

One of the age old questions we face as humans and as Christians is “why?” Why do certain things happen that seem so unfair? The things people do to one another; natural disasters; human suffering. The band “Genesis” even had a song about it called simply “Tell Me Why.” As Saint Paul writes in our second reading today: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways” and he wonders who has known the mind of God.

Now does this mean that God is impossible to understand? Not at all. But it does mean that God isn't like understanding say another person, or things that are part of the world that we can study. Rather God is other, but also one of us too as Joan Osborne might say. And what that means is like Peter, who makes that journey of faith that waxes and wanes allowing him to declare Jesus as the Christ, while the next minute denying the future Passion and then denying Jesus too. But through it all, Peter and the others will continually grow in their faith and trust in the words of Jesus and the mission that they were given, knowing if they don't quite always fully understand the plan, they do understand that God is journeying with them and would never abandon them. Faith is indeed a journey, and what we

find is that while we might not always understand God, God understands us and does not abandon us.

Marjoe and Jean Siongco, a married couple, like all of us have endured suffering; but over the course of their marriage, they had many trials.

However they never wavered in their faith. In sharing their story, Marjoe (Mario Jose) comes from the Philippines, from a family of 5 kids that were raised at Roman Catholics and went to schools run by the Augustinians and Dominicans. He met his wife while in college and were accounting majors, and they fell in love.

Jean came from a Chinese family from a city about 300 miles north of Manila. She is the second child in the family, and they had to deal with a long distance relationship but were married in December of 1980. They became CPAs.

In 1979, Mario left Manila for Saudi Arabia to work for an oil company. She followed him to Saudi Arabia and was working at the same oil company. They were able to practice their faith through a royal decree through the king to Christians working at the company. They welcomed two kids, Mark

and Kay. There was a Catholic Parish, Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima that did not have a physical building, but was set up for Catholics working at the oil company. Mark and Kay received their sacraments, and things seemed to be going well for them in Saudi Arabia as Mario says they enjoyed most of life's material comforts and delights.

That all changed though in 1993. Jean was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. It was discovered by accident when she was being seen for a cold and sore throat when a lump was found in her neck. "Cancer" shook them both as it would for any of us. They turned to God for prayers of healing. An operation to remove the cancerous thyroid nodules was performed; there was risks of impact to her voice, but their prayers were answered and it was a success.

Beforehand Mario says, they were just the average religious family out there; weekly Mass goes. God he says was there to be taken at our convenience, on an as needed basis. Life was revolving around them, what they needed, and mostly he notes these were earthly things. God used to be passive for him; but now that changed, for he says God came to us when we were in pain and suffering. Cancer shattered their peace of mind;

and he says when we turned to God, he “came and never abandoned us.” Their lives were normal again with their new found peace; Jean's cancer he says made us realize that only in prayers and communion with God do we gain peace. And this paved the way to the start of spiritual growth for them both. Jean got more involved in prayer groups and a Rosary Novena Group. Mario saw her transformation and her devotion to God grow stronger, as it did for their children too. For Mario, he saw their growth spiritually; as nothing would take his wife and kids out of the Legion of Mary meetings. A few years down the road at his wife's urging, Mario started turning up his faith too, getting involved in a group that did talks, discussions and Adoration activities along with faith sharing.

So undergoing all this, despite so much going well in their lives, come 2002 they hear the word again: cancer. And this time tumor calcifications were detected in Jean's right breast during a routine exam. She underwent surgery and they again lifted this illness to their Lord. In Mario's words, they said more prayers, but also realized their faith grows not only in comfortable conditions but when they are challenged and tested. They looked at cancer not as a curse, but in Mario's words “if God allowed it to happen, then there must be a purpose, a reason, and something good will

come out of this sickness.” Jean recovered, returned to work, and they got involved in another prayer/charismatic group Couples for Christ. Jean joined the parish council and became a liturgy coordinator at daily Mass, and started reading more religious books. They both became Eucharistic Ministers and marriage coordinators.

Come 2006, the cancer came back, this time in Jeans’ left breast, which she had to have removed and endure chemo. Then in 2007, she was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer with metastases in her lungs, pelvic bones and liver. Her weight was just coming back and then she is hit with that and more chemo. What else could go wrong, Mario wondered; and his answer was “Nothing, for as we continued with our journey, we lifted everything to Our Lord and accepted His will for us. We trusted him fully, knowing he walks with us on this journey and has the best plan laid ahead.”

Their faith kept them going; they found peace. Jean kept up hope and she was full of life, and her attitude inspired others like Mario’s sister Tessa who faced an ovarian cancer diagnosis. Jean became an online cancer blogger to motivate and give advice to others. Mario saw how cancer victims could find hope in pain through giving that hope to others. Her cancer stabilized

and they were able to do pilgrimages, visiting churches and basilicas, and while there was constant oncology clinic visits with tests, meds and transfusions, Jean never slowed down. She served her Church and prayer groups and her faith only grew.

By the spring of 2014 though her tumor markers climbed and the bone metastases progressed; it got to the point where she could not sit or stand in bed. The pain never left, and Mario could only hold his wife. They gave her pain meds, and did more chemo, but she lost her battle on December 10, 2015. Mario says it was “God’s appointed time” but it did not come before she manifested for the last time her love for God in prayer.

So what to make of what they went through? Mario says death is not something we want to talk about or experience for it comes with emptiness, sadness, despair and even anger. But not for Jean; rather she embraced her inevitable death with happiness and zeal for she looked forward to meeting her Lord. Mario says for those left behind, God is present too. And they hold onto the promise that who believes in Him has eternal life and Jean is in a better place and is praying for her husband and children as they continue their journey. He also thanks God for letting him experience

the love of God through the life of his wife, and writes how he realizes that throughout her illness, in the many events God had allowed into their lives, he and Jean were actually preparing Mario for that very moment of her death - to be strong in faith and prayer. For this he says is the same faith and prayerful life she took with her when she left for heaven.

He retired after 40 years in Saudi Arabia in 2019. He notes he does not know how his journey will end, but he knows that the Lord will always be there for him as before. He left Saudi Arabia with material blessings, but he says even more importantly he returned home in spiritual richness with a deeper faith in Jesus, his Savior and Redeemer.

“Lord you are the center of my life” is a song we so often sing. But what about when the boat of our life is tossed about? As a priest, there is no manual I’m given for the perfect words to say to a person who lost a child, who was given a diagnosis, or had someone they love betray them. The healer in you wants to find those words; to say “here is God’s plan let me explain it to you.” But of course this isn’t something one can answer clearly. Saint John Paul II, in his encyclical “On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering” notes now humanity can’t find a satisfactory answer, and evil

obscures our vision of God sometimes to the point of atheism where we say “if a loving God existed, He would not allow this to happen; therefore there is no God.” It’s a reaction we can have to undeserved evil. However, God is not just out there far away or entirely unknowable though some aspects of Him are unknowable.

On the one hand, God is other; God is the Creator. So while we as humans can define things like animals, or stars, or planets, we can’t define God. God can’t be defined or contrasted or compared with anything in the world.

But God does give us some answers. Some suffering is a punishment for sin, such as the suffering we endure when we make a bad choice and it costs us say a job or a friendship or trust. But many suffering is not punishment at all. However, the answer definitively comes in Jesus Christ. And this is what Mario and Jean realized; as John Paul II says, God does not just send the Son, He gives the Son, who comes to give us eternal life, the exact opposite of perishing. Jesus was around the suffering and the sick all the time while on earth; and when Peter says he will not have to suffer Jesus rebukes Peter, because Jesus is determined to face what lies ahead. God is other, but God is a person in Jesus - and in Jesus, all of the



suffering and sin of humanity is brought to the Cross, and Jesus is victorious. He says that famous Psalm (22) "My God my God why have you forsaken me," but still Jesus trusts in the plan of the Father, and His passion is the culmination of human suffering linked to love which can draw good from it. We as humans share in this; we share in the redemption, but also share in the suffering, including the suffering for others, like Mary endured journeying with her Son in his last moments, or the suffering so many endured for the sake of the Gospel. The Cross then changes suffering entirely - the key is to remember God will always help us and lead us home even if his ways are mysterious.

What then to make of our suffering or how to make sense of it? Again, we do not suffer alone, for Jesus is journeying with us.

But also, sometimes our suffering as John Paul writes "conceals a grace which draws a person close to Christ, resulting in a deep conversion by which the person is changed to the core." Those who suffer display "interior maturity" and "spiritual heroism" he says which in turn can deepen others' faith. I know I have been inspired in how I've seen people deal with suffering too; from my grandmother's battle with pancreatic cancer where

she was so much at peace knowing where she was going (home) to people I visit as a priest. I've come to know so many over the years who teach me how I hope to handle my own Good Friday. The suffering of Christ changed our future; and our suffering can sometimes change ourselves and others too which is why it's called "redemptive." Paul says in Colossians 1:24 "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the Church." So what is "lacking" in what Jesus did for us? Nothing in what Jesus did, but in you and me. We unite our suffering to that of Jesus's to create an eternal offering of love. We suffer, often for others, and our suffering can be a powerful way to become like Christ and love like He does. Again, to return to my grandmother Pat, I'll never forget her attitude and positivity when she was in hospice, and of the love she kept saying she had for us all. She was so much at peace. This has helped my faith, much like Jean's journey then strengthened the faith of her husband Mario. The point is that while God's ways are mysterious, and God allows things to happen, good can even come out of that as the person's faith can grow but also others around them can have their faith grow too. Suffering can draw some back to God and refocus them. And a person who links their suffering to Christ's on the cross can use that to bring good to someone else.

And as one final note, it's also worth asking ourselves how are we going to suffer for others? There is the suffering that comes through no fault of our own like Jean's; but there is also the suffering in voluntarily taking up a difficult mission as Jesus does which is why Peter will be rebuked right after the profession of faith. As Mario and Jean's story goes to show you, they were living a pretty good life and believed in God; but their journey together brought so much hope to others as they did so much, but also suffered in saying "no" to some things so they could raise their kids, and be active in helping others in their parish. As we too journey through life, we need to ask ourselves am I willing to "take up my cross" and serve my family and sacrifice for them; am I willing to volunteer and make a difference; am I willing to be hated or ostracized for sharing what I believe with others. If we love one another, like the Good Samaritan, we act: we see where there is need, be it at home or in the greater community, and we do something for others by showing love. No one should suffer for just the sake of suffering. But over the course of our lives, when we are willing to sacrifice for the greater good, we can do so much to truly love one another and bring them closer to God.

Indeed, Paul is right in the ways of God are hard to understand. As CS Lewis reflected, sometimes God is like the kindly grandfather who looks at us and with his eyes says “you do not understand now, but in time, you will.” On our part, may we let go and let God, knowing that while at times the will of God can be hard to discern and know, one thing we can know is that He loves us and will never abandon us, but always journey with us to lead us home to Him.