

*“While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.”* The parable of the prodigal son is probably one of the most beloved parables in all of scripture because it is so joyful and full of hope. Most of us can identify with this story and so the story speaks to our hearts in a powerful way. The Good news of this parable is the power of our heavenly Father’s love, a love that can transform even the most lost of his children.

Every parent who has raised a child to know God but who then sees that child wander off, disregarding all that he or she has been taught, descending slowly but surely into a life of serious sin – bagging the whole religious thing, so to speak – can identify with the Father’s pain. The parent knows that the child is lost; that they have by their own choices condemned themselves to a life of suffering and pain and, if they do not repent, to an eternity of suffering and pain, but the parent is helpless to do anything because the child will not acknowledge their sin. The parent grieves for their lost child, as for one who is dead, knowing that the only thing that can save their child is prayer, offered daily, in faith and hope and even tears, like St Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, the Church’s most famous prodigal son.

But there is hope even in the suffering the child will undergo. Human suffering is a mystery. God does not inflict suffering on us, we bring it upon ourselves, but God does permit suffering for remedial effect. The Catholic Church is the only church that understands the redemptive nature of human suffering. Suffering is meant to bring us to repentance, it is meant to show us the error of our ways and is meant to enlarge the human heart, making it more capable of compassion, love and mercy. God’s primary punishment for our sins is to allow us to remain in them in the hopes that we will come to recognize our folly, just like

the younger son who squandered his inheritance on dissolute living. It is God's hope that we will come to see the ugliness of what we have done by the harm that it brings into our lives. It is true that sin has a certain superficial attractiveness but that surface beauty hides a deeply rooted ugliness that gives birth to suffering, pain and even death. Sin and death are the true offspring of Satan, ugly, deformed, vicious progeny who seek to destroy the beauty of our souls, and this is what we choose for ourselves when we choose to live as though God did not matter: ugliness, hatred, bitterness and pain.

With God there is hope for our heavenly Father also grieves for his lost children, and he can do what we cannot. He can see his lost child a long way off, that is, even while the child is still steeped in deadly sin, and the Father will come rushing to his child when there is even the least flickering of awareness of the stupidity and cost of sin. The pain and suffering we experience because of our sins is also endowed with the grace of repentance. If we come to our senses and seek to return to the Father through genuine repentance and sorrow, he will come rushing toward us with arms outstretched, like a mother embracing a fallen child. The grace of repentance gives birth to new life within us. The imperfect contrition of the younger son was sufficient to trigger the Father's all-forgiving, all loving embrace. This is what sincere confession does for us, it clothes us with new life and restores our union with a loving and merciful Father.

The most precious gift of the Father's love is the gift of his only begotten son because in Christ all things are made new. Let us therefore ask the Father and Mary, the mother of God, lead us to true repentance and to obtain for us the indwelling presence of Christ in our hearts so that we, too, may forever feel the Father's loving embrace.