

Synopsis of BioEthics Cohort, Part 1 (March 2011):
Toward Developing a Practical Theology of Suffering
Presented by Lauren Clevenger

The March 2011 **Bioethics Learning Community's gathering attempted to garner our thoughts and put into words the unrest and uncertainty of living as believers and practitioners in a world filled with suffering and pain.** Our goal was to explore our personal thoughts and attitudes toward suffering, and to clarify what the Body of Christ can do about the problem of pain.

Heeding Henry Blamire's call to develop what he calls "the Christian mind," that is, a commonly held set of notions about a particular area or subject that reflects and supports the Christian worldview of the active believer, we ventured into discussing a theology of suffering. **The aim here was to better equip the individual believer to enter into effective discourse and problem-solving with others** in his or her profession or life activity.

Along the way, we noted that **the secular worldview has much to say about the negative value accorded to suffering** as demonstrated in rising divorce and abortion rates and the gaining momentum for legalized euthanasia—all of which point toward a focus on individual convenience and burden-free living, a preference that trumps all.

We also noted that **within the Church's teaching**, dating from the early Church fathers to some of our more mainstream gatherings, **we find diverse approaches and attitudes to suffering** that range from an ascetical view that might interpret suffering as bringing one closer to God to the "health and wealth" view which implies that suffering is a sign that one is out of step with God. Even isolated Scripture passages can be confusing with their seemingly competing ideas of God's use and allowance of suffering in His world.

So how do we develop a collective Christian mind on suffering?

Being reminded in Therese Lysaught's article Patient Suffering and the Anointing of the Sick of the **shortcomings of our current bioethical model** in guiding the believing practitioner, we were **encouraged to discover the commonalities** shared among diverse sufferers; a loss of voice and a sense of marginalization and isolation. In seeking to form a response to those who suffer, we looked at the idea of **"empathetic witness"** in which one makes an existential commitment to be with the sick person and to facilitate the building of a narrative to make sense of and give value to the experience of suffering. Encouraged by the **liturgical framework of the "Anointing of the Sick,"** we explored the components of prayer, touch, validation and mutual benefit readily accessible to the believing practitioner.

Our plenary session then broke into three discussion groups to further examine the use of empathetic witness in one of the following: 1) Scripture study of Jesus at the death of Lazarus; 2) Viewing of a training video for pediatric palliative care providers; and 3) Brief analysis of the article AIDS and the Church and exploring the concept of a transcendent and imminent God who is *with us* in our sufferings.

We rejoined to share our thoughts and findings as well as our ongoing areas of challenge to further develop our theology of suffering. Clarifying and defining our Christian mind on suffering that encompasses a practical application long needed for those of us in healthcare is a daunting task. All too often, **we find ourselves feeling unequipped and uncertain as we navigate the waters of suffering** seen and experienced in our lives. **As believers and children of God, we long to respond as God would call us to be empathetic witnesses to the sufferings** of those we live and work with, to bring practical help and authentic engagement of our hearts and faith.

Drawing from Nicholas Wolterstorff's Lament for a Son, we find now that we *can* say blessed are the mourners, those who suffer, and those who walk along side them. "The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for that day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence." **The image of the aching visionary is played out as we achingly enter into each other's and our own pain with authentic connection and engagement, yet with our eyes firmly fixed on the already, not yet, Kingdom of God.**