

A contradiction, explored.

SALT IN CHOCOLATE

“It doesn’t make any sense, Father.”

“What doesn’t, Eddy?”

“The whole deal about Jesus being crucified ... he deserved better.”

“Yea, it wasn’t fair. Jesus didn’t do anything wrong,” a young lady named Jillian offers.

Father Bob looks at the class of teens; concern about diving into theological quicksand registering in his eyes.

“Eddy, we believe we’re made in the image and likeness of God. Scripture tells us so,” he says.

“Okay”

“So, consider this. The crucifix over the altar reminds us that what we see is also an image and likeness of God. Christ suffered death on a cross for our sins. And that when we suffer, God understands us, because He, too, experienced it ...

... and in the end, triumphed over it.”

Hi, Tony here. We’re in the Sunday morning CCD class between the 9:00 and 11:30 a.m. masses. Father Bob is leading a discussion with the senior youth group about Holy Week, and particularly, Good Friday.

Eddy is Walt Robinson’s youngest son. Like many of his peers, he’s prone to mischief, yet, just when we think they’re ignoring us, they surprise us with some insight or observation that shows

us the amount of thought they have put into something. It is an interesting group

From the look in Father Bob's eye, I think he wasn't quite prepared for Eddy's statement. But knowing the good pastor, he relishes the opportunity to engage the kids, regardless of how disinterested many of them seem to be. This could be an interesting fifteen minutes or so.

What do you say we listen in?

"Yea Father," a young lady named Allison, says. "We're taught we suffer because of something two people did ten thousand years ago, then they tell us God is loving and just. Doesn't seem He's all that loving or just to me."

Heads nod subtly as young eyes look to the man in black for his reply.

"Allison," the priest says, "Your point is not only valid, but something people have wondered for thousands of years; what's the reason for and the value of, suffering? So, let's go back to Eddy's question; why did Jesus have to suffer that horrible death? And see if it was unfair."

Setting his ever-present cup of coffee on the desk, he continues.

"Okay, let me ask you this. Who in this room would eat a tablespoon of salt?" Father Bob asks.

"By itself?" Eddy laughs, making a seriously miserable face. "Not me."

From the reaction in the room, everyone agrees.

Pulling an object from his pocket, Father Bob holds it up. "Then who would eat this?" he asks.

A ripple of laughter follows the priest's question.

"If that's what I think it is," Alissa Kossarides says, laughing softly, "that's one of the four major food groups."

Chuckling, the priest puts on his reading glasses. "Then, let's read the ingredients. Let's see, sugar, unsweetened chocolate, cocoa butter, lecithin, and" ... he pauses ... "sodium ... salt. Salt in chocolate? Why would anyone put salt in chocolate?"

Silence. Then, chuckling softly, the priest sets the candy bar aside. "Because salt brings out the sweetness, the goodness, of chocolate," he says.

The class seems skeptical.

"It's difficult concept, suffering," the priest continues. "Yet, something it seems God deems valuable. Jesus redeemed a fallen world, not through intellectual brilliance or joyful participation, but rather through suffering and death. And ultimately, resurrection."

"So that's why He suffered?" Eddy asks.

"Well, Eddy, we must remember Christ's suffering was consistent with the Jewish understanding that there is no atonement for sin, without blood. That is why animal sacrifice was so widely practiced in the Jewish world of Jesus' time."

"And that's why Jesus is referred to as the 'lamb of God,'" Alissa asks?

"Yes, Alissa. In Jesus' suffering we hear the echo of the sacrificial lamb on whose back the sins of the people were piled and then sent into the desert, to die."

Pausing, Father Bob steps to a blackboard. "Can you tell me instances in which people in the gospels encountered suffering? Were scared, hurt, or lonely?"

The class falls silent for a moment. Then ... "the adulteress going to be stoned to death?"

"The lepers, the deaf man, the man born blind?" comes another response.

"Jairus when his daughter was dying?" Eddy adds.

"Or the widow in Nain whose son died," Allison says.

"Right, Allison. Jesus Himself spoke of the true nature of suffering in citing a mother giving birth. She experiences pain, yet when the child is in her arms, the pain is past, and she rejoices in her newborn child.

"So, you're saying Jesus is telling us suffering is temporary and ultimately gives way to joy?" a tall red-head named Gloria asks.

"Yes... when we hold fast to our faith despite our suffering ... exactly, Gloria. And we might say a silent prayer offering our pain or suffering in the hope and trust that our heavenly Father will see us through it," says the priest.

He continues.

"In His time with us, Jesus, Himself, encountered suffering in many forms. For instance, loneliness, or homelessness, for one, when he said, 'birds have their nests ... but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'"

Father Bob pauses, letting his words sink in. Met with silence, he continues.

"The crucifix in the sanctuary is our ultimate example. We see Christ suffering ... His passion, death, and resurrection tells us no matter how much we suffer, or feel the pain of loss, loneliness, abandonment, bigotry, hatred, or apathy, He knows our pain. Why? Because He experienced it. And I might add, to a greater degree than most of us ever will."

Again, the priest pauses to sip from his coffee.

"Imagine how the widow at Nain, or Jairus felt when her son and his daughter were given back to them," he continues. "Did they treasure their child all the more greatly in light of the suffering death brought? Did the paralytic appreciate the simple act of walking more than those who had never suffered so terrible malady?"

"Or, the lepers, appreciate their health after they was cured?" Eddy says, an understanding look rising in his eyes.

"Right Eddy. Or the deaf, the dumb, the crippled and the lame. Do you think they appreciated their health more than those who had never suffered the things they did?"

Heads nod around the room as the priest's words hit their mark.

"We are baptized into a life with Christ, one that includes pain and suffering," the priest continues. "We hear it in Jesus' words, 'take up your cross and follow me.' It's natural not to want sorrow, pain, or crosses. And we should avoid them if possible. There is nothing wrong with that. We don't like

to think about those things, more less experience them. Jesus didn't either. 'Father let this cup pass from me, He said ...' Yet, His trust in His Father's Will sees Him thru. Like Christ, we must come to understand that beyond suffering lies the life we are made for. One with God ... where every tear will be washed away ... in a kingdom Jesus called, Paradise."

Father Bob, pauses ... "one final question," he says.

"If you were to ask God, does He understand our suffering, our pain, might his answer simply be ..."

The priest pauses, a twinkle rising in his eyes.

"Yes my child ... been there, done that ... got the tee shirt."

Soft laughter ripples through the room

"End of class; see you next week," Father Bob says with a wave of his hand. "Oh, and bring a chocolate bar for a snack!"

And a cheer is heard as the kids head for the door.

Salt is a flavor enhancer.

Visit a Roman Catholic church and one notices a crucifix adorning the main altar. Often, criticism is leveled at Rome saying the unadorned cross is the true symbol Christ's victory over death and the glory of man's salvation. The inclusion of the suffering Christ is a needless and unpleasant reminder of the price paid. Or, that Rome considers Christ's suffering as ongoing ... incomplete ... that Calvary wasn't enough. Not only are they wrong, those criticisms miss an important point.

Man is made in the image and likeness of God. Something the faithful believe. So, isn't the image of the crucifix, the suffering Christ, not another facet of that image and likeness?

When we experience suffering, pain, anguish, loneliness, and ultimately, death, we need to realize that God Himself experienced all we do. The crucifix reminds us of that.

And in that fact, we find the ultimate meaning of human suffering. That something so incongruous, and seemingly absurd, in the end, ultimately enhances the flavor of pure and total joy when we are united with our Heavenly Father, and each other ...

... like salt brings out the sweetness in chocolate.

Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.