

**Homily for the Diocesan White Mass
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
October 17, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in 1990, one of the leading news stories involved events surrounding the death of a 54-year-old woman from Oregon by the name of Janet Adkins. Mrs. Adkins was a musician and teacher from Portland who had been recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Faced with an uncertain future regarding her mental and physical capacities, Mrs. Adkins decided that she had an important decision to make. Apart from a few memory lapses, she had yet to experience the more serious symptoms of the disease, but she was fearful of what could potentially lie ahead for her. The decision that she made in light of what would likely eventually happen to her was to avoid a potentially bleak future by ending her life early, which she did with the assistance of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, a retired pathologist from Michigan. This event sparked a national debate on the topic of assisted suicide and the morality of such an

action, a debate that continues to take place, as evidenced by the recent passage of a bill in the State of California legalizing assisted suicide, the fourth state in our country to do so.

In the same year, there was another woman who was facing a similarly bleak future after having been diagnosed with an extremely painful and fatal form of bone cancer. Chiara Badano was a 17-year old living in Italy who was joyful, beautiful, well-liked, and actively involved in activities such as tennis, swimming, and mountain climbing. The discovery of her cancer cast a dark shadow on what promised to be a very bright future.

Chiara, like Janet Adkins, was faced with the hard reality of the suffering that awaited her. Unlike Adkins, however, Chiara chose to accept the suffering and to make the very best of whatever time was left for her on this earth. She would go on to be a source of inspiration to those who would visit her in the midst of that suffering, and she died with great peace, saying to her mother as she was about to die: "Mamma, be happy, because I'm happy!"¹

While the circumstances of these two women are not identical, we can see how their stories do bear some significant similarities. Both were

faced with what might seem like a hopeless future, and each made a decision regarding how to deal with the future. Those decisions were ultimately based on how each of them viewed the mysterious and confusing question of suffering and its place in our lives.

For those who support the practice of assisted suicide, suffering is seen as something to be avoided. We all face various forms of suffering in our lives, and it is not unnatural for us to want to avoid suffering if at all possible. In this regard, much progress has been made in the field of medicine in finding ways of alleviating suffering in ways that were not possible in previous generations. While this is to be seen as a positive contribution to humanity, there are drawbacks. The successful maintenance of suffering can lead to an attitude that we have a right not to suffer, and that any and every means should be employed to eliminate that suffering.

The prospect of having to suffer for the rest of one's life, therefore, is seen as something absurd and unnecessary. It is out of this that advocacy for ending that suffering by the willful taking of life arises. It is considered to be a right that we have to determine when life can come to an end. It is claimed that such an action is a sign of compassion in which the person

suffering from a terminal condition can be relieved of that suffering for good, so as to die with dignity in peace.

The other view of suffering, that adopted by Badano, is one based on the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. It is a view that sees all of life as good, not something that can so easily be discarded. While arguments for this view of suffering can be made apart from our faith, we find great clarity and illumination from our Catholic faith in this regard, and it was that faith which prompted Chiara Badano to embrace her suffering. As a result of that heroic struggle, she was beatified by the Church in 2010.

In our first reading for today's Mass from the Prophet Isaiah, we hear one of the prophecies of the Suffering Servant, which is understood to be pointing to Jesus Christ. The prophet speaks of how the long-awaited Messiah would be subjected to suffering, but that it would be through that suffering that "the will of the LORD shall be accomplished through him" and He "shall justify many" (Isaiah 53:10, 11). Jesus Himself confirms this in our Gospel when He tells His disciples that He came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The suffering of Christ is therefore not absurd or without meaning – His suffering has redeemed the world. As such, He gives a new light to the experience of suffering, that we too can find meaning in suffering by uniting it to His suffering on the Cross.

In his commentary on the figure of the Suffering Servant, Pope St. John Paul II wrote the following:

Human suffering has reached its culmination in the Passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: it has been linked to love, to that love of which Christ spoke to Nicodemus, to that love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering, just as the supreme good of the Redemption of the world was drawn from the Cross of Christ, and from that Cross constantly takes its beginning.²

Blessed Chiara had the blessing of seeing her suffering through this lens of faith, transforming it into an opportunity to be closer to Christ and to offer herself to Him in love. “Chiara had a profound sense of redemptive suffering. She often repeated the phrase, ‘If this is what you want, Jesus, so do I.’ Like any teenage girl, she loved her hair, but with each lock that fell

out she'd pray, 'For you, Jesus.' She frequently refused morphine, saying, 'I want to share as much as possible in His suffering on the cross.'"³

While it may not seem important to us when we are enjoying relatively little suffering, this message of the redemptive power of suffering can be a source of great comfort for those who find themselves confronted with the frightening prospect of suffering. It is not just a pious saying to be encouraged to "offer up" our sufferings, for when we do so, our faith promises us that those sufferings will be transformed into blessings for ourselves and for the Church.

We also have the many promises from the Sacred Scriptures which give us hope in the face of suffering. These promises apply to each of us and we can have great confidence in them. Just last week, in the Gospel for Sunday, Jesus promised His disciples that "[a]ll things are possible for God" (Mark 10:27). Also of great comfort are the words of St. Paul in this regard, where he reminds the Church in Corinth that "God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In light of this hopeful view of suffering, we are called to be messengers of this good news in our lives. First of all, when we suffer, we are invited to place our trust in God's loving care for us, confident that He will not abandon us in our time of suffering. Our trusting resignation to the love of God speaks volumes to those who encounter us in our sufferings. Blessed Chiara communicated that message in a beautiful way. One doctor who cared for her said: "Through her smile, and through her eyes full of light, she showed us that death doesn't exist; only life exists."⁴

We can also be messengers of the proper view of suffering through our interactions with those who are suffering. We need to reassure them that their life is a gift. They should never feel, either by our words or by our actions, that they are a burden to us. In a statement by Cardinal O'Malley after the recent legislation in California, he commented on how this feeling of being a burden is a major factor in people seeking assisted suicide. He wrote the following:

Most people taking the lethal drugs do so not because of pain but because they feel they are helpless and a "burden" on others. The state of California in effect is now confirming this judgment. A government that legalizes assisted suicide sends the terrible message

Pope Francis has so eloquently warned us against, that there is such a thing as disposable people.⁵

Regardless of what the law says, we are always capable of treating those who are suffering with true compassion by encouraging them, by loving them, and most importantly, by just being with them in their time of struggle.

Finally, for those of you involved in the medical profession, you have a key role to play in spreading this message. Our celebration of this White Mass is an opportunity for us to recognize your many contributions to the work of safeguarding the dignity of human life by being instruments of God's healing touch to those who suffer. Your privileged place of being so close to those who suffer offers you the opportunity to alleviate physical suffering, as well as helping to address the spiritual and emotional suffering that often accompanies physical suffering.

Patients under your care should benefit from the skills that the Lord has generously given to you in your professional life. But you should also realize that He has also given you many spiritual and human gifts that, when directed to your patients with love, can go a long way in giving them

the encouragement that they need in order to persevere through their suffering and see their life as a gift.

As we continue this Mass, we prepare our hearts to receive the fruits of the suffering of Christ on the Cross, made present here on this altar. We prepare to receive the gift of true life in the Eucharist, that gift which sustains us on our journey throughout this life. Let us pray that we will remain united to Christ every day of our lives so that whatever suffering we may encounter, personally or in those around us, we may confront it with that faith which believes that with Him, all suffering can be transformed into a powerful gift of love for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Focolare Movement, *Blessed Chiara Luce Badano*, www.focolare.org.

² Pope St. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, §18.

³ Real Life Catholic, *Blessed Chiara Luca Badano, Pray for Us*, <http://reallifecatholic.com/>.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Cardinal Sean O'Malley, *Press Release*, 6 October 2015, uscgb.org.