

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
July 20, 2025
Year of the Holy Spirit

“Brothers and sisters: 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)

I believe it necessary for us to use a second weekend to reflect upon Saint Paul’s Letter to the Colossians. Paul writes a particular line, verse 24, which has confused Christians for countless generations. Let us waste no time and dive into the heart of the issue. What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ?

My family, I apologize if I proceed slowly, but this issue needs dedicated time. Now, as much as I would desire to present you with a total and complete answer, I know this to be impossible. Nevertheless, we will proceed by first reminding ourselves of Saint Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus. *“On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ He said, ‘Who are you, sir?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’”* (Acts 9:3-5). We must examine three significant things happening in this moment. First, Saul’s name is called twice. Why is this important? In the Old Testament, when God chooses a person for a mission He speaks their name twice. *“When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’”* (Exodus 3:4). Secondly, the response, *“I am Jesus,”* would disarm and confuse Saul/Paul who knew Jesus to be both dead and cursed. *“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; . . .”* (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Thirdly, Jesus identifies Himself with those believers whom Saul had been persecuting. In essence, Saul is taught to lay hands upon a follower of Jesus is to lay hands upon Jesus, Himself. It is this understanding which will shape the foundation of Paul’s theology where the Church IS the Body of Christ.

Returning to Saint Paul’s Letter to the Colossians, Saint John Chrysostom, in his homily on the Letter to the Colossians, addressed the first part of Paul’s statement where he rejoices in his sufferings: “And what things I suffer, I suffer, he says, on his account. Therefore, don’t thank me, but express your gratitude to Christ, for it is he himself who suffers.” Paul, harkening back to his experience with the risen Jesus on the road, rejoices in his sufferings because Jesus is with him. The thought of Jesus, although risen and present in Heaven, allowing Paul to join his own personal sufferings with His, consoles Paul and causes his rejoicing. Therefore, Paul is able to write those next words concerning his sufferings filling up what is lacking.

For you and me to understand what Saint Paul meant by “filling up what is lacking,” impels us to turn to the original Greek word and seek out the meaning. There is a series of books entitled, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, which offers an understanding of this point. The scholar, Dennis Hamm, S.J., wrote this explanation: “The Greek word for ‘filling up’

(antanaplēroō), which occurs only here in the New Testament, has a nuanced meaning in extrabiblical Greek: ‘to take one’s turn in filling up.’ **What is lacking** can be rendered ‘what remains to be completed,’ that is, what remains for the full establishment of Christ’s kingdom throughout the world. And **the afflictions of Christ** can mean the afflictions that inevitably accompany the mission of any follower of Christ.” For Paul, the afflictions he endures for his mission, the spreading of the Gospel, must be experienced and accepted. It is in doing so, with a joyful heart, the faith of the believers will be built up. Saint Augustine would remind his listeners that all Christians (members of Christ’s Body) are a part of Christ and Christ is found fully present in all Christians (members of Christ’s Body). Where the Body is, the Head is fully present.

All this being said, what does this mean for you and me? It means we are no different from Saint Paul or any other member of Christ’s Body, the Church. As Christ was active and present in Paul, so He is active and present in you and me. We should, with Saint Paul, join our sufferings in union with His. In doing so, we are provided a meaning for our suffering. In essence, it is My Turn. It is my turn to contribute my personal suffering to the entire sufferings of the Body of Christ till the end of time. My offering, even if I consider it small in comparison to others, **STILL** has meaning. I have meaning in my suffering because I matter. As a body is incomplete if all of its members are not fully present and fully functioning, so too my contribution fills up what is lacking in the Body when other members are no longer present (physically or spiritually). The sufferings we experience join us to Christ and to each other **AND** this is a reason we should accept them with a joyful loving heart.