

At the foot of the **CROSS**

The question

It is the unavoidable question accompanying us through life: the anguished 'Why?' of human suffering.

It is the most painful and difficult of questions put to God with all the emotion of the human heart. The importance of the asking cannot be underestimated, says Pope John Paul II. God expects the question and listens to it.

The answer to a question which probes the depths of human experience and the mystery of divine love, can only come from the cross of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, it is in the very experience of suffering that God longs to speak to our hearts in a radical way.

John Paul II addressed this question in his 1984 Apostolic Letter 'On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering' (Salvifici Doloris is its Latin title). Some key points from that document follow.

A starting point

Where does one begin to address the topic of human suffering? In this letter, John Paul II starts by acknowledging that the experience of suffering is deeply human. Suffering is:

- **Universal.** It accompanies humanity at every point of the earth.
- **Profoundly human.** It is part of human experience, inseparable from our earthly existence.
- **A call to go 'beyond ourselves.'** Suffering is somehow connected with the mystery of love and calls us to enter more deeply into this mystery.

It is precisely on this path of suffering that the Church must try to meet people. (SD,3)

The question of evil

The question of suffering is closely connected with the question of evil. Evil leads to pain and hurt and tortured questions like 'Why is there such evil in the world?' When we see people enduring the effects of war, disease, poverty and loneliness we are tempted to view the world as a bad place and, indeed, some cultures and traditions view existence as an evil from which one needs to be freed.

Christianity, however, takes a different view, proclaiming that creation is essentially good because it reflects the goodness of the Creator. The goodness of the world opens the eye of the human soul to the existence of God's wisdom, power and greatness.

Evil, on the other hand, is a lack, a limitation or distortion of good. Evil and suffering seem to obscure the image we have of God's creation, sometimes in a radical way that can lead to the denial of God.

Thus the question, the 'Why' of suffering and evil, has important ramifications for our relationship with God. Great care must be taken both in dealing with the question itself and with all possible answers to it. (SD,9)

One Night...

The screams coming from the front of the church had a particularly tragic sound, like that of a wounded animal. On entering the church we saw a woman doubled over before the tabernacle, screaming and screaming... words which at first were incoherent through her sobbing. Then we began to understand the source of her grief. 'How could you let my baby die?' she kept crying.

I was somewhat shaken by the commotion, but the parish priest whom I was with seemed calm and unperturbed. 'It's okay, I'll stay with her,' he said and sat down in a pew, patiently waiting until the woman was ready to talk...

When he came in later he was full of admiration. 'Such faith, such faith,' he kept saying. 'That woman told God exactly what she thought! So many praying people hide their true selves, but this woman has brought God her real self, her deepest questions.' (VC)

A question about suffering and evil

The quest for meaning

How can we begin to discover the Christian meaning of suffering? We can start by opening ourselves to:

- **our full human potential. There are depths to ourselves yet to be discovered.**
- **the dimension of divine love. Love is the fullest source of the answer. This answer has been given to us in the cross of Jesus Christ. (SD,13)**

Jesus: man of healing and compassion

Jesus was no stranger to human suffering. He directed much of his attention to the sick, the hungry, the afflicted. He himself experienced fatigue, homelessness, misunderstanding, isolation and hostility, all which culminated in a cruel and humiliating death.

Jesus was willing to meet suffering 'face to face'. He could have run away and avoided it by compromising his message. Yet a deeper conviction called him to face the unpalatable consequences of his teaching and public actions; a conviction stemming from his sense of being loved by and united with God (as 'the Father's Son') and called to a profound work for the sake of humankind. As his followers later came to understand, at stake here was more than conflict on a human plane. In Jesus' acceptance of suffering and death was the embodiment of God's saving action. By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ redeemed the world.

Context

Salvifici Doloris was written in the context of a special year declared by the Church in 1984: 'The Jubilee of the Redemption.' During this year, members of the Church were called to reflect on the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection and its implication for their lives.

Jesus: Son of God who conquers sin and death

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16).

These words take us to the very heart of what salvation is all about. When the scriptures speak of salvation they are speaking of an extraordinary action of love, whereby God gives His Son, Jesus, 'to the world' to free humankind from its entrapment in the ways of evil. In loving response, the Son gives his whole life to the mission entrusted to him by the Father. This is a giving unto death, for the Son holds nothing back in his willingness to be and do all that his Father asks of him.

In the lifting up of the God-man Jesus on the cross we see the climax of a life of unsurpassed faithfulness and love; a faithfulness and love so profound that no force of evil can withstand it. Sin is conquered at its deepest roots. The power of the resurrection breaks through and humanity is offered a way to be reunited with God. Sin and death give way to new possibilities for love. The world is opened to a new dimension of life. Christ has gained 'eternal life' for us, the hope of tangibly experiencing his love on this earth, and the promise of living forever with him in eternity.

All this is accomplished through the Father's love. This is salvific love which Christians rejoice in and proclaim. The work of the cross is the work of salvation.

Scripture: a book about suffering (SD, Chapter 2)

In the Old Testament we find all kinds of examples of suffering, including the death of one's children, childlessness, homesickness, persecution, mockery, loneliness, the remorse of conscience, unfaithful friends and the misfortunes of one's own nation.

Scripture is the story of a people coming to know God through wrestling with their own painful predicaments. In the Old Testament we see a development in understanding of suffering, a movement

- from a primitive view that all suffering is punishment for evil;
- to a recognition that good and innocent people also suffer;
- to a realization that suffering creates positive possibilities for goodness, for faith and the overcoming of evil.

This progression is vividly expressed in the Book of Job and paves the way for a penetration of the mystery of suffering as revealed in the 'Jesus story' of the New Testament.

Think about it

What movement in faith and understanding is taking place through your own life struggles?

Read about:

- *Jesus' experience of suffering: Luke 22-23*
- *Jesus' response to sufferers: Matthew 9*
- *Jesus' teaching on suffering: Matthew 5:3-11*

An **answer** from the source of **love**

The gospel of suffering

'Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace' (SD,26).

It was through this grace that many great saints discovered Christ alive in their lives. Most especially we honour Mary, the Mother of Jesus, whose unshakeable faith and whole life bore witness to the gospel of suffering. Indeed, her 'intense sufferings were a contribution to the redemption of all' (SD,25).

Sharers in the suffering of Christ

With the passion, death and resurrection of Christ all human suffering has found itself in a new situation. Instead of being crushed by hopelessness an extraordinary opportunity and invitation opens up before us; an invitation to go forward through the darkness of humiliation, doubt and hopelessness with a willingness to be drawn into closer union with the sufferings of Christ. (SD,22)

The repeated testimony of our Christian ancestors who have walked this path before us says that mysteriously linked with this path is a sharing in Christ's glory. An extraordinary paradox is revealed to eyes of faith: While Christ was 'emptying' himself to human eyes, Christ was being 'lifted up' in the eyes of God. At his moment of greatest weakness he manifested God's power. The letters of St Paul often speak of this paradox: *'I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me'* (2 Cor 12:9).

Thus in suffering we become disposed to the working of God's power. The virtues developed through suffering strengthen in us a sense of our own human dignity and a conviction that suffering will not get the better of us. In this movement we experience the working of God's love which is a gift

of the Holy Spirit. The more we share in this love, the more we discover ourselves as persons created in God's image (SD,23).

Indeed it was out of this experience of love that the Church was born, the community of persons who shared intimately in Christ's life, death and resurrection. Although the redemption is already achieved, it continues to be lived out in human history in the lives of Christ's followers.

The Good Samaritan (SD, Chapter 7)

Three travelers on the road to Jericho came across a half-dead man who had been stripped and beaten by robbers... The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) teaches us to respond to our suffering neighbour:

- **STOP! We must not 'pass on the other side'. We must stop and be present to the one who suffers. Stopping does not mean curiosity but availability.**
- **HAVE COMPASSION. Sensitivity of heart bears witness to the compassion of Christ. At times this empathy is all we can offer our neighbour.**
- **OFFER HELP. Compassion gives rise to action which, material or otherwise, is a gift of self.**



'We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us' (Rom 5:3-5).

Suffering clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls (SD,27).

Come! Follow me

Suffering releases love

'The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for another world: the world of human love' (SD,29).

While suffering is painful, it also has the effect of unleashing sensitivity and compassion in human hearts and prompting people to unselfish actions which are vital to building a 'civilisation of love'.

John Paul II praises those involved in the alleviation of human suffering – from the actions of families and neighbours to medical professionals and educators.

Institutions have an indispensable role to play too. We are reminded, however, that 'no institution can by itself replace the human heart, human compassion, human love or human initiative' (SD,29).

Witness

As a bereavement counsellor at a hospice I couldn't help but notice that those who died with faith did so peacefully. Those who died without a religious conviction seemed to struggle more. This had a tremendous impact on me and contributed to my decision to return to the practice of my faith. I find it moving to think that these people, through facing death, have helped me discover a fuller and richer life. (Jan)

In suffering there is a call

The 'Why?' of human suffering is answered from the heart of Jesus on the cross. But the answer is not given in the abstract; it comes through the experience of suffering itself. It takes time, often a long time, for the answer to become clear. Yet in this answer there is a call, a vocation, as Christ 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!' (SD,26)

Gradually, as we take up our cross, uniting ourselves to the cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed within ourselves through eyes of faith. It is here, in that deeply personal space of our hearts where we meet Christ, that extraordinary possibilities open up as we find in our suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy.

St Paul speaks of this joy in his letter to the Colossians (1:24) *'I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.'* It is a joy that overcomes the sense of depression, uselessness. Instead there is a sense of purpose and service, a conviction that one's life is contributing to the powers of good and opening the way for Christ. Again we meet that paradox of divine strength displayed in human weakness. *'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.'* (SD,27)

Conclusion

Suffering is certainly part of the mystery of humankind. Its meaning is supernatural and at the same time human. It is supernatural because it is grounded in the divine mystery of the redemption of the world. It is profoundly human because through it we can discover our own humanity, dignity and personal mission. (SD,31)

John Paul II concludes his letter with a call to solidarity: Let all who believe in Christ gather with those who suffer beneath the cross on Calvary, so that in love we may find the salvific meaning of our sorrow and valid answers to our questions. May we gather together with the support of Mary and all the saints who down through the centuries in a special way share in the sufferings of Christ.

The final words of *Salvifici Doloris* acknowledge the power of the sufferer to make a difference. 'We ask...all who suffer to support us. We ask precisely you who are weak to become a source of strength for the Church and humanity.' (SD,31) In the battle between forces of good and evil, the sufferer who unites with the cross of Christ is a powerful ally.

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Landmarks