

## How to suffer well, without losing joy:

### Advice from Cardinal Tagle

In May 2017, Anglican priest Nicky Gumbel interviewed Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle before an audience of 6,000 at a leadership conference in London. The conference was hosted by Alpha, a global ecumenical ministry founded by Gumbel.

During their exchange, they discussed how Christians, and particularly Christian leaders, should engage with the realities of widespread suffering. The chat drew from the cardinal's extensive experience with poverty and natural calamities, both as a pastor in the Philippines and as president of Caritas International, the Catholic Church's official humanitarian organization, which he led from 2015-2022.

[Here are three of Cardinal Tagle's most helpful insights from that conversation.](#)

[Telling stories can be more powerful than finding solutions.](#)

When Gumbel asked what Cardinal Tagle found most difficult about being a leader, the cardinal focused on two things. First was, "This (being a bishop) is just pure faith for me. And so, if I could call it a difficulty, struggle, it is a struggle in faith, accepting that God is putting trust in a person like me."

The second part was this, "Other things I also find interiorly quite burdensome is people come bearing their burdens and their concerns ... and I have this notion of being a leader as a problem solver."

Whenever he cannot give solutions (which he said is often), the cardinal shared that he gets frustrated. From this frequent occurrence, he has learned that many people don't have problems, but dilemmas. Dilemmas, he explained, are problems that persist because they lack a clear solution.

Examples from his experience are the many deaths, illnesses, and human displacement caused by frequent typhoons and flooding in the Philippines.

Cardinal Tagle shared that he is learning to respond to dilemmas not with solutions but with stories. Leadership has taught him that more than being a problem-solver, a good leader is a storyteller. He emphasized that to be a compelling storyteller, one needs to listen to the stories of others, and most importantly, the story God wants to tell.

He ended his reply to Gumbel's difficult question by telling the story of a girl street child who approached Pope Francis in tears, then asked this question, "Why does God allow innocent children like us to suffer?"

The Holy Father shook his head and embraced the girl, then told her, "There are some questions that don't have easy answers. Maybe tears cleanse our eyes and allow us to see more clearly."

The cardinal told Gumbel that at that moment, he desperately wanted a solution to the girl's suffering, but he didn't have one. That was when he began to consider that his helplessness might, in fact, mirror the girl's helplessness, and that this moment of shared vulnerability was a chance to experience communion with her.

**Insight 2: Don't let the enormity of suffering stop you from bringing the gospel to life.**

Although experiences like the above happen often, Cardinal Tagle believes these must go hand in hand with more active and collective ways to uplift people who are experiencing poverty.

Moreover, he believes that taking concrete steps to alleviate poverty is necessary to bring the gospel to life.

He shared some suggestions from speeches he has given to business leaders around the world. His most prestigious audience was the World Economic Forum in Davos.

In these presentations, he invites business leaders to consider and act on the following recommendations, hoping that, if they respond, the gospel will humanize culture in the best ways:

1. Learn to examine your motivations by asking the question, "What governs me? Is it ambition, success, or conscience?"
2. Examine whether you include people experiencing poverty in the culture of your business. For instance, think of the question, "Do you include the poor in your company's vision statement?"
3. Seek out personal encounters with persons at the margins of society: "Touch the hands of a poor person. They aren't statistics. They can be me, my parents. The power of that encounter can create cracks in my pre-existing presuppositions."

**Insight 3: Find moments of shared struggle, made lighter by shared laughter.**

Of course, poverty, even in its many forms, is only one item in the long catalogue of human woes. A darkness more widespread than physical poverty, and possibly its root cause, is the hard-to-bridge distance we often feel between ourselves and God. The cardinal was candid about the many instances he has confronted his own spiritual poverty, even though he has been a priest for thirty-five years.

Gumbel asked him what spiritual disciplines he practices. His reply was simple: He spends the early mornings meditating on Scripture as a way of opening himself up to the voice of the Holy Spirit. He confessed he doesn't hear the Spirit daily.

He then jokingly teased his non-Catholic interviewer, "The Holy Spirit talks to you daily, huh?"

As they both shared laughter at the cardinal's humble comment, that small moment became a demonstration of a principle the cardinal underscored earlier in the interview: the importance of laughter as an act of faith.

In the Cardinal's own words,

"I have not developed a 'Theology of Laughter', but for me it is part of what I would call, in a more generic sense, what I would call spirituality of living in the Spirit, a sense of humour, a capacity to smile, a capacity to smile, to laugh at your own self, at your own mistakes, or a call to, to be free, to be free in the Spirit.

For me, it is a profession of faith that I am not the saviour of the world, so I don't need a grim face.

For Cardinal Tagle to suggest that others might hear the Holy Spirit more often models another value he emphasized during this chat: respecting those who disagree with you.

He explained that respect is crucial to effective evangelization because sometimes those we communicate with resist what we say because of how we approach them.

In truth, the entire dialogue is a master class in mutual respect, despite obvious theological differences. They ended the chat with a warm, brotherly embrace.