Peace be with you! Have you ever said anything to a loved one you later regretted? Do you wish you would have spoken up about an injustice in your workplace but did not? Is there a relationship in your life that has completely fallen apart and that you can’t put back together? Do you have an addiction you can’t quite crack? Drugs? Alcohol? Pornography? Are you thin-skinned and addicted to outrage based on too much TV news?

If so, then look no farther than the words of St. Paul to the Romans in our second reading. “Through one man, sin entered the world,” notes St. Paul and as a result “…death reigned from Adam to Moses....” Yet, St. Paul continues, if through the sin of one man – Adam – “…that many have died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of one man, Jesus Christ, overflow for the many.”

Our conventional wisdom tells us that sin is the result of a personal choice. Do we do the right thing? Do we do the wrong thing? Our conventional wisdom focuses on us. Our conventional wisdom focuses on what we do. But in this very rich and deep message to the Romans, St. Paul flips the telescope around. He focuses on the condition around us. While not knocking the edges off of personal responsibility, St. Paul stresses that the conditions for choosing the good, the wise and the beautiful are premised first and foremost on a redemptive act of God.
This means that if we are under the spell of an addiction, it is impossible for us not to drink, not to take drugs, not to escape in compulsive behaviors without some outside help. We cannot choose wisely or well left to our own devices alone. We need help. We need a Savior. We need Jesus Christ. We need redemption.

How does redemption operate in our lives? Some years ago, I received a night call from a grief-stricken parishioner. He was an immigrant dad with a large family. He had just received a call from the hospital. His teen-aged son was dead. His first question to me was this: “What is ‘Russian Roulette’?” The hospital staff told him his son had shot himself playing “Russian Roulette,” but he didn’t know what that was. I had to explain to the dad the meaning of this English slang term. It turned out that his son and some friends had been watching the movie “Deer Hunter” and decided to play the same “game.”

Needless to say, there is no way this father can bring back his deceased son. There is no way to undo the damage. Yet this is precisely why we need the redemptive power of God. We need God to come into the darkness that cannot be humanly undone.

What does this redemption look like? The famous writer C.S. Lewis in a graphic lecture during the Second World War on BBC likens redemption to a military rescue. He writes: “Enemy-occupied territory – that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed in disguise and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage. When you go to church you are really listening into the secret wireless from our friends.”

Lewis goes on to note that the dark forces about which St. Paul writes are not a negation of goodness. God created every inch of creation as good. But things went wrong. Sin entered. Rebellion occurred. We find ourselves in rebel territory. Our words are those of St. Paul, who a little later in his message to the Romans notes, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate.” As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes: “Sin creates a proclivity to sin.” In other words, while sin is always a personal act in a fallen world, inside the rebel territory our own time and place, our consciences are clouded and our judgment marred.

Only in and through Jesus Christ, through our encounter with Jesus – a Jesus whom we meet in Word and Sacrament –can we unite our suffering to His and perhaps find meaning. By our desire to draw close to Jesus with whom we can speak in prayer and worship we can perhaps sense that we are not alone. By our contact with the Jesus whom we touch and see in our spiritual and corporal works of mercy we can experience His compassion growing in us. We cannot undo our losses. We cannot take back our failings. We cannot avoid regrets. But we can unite ourselves to the mind and heart of Jesus Christ.

In his apostolic letter, “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis uplifts the insight of his predecessor Pope Benedict the XVI: “Christianity is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty ideal, but an encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”
No, there is often no way of undoing the losses in our lives. We cannot undo the harm we have done to others on our own. We cannot undo the pain and loss of death. We cannot resolve the question of evil in the world. But we can unite ourselves to the insight of St. Paul. “Through one man, sin entered the world...death reigned from Adam to Moses....” Yet if through the sin of one man – Adam – “…that many have died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of one man, Jesus Christ, overflow for the many.”

My hope and prayer for you as bishop is that you might discover the grace of Jesus Christ overflowing into the empty spaces of your heart carved out by suffering, by sorrow and by the sin you’ve committed and the sin of those against you. Be assured of my prayers for you especially in your times of darkness and kindly pray for me too. Peace be with you!

Art: Glory of the New Born Christ in the Presence of God the Father and the Holy Spirit (Annakirche, Vienna); by Daniel Gran, 1694-1757. Photo by Alberto Fernandez Fernandez / CC BY-SA (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)