

Human Suffering Why Does God Permit It?

By Jeff Ziegler

ISSUE: “If God the Father almighty, the Creator of the ordered and good world, cares for all His creatures, why does evil exist” (Catechism, no. 309)?

RESPONSE: “To this question, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice. Only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer to this question” (*ibid.*).

DISCUSSION: “Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice, and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it” (Catechism, no. 164). In his 1984 apostolic letter on the Christian meaning of human suffering (*Salvific Doloris*, hereafter “SD”), Pope John Paul II says that suffering happens “at different moments in life, it takes place in different ways, it assumes different dimensions; nevertheless, in whatever form, suffering seems to be, and is, almost *inseparable from man’s earthly existence*” (no. 3).

At some point in our lives, our experience of suffering causes bodily and spiritual pain and leads us to ask the question “Why do I suffer?” Particularly anguishing is “the daily drama of so many cases of undeserved suffering and of so many faults without proper punishment” (SD, 9).

The lack of a sufficient human answer to this question often causes more anguish than the physical and moral evils themselves. “I sought whence evil comes, and there was no solution” (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7, 7, 11).

Few men have suffered as much as St. Paul:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak?” (2 Cor. 11:24-29).

Despite all of his sufferings, St. Paul could declare, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake” (Col. 1:24). St. Paul rejoiced not because he ceased to suffer, but because he saw the salvific meaning of human suffering. “These words [of St. Paul] seem to be found at the end of the long road that winds through the suffering which forms part of the history of man and which is illuminated by the Word of God” (SD, 1). Using *Salvifici Doloris* as our guide, let us retrace St. Paul’s steps on what Pope John Paul II calls a long road.

In Search of Meaning

The mystery of human suffering, physical and moral, leads inevitably to the mystery of evil, for suffering arises when man experiences evil. In the face of evil, several cultural and religious traditions developed the view that the world is an evil from which man must be liberated. Christians, on the contrary, believe that creation is essentially good, for the Creator is good. Evil is not identical, then, with the created order. Rather, evil “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 . . . Thus, in the Christian view, the reality of suffering is explained through evil, which always, in some way, refers to a good” (*SD*, 7).

The panorama of human suffering leads to the question “Why?” Pope John Paul II comments, “[O]nly the suffering human being [as opposed to animals] knows that he is suffering and wonders why; and he suffers in a humanly speaking still deeper way if he does not find a satisfactory answer” (*SD*, 9). Because this questioning is often directed to God and sometimes lead men to deny God’s existence, it “shows how much care must be taken both in dealing with the question itself and with all possible answers to it” (*ibid.*, 9).

In the Old Testament, this questioning takes place most vividly in the Book of Job. The friends of this just man who suffers believe that “suffering can have meaning only as a punishment for sin” (*SD*, 10).

The friends of Job were partially correct. God the Creator is also the Judge whose justice demands that sin—“the conscious and free violation of [the good of creation] by man”—be punished (*ibid.*, 10).

But Job challenges his friends’ assertion that *all* suffering is a punishment for sin. In the end, God rebukes Job’s friends (cf. Job 42:7-9). The suffering of the innocent must be accepted as a mystery, not the consequence of their sin.

Other Old Testament passages teach that God punishes the sinner in order to lead the sinner to conversion. Thus, “punishment has a meaning not only because it serves to repay the objective evil of the transgression with another evil, but first and foremost because it creates the possibility of rebuilding goodness in the subject who suffers” (*SD*, 12).

The Old Testament points us toward the salvific meaning of suffering revealed to us by Jesus Christ on Calvary:

Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the “why” of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love. . . . We must above all accept the light of Revelation not only insofar as it expresses the transcendent order of justice but also insofar as it illuminates this order with Love, as the definitive source of everything that exists. Love is also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ (*SD*, 13).

Conquering Suffering by Love

God sent His only-begotten Son into the world to free the world from definitive evil. Definitive evil is the loss of eternal life, and definitive suffering is damnation (cf. John 3:16). Because sin and death are the basis of this ultimate evil, the Son’s mission consists in the conquest of sin and death. The Son “conquers sin by His obedience unto death, and He overcomes death by His Resurrection” (*SD*, 14).

While the example of Job demonstrates that one’s suffering is not a direct consequence of one’s sins, it is true that “at the basis of human suffering, there is a complex involvement with sin” (*SD*, 15). Likewise, death involves the dissolution of the soul from the body. While man’s soul subsists separately from his body after death, the body returns to dust, in accord with God’s decree after the original sin (cf. Gen. 3:19). Jesus Christ blots out the dominion of sin and death. He conquers the former by giving to “man the possibility of living in sanctifying grace,” and He conquers the latter “by His Resurrection beginning the process of the future resurrection of the body” (*SD*, 15). Though Christ’s victory does not remove all temporal suffering, man can now live in “the hope of eternal life and holiness” (*ibid.*, 15).

During His life on earth, Jesus Christ drew close to the world of human suffering. He healed and consoled

those who suffered in soul and body. He addressed the eight beatitudes to those who suffer. He Himself was the Man of Sorrows who suffered in His human nature even before His Passion. He accomplished the salvation of mankind from sin and death by His own suffering on the Cross which, “in the plan of eternal Love, has a redemptive character” (SD, 16). “In His suffering, sins are cancelled out precisely because He alone as the only-begotten Son could take them upon Himself, accept them *with that love for the Father which overcomes* the evil of every sin” (SD, 17). In suffering voluntarily and innocently, “Christ gives the answer to the question about suffering and the meaning of suffering not only by His teaching, that is, by the Good News, but most of all by His own suffering” (SD, 18). The events of Gethsemane and Golgotha prove the reality and incomparable intensity of Christ’s suffering. His willingness to assume these sufferings, including “*the ‘entire’ evil of the turning away from God,*” manifests His love (*ibid.*).

“Human suffering has reached its culmination in the Passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order. . . . In [the Cross of Christ] we must also pose anew the question about the meaning of suffering, and read in it, to its very depths, the answer to this question [of suffering]” (*ibid.*).

Sharers in the Suffering of Christ

Through His suffering, Christ not only redeemed man from sin and death but also redeemed suffering so that suffering itself becomes redemptive. Being redeemed, each man is also called to become a sharer in Christ’s redemptive suffering (cf. SD, 19).

St. Paul wrote: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Pope John Paul II uses this passage as a starting point for his discussion of Paul’s theology of redemptive suffering:

Faith enables the author of these words to know that love which led Christ to the Cross. And if He loved us in this way, suffering and dying, then with this suffering and death of His He *lives in the one whom He loved in this way*; He lives in the man: in Paul. And living in him—to the degree that Paul, conscious of this through faith, responds to His love with love—Christ also becomes in a particular way *united to the man*, to Paul, *through the Cross*. This union caused Paul to write, in the same Letter to the Galatians, other words as well, no less strong: “But far be it from me to *glory* except in the *Cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14, emphasis added).

Paul writes: “That I may know him (Christ) and the power of his Resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Truly, the Apostle first experienced the “power of the Resurrection” of Christ on the road to Damascus, and only later, in this paschal light, reached that “sharing in his sufferings” of which he speaks, for example, in the Letter to the Galatians. The path of Paul is clearly paschal: *sharing in the Cross* of Christ comes about *through the experience of the Risen One*, therefore through a special sharing in the Resurrection” (SD, 20-21, citations omitted).

Moreover, St. Paul teaches that to share in the sufferings of Christ is to suffer for the kingdom and to become worthy of attaining that kingdom and thus sharing in the glory of Christ. This glory is already hidden in suffering: As Christ’s suffering is a manifestation of messianic greatness, human suffering becomes an invitation to spiritual maturity and moral greatness. Thus, “to *suffer* means to become particularly *susceptible*, particularly *open to the working of the salvific power of God,*” for suffering is a call to perseverance, the virtue that “unleashes hope, which maintains in [man] the conviction that suffering will not get the better of him, that it will not deprive him of his dignity as a human being” (SD, 23).

The path of St. Paul goes even further. He declares, “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” (Col. 1:24). The Pope comments:

Does this mean that the Redemption achieved by Christ is not complete? No. It only means that the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, *remains always open to all love* expressed in *human suffering*. In this dimension—the dimension of love—the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished. Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limits; but at the same time He did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened Himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part *of the very essence of Christ’s redemptive suffering* that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed (SD, 24).

The Gospel of Suffering

Suffering itself, then, is a Gospel preached by Christ, a Gospel witnessed to and shared by Christians, preeminently the Blessed Mother. Our Lord spoke frequently of the need for suffering and foretold that His followers would be persecuted. Persecution is the “first chapter of the Gospel of suffering” (SD, 25); the next chapter “is written by all those *who suffer together with Christ*, uniting their human sufferings to His salvific suffering” (SD, 26). The lives of the saints show that suffering is “a special grace” because it “draws a person interiorly close to Christ. . . . When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior *maturity and spiritual greatness* become evident” (*ibid.*).

How is this maturity brought about? “To the suffering brother or sister,” the Holy Father writes, “Christ *discloses* and gradually reveals *the horizons of the kingdom of God*: the horizons of a world converted to the Creator, of a world free from sin, a world being built on the saving power of love. And slowly but effectively, Christ leads into . . . this kingdom of the Father, suffering man, in a certain sense through the very heart of His suffering . . . through the heart of His holy Mother” (*ibid.*).

Why, then, does God permit suffering? Pope John Paul II answers:

The answer which comes through this sharing, by way of the interior encounter with the Master, is in itself *something more than the mere abstract answer* to the question about the meaning of suffering. For it is above all a call. It is a vocation. 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. He does not discover this meaning at his own human level, but at the level of the suffering of Christ. At the same time, however, from this level of Christ the salvific meaning of suffering *descends to man’s level* and becomes, in a sense, the individual’s personal response. It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy (*ibid.*).

Last edited: 9/25/01

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