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Humans experience suffering on physical, spiritual level

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Patrick Coffin, host of the popular radio program "Catholic Answers Live," will address the "Gospel of Suffering" on Thursday, Feb. 2, during a luncheon event hosted by the diocesan Communications and Respect Life Offices. Coffin will also speak at the annual Real Presence Radio fundraiser event that evening.

"Catholic Answers Live" airs locally on Real Presence Radio from 5 to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.

In 1984, Blessed John Paul II issued a letter to the faithful titled "On the Meaning of Human Suffering." John Paul II was no stranger to suffering. He personally experienced the many forms of human suffering throughout the course of his lifetime. From the deaths of his parents at an early age to the horrendous evil of war, he lived firsthand the annihilation of humans, cultures and the consequences of hate.

He had his own physical sufferings of being shot, and then living with the effects of Parkinson's disease in old age. But he also experienced another side of suffering that we all encounter, the interior suffering of the soul — that moral suffering that comes about because of our personal sinfulness or the transgressions and failings of others.

We as human beings suffer in a way that is different from animals. Both animals and humans can experience physical pain because we both have bodies. Yet, as John Paul II describes, "suffering is something that is still wider than sickness, more complex, and at the same time more deeply rooted in humanity itself."

Humans experience suffering precisely because we are integrated beings; we have a body and a spiritual soul. We can realize that our bodies are in pain — that something is "not right" within us spiritually. And this spiritual suffering begs us to ask: "Why am I suffering? What is the meaning and purpose of my suffering?"

Yet, those are difficult questions with no easy answer for the person who suffers. We experience suffering because of the absence of a good, or what we call either a physical or moral evil that is present in our lives. Anytime there is a wanting of the human goods that are due to us, we can experience suffering.

The physical evil of disease that affects the human body in its many forms is a distortion of the good that health is to us; the effects of natural disasters that may leave us lacking in clothing or food is a physical evil because we all need the good of protection from the elements and nutrition to preserve our life; the effects of abuse, of not being loved by those who should love us, robs us of the moral good of human relationships and can cause interior sufferings of the heart. And the effects of sin that separate us from our communion with God can lead to a definitive, or eternal suffering "in the loss of eternal life, being rejected by God - damnation" (Salvific Doloris, n. 14).

An understanding of the different kinds of suffering we can encounter raises further questions about the roots of suffering. Do we suffer because of a punishment due for sin?

Then why do the innocent suffer? Are natural disasters a consequence for moral evils, such as abortion? If God is all loving - then why do people suffer from violence and injustice?

The answer to the question of suffering can rightly be found in the person of Jesus Christ. For the mission of Jesus, his coming as man, his own suffering, passion and death are found in his response of love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus is the "Word of the Cross." He becomes united to us in a particular way because he "has born our griefs and carried our sorrows."

Christ's own sufferings were not meant to do away with our personal sufferings, but rather, as the French poet Paul Claudel said, "He did not come to explain it; he came to fill it with his presence."

It is the "Word of the Cross" that redeems our wounded nature and ends humanity's destiny of definitive suffering. The doors of eternal life are open once again to human persons because of the redemptive sufferings of Christ. The cross is also an invitation for us to be transformed and to share in the sufferings of Christ.

Our sufferings can become for us a means of conversion, a discovery of the spiritual greatness that the human person is capable of, and cooperation with the graces of the crucified Christ.

In 2006 Patrick Coffin and his wife experienced this "Word of the Cross" in a very personal and real way. Their daughter, Naomi, died from a rare form of Trisomy 9. Patrick says that it's "one thing to talk about the cross, but it's quite another thing when you feel like you're hanging on it."

On Feb. 2, he will share his story with the hope that others will be helped by his message of God's unspeakable compassion. You are invited to join us for this inspiring presentation on the "Gospel of Suffering."

Rachael Sauvageau is director of the Respect Life Office.