

Transference

Ezekiel 37:12-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:8-11
John 11:1-45

From the very beginning of salvation history, God has invited His people to be *intercessors*—to pray, suffer, and sacrifice for the salvation of His people. The reason God desires for people to be intercessors is not because He *needs* us, but because intercession is one of the most intimate forms of love and relationship. It is God *choosing* us and *allowing* us to be a part of His work in the world. We see proof of this throughout the Old Testament. For example, God’s words through the prophet Ezekiel explained His desire for an intercessor.

“The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they afflict the poor and the needy, and oppress the resident alien without justice. Thus I have searched among them for someone who could build a wall or stand in the breach before me...”

-Ezekiel 22:29-30

God continues today to search for intercessors—men and women who are willing to carry other people’s burdens through prayer, suffering, and sacrifice. And, He tends to use the least likely people—including those who have struggled through addictions.

Since the beginning of Lent, we’ve been looking at the process by which God heals us of our addictions and serious attachments. God not only desires to heal us for *our* sake, but for the sake of *others*, as well. In other words, He will begin using us as intercessors for the healing of other others who are struggling with the same things that we’ve struggled through. For example, if God has led us into healing for an addiction to alcohol, He will often invite us to be intercessors for those who are still struggling with alcohol. Often, God’s call into intercession is done through what Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen called, “transference.”

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, in a presentation he did on Saint Therese the Little Flower, used the word “transference” to describe God’s invitation for us to be intercessors. He gives the word a different meaning than what we find in the field of Psychology. Archbishop Sheen explained “transference” in this way—

Just suppose that you were in debt, and there was no possible way of getting out of debt. Some friend comes to you and says, “I will pay your debt.” That would be financial transference. He would be taking your burden upon himself.¹

Transference, then, is our willingly taking upon ourselves another person’s burden. Using this definition, we can say that spiritual transference is the suffering and sacrifice that a person endures for the benefit and salvation of another person or group of people. Jesus is the perfect example of transference. The Gospel of Matthew describes this beautifully when we are told that Jesus Christ “took away our infirmities and bore our diseases” (Matthew 8:17b). Another example is in the first letter of Peter, which explains that Christ, “bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds [we] have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

¹ Sheen, Fulton J. Archbishop Fulton Sheen’s St. Therese: A Treasured Love Story. Basilica Press, 2007, pg. 137

The spiritual reality of transference is based on the fact that we, as Christians, are called to follow Christ's example. Just as He willingly suffered for the salvation of others, we too, are called to take other people's burdens upon ourselves. This in no way implies that Jesus Christ's sacrifice was insufficient, but rather, Christ invites His disciples into such an intimate relationship with Him, that we are allowed to participate in His saving action in history.

Saint Paul expressed this beautifully in his letter to the Colossians, writing, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24). Christ's suffering is not insufficient, but it is unfinished in history. In other words, it is still unfolding in the course of history through the Body of Christ, the Church. This is why Paul wrote, "'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?'" (1 Corinthians 6:15a). Christ is the Head, and we are His Body. Therefore, we "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). This is an intimate solidarity with Christ and with other people. And, for those who are willing, that solidarity sometimes takes the form of transference—a form of intercession for the salvation of others.

Transference can manifest itself in several ways—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Here are some examples. One night, I had just returned home and I was walking through my living room when I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to gag myself. I stood there dumbfounded. I had never felt such an urge before; and, as you can already tell, I do not have bulimia. After recovering from the initial shock of the urge, I began to pray for anyone and everyone who might be struggling with bulimia.

The following day, before the youth Mass, a young woman approached me and explained that she was bulimic and had never told anyone before. She knew that she needed to tell her family but was afraid of their reaction. I prayed with her and asked God to give her courage to be honest with her family. I truly believe that God allowed me to physically suffer as a form of intercession for that young woman, so that she might experience the grace to seek healing.

The life of Saint Teresa of Avila gives us an even better example. She experienced eighteen years of spiritual darkness, where she felt separated from God. This was not because of some sin she committed or because God was angry with her, but rather, God gave her an opportunity to carry the burden of other people's lack of faith in Him. Saint Teresa was able to endure the spiritual suffering she was undergoing because she didn't focus on herself, but she understood the suffering to be a transference from God. She carried the weight of other people's doubt, and therefore participated in the salvation of their souls.

Transference is one of the greatest ways that God is glorified through our weakness. Here's how it often works in regards to our former attachments and addictions. After years of struggling with a particular series attachment, we finally come to a place of surrender to God's healing. We begin to feel a new freedom and peace. Often the temptation will even reside or disappear. Then, out-of-the-blue, we might be hit by the temptation again—and hard! At this point, many people begin to question whether God really healed them or not. They might even fall into doubt or despair. In reality, what is happening is that God has grown in such a trust in the healing that they've accepted that He is letting them feel again the temptation toward a particular attachment as an invitation into intercession for others who still aren't free from it. In such cases, simply taking a moment to pray for those who are experiencing such temptations usually leads quickly to peace and the dissipation of the temptation.

This week, let's pay attention to the numerous and various ways in which God is inviting us to be intercessors for His people, including through transference.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Try to remember a time when God used something painful in your life as a blessing for someone else. Share with God your thoughts about that experience.