

Christ

the Physician of our Souls and Bodies



CATECHETICAL YEAR 2021-22
EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES OF AMERICA

Stand Firm in the Midst of Chaos

In the October Gospel readings, we hear Jesus perform two miracles, both from St. Luke. The following reflection explores Christ's compassion. His compassion is experienced in His presence. He stands firm in the midst of human suffering. Jesus enters into the "chaos" of suffering, death, loss, darkness and fear. Then, as the Physician of Souls and Bodies, by His presence and power, He restores His fragmented creation to wholeness. Finally, the reflection will shed light on our own participation in the healing presence and power of Christ in the midst of human suffering here and now.

Jesus Enters Into Our Suffering

The first miracle we'll hear this month is about a widow in the city of Nain. Her only son has died, and her son is carried on a funeral bier while she mourns. She doesn't mourn alone. A large number of people from the city are with her. The scene reflects a kind of chaos and tumult surrounding the death of the widow's son. She is already without a husband, she's a widow. And now her only son has died. In the ancient world, without her husband and only son, she is vulnerable physically and financially. This woman's suffering is profound. She has lost two of the most important human relationships she has.

Before their deaths, we may assume her husband and son supported her. Symbolically, she was inside the city walls, stable, safe and secure. Her secure life is unravelling by their deaths. Symbolically, the funeral procession out of the gate of the city is the fragmentation of her safety, security and stability. Her life and future hangs in the balance. She is vulnerable. Symbolically, she is being swept up by the chaotic forces of life outside the city. Outside the city walls she is defenseless. Her now dead son, her last hope for strength, she escorts from inside the walls of the city to his burial place, a place of death and decay and corruption. Symbolically, the funeral procession is the unravelling of her life, marked by suffering, grief and mourning.

Then, Jesus sees her. He sees her suffering. He has compassion on the poor widow of Nain. He enters into the chaos of her suffering. He remains firm and present in the midst of the weeping crowd. He doesn't shrink away from the discomfort of their suffering. He enters into it. The Lord, the widow's Helper and Redeemer, enters into her unravelling life and prevents it from falling apart. He stops the funeral procession by His almighty and loving hand. Jesus stops the descent from life to death.

Jesus remains present in the midst of suffering. He has compassion, He "suffers with" her. But, He does more than passively stand firm. He does what is in His power to ease her suffering. He raises up the widow's dead son and so stops the widow's further descent into profound grief in her loss. Jesus commands the widow, "do not weep." These aren't words of flattery or false comfort, as if spoken from a place of helplessness. Jesus commands her not to weep, because He is capable of restoring her life. He has the power to restore the poor widow to strength and stability by healing her son. The Lord stood firm in the face of her grief and her suffering, He suffered with her, and did what was in His

power to restore her life and ease her suffering.

The second miracle we'll hear this month is the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. Just as the first miracle takes place outside the gate of the city, this event takes place on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. The region was primarily inhabited by pagans. Because the Gerasenes kept swine, they were not "inside" the Law. Symbolically, they are outside of the kingdom of God. The demons, chaos, darkness and suffering dwell outside the grace of the kingdom of God. Out here, a man possessed by demons is living and moving among the tombs, among the dead.

Jesus steps out onto the land, an unclean land outside the Law. Despite the fear and chaos, Jesus enters into the suffering of the pagan territory. The demon-possessed man comes out to meet Him. The man's countrymen did what they could to restrain him. They tried to manage the fear and anxiety surrounding the darkness of demonic possession. They used their limited means to keep the suffering man from upsetting them with his presence. They kept him under guard and chained. But, only the loving hand of God and the healing presence of His light and goodness will ultimately restrain the chaotic forces of evil that drive this poor pagan to live naked among the tombs. After the dramatic healing of the man, and the destruction of the unclean swine, the Gerasenes don't rejoice that their brother is clothed and in his right mind. They don't recognize the light and goodness, the beauty and harmony, that has just entered into the chaos of their lawless pagan city. Instead of rejoicing in His presence and entering into the kingdom of God themselves, they ask Jesus to leave them alone in their darkness.

The Lord's compassion and mercy do not end with His rejection by the Gerasenes. The restored man, clothed and in his right mind, begs Jesus that he may stay with Him. Jesus sends him away. He commands the man to go back to the pagan city, to re-enter into the chaos and darkness from which he came, and bring glory to God by proclaiming the good things that God has done for him. A man once held by the chains of evil now shines a bright light for those still in darkness.

Jesus enters into the darkness and the chaos of the lawless. He enters into their suffering and stands firm in the face of it. And by His presence, light dispels darkness. Jesus uses His power to heal and make whole. But, not everyone rejoices in the light and desires to be made whole. Regardless, Jesus does not abandon the Gerasenes to the same fate as the swine: to drive themselves off the edge of a cliff to their destruction. Instead, Jesus empowers the man, clothed and in his right mind, to proclaim and make present the same healing power that had saved him.

Our Mission to Heal: Christ Made Present

The Church continues this mission of healing. The Church stands firm and makes itself present in the midst of the darkness of human suffering. The clergy and faithful are all members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Wherever we are, whatever our occupation, whomever we are with, God provides opportunities to participate in the healing ministry of the Head of the Church, Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the midst of the chaos in the world, we may bring comfort and healing through our firm and prayerful presence with those who suffer. Then, moved to compassion, with whatever power we have, we may restore the fallen.

When our loved ones suffer, it can be difficult to stand firm as a healing presence for at least two reasons:

- 1) suffering is uncomfortable and gives an urge to remove ourselves from the situation prematurely, and

2) if we remain present, we risk being carried away by the emotional and spiritual chaos.

Suffering evokes discomfort and a desire to remove ourselves from the suffering. If we follow the urge, we may unintentionally ignore and abandon our loved ones. But, in the presence of suffering, we may feel helpless. We want the suffering to go away, but may lack the power and skill to heal and restore. So, instead of remaining a healing presence, in our discomfort, we speak an untruth to calm our fears. Or we may avoid the subject, rather than listen actively.

Ultimately, to participate in Christ's healing power, we must:

1) remain present in suffering, and

2) with a sense of humility, act within our power and skill to heal and restore.

Our Lord stepped onto the land of the Gerasenes and approached the crowd in Nain. He does not flee. He stands firm, courageously. To bring healing, we must stand firm when we see suffering and take courage, regardless of the fear and discomfort. But, while present in the midst of suffering, we can't be swept away by the chaos, either. Jesus isn't swept away by the mourning crowd in Nain or the fear and darkness in the land of the Gerasenes. When suffering with our loved ones, we need courage, our words must be true, and we must do only what is in our power to heal and restore.

The priest's presence makes present the Physician of Our Souls and Bodies. Every time a priest hears a confession, buries the dead, anoints the sick, or visits a grieving family in their home, Christ enters into our suffering symbolically. The priest, by his ministry, mystically reveals God in the midst of the tragic suffering of our world. The priest does this in the power and skill given to him. Likewise, all the faithful are called to the compassion of our Lord. In whatever capacity we have, we enter into the suffering of our loved ones and our communities. We carry the light of Christ and it dispels the darkness. If our power and skill can heal and restore, then in courage with our presence, we can restore those who suffer in our own little worlds. Stand firm in the midst of chaos.