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28 May 2017

VII Sunday of Easter A

“Rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when His glory is revealed, you may also rejoice abundantly.” (I Pet. 4:13).

What are the most important lessons in life we can teach our youth? How to be successful?

How to raise a family? How to accomplish their goals? How to remain faithful to the Church?

All of these are very important, but I bet no one had on their list, “How to accept suffering”.

What St Peter is telling us in his second epistle today, is just that. How must we look at suffering, how must we accept suffering when it comes our way. He is especially referring to suffering for our faith, suffering for Christ, but it can easily be applied to any form of suffering: illness, marital problems, financial worries, loss of a job, rebellious children, in-law difficulties.

Let's face it, none of us is exempt from suffering. It comes in one form or another into our lives, and we can either let it weaken if not destroy our faith, or it can make us bitter or angry with God, or we can accept it and use it to become closer to God and more full of love.

That is one reason I put on the back of your bulletin this weekend, the beautiful prayer of St. Thomas More, written while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1534. Here is an amazing example of a Catholic who accepted suffering in his life. Thomas More was the Lord Chancellor of King Henry VIII. That position would be comparable to the Secretary of State in our government today. As a very successful lawyer, St Thomas More had accumulated a vast amount of wealth, he owned some very nice property, and had a wife and four children. He was acknowledged by his contemporaries as a very learned, wise and holy man. All sorts of people flocked to his mansion to discuss and debate issues of politics, philosophy and theology with him. As a Catholic layman, he was a model husband and father. At night, he gathered all his servants and family for prayers together. At dinner time, he would have one of the children read a passage

of the Holy Gospel and comment on it! He would not allow cards or dice in his home (the equivalent of cellphone or ipad of his day). He endowed his parish church in Chelsea and sang in the choir vested in a surplice on Sundays!

Well, we all know what his crime was! So pertinent to our own days! King Henry VIII had issued a decree insisting that all his nobles accept his adulterous marriage to Ann Boleyn, and the right of succession to the throne of their offspring. Sir Thomas More refused to acknowledge this. He had already refused to acknowledge the King's claim to be Supreme Protector and Head of the Church in England. For denying these claims, More was accused of treason. He resigned his office, was deprived of his wealth and his income, and was imprisoned in the Tower of London. Most devastating to Thomas More, was the loss of his beloved family, who kept urging him to save his life by signing these oaths falsely. He wrote to his beloved daughter Margaret, "I find no cause, I thank God, Meg, to reckon myself in worse case here than at home, for methinks God maketh me a wanton and setteth me on His lap and dandleth me." His wife had to sell her clothes to buy necessities for him in prison. He saw St John Fisher, the only English Bishop to remain loyal to the Catholic faith in these days, go to his execution, and he knew what awaited him. On 9 July 1535, , having proclaimed that he died for the Catholic Faith, he said famously, "he was the king's good servant, but God's first", he kissed the executioner and forgave him, and then had his head struck off.

Now imagine what that Saint had to go through in the time of his imprisonment! The suffering of cold and hunger, the fear of an unjust verdict, the specter of death ever before him. You know that the English martyrs under Henry and his daughter Elizabeth were put to death in the most brutal fashion: the Moslems had nothing over the Protestants: the usual form of execution was hanging, drawing and quartering. They would hang the condemned just until they lost consciousness, then lower the rope so the victim would regain consciousness. Then they would slice open the

victim's chest and stomach, and begin pulling out his organs while he was still alive, and toss them into a vat of boiling water. Then the body was chopped into four pieces, and mounted on stakes in a conspicuous place as a deterrent to any other scoundrel professing to be a Catholic. Now, the suffering you and I undergo is not usually for our faith, as was the case of St. Thomas More. We do not suffer like those poor Coptic Christians savagely murdered by the followers of Mohammed this week in Egypt.

But we suffer. And the lesson of our faith is that we have to look upon suffering as a way to identify with Our Lord. We have to see that by accepting suffering, we are accepting our union with Christ Who saved us by His suffering and death. That is why we say that suffering is salvific: suffering, when it is accepted in union with Our Lord, can bring us to heaven. When we embrace the sufferings of life, we can bring souls to heaven that would not be able to get their on their own. And that is why it is so important to teach our youth how to view suffering, when it comes to them.