

# FRANCISCAN LIVING

## Suffering and Transformation

By Francine Gikow, OFS

What does suffering have to do with transformation? Do we really have to suffer to be transformed?

Yes! Suffering *can* lead to transformation and yes, we do have to suffer! As Pope Benedict XVI has said, “Love is always a process involving purification, renunciations and painful transformations of ourselves — and that is how it is a journey to maturity.”<sup>1</sup>

Suffering can lead to bitterness if we don’t make the right choices. However, if we look at suffering through a spiritual lens, it can awaken us (or “sensitize” us) to the areas in our lives that need change, conversion and transformation. If we avoid suffering or avoid looking at our suffering, we miss the chance for transformation and maturation in our spiritual life.

So how can we remove the blocks that prevent this transformation? First, we have to get comfortable with suffering. We have to accept it as part of life. Not only do we have to accept it, but we have to learn to embrace it! *Embrace* it you say? That sounds almost masochistic! But our lives as Christians demand that we suffer. There is no easy way.

God’s love though, is already present in our suffering, even though we may not be able to “feel” it. God is LOVE and we know He is ever present. We have to remind ourselves that we are already in the presence of LOVE when we suffer. We can unite ourselves with this LOVE and that makes all the difference!

Furthermore, with prayer and contemplation, we can become comfortable in suffering so we can be open to the tender embraces of our God and experience Him. The practice of contemplation makes us available to see God as the “Suffering Servant” — for we share in his passion, and He shares in ours, and that shared love opens outward to others.

Union with my loving God also changes the lens through which I see suffering. God’s love can supersede the anguish of suffering and can take me outside of my self-centered reality and refocus me toward others. Father Francis exhorted us in this effort when he said: “Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He who gives Himself totally for you may receive you totally!”<sup>2</sup>

Our suffering then becomes a reason to do things differently — now with the eyes of God. We become more sensitized to the needs of others and their own suffering because we too have suffered. We accompany others in their suffering and become a vessel of God to

them, even when they cannot perceive God themselves. As St. Francis says, “We are *spouses [of Him]*, when by the Holy Spirit the faithful soul is united with our Lord, Jesus Christ.... We are *mothers,... when... we give birth to Him* through a holy life which must give life to others by example.”<sup>3</sup>

The poem that follows can be used for further meditation. It is my gift to you.

### *The Mystery of Suffering*

By Francine Gikow, OFS

*Emotional pain-emotional rawness*

*At first you deny it — but it returns and you're left with the grief.*

*Then you bargain: “Maybe if I'm a better person, then this will cease.”*

*But the pain keeps coming no matter what you do.*

*You cry until you're exhausted, but the hurt is still there.  
You crawl into a hole but you have to come out sometime  
and the pain is there.*

*You let it fill you and purify you and teach you about God.  
You learn to use it — to convert you, to seek what is  
important... and become closer to God.*

*So you seek a way through it; accepting it,  
Embracing it and learning from it- from the pain that is  
there.*

*Then you become aware of the mystery of suffering: the  
experience of atonement — which leads to Love.  
For suffering that is shared becomes Love for all .*

*Our suffering has a reason. Our suffering has meaning;  
For God is ever-present and nearer to us than ever we  
could know.*

*For the One who is LOVE is already at hand — never  
ending, fully flowing out and into the world.*

*We bring what we have encountered and share His love as  
we accompany others.*

*We are transformed as we hold onto LOVE Incarnate and  
become the mystery of suffering with God for all.*

*To share in Christ's suffering and His sharing in ours,  
Is the meaning for the suffering: transformation is there.  
Perfect Joy!*

<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*. Ignatian Press: San Francisco, 2007, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> LtOrd, 29

<sup>3</sup> 2LtF 51,53