



# Prayer and Hope In Times of Suffering

FR. ROBIN RYAN, CP, PhD

**O**ne of my close friends suffers from a form of mental illness caused by a chemical imbalance. Agnes (not her real name) resides in an assisted living facility and, with the aid of good psychiatric care and effective medication, functions at a high level. In fact, the facility where she resides recently featured her artwork in a show and held a lovely reception in her honor.

Agnes is a person of deep faith who prays regularly. Prayer seems to be her greatest source of strength and consolation. Still, she wrestles with dark times marked by frustration, anxiety and grief. In the past, the deleterious effects of her illness have caused alienation from some of her children, and she often grieves that loss. Sometimes she asks, “Why do I have to suffer from this illness?” “Why is it that my brain does not work right?” “Why did God allow this to happen to me?”

Questions like these are asked by many people who encounter suffering in their lives. Health care providers, especially — but not only — those in pastoral care, often hear them. It is easy to succumb to the temptation to offer an immediate explanation or proverbial response to such questions. (“God has a plan for us.” “God never gives us a bigger cross than we can carry.” “There is a reason for everything.”)

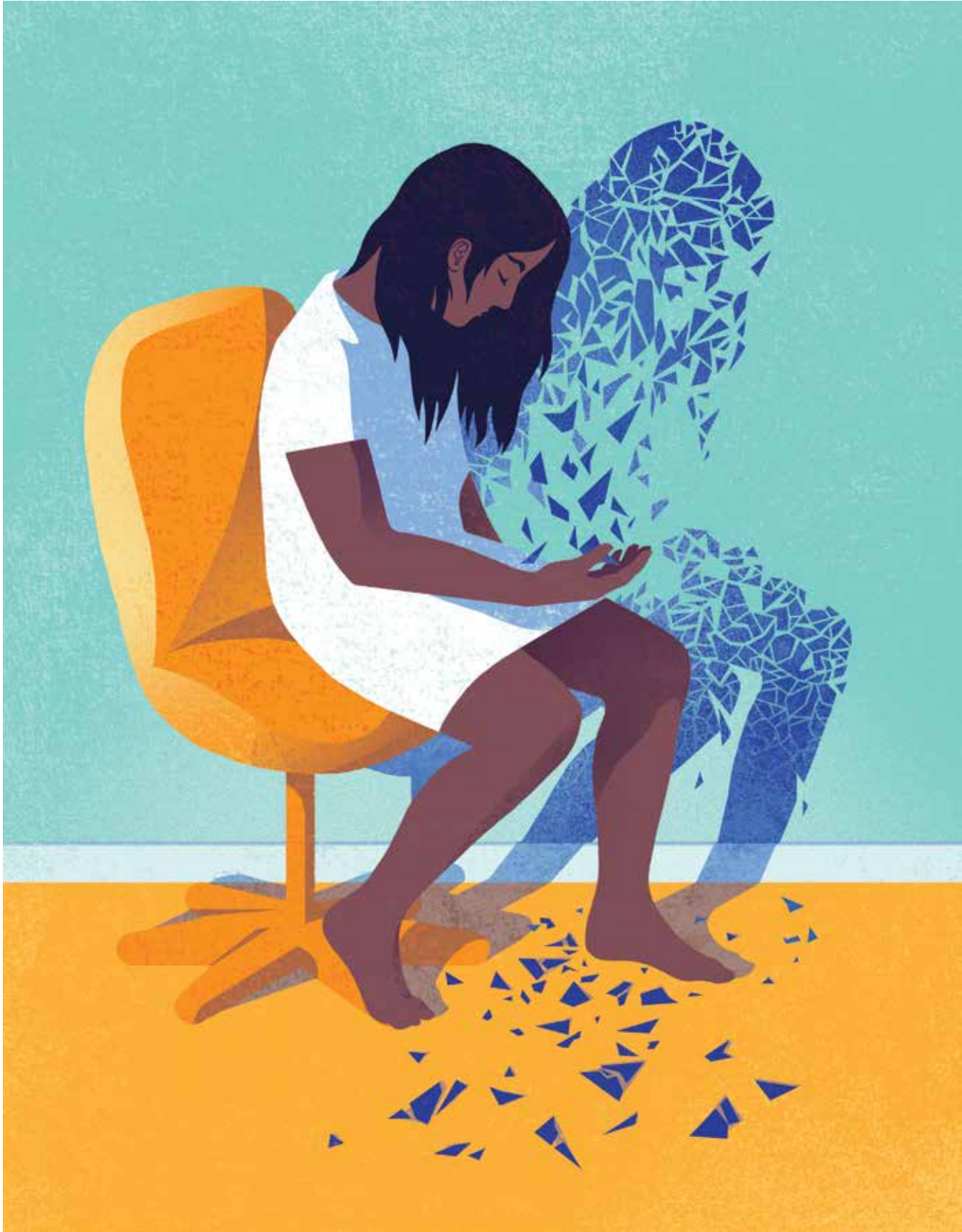
People typically make such statements as a way of expressing compassion for others and in an attempt to find meaning in perplexing situations. Sometimes it is easier to fit an experience of suffering into a structure of meaning that involves a questionable image of God than it is simply to

stand before the mystery and accompany the suffering person. We do need to speak, but what we say must respect the mystery of God and the mystery of suffering. And what we say to suffering people *about* God must help them in their own prayer; it must assist them in their talking *to* God.

I wish simply to highlight four dimensions of the Judeo-Christian tradition that can illumine our path as we journey with others and with ourselves through the dark valleys of suffering. I believe that they can serve as resources for us in

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grappling with the mystery of suffering. Although none of these resources provides a solution, they speak to us about our relation to God in times of suffering and about God’s relation to us. Thus, they can aid us in practicing prayer and cultivating hope through life’s painful moments.



## THE CRY OF LAMENT

One of the most famous prayers in the Bible is Psalm 22. The evangelists Matthew and Mark cite the first line of this psalm in recounting the final words of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” They depict Jesus uttering a raw, piercing cry of lament at the moment of death.

Of all the types of psalms within the Bible, laments constitute the greatest number. The Hebrew Scriptures bear direct and compelling testimony to the crying out of the sufferer. The people of ancient Israel expressed their feelings to God with remarkable honesty and boldness. Scripture scholar Fr. Daniel Harrington, SJ, highlights the significance of this lament tradition for contemporary believers.<sup>1</sup> He observes that praying these lament psalms can help people in pain to get in touch with their intense emotions and to address God directly and without religious censorship. These psalms also help us to recognize that we belong to a tradition and a community of faith; we are not alone in this experience. We stand within a faith tradition and are connected to many other people, those living and those who have gone before us in faith. This awareness can ease the sense of isolation that suffering people often feel. The fact that the Gospel tradition portrays Jesus as praying Psalm 22 from the cross means that Jesus plunged into the very depths of human suffering and identified himself with the pain, but also with the faith, of generations of people.<sup>2</sup>

People of faith strive to be careful in their language about God and in their address of God. We want to be reverent. But there are times when the most reverent act is to be as honest as possible in our conversation with God. To pour out our souls to God. For the people of the Bible, God was so real to them, so present and involved in their lives, that they knew they could and even should speak to God about everything that was happening to them. And that was precisely the way in which God remained real to them, even amid experiences that defied rational explanation. This lament tradition is an important resource for the emotional and spiritual care of the sick and dying. There are times of intense suffering in people’s lives when they are left speechless, without words. Caregivers should respect such silence. At the same time,

the movement from pain-filled silence to the cry of lament can further the process of healing.<sup>3</sup>

## JESUS’ PROCLAMATION OF THE REIGN OF GOD

The second resource in the Christian tradition that can help us in approaching prayer and cultivating hope is Jesus’ proclamation of the reign, or the kingdom, of God. The Gospels attest to this proclamation as the very heart of Jesus’ public ministry. For example, the author of the Gospel of Mark begins his narrative of Jesus’ public ministry in this way: “After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ‘This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.’” (Mark 1:14-15).

Then Mark proceeds to give us a breathless account of what this proclamation entailed by describing a series of snapshots of Jesus’ ministry. These snapshots include: the cure of a demoniac in the Capernaum synagogue, the healing of

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Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, the cleansing of a leper, and the cure and forgiveness of a paralytic who is brought to Jesus by his friends. In the midst of this flurry of activity, Mark writes: “When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. The whole town was gathered at the door. He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons . . .” (Mark 1:32-34). The reader of the Gospel immediately receives the impression that the announcement of the reign of God and what is taking place in these life-giving actions of Jesus are inextricably linked.

This image of the reign of God pointed to the longing of ancient Israel for God to come in power and rule the world in the way that God had always intended creation to be. It connoted the drawing near of God to God’s beloved creation to establish the right order of things. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God in words, especially



through his incisive and provocative parables. He also made this reign of God present in people's lives through his deeds. He did that in his table fellowship with all kinds of people, his forgiveness of sinners and his healings and exorcisms. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry show that when God's reign became present in and through him, people found life. They experienced what the Jewish people meant by *shalom* — wholeness and peace. This restoration affected the bodily as well as the spiritual dimensions of the person.

The tradition of Jesus' healing ministry can be both consoling and confusing to contemporary believers. People who have prayed long and hard for healing for themselves or their loved ones can wonder why their sincere prayers have not been heard. Thus caregivers must be wise in the ways in which they formulate the prayers they share with those to whom they minister, lest they imply that a cure depends upon the genuineness of the suffering person's faith. Jesus did not heal everyone in first-century Israel. But in his public ministry, he did reveal God as the God of life, about whom the second-century saint and theologian Irenaeus of Lyons said: "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." Although our prayers for healing may not result in a cure, we can be confident that our petition for the healing presence of Christ will be answered. It is Christ's faithful presence that brings hope and peace, even during times of affliction.

#### THE RESURRECTION OF THE CRUCIFIED JESUS

The third resource in our tradition is the conviction that God raised the rejected, crucified Jesus from the dead. It is important to remember that Jesus' death was a scandal to many people. Crucifixion was a form of execution reserved for enemies of the state and rebellious slaves, and it was designed to be a deterrent to anyone who might think of opposing the Roman empire. This was an experience of traumatic suffering for Jesus himself and for his disciples, who had come to identify their lives with his. To proclaim that a man who had been crucified is the Son of God and the Savior would have sounded ludicrous to many people. When Paul speaks of the "foolishness" of the message of the cross, he is not exaggerating (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

Something momentous must have happened, then, that impelled frightened, traumatized disci-

ples to go forth and make this bold proclamation. That "something" was the experience of Easter. It was the presence and impact of the risen Christ that enabled the disciples to look back on his life and begin to make sense of things. Reflecting from the vantage point of the resurrection, believers soon proclaimed the death of Jesus not simply as a tragic injustice, but as, in some mysterious way, intrinsic to God's saving activity. The Easter experience also convinced his followers that, despite his rejection by religious and civil authorities, God ultimately had been revealed in Jesus — that Jesus is the human face of God. The resurrection disclosed to them that in and through Jesus, the reign of God had been inaugurated, even though its fullness was still to come. Theologian Fr. Gerald O'Collins, SJ, sums it up in this way: "In short, the resurrection fully and finally revealed the meaning and truth of Christ's life, person, work and death. It set a divine seal on Jesus and his ministry."<sup>4</sup>

The experience of the risen Christ also led believers to a renewed understanding of God. It showed them that God can be found present in the suffering one, even in one undergoing a shameful and horrific death by crucifixion.<sup>5</sup> God is not distant or aloof from suffering; rather, in the person of Christ, who was truly human and truly divine, God came to know suffering from the inside. The Easter experience disclosed that at Calvary, the Father was faithfully present to the Son in his suffering, silently at work from within to overcome the power of death. The God who is revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection is the God whose character comes to be known as tenacious fidelity and enduring communion. And the presence of the risen Christ showed that God is the Resurrector; bringing life out of death is God's signature activity.

#### THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

A fourth resource from the Christian tradition is our belief that the church is the Body of Christ. Paul lifts up this image in his First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, and his Letter to the Romans, also chapter 12. The idea is further developed in the Letter to the Ephesians, where Christ is acknowledged as the head of this body (Ephesians 1:22-23). The New Testament teaching reflects the vital, organic connection between Christ and the church, indeed the vital, organic



link between Christ and every believer.

Saint Augustine expounded this teaching in an exquisite way. He accentuated the enduring bond between Christ and the church and the way that believers really participate in the life of Christ. He liked to speak of the “Whole Christ” (*totus Christus*). Particularly in his commentaries on the psalms, Augustine taught that when the church prays, it is the whole Christ, head and body, who utters these prayers. So he could say, “The one sole savior of his body is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who prays for us, prays in us and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, and he is prayed to by us as our God.”<sup>6</sup>

Augustine appeals to this idea of the Whole Christ in his commentary on the psalms of lament. Just as Jesus prayed the psalms when he suffered on earth, so the risen Christ prays in those believers who cry out in lament to God. Augustine affirms, “when we hear his voice, we must hear-ken to it as coming from both head and body; for whatever he suffered, we too suffered in him, and whatever we suffer, he too suffers in us . . .”<sup>7</sup> Augustine illumines the way in which Christ is in the closest possible solidarity with the suffering members of his body.

## REFLECTIONS

These are four resources from our faith tradition that can help us to pray and to preserve hope in moments of affliction. The tradition of the lament inspires us to turn to the psalms for help in praying at difficult moments. The biblical laments also give us permission to use our own spontaneous words to speak to God directly and honestly, with the trust that God truly does listen, when we are at our best and even when we may feel that we are at our worst.

The belief that the church is the body of Christ assures us that there is a vital, organic link between Christ and every member of his body. When we try to pray in times of suffering, it is Christ who is praying in us and for us.

Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God and the good news of his resurrection reveal to us that God is the God of life, the God who is the source of life and the one who restores life to those who have had life drained out of them.

My friend Agnes continues to pray and to hope as she confronts the challenges of mental illness.

Her faith has been an inspiration for me. Sometimes she alludes to the redemptive grace that has come through her illness, especially the way in which it has made her more sensitive to the suffering of others.

I do not have any clinching answers to the questions she raises in the dark times, especially the questions about the “why?” of her illness. Suffering remains a mystery in our world and in our lives. It is a mystery, not a problem. Problems have solutions; mysteries are not amenable to rational solutions. But our tradition does offer resources that teach us the God to whom we turn in prayer is the God of compassion, who desires life for the world and for each one of us. In the midst of suffering that is often inexplicable, Christians cling to the hope that the God who brought life out of death for Jesus is always on the move to bring life out of death for God’s beloved sons and daughters. And so we can pray with trust and hope.

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## NOTES

1. Daniel Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer? A Scriptural Approach to the Human Condition* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 1-12. See also Robin Ryan, *God and the Mystery of Human Suffering: A Theological Conversation Across the Ages* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 27-30.
2. Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms I* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 150.
3. See Phil Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 71-90.
4. Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.
5. O’Collins, *Christology*, 107.
6. Augustine, “Exposition of Psalm 85, 1” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Expositions of the Psalms, III/18*, trans. Maria Boulding, (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2002), 220.
7. Augustine, “Exposition of Psalm 62, 2” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Expositions of the Psalms, III/17*, trans. Maria Boulding, (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2002) 230-31.

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