

#1 – On the Suicide of your Younger Sister



Dear Peregrinus (12:20 PM):

It is one of the beautiful things about good people that they feel deeply the affect of difficult, even grindingly hard, experiences happening to those they love, such that they even sometimes appear to grieve the loss in another's life more intensely than he into whose life came suddenly an incomprehensible sorrow. This capacity for empathy is one of the signal proofs, I believe, for the existence of the soul, and that it has its source in God.

And so it was that your friend wrote on May 2nd to tell me about the death of your younger sister, not so that your privacy about that might be intruded upon, and especially by someone like me whom you do not know that well, but so that there may become gathered around you people you know, and even do not know, who are praying for you and for your family.

She asked me to stand as one of those who are praying for you, which I have been doing.

Though you are now some days farther away from the death-day of your sister, and so the sharpness of that experience for you and for your family may be dulled somewhat, you may now begin to feel (though everyone goes through a process of grief in his own way and according to his own interior rhythm) a kind of desolation, as a swath of the Earth must feel after the open-pit miners have abandoned the site and moved on to another piece of land.

And so it is into this space of emptiness that I write these words to you. I write not to be so crass as to "explain" anything to you, but simply to stumble about in verbs and nouns, so that you know that I and many others are praying for you, wanting to "be there" for you and for your family.

What I do know is that every person, and this includes those also who have taken their lives, does the best that he or she can here, in this life filled with mystery and confusion, glories, and sometimes profound difficulties. The Italian poet Dante in Canto 1 of his famous Inferno writes powerfully of the fear and confusion and lostness he felt at one point in his life. He writes:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

So bitter is it, death is little more;
But of the good to treat, which there I found,
Speak will I of the other things I saw there.

Even Aristotle was clear that the human soul is incapable of choosing its own death, either for oneself or for others. Death must somehow be understood as a good, or good for someone other than she. Persons can only choose what they believe is a good, or what they judge is better, or what they have come to believe is a good solution to some terrible riddle that has vexed them for a long time. And, very often, they choose what they have come to believe will actually be a blessing to those who worry about them. Your sister, I am certain, did the best she could ... as do you; as do I.

And because of this truth, I know that God must show very special attentiveness to those who could find no solution other than the one your sister chose (if "choosing" is really the proper word). Wouldn't your own heart go out so strongly to someone you knew who had struggled with such thoughts?

And so I see in my mind's eye, and through a well-tested faith in God, how Christ's first move towards your sister coming towards Him in Heaven will be to put his mighty arms around her and to hold her tight, feeling her fear and the shaking of her limbs, and quietly speaking to her of his happiness at having her close. He will say her name as only one who knows and loves her can speak it.

Then, when she has calmed enough, and is confident enough to look up into His deep and clear eyes, He can begin to speak to her about how He wants her to take responsibility for the hurt she unknowingly inflicted on those who loved her here. And He will show her how she, even now in Heaven, may begin to work with Him to heal those broken relationships. The divine solution to sorrow we cause others by our actions is to make it possible for us to see and grasp a means of taking responsibility for what we cause, and showing us a way to make good. What a magnificent courtesy it is – or as one author spoke of it, "a severe mercy" – that God gives us a way to take responsibility for, and to participate in, the extending of His healing mercy to those we have hurt.

Be assured that up here in Portland, OR there are those mindful of you and of your family, and who all and each have suffered sorrows unexpected and damaging. But because there came into view, and right at our side, friends in the Lord, we, in time, came to a place of peace, and experienced a deepening of our wisdom.

Your friend in Christ the Pilgrim,

Padre