

Embracing the Cross

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Nietzsche once exclaimed: "If God exists and does not help those who suffer, then he is a monster. And if he cannot help them, then he is not God - he does not exist."

What a mystery it is to see the suffering of so many innocents who bear the sin of others...That row of naked women and children headed to the gas chamber!...They say that after the horror of Auschwitz, belief in God is no longer possible.

No! That is not true. God became man to take the suffering of the innocent upon himself. He is the completely innocent one - the Lamb led to the slaughter - who opened not his mouth in bearing the sins of all.

The Lord Jesus not only accepted the cross for our sake, but he invited all who wish to be his followers to embrace the cross as well; for it is precisely through the cross that we prove our love for him. This month, I want to highlight someone I was privileged to know years ago who did just that: John Rook, a 20-year old hemophiliac with full-blown AIDS, the result of a bad blood transfusion. What follows are my journal excerpts that detail the Via Dolorosa travelled by John.

1991

May 18

I became emotionally drained as I watched John struggle down the aisle on his crutches. It was his great desire to be released from the hospital in time to be an usher at his sister Sherry's wedding. His mother, Mary Jane, watched proudly as he hobbled slowly towards the front of church. What a woman! Last year she buried her eldest son Donald, the father of four - a victim of the same disease. Lord, we pray for a miracle. Answer his mother's prayers, and restore John to full health.

December 9

Today John's mother had a spinal disk operated on at Children's Hospital. At supper, the seminarian intern at our parish informed me that while he was praying with John at Johns Hopkins Hospital, his only prayer was: "God, please bring my Mom through her operation O.K."

December 13

Sitting beside John's bed at Johns Hopkins today, I kept my eyes fixed on him. As he dozed off to sleep, he resembled the Lord on the cross ever more closely: Lips parched and cracked; the skin stretched taut over his protruding bones; and with the clear plastic hose draining the liquid from his lung, the similarity was complete. "Now one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, and at once there flowed out blood and water."

December 20

Mary Jane phoned this morning: "Father, John's lung collapsed again. The doctor said it's too risky to try to re-inflate it. They're sending him home. They claim he won't live to see the New Year." Replacing the receiver, I thought of Mary Jane and that verse from Lamentations: "All you who pass by this way, stop to see if there is any sorrow like unto mine."

December 22

There was a large family reunion today at the Rook residence, an early Christmas celebration for John's sake. Later in the evening, after some had departed while others were still in the kitchen, I sat down on the living room floor next to John seated in the recliner. We were alone. "You know, Father Victor, I'm afraid to die." - "So am I, John. As much as I love Jesus and want to be with him, I'm still fearful of dying. I suppose it's like everything else in life that we've never experienced...afraid of the unknown." - "Then taking Peter, James, and John, Jesus said to them: My soul is sorrowful even to the point of death."

December 31

“Happy Birthday, John! You made it: 21 years old!” - “Thanks. What did you bring me?” - “Jesus!...Why? Did you want something more?” - “Yeah...a slurpee.” After he received the Eucharist and we had prayed, I was chuckling while driving over to the Seven-Eleven: “Lord, there better be slurpees in heaven, or John will be one unhappy camper.”

1992

January 13

John has been having great difficulty swallowing an entire host. So the last few days, I've been bringing only one host to divide between him and Mary Jane. Today, the host broke quite unevenly. As I held up the smaller portion for him, he said: “Uh, uh! I want the other half.” - “But John, it's the same complete Lord under either portion.” - “Oh no! I need more of Jesus than my Mom does. Give me the other half.” And Jesus said: “Unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.”

January 20

While waiting for John to awaken this afternoon, sitting next to his mother, I remarked, “Mary Jane, I don't mean to embarrass you, but I must tell you what an example you are for me: Bearing all of this like the Rock of Gibraltar.” - “Father for John's sake, I keep my composure during the day, but at night, I let it all out. The other night he woke up and heard me. - “Hey Ma, is that you crying?” - I didn't answer. - “I don't want anyone crying around me. Got it? There's nothing to cry about.” Now there was standing beneath the cross of Jesus his Mother.

January 24

For over a week now, John has rallied considerably. As I prepared to leave after giving him Communion, I said: “John, it's encouraging to see the improvement you've made over the last two weeks. Since you're getting better, it's not necessary for me to bring you Communion every day.” - “You mean you won't be coming anymore?” - “Oh no, I'll be back...just not every day. Maybe once or twice a week.” - (Very dejected) “Well, OK...If it's got to be, I guess it's got to be.” [A flurry of thoughts hit me: His father abandoning the family when John was diagnosed HIV positive at the age of 15, the third and last of his sons with hemophilia... John seeing in me a vicarious father-figure...His mother who received such comfort during my brief daily visits.] “John, I'll tell you what...I'll be back tomorrow. See you then.”

February 2

“Hey Fr. Victor, I promised Jesus last night that if he makes me well, I'm going to go to church every Sunday. You didn't know me in my younger days. I was pretty wild back then. But now I'm seeing life different. I'm starting to understand what God's done for me. So if Jesus heals me, you won't see me missing Mass ever again.”

March 11

“Fr. Victor, did my Mom tell you? I've got to go to the hospital today. The back of one leg has a bad rash on it. They think it might be shingles. Let's pray to God it isn't.” Then Satan struck Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head...

April 21

For two days John has been in a diabetic coma. When I visited today, Mary Jane informed me: “Father, we had to cut John's pajamas off last night. We couldn't get them off any other way. The pediatric nurse from Hopkins had to give him a shot of platelets to stop the bleeding from those shingles.” Now one the soldiers tore Jesus' garments into four parts, for each soldier a part.

May 10

[Mother's Day, 8:45 p.m.] Walking from my car to the front door, I noticed in front of the hedges an

object that wasn't there yesterday...a garden statue of St. Francis. "Mary Jane, where did that statue come from?" - "It's a Mother's Day gift from John." - "From John?" - "Driving John back from a checkup at Hopkins last year, I noticed a neighbor setting up a statue of Mary on his lawn. I thought out loud, 'How I'd love to have a statue of St. Francis on my lawn one day.' John remembered. So last week he asked Nancy [his sister-in-law] to buy one for him with some money he had been saving."

May 18

John, appearing more dead than alive, greeted me faintly, and then fell right back to sleep. "Mary Jane, how much more can he take?" - "I don't know, Father. Janet was here till midnight, trying to get a needle in him to coagulate the blood flow from the shingles; but she didn't succeed. Since then, I've changed the bandages on his thigh three times, but the blood is still oozing through. He's ready though. He told my sister Shirley last night: "Aunt Shirl, I'm dying. But I'm not afraid anymore."

May 26

As I sat down to lunch, the secretary informed me there was an urgent call from John's brother, Rusty. "Father Victor, you may want to come right over. John stopped breathing a few moments ago." - "I'll be right there." When I arrived, I found Mary Jane kneeling beside John's bed, clasping his hands. There was an angelic smile on his face. With the other family members who had gathered, we knelt around the bed, praying and shedding tears of joy and sorrow.

John, my good brother - even though you loved life and relished every moment of it more than those of us blessed with full health - yours was cut off in the bloom of youth. Not once during all those months did I hear you complain, "Why me, Lord?" But your most important lesson you saved for the very end: "I'm not afraid to die. I am ready. Come, Lord Jesus!"

For those of us shouldering a difficult cross at this time, let us take courage from John Rook's marvelous example. Like him, let us make the words of St. Paul our own: "I have been crucified with Christ. So it is no longer I who live, but Christ who is living in me." Gal. 2:19-20