

Understanding and Accepting

The “Redemptive” Value of Suffering

By Michelle Willis

The existence of evil is a pressing human question. Among the consequences of evil, suffering, sickness, anguish, and death are the most distressing. Something within human persons suggests that these are things that ought not to be, that suffering, sickness, anguish, and death fall extremely short of expectations for personal happiness and fulfillment. In his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering), John Paul II tells us that human suffering “is a universal theme that accompanies man at every point on earth: in a certain sense it coexists with him in the world, and thus demands to be constantly reconsidered.”¹



In this treatise we will not consider so much the “why” of suffering, although we will touch on it briefly, but rather, acknowledge along with John Paul II that suffering in all its forms “seems to be, and is, almost inseparable from man’s earthly existence.”² Since suffering is, has been, or will be a challenge we each face, we will look at suffering from the standpoint of Redemption and examine ways for understanding and accepting suffering’s “redemptive” value.

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Part I: Suffering and the Problem of Evil

- God is the source of the good in all things, but not the evil.
- Human suffering is an experience of evil. Rather than something *put upon* human persons, suffering actually signifies a *lack* of the good willed by God.

Part II: Aspects of Suffering

- Suffering is experienced by the whole person, both body and soul -- the two essential dimensions of the human person.
- Suffering has a personal and social dimension.
- Asking “Why?” is a normal response to suffering, because human persons are rational beings.
- Suffering is not necessarily the consequence of a fault or a punishment for personal sin. Innocent people also suffer.
- One of the greatest challenges sufferers face is the uncertainty of recovery, of restoration.

Part III: The Redemptive Value of Suffering

- Jesus is God’s gift of love to all who suffer. Through his Son, the Father reveals that he desires our salvation, our “eternal liberation” from the evil of suffering.
- Those who embrace suffering can share in Christ’s work of saving the world. Also, such *good works* entitle *sufferers* to share in Christ’s glory.

Part IV: The Compassionate God-Man

- Jesus demonstrated a special love and deep concern for the suffering people of his time. In imitation of Jesus, every Christian ought to feel called personally to bear witness to love in suffering: To do good by his or her own suffering and to do good to those who suffer.

Part I: Evil and the Problem of Suffering

God is the source of the good in all things, but not the evil.

An essential Christian belief about God's goodness and the goodness of creation comes to us from the Book of Genesis. In the first two chapters we learn that all God creates is good in itself and human beings, by God's design, share in this created *good*. Then, in Chapter 3, we learn of a disruption in creation. It comes about as the result of human disobedience. While at first harmony between human beings, God, and creation reigns, evil enters the human picture, bringing with it suffering and death. The original state of "holiness and justice" intended for human beings by God is disrupted (CCC 375). For all who come afterward, life is a mixture of good and evil.

Our Sunday Visitor's *Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine* explains it in this way:

God created a perfect, though finite, world in the beginning. The common human sense that something is missing from the world is a kind of confirmation of the original integrity, harmony, and order of all things and the absence of evil and suffering at creation's beginning. In order to experience a loss, one must first possess the thing that has been lost. Something cannot be missed that has not gone missing. The loss of original innocence and the freedom from suffering that accompanied it haunt the human spirit like a distant memory of that perfect world now gone wrong.³

Evil is commonly divided into two kinds: bad things that happen, which we call physical evil, and bad things that are done, which we call moral evil. There are many forms of physical evil that occur as a matter of course in nature, for example earthquakes and various diseases. God *permits* physical evil, but he is not the cause of such evil.

The *good* of God's creation includes human freedom. God allows his human children the freedom to love. In fact, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God who himself is love (CCC 1604). Love requires freedom; it cannot be forced. Without the freedom to choose love, true freedom cannot exist. Therefore, the possibility to choose against love also exists. It is this gift of freedom that makes disobedience possible. Because God does not interfere with human freedom, human beings can choose to act badly, which often brings harm to themselves or others. This is moral evil.

However, God himself is *all good*. This means he is never at the root of evil, and he is never at the root of a temptation to commit an evil deed. He cannot be the direct cause of any evil. In his providential wisdom, God alone knows how to bring good out of evil, but "he is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil" (CCC 311). The *Catechism* tells us that after the first sin "all subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and a lack of trust in his goodness" (CCC 398).

Human suffering is an experience of evil. Rather than something *put upon* human persons, suffering actually signifies a *lack* of the good willed by God.

For this we will first turn to *Salvifici Doloris* and to what John Paul II has explained about the relationship between evil and suffering:

This question [of evil] seems, in a certain sense, inseparable from the theme of suffering. The Christian response to it is different, for example, from the one given by certain cultural and religious traditions which hold that existence is an evil from which one needs to be liberated. Christianity proclaims the essential good of existence and the good of that which exists, acknowledges the goodness of the Creator, and proclaims the good of creatures. Man suffers on account of evil,

which is a certain lack, limitation, or distortion of good. We could say that man suffers because of a good in which he does not share, from which in a certain sense he is cut off, or of which he has deprived himself. He particularly suffers when he “ought” -- in the normal order of things -- to have a share in this good, and does not have it.⁴

What is this good that God wants human persons to have?

What is good for a person is that which perfects or builds up the person; what is bad is that which diminishes, what deprives him or her of something he or she could have or be. Therefore, the good intended for human beings by God’s design are those aspects of human existence that are perfective, that “actualize potentialities that belong to us as human beings; they are basic reasons for acting; they are intrinsic aspects of the ‘full-being’ of human persons.”⁵

Said another way, human beings are creatures of God, and are creatures of a certain kind, which means they have a definite nature. It is precisely because of the kind of creature human beings are and because of their particular nature that they are perfected by certain things and diminished by others. Consequently, there is an observable order called for by the Creator through which human beings are to achieve their greatest perfection as persons.

- Because human beings are living, bodily creatures, they are perfected by life and health. In fact, according to The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its 1980 *Declaration on Euthanasia*, “Human life is the basis of all goods, and is the necessary source and condition of every human activity and of all society. Most people regard life as something sacred and hold that no one may dispose of it at will, but believers see in life something greater, namely, a gift of God’s love, which they are called upon to preserve and make fruitful” (I. The Value of Human Life).
- In the point above, health is noted as a “good.” Health perfects, builds up, and actualizes the potentialities of a person, while sickness and disease diminish, or take away from, a person’s perfection or fulfillment.
- Since human beings have the capacity for intelligent, rational thought, they are greatly perfected by knowledge of truth and aesthetic experience.
- God has endowed human beings with the capacity for taking substances found naturally in the creation and transforming them into usable objects. Thus, it is particularly pleasurable and desirable for them to be creative, to skillfully perform certain tasks, and to perfect their talents and abilities.
- Because human beings are deeply complex creatures, they are enriched in their capacity to enjoy life when they experience what is known as self-integration, which is harmony of the different aspects of the self.
- In their unique complexity, human beings have various capacities to form relationships with others; therefore, they find fulfillment in friendship and society.
- Harmony between a person and God is a fundamental human good, as is maintaining harmony between actions and that which is morally true.
- Finally, since human beings are individuals created by God as masculine and feminine persons and are capable of forming communities that include aspects of all of the basic goods, there is the human good of marriage and family life.

Human beings “ought” to share fully in the human goods of God’s design. When the fullness of these goods is diminished, they “lack” the good God intends for them. They experience some form of suffering. “Thus, in the Christian view, the reality of suffering is explained through evil, which always, in some way, refers to a good.”⁶ Since evil, by definition, is the absence or lack of the good that should be present by God’s design, when John Paul II speaks of suffering as being explained through evil but pointing to a good, he is showing that suffering results because of the *lack* of a quality or state that should be present.

Part II: Aspects of Suffering

Suffering is experienced by the whole person, both body and soul -- the two essential dimensions of the human person.

In his book *John Paul II and the Meaning of Suffering: Lessons From a Spiritual Master*, author Robert Schroeder states:

Suffering is “experienced evil” that deprives us of the good we were meant to have as human persons. And this experience is one of the whole person, composed of both a body and a soul -- the two essential dimensions of our being. According to John Paul, we suffer both bodily and spiritually in accord with who we are as persons; suffering results when we lack the good we were meant to have in one of these two aspects of our selfhood.⁷

When one thinks of suffering, one thinks primarily of bodily suffering, which is the subject of medical science. John Paul II speaks of suffering from a broader, wider, multi-dimensional perspective.

Man suffers in different ways, ways not always considered by medicine, not even in its most advanced specializations. Suffering is something which is *still wider* than sickness, more complex and at the same time still more deeply rooted in humanity itself. A certain idea of this problem comes to us from the distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering. This distinction is based upon the double dimension of the human being and indicates the bodily and spiritual element as the immediate or direct subject of suffering. Insofar as the words “suffering” and “pain” can, up to a certain degree, be used as synonyms, *physical suffering* is present when “the body is hurting” in some way, whereas *moral suffering* is “pain of the soul.”⁸

John Paul II goes on to explain that in various ways moral pain permeates all suffering, because when a person suffers, he or she suffers as a “whole” person, physically and spiritually. However, he also notes that the vastness and the many forms of spiritual suffering are certainly no less in number than the forms of physical suffering, yet spiritual suffering seems less identified and less reachable by therapy.

Bodily suffering often seeps into the soul, not content to be contained in flesh and blood alone. Thus, interior and unwelcome fears and psychological uncertainties are spawned and this leads to spiritual unrest. The suffering person often struggles to find inner peace. Likewise, sadness, disappointment, discouragement, and despair can have debilitating effects on one’s bodily health and are often reflected in the state of the entire organism.

Fr. Jim Willig was a young priest who died from renal cell cancer. In the years prior to his death, he struggled through the painful and often tormenting ups and downs of his treatment. His journey is chronicled in his book *Lessons From the School of Suffering*. Fr. Jim was a deeply spiritual man. By his own admission, he had always had an awareness of God, even in childhood. Suffering impacted him dramatically, and he learned through his own devastating experience that when the body suffers, so does the soul, and visa versa. Fr. Jim found that caring for the spiritual dimension as well as the physical dimension is essential for the sufferer. He relates:

Prayer in the school of suffering is not only allowed, it is absolutely required. Without a doubt, prayer has been my greatest source of strength in times of my greatest weakness. It has been my foremost source of consolation in times of desolation. It has given me more relief than most medicines I have taken.⁹

Yet, Fr. Jim found that he needed something more than prayer alone. He became convinced that all sufferers need more. They need the greatest prayer of all: The Eucharist.

Very early in my cancer treatment, the Lord taught me that the greatest prayer is the Eucharist. The Lord made me understand that my mind, my body, and my spirit need constant, daily nourishment. It was here, at the table of the Lord, that he also taught me the finest food for my soul and the strongest medicine for my spirit is the Eucharist. It is in the gift of Communion that Christ, himself, comes to us.¹⁰

Fr. Jim also learned that in his suffering he needed to approach God as a child and that tears were sometimes the most appropriate and effective type of prayer.

Like Jesus in the garden, sometimes my deepest prayers express themselves in tears. These tears have expressed far more than mere words could ever communicate. They express my fears, my hurts, and my longings from a place deep within me I had rarely entered before. It is there I learned that I am like a two-year-old child who doesn't have any idea of what truly is best. I simply know I need help. I need to be loved. I need to be saved. The depths of these feelings were never previously given a voice in my more "adult" prayers.¹¹

Suffering has both a personal and social dimension.

In *Salvifici Doloris* John Paul II states:

In itself human suffering constitutes as it were a specific "world" which exists together with man, which appears in him and passes, and sometimes does not pass, but which consolidates itself and becomes deeply rooted in him.¹²

Each suffering person is an individual member of this "world" of suffering about which John Paul II speaks. At the same time, suffering individuals comprise a social world of suffering that blankets the planet. Despite various cultures and traditions, suffering is something people have in common world-wide. At particular periods of time and in some eras of human existence, suffering is more concentrated. "This happens, for example, in cases of natural disasters, epidemics, catastrophes, upheavals, and various social scourges: one thinks, for example, of a bad harvest and connected with it -- or with various other causes -- the scourge of famine."¹³ War is one of the most intense scourges and brings with it "a much greater harvest of death and a much heavier burden of human sufferings."¹⁴

The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes*, (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) notes that human life, in itself the basis of all human good, is attacked or demeaned in many ways. Named in the document are: "murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and willful self-destruction; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, as well as degrading working conditions where men are treated as mere tools for profit rather than free and responsible persons" (27).

Other dehumanizing situations include the devaluing of human life reflected in policies favoring capital punishment and the misuse of modern technologies that attack life or treat human beings as mere objects. These latter include nuclear or biological warfare, genetic experimentation, and certain reproductive technologies which force the generation of human life to be separated from its proper context: between a husband and wife in a loving, intimate marital embrace.

John Paul II speaks of the social aspect of suffering as being "collective" in nature. He views the entire body of sufferers throughout the world as part of this "collective" world of suffering. Such "collective" suffering is often

rooted in huge blind structures, for example, political policies, cultural biases, economic practices, and social attitudes in which we all, sometimes unknowingly or indirectly, participate. These “structures” perpetrate and sustain human suffering in far reaching ways.

John Paul II speaks of our own time in human history as a particularly intense period of suffering which has increased “in proportion to the mistakes and transgressions of our contemporary civilization.”¹⁵ More than at any other period in history, the world has been transformed by progress through human effort and ingenuity, but is, at the same time, in grave danger because of human mistakes and offenses.

Robert Schroeder sums up this reality when he states:

Perhaps such heartbreaking truths in our story reaffirm that the presence of evil in our midst is undeniable. Even our happiest moments and most brilliant successes are often stained by sin, ignorance, and pain. In those spaces where humanity is not the cause of its own anguish, suffering still seems to find a way in.¹⁶

Asking “Why?” is a normal response to suffering, because human persons are rational beings.

According to Christian Psychologist Conrad W. Baars, author of *Feeling and Healing Your Emotions*, man derives his knowledge of the world first from his senses. This is also true for animals. However, while animals are sentient creatures, able to feel, see, hear, smell, and taste, human beings are a unity of body and soul. “The distinguishing feature of the human soul is that it is rational and intellectual.”¹⁷ Reason provides human persons with a source of higher knowledge. It is a person’s reason that enables him or her to think, form ideas, compare, synthesize, judge, and solve problems.

Animals feel pain but, lacking reason and intellect, are not able to analyze why they are feeling pain or why they are suffering. When a human being feels pain or is suffering, either bodily or spiritually, it is natural for him or her to reflect intellectually upon this experience, to seek a reason for it, and to wonder if there is meaning in it. In other words, as intelligent, rational beings, human persons will naturally seek answers. It is natural for them to ask “Why?”

In *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II states:

Man can put this question to God with all the emotion of his heart and with his mind full of dismay and anxiety; and God expects the question and listens to it.¹⁸

However, as Fr. Jim Willig learned through his experience with renal cell cancer, it is natural to ask for understanding, but there are no easy answers.

One day as I meditated before the cross of Christ, I began questioning the Lord: “Why is it that I have cancer? And why did it have to be renal cell cancer that offers such little hope of any cure? Why do I have to suffer so much? Why? Why? Why?”

In the silence of the church, I could hear clearly in my mind the words that the Gospel of Matthew had reported Jesus saying to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24-25). I let those challenging words sink in a bit and then I responded honestly to the Lord, “Instead of being your follower, how about we go back to being just good friends?” There is something in each of us that naturally resists

the cross and the sacrifice that life sometimes asks of us. It was then that I realized Jesus has many good friends, a church full of them. But I wonder, “How many followers does Jesus have?”

To follow Jesus means to deny your very self and sacrifice your life. This teaching goes against our human tendency and the way society always urges us to look out for number one. Jesus tells us we must let go of number one. Or better yet, we must rethink who number one really is.

And so I pray about this and try little by little, day by day, to consciously unite myself with Jesus on the cross. As a Catholic, making the Sign of the Cross often became a rote way to begin and end a prayer. My hands were moved, but my heart was not. Now the Sign of the Cross has become a heartfelt reminder that I am “signing my life” over to the Lord.¹⁹

There are, of course, situations in which a suffering person can question the “why” of his or her condition and gain insights. Lifestyle choices can affect one’s health and well-being for good or woe. When lifestyle is examined and found wanting, adjustments can be made. Those struggling emotionally can seek treatment, learn to understand themselves better, and make beneficial changes. Medical science has advanced tremendously and offers remedies for a wide variety of health conditions. The explosion of information available to modern society makes it possible for many to research and find answers for themselves. However, as Robert Schroeder observes:

Often the line between the suffering we have a hand in versus the suffering that “just happens to us” looks blurry. We can’t always be sure what or who brings suffering into our lives. Sometimes, all we can know for sure is that we hurt. Nevertheless, suffering teaches us the unsettling truth that we don’t have total control over things. We don’t want to suffer, but we do anyway -- a reality which confirms that as being by nature “created,” we don’t get to choose the essential conditions of the world into which we’re born. If it were up to us, suffering would cease to exist. And yet suffering continues, because it is the human condition. So the challenge of coping with the many limitations suffering imposes on us become ours by virtue of our existence.²⁰

Therefore, it is *okay* to ask “Why?” In so doing one makes use of the human faculties of reason and intellect. Both are endowments the Creator expects and desires his human children to use. As intelligent beings, human persons want to believe that life -- and thus suffering -- is not senseless, that it has some ultimate meaning, some purpose. Seeking answers should not be confused with calling into question the Will of God. Likewise, in asking for answers one should not expect to understand God’s infinite wisdom or grasp fully the great mystery that suffering is.

**Suffering is not necessarily the consequence of a fault or a punishment for personal sin.
Innocent people also suffer.**

It is not an uncommon human response to react to suffering as coming from the hand of God as a punishment. Indeed, many very good and noble people scour their consciences, looking for any reason God may have for sending them a particular cross, or they use the microscope of moral examination to determine whether or not guilt justifies their pain. Yet, as Robert Schroeder tells us:

But what a challenge it is to really know for sure. How thoroughly must we analyze our moral history during the evaluation process? Should we interpret our current suffering as punishment for a sin we committed years ago, or just yesterday? Are we being disciplined now for all our sins, a select group of sins, or just one particular sin? ²¹

The honest assessment is that it's hard to know if suffering is directly related to personal sin. What makes this inquiry even harder is that throughout time there has been a vast amount of innocent suffering. Children are a good example. Before the age of reason they are not capable of making moral decisions for which they are responsible before God. And although they have inherited the guilt of original sin, they are not guilty of personal sin. If personal sin is always at the root of suffering, one could conclude that innocent children should not experience suffering, since such punishment would not be deserved. Yet, even very young children suffer.

And what about those of us who are responsible before God for personal sin? How do we know if the suffering we endure is a result of this? Can we ever know with certainty? Again, the honest assessment is: No.

In Part I we recalled the creation story in the Book of Genesis, establishing that God created a good world intended for human flourishing. Evil entered human existence through a free act of disobedience. The world and all who inhabit it became subject to suffering and death. From the standpoint of the guilt of original sin, we have all inherited the consequences of that sin. We are all subject to the fallen condition into which we are born, and suffering is part of it.

In Part II we established that suffering has a social dimension, and this type of suffering is often perpetrated and supported by human beings themselves. On that basis, "it is equally true that one cannot reject the criterion that, at the basis of human suffering, there is a complex involvement with sin."²² But knowing to what extent we are each morally responsible for the suffering we endure in this life remains unclear.

It is, however, always a good and beneficial practice to examine one's life from the standpoint of right and wrong actions. This practice, in fact, is required of all Christians, in good times and in bad.

The examination of conscience has been a part of the Christian life since the earliest times and should always have a preeminent place in every Catholic's interior life. In the New Testament, St. Paul urged that there be an examination of conscience before receiving the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:28). So important was the examination of conscience to St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus, that he made it a key element in his *Spiritual Exercises*.²³

According to John Paul II, the Book of Job in the Old Testament challenges the truth of the principle that identifies suffering with punishment for sin.

[Job's] suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent; it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence. ... At the same time, however, this book shows with all firmness that the principles of this order cannot be applied in an exclusive and superficial way. While it is true that suffering has a meaning as punishment when it is connected with a fault, *it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment.*"²⁴

For those who suffer, John Paul II's assurance that not all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment is a most welcome insight. Although the sufferer still finds himself or herself inside the mystery of suffering, this knowledge can bring great relief and remove an unnecessary and less-than-helpful burden.

Along with all Christians, the sufferer should examine his or her actions, attitudes, thoughts, and words for the purpose of distinguishing good from evil and right from wrong. In a spirit of correct discernment, sound judgment, honesty, integrity, and veracity this should be undertaken, not as a way of assessing if one's sins can be reconciled with one's degree of suffering, but because this is required of all faithful Christians.

One of the greatest challenges sufferers face is the uncertainty of recovery, of restoration.

The ways in which people suffer are so varied, it is difficult to grasp the full range of human suffering. One aspect of suffering that is common to afflictions of all kinds, however, is the uncertainty and powerlessness that so often accompanies them. As John Paul II points out, “we have the innate capacity and motivation to put our pain into context through interpretation. But when our afflictions don’t make sense, we experience confusion and anxiety, which add a new psychological dimension to the suffering we already feel.”²⁵

For many, suffering is a long road marred by ups and downs, twists and turns, highs and lows. At times hope is inflated, but later this hope can be lost after only a short distance down the road to recovery. There are times when answers seem forthcoming, leading the sufferer to place confidence in those who appear to hold the clues to his or her affliction. At other times, one is left speechless and bewildered.

Pinpointing the reason for one’s suffering and applying an effective remedy to restore normalcy is a hoped for outcome. Even when the recovery is not complete, and suffering must be endured over time, at least knowing the root cause and how to manage it gives some peace and restores some semblance of control over one’s life. Unfortunately for many who suffer there is no rational explanation, and suffering denies them even a basic level of understanding about why they have been afflicted so dramatically.

For a long time Fr. Jim Willig did not know if hope of recovery was something to which he should cling, since his prognosis was not good. The uncertainty, the worry, and anxiety, along with the strength and ferocity of his emotions, was sometimes overwhelming. During certain periods of his illness, he struggled to find the calmness and certainty of faith he had possessed before his illness. One day he picked up his Bible and opened to the Gospel of Matthew and to the story about Peter walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-23). This is how Fr. Jim relates it:

For one brief and beautiful moment of complete faith, when Peter was only looking at Jesus, trusting in him, he was able to step out in faith and walk on water. Peter was able to rise above the elements of nature. The wind, waves, and water could not bring him down. But then, Peter naturally looked down at the frightful elements that surrounded him. As soon as he looked down, he started sinking. When he took his focus off the Lord, he was overcome. So, Jesus reached out his hand to Peter and brought him back to his boat. ... I came to realize that if I could keep my eyes -- my sole focus -- on Jesus, only then would I be able to overcome the natural tendency to be overcome by outside elements and fears -- the winds and waves of worry.²⁶

Suffering has a way of entering one’s life and turning everything upside down. Fear, anxiety, and worry are natural reactions to the upheaval and powerlessness that suffering brings. There is no shame in this. And yet, the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians can be a powerful reminder that while suffering remains a mystery, it is not a mystery without meaning. *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies”* (2 Corinthians 4: 8-10).

As we will see in the next section, through our own earthly suffering, we are united with Jesus in his suffering and thus, we share in his work of Redemption. But this “salvific” sharing is not only one of suffering. We also have a share in Jesus’ life! Fr. Jim relates that when he read the above passage from 2 Corinthians, he felt that the Lord was explaining everything he was feeling. “What is more,” he states, “it also explained the highest purpose for which I was suffering. It was something no counselor but the all-wise Counselor could tell me. It was precisely what I needed to hear.”²⁷

Part III: The Redemptive Value of Suffering

Jesus is God's gift of love to all who suffer. Through his Son, the Father reveals that he desires our salvation, our "eternal liberation" from the evil of suffering.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3: 16-17). In *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II tells us that these words from the Gospel of John, spoken by Christ to Nicodemus, introduce us to the very heart of God's work of salvation. "Salvation means liberation from evil, and for this reason it is closely bound up with the problem of suffering."²⁸ God desires our liberation from evil -- from suffering -- but evil in its greatest sense does not only refer to the suffering human persons endure in this world alone. God desires our **eternal** liberation from evil. In other words, there is a worse suffering from which he desires to liberate us: from eternal suffering, which is the loss of eternal life. Therefore, the words "should not perish" are followed with the words "but have eternal life."

This truth radically changes the picture of man's history and his earthly situation: in spite of the sin that took root in this history both as an original inheritance and as the "sin of the world" and as the sum of personal sins, God the Father has loved the only-begotten Son, that is, he loves him in a lasting way; and then in time, precisely through this all-surpassing love, he "gives" this Son, that he may **strike at the very roots of human evil and thus draw close in a salvific way to the whole world of suffering which man shares.**²⁹

One may wonder: Is this the way it had to be? Was it necessary that Jesus suffer so cruelly? Was there no other way? Throughout the New Testament writings, Jesus' death on the Cross is held as necessary for salvation. This was also a notion foretold in Old Testament texts. And John Paul II states:

Precisely *by means of this suffering* he must bring it about "that man should not perish, but have eternal life." Precisely by means of his cross he must strike at the roots of evil, planted in the history of man and in human souls. Precisely by means of his cross he must accomplish *the work of salvation*. This work, in the plan of eternal Love, has a redemptive character.³⁰

Therefore, Jesus is God's gift of love to all who suffer. We should not lose sight of the magnitude of such a love.

Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation. By his suffering on the cross, Christ reached the very roots of evil, of sin and death.³¹

In the passion of Christ, human suffering reaches its culmination, and suffering enters a "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. The cross of Christ has become a source from which flow rivers of living water."³²

Those who embrace suffering can share in Christ's work of saving the world. Also, such *good works* entitle sufferers to share in Christ's glory.

In *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II tells us:

In the cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but *also human suffering itself has been redeemed*. Christ -- without any fault of his own -- took on himself "the total evil of sin." The experience of this evil determined the incomparable extent of Christ's suffering, which became *the price of the Redemption*.³³

In the First Letter of Peter we hear about the price of Redemption: "*You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*" (1 Peter 1: 18-19).

St. Paul also speaks of the price of Redemption. In his letter to the Galatians he writes: "*Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen*" (Galatians 1: 3-5). To the Corinthians he says, "*You were bought with a price. So glorify God with your body*" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

What does it mean to "glorify" God with one's body? One way of approaching this is to speak of "sacrifice." By definition, a sacrifice involves offering something tangible to God with the proper internal submission to him, in acknowledgment of his dominion over us and our subjection and obedience to him. According to St. Augustine, "Every action done so as to cling to God in communion of holiness, and thus achieve blessedness, is a true sacrifice."

We are all subject to evil and suffering, therefore, we can all turn our suffering into a "sacrifice" (something holy) by uniting it with the suffering of Jesus Christ. This is what St. Paul means in his letter to the Romans when he writes, "*I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*" (Romans 12: 1-2).

John Paul II explains it this way:

The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.³⁴

St. Paul writes to the early Christians about "sharing" in the work of Redemption through their own suffering. The early Christians, whose sufferings were often intense and atrocious, found that St. Paul's teachings on this subject greatly enabled them to face and endure such malicious persecutions. Yet, there was something more in his message, something that he himself would later admit helped him to persevere through the humiliations, doubts, hopelessness, and persecutions. Thus, he also writes in the second letter to the Corinthians: "*For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too*" (2 Corinthians 1:5).

The comfort St. Paul is referring to in the above passage is precisely what John Paul II speaks about in *Salvifici Doloris*: “Those who share in the sufferings of Christ are also called, through their own sufferings, to share in glory.”³⁵ Through the centuries, Christians have continued to suffer persecutions for Christ’s sake. They have relied heavily on the testimony of those who were eye witnesses to both the crucifixion and the resurrection, a powerful reminder that sharing in the cross of Christ also brings with it a sharing in his resurrection and glory.

It is also important to note that John Paul II speaks of sharing in Christ’s suffering as a “calling,” as a “vocation.” He states:

Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: *Follow me! Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering!* Through my cross! Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him.”³⁶

John Paul II sums up this idea of suffering as a “calling” when he comments on the words of St. Paul: “*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church*” (Colossians 1:24).

In this Body, Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way he is united with those who suffer. The words quoted above from the letter to the Colossians bear witness to the exceptional nature of this union. For, *whoever suffers in union with Christ* -- just as the Apostle Paul bears his “tribulations” in union with Christ -- not only receives from Christ that strength already referred to but also “completes” by his suffering “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”

This evangelical outlook especially highlights the truth *concerning the creative character of suffering*. The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world’s Redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering.

Insofar as man becomes a sharer in Christ’s sufferings -- in any part of the world and at any time in history -- to that extent he in his own way completes the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world.³⁷

Additionally, John Paul II explains that by participating in the sufferings of Jesus Christ and, thus, in his work of Redemption, each “sharer in suffering” is performing a spiritual service. Together with Christ, he or she is working for the salvation of his or her brothers and sisters. John Paul II calls this “an irreplaceable service.” He goes on to say that “those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special *particle of the infinite treasure* of the world’s Redemption, and can share this treasure with others.”³⁸

It is only fitting, of course, that Mary, who was given the title *Theotokos* (Mother of God) in the third century at the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) be part of our consideration of “shared” suffering. In *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II explains that “it is especially consoling to note -- and also accurate in accordance with the Gospel and history -- that at the side of Christ, in the first and most exalted place, there is always his Mother through the exemplary testimony that she bears by her whole life.”³⁹ She was a witness to her Son’s passion by her presence. She shared in Jesus’ passion by her compassion. Not only did Mary herself share in the suffering of this world in her own life but also, in bringing forth the Savior of the World, she participated in the Redemption of us all.

In *Lessons From the School of Suffering*, Fr. Jim Willig shares how Mary helped him through some of his greatest trials and torments.

Each evening at this stage of treatment, members of my family gathered around my bed at my parents' home and prayed the Rosary through those terribly difficult times. The Rosary soon became a comfort to me, reminding me that the Blessed Mother, Mary, was with me. Just as she stood beside her Son when he was on his cross, she stood beside me, helping me carry the cross of cancer.

While my heavenly mother stood beside me, so, too, did my earthly mother. Every night while recuperating at my parents' home, my mother and I shared a simple ritual: Mom would sit at the foot of my bed and massage my feet. This gentle and loving gesture always reminded me that Mother Mary was at the foot of the cross of Jesus when he turned to his beloved disciple, John, and said, "Woman, here is your son" (John 19:26), thereby giving his mother to John and at the same time, giving her to all of us. From that day on, John took Mary into his home. This image from Scripture gives me great comfort. It is there for us all. All we need to do is invite Mary into our hearts and homes to help us, especially in our times of suffering.⁴⁰

Part IV: The Compassionate God-Man

Jesus demonstrated a special love and deep concern for the suffering people of his time. In imitation of Jesus, every Christian ought to feel *called personally* to bear witness to love in suffering: To do good by his or her own suffering and to do good to those who suffer.

Earlier we discussed John Paul II's reference to suffering as a "world" of its own. Similarly, he tells us, the world of human suffering calls for another world -- "the world of human love." He summarily recalls Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in which Christ wished to give an answer to the question: "Who is my neighbor?" Using this parable, John Paul II brings forth what characterizes a Good Samaritan. Here are some of his key points:

- This parable indicates what the relationship of each of us must be towards our suffering neighbor. We are not allowed to "pass by on the other side" indifferently; we must "stop" beside him. Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan.
- The name "Good Samaritan" fits every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others, who "is moved" by the misfortune of another.
- If Christ, who knows the interior of a person, emphasizes this compassion, it means that it is important for our whole attitude toward others' suffering.
- We must cultivate a sensitivity of heart, which bears witness to compassion towards a suffering person. Sometimes this compassion remains the only principal expression of our love for and solidarity with the sufferer.
- A Good Samaritan is one who brings help in suffering, whatever its nature may be. Hopefully the help is effective, but nevertheless, our whole heart must be in it. Doing so is a form of giving one's very "I," and opening this "I" to the other person.
- Every individual ought to feel as if *called personally* to bear witness to love in suffering.

Jesus demonstrated a special love and deep concern for the suffering people of his time. In the words of John Paul II: "He goes about 'doing good,' and the good of his works became especially evident in the face of human suffering. The parable of the Good Samaritan is in profound harmony with the conduct of Christ himself."⁴¹

In conclusion, John Paul II states:

These words about love, about actions of love, acts linked with human suffering, enable us once more to discover, at the basis of all *human sufferings, the same redemptive suffering of Christ.*

Christ said: "You did it to me." He himself is the one who in each individual experiences love; He himself is the one who receives help, when this is given to every suffering person without exception. He himself is present in this suffering person, since his salvific suffering has been opened once and for all to every human suffering.

And all those who suffer have been called once and for all to become sharers "in Christ's sufferings," just as all have been called to "complete" with their own suffering "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."

At one and the same time Christ has taught man *to do good by his suffering* and *to do good to those who suffer*. In this double aspect he has completely revealed the meaning of suffering.⁴²

Endnotes

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38. Ibid. VI:27
39. Ibid. VI:25
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