Until finally, the foundation crumbles entirely, and we turn to disbelief:

1. Does God even exist? Because if He exists but is not powerful, wise, good, or loving enough to stop our suffering, why bother believing at all?

Amid these natural feelings of abandonment, as the world feels cruel and confusing, and we are left helpless, we lose our faith. When we lose faith, we lose hope. And without hope, we fall into desperation. The natural course of unbelief is despair. When the “bad” happens, we are forced to answer a simple question: *Do I still believe?*

If the answer is “no,” we are doomed to despair. And in the midst of suffering, that alternative can actually seem like the most logical choice. But look at the consequences of that choice. To choose disbelief is to accept that our pain has no purpose, no meaning, and no redemption. Despair offers absolutely nothing to the human heart. It is a dead end.

So, do I still believe? Yes. I choose “yes” because it is the only viable alternative to despair. I choose to believe because belief keeps the door open to hope, while the alternative slams it shut. But choosing to say “yes” forces us to wrestle with a mystery: If we still believe, how do we make sense of a powerful, wise, good, and loving God in a world filled with suffering?

The answer lies in a **radical shift in how we view our pain**. The world tells us that suffering is a malfunction—a glitch in a life that is supposed to be perfect. Because the world sees suffering as completely useless, its only advice is to avoid it, hide it, numb it, or escape it. We are taught to treat our pain like trash, something to be discarded as quickly as possible. And if you can't fix it or escape it, the world tells you to just grit your teeth and merely survive it.

But God invites us to do something entirely different. When God looks at our unbroken pain, He doesn't see trash to be thrown away; He sees raw material. Think of an artist standing before a massive canvas: they don't just use the bright, easy colors. They take the dark, heavy, messy paints and intentionally work them into the masterpiece.

God does the same with our lives. God's answer to suffering is not just to give us a coping mechanism to help us endure it. His answer is infinitely more powerful: **our suffering is meant to be transformed into an offering**.

But how do we actually do that? How does my heartbreak, my sickness, or my grief become something holy? We cannot do it on our own. Our pain only gains redemptive power by the grace of God when it is united to Jesus Christ. The primary place this happens is the Eucharistic celebration. When we go to Mass, we don't just bring our prayers; we bring our brokenness. We place our sufferings on the altar alongside the bread and wine. We unite our pain to the Eucharistic Lord, who is actively offering the sufferings of the entire world to the Father. **Through the Eucharist, our meaningless pain is swept up into Christ's perfect sacrifice.**

Now, we have to pause here because this raises a profound theological mystery. Was Christ's sacrifice on the cross enough? Yes. It was perfect. It was done once and for all, and it objectively redeemed the world. Jesus does not *need* our help to save us. And yet, in His mysterious will, God desires our subjective participation. Saint Paul captures this mind-bending reality in his letter to the Colossians when he writes: *“I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ...”* (Col 1:24). What could possibly be “lacking” in the perfect sacrifice of the cross?

The original Greek word Saint Paul uses here holds the key: *antanaplēroō*. It means “to fill up in turn,” or to supply a missing piece. Christ provided the infinite, saving grace, but by His own divine design, the offering is left open. Christ's perfect offering is, in a sense, “incomplete” if *I* am not part of it. He intentionally left a space on the cross for you and me. God desires us to accept it, participate in it, incarnate it in our own lives, and contribute our own pain to His saving work. Understanding this is the key to fully understanding the power of the Eucharist. **The Eucharist is our God-given means to turn our sufferings into offerings.**

When we do this—when we transform our suffering into an offering through the Eucharist—it achieves three profound things:

1. **For our own well-being:** It keeps us from becoming bitter. It heals our hearts by giving our pain a purpose, which is the only true alternative to despair.
2. **For the good of others:** When we turn our sufferings into an offering, it becomes a channel of grace for those who desperately need it, especially

our loved ones. To understand how this actually works, the Church uses two profound theological terms: **condign merit** and **congruous merit**. They simply describe the beautiful partnership between God's infinite power and our personal pain.

**Condign merit** belongs to Jesus Christ alone. *Condign* means it is strictly deserved by right and justice. Because Jesus is God, His perfect, sinless sacrifice on the cross earned an infinite ocean of grace. He has the absolute right to that grace. He paid for it completely.

**Congruous merit** belongs to us. *Congruous* means "fitting" or "appropriate." You and I cannot strictly earn grace or salvation for anyone—our pain doesn't have the power to save on its own. But when we unite our suffering to the cross, we become collaborators with God through our subjective participation. It is deeply fitting that a loving Father would receive our sufferings, turned into offerings, as loving sacrifices united with the Eucharistic Lord.

Think of it like an infinite reservoir. Christ's **condign merit** is the water—the endless, objective supply of saving grace that He alone provides by right. But our **congruous merit**—our little, faithful offerings of daily pain united with the Eucharist—acts as the faucet. When you offer up your heartbreak, your loneliness, or your illness for a loved one who has strayed, your congruous merit turns the handle. It opens up the floodgates, allowing Christ's **condign graces** to rush directly and powerfully into their lives.

3. **For the salvation of the world:** By the power of the Holy Spirit, we actually participate in Christ Jesus' ongoing work of saving souls. When we suffer well and unite it to the altar, we are helping to pull others into heaven.

This is not just a theological concept; it is a concrete way of life. In fact, it is the very heart and charism of the Marian Eucharistic Missionaries (MEMs). Our mission is simple but world-changing: **To turn sufferings into offerings through the Eucharistic Lord for the salvation of others.**

To know what this actually looks like in flesh and blood, we look to Mary. If anyone had the right to despair, it was her. She had to endure the ultimate “bad”—watching her innocent Son be tortured and murdered. Simeon had prophesied that a sword would pierce her heart, and on Calvary, that sword was twisted.

But look at what Mary does at the foot of the cross. Amidst the screaming crowds, the mocking soldiers, and the absolute horror of that day, she does not run away. She does not hide. She does not try to numb the pain. The Gospel of John tells us that she *stood* by the cross. The Greek word used here implies taking a stand. She took a stand by choosing to continue believing when the entire world went dark.

Mary couldn't physically take Jesus down from the cross. She couldn't stop the crucifixion. But even if she could, would she have stopped it? Knowing that this is what Jesus said He came to do all along? Instead, she did something profoundly powerful. Defying the world's understanding of suffering, by the power of the Holy Spirit, she deliberately united her agonizing emotional pain with the physical suffering of her Son.



If you have ever seen the Schoenstatt Unity Cross, it captures this mystery perfectly. It depicts Mary standing at the foot of the cross, but she is not empty-handed. She holds a chalice raised close to His pierced heart. In that moment, Mary is acting much like a deacon at Mass. Just as the deacon stands next to the priest at the altar and raises the chalice, Mary stands next to Jesus, the eternal High Priest. She is there not only to receive the flood of water and blood pouring from His side, but to actively offer it up to the Father, mingled with the congruous offering of her own pierced heart.

Mary is the absolute blueprint for everything we have just talked about. Christ's suffering on that cross was the **condign merit**—the infinite ocean of grace that saved the world. But Mary's faithful, agonizing offering of that chalice was the ultimate **congruous merit**. Through her profound suffering, she

participated in the redemption of humanity more intimately than any other creature in history.

This is exactly why the Eucharist is the perpetual memorial of our faith. Calvary is not just a tragic event locked in the past; it is made present on the altar at every single Mass. The Eucharist is our God-given means to unite our suffering to Christ for the good of others. To live out the mission of a Marian Eucharistic Missionary—which is, in truth, the mission of every single Christian—is to stand exactly where Mary stood, doing exactly what Mary did.

When your heart is broken, when you receive the terrible diagnosis, when your family is falling apart, you do not have to fall into despair. You can take a stand. You can stand at the foot of the cross, spiritually place your pain into the chalice on the altar, and say: *"Lord, I cannot fix this. But like Mary, I offer this pierced heart to You. Use it to save souls."*