

HOMILY

Good Friday Celebration of the Lord's Passion

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There are many Christians who are uncomfortable focusing on the cross. Yet it is the very heart of our faith.

Father Henri Nouwen tells a disturbing story about a family he knew in Paraguay. The father, a doctor, was active in protests against the military. He spoke out repeatedly against its human rights abuses. Local police took their revenge by arresting his teenage son and torturing him until he was dead. It was a horrible crime. Townsfolk wanted to turn the funeral into a huge protest march, but the doctor chose another means to protest. The father displayed his son's body in the local church. However, he was not dressed in a fine suit and the funeral director applied no make-up. The father displayed his son as he had found him in the jail. The son was naked, his body marked with scars from the electric shocks and cigarette burns and beatings. The young man's body did not lie in a coffin but on the blood-soaked mattress from the jail. It was the strongest protest imaginable for it put injustice on grotesque display.

See Christ hanging on the cross. He hangs there naked. In reverence of Jesus today, we show him with a loincloth; but that was not the practice for crucifixion. The condemned man hung there naked. The execution was always carried out publicly to totally humiliate those judged guilty of crimes warranting crucifixion.

In those barbaric times, crucifixion was regarded as the worst form of execution—it was so cruel and demeaning. Roman crucifixion generally followed flogging, which could itself kill. Generally, the victim carried the crossbeam to the place of execution. There, the person was either nailed or lashed to the crossbeam. Jesus, of course, was nailed to the cross both by his hands and his feet.

It was certainly not death that Jesus dreaded as he knelt in the garden and prayed that this cup might pass from him but the pain, the suffering. Those of you who had had a loved one who has suffered mightily know that death can come as a

sweet relief. Jesus, who had emptied himself completely and became as we are, chose to experience the full depths of human suffering so that he might deliver us from death and despair.

As we behold the cross, we see Jesus' courage as he faced incredible cruelty and suffering. But there is another powerful lesson. It is God's love poured out in the death of his son. "*God so loved the world that he gave his only son.*" God watches as Christ hangs upon the cross. God's heart breaks. The Jewish Author, Eli Wiesel, says that this is why he could never be a Christian. He could not believe that God would stand by while his own Son was sacrificed. It is unimaginable unless you understand that it was necessary to show how much God cares for you and me.

A father by the name of Tim Miller tells of a time when he experienced what God surely experienced that day on Calvary. While on a vacation, Miller's nine-year-old daughter Jennifer became very ill. After an all-night series of CT scans, X-rays and blood work, the doctors told this exhausted little girl that she needed to have a spinal tap. The procedure would be painful. As they had her curl into a tiny ball, Jennifer's dad buried his face in hers and hugged her. When the needle went in, Jennifer cried. As her searing pain increased, she sobbingly repeated, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" with her voice becoming more intense with each word. It is as if she were saying, "Oh, daddy, please, can't you do something?" Dad's tears mingled with hers. His heart was broken. He felt nauseated. Because he loved her, he was allowing her to go through the most agonizing experience of her life and he could hardly stand it. In the middle of that spinal tap, his thoughts went to the Cross of Christ. What unspeakable pain both the Son and the Father went through.

And it's true. Just as we see Jesus' courage, we see the Father's amazing love poured out. And here is the most astounding thing of all—it was for all of us. It was for you. It was for me. We didn't deserve it, but Jesus died for you and me.

Jesus' courage sustains him in the face of barbaric cruelty. God's heart breaks, but his love comes shining through. And it was all for you and me.

