

**FAITH AND WITNESS COMMISSION  
CANADIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

**WORKING PAPERS ON  
SUFFERING AND HOPE**

**Editor: Dr Paul Ladouceur**

<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>SUFFERING, SACRIFICE AND SURVIVAL AS A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT MORAL AGENCY by Dr Gail Allan (United Church of Canada)</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>BIBLE STUDY ON SUFFERING AND HOPE by Neil Bergman (Christian Church – Disciples of Christ)</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>PAIN AND SUFFERING IN THE ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE by Fr. Dr. Jaroslaw Buciora (Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada)</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>“FROM FEAR TO TRUST”: A THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ON THEODICY by Fr. Dr. Jaroslaw Buciora (Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada)</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>REFLECTION ON ROMANS 8:16-28, 31-39 by Rev. Fred Demaray (Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec)</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>CROSS WORDS WITH GOSPEL REFLECTIONS - A RESPONSIVE READING ON THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS by Rev. Fred Demaray (Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec)</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>GOD DOES NOT WANT SUFFERING - A PATRISTIC APPROACH TO SUFFERING by Dr Paul Ladouceur (Orthodox Church in America)</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>REFLECTION ON THE BOOK OF JOB: JOB, THE GREAT SUFFERER OF THE OLD TESTAMENT Dr Paul Ladouceur (Orthodox Church in America)</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>SUFFERING ACCORDING TO JOHN PAUL II by Dr Christophe Potworowski (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops)</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>SUFFERING AND HOPE: ANGLICAN PERSPECTIVES by Rev. Dr. Ian Ritchie (Anglican Church of Canada)</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>TEACHING ON SUFFERING AND HOPE IN THE SALVATION ARMY by Major Kester Trim (The Salvation Army)</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>SUFFERING AND HOPE: A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE by Rev. Beth Wagschal (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada)</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>THE DOOR OF HOPE by Fr. Lev Gillet (“A Monk of the Eastern Church”)</b>	<b>68</b>

**February 2010.**

## PREFACE

The documents reproduced here were presented as working papers in the context of the study undertaken by the Faith and Witness Commission of the Canadian Council of Churches on the theme of Suffering and Hope, between 2004 and 2008. The papers were prepared by members of the Commission, with the exception of the final essay, by Fr Lev Gillet of the Orthodox Church, submitted as supplementary documentation. The views expressed in the working papers are those of their authors.

The outcome of the Commission's study on Suffering and Hope is published under the title *The Bruised Reed: A Christian Reflection on Suffering and Hope* (Canadian Council of Churches, 2010), and in French as *Le Roseau Meurtri: Une réflexion chrétienne sur la souffrance et l'espoir* (Conseil canadien des Églises, 2010).

It is the hope of the Commission that pastors, teachers, members of Churches, researchers and others interested in the theme of the Christian response to suffering may find these working papers useful in their work and their reflections.

Paul Ladouceur  
(Orthodox Church in America)  
February 2010.

# SUFFERING, SACRIFICE AND SURVIVAL AS A FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT MORAL AGENCY

by Dr Gail Allan  
(United Church of Canada)

## Introduction

Any attempt to think about suffering, sacrifice and survival as a framework for understanding feminist perspectives on moral agency must begin in the concrete realities of women's daily lives. What knowledge of these concepts and their implications is gained from the lived-experience<sup>1</sup> of women and all others who are marginalized or excluded in the interlocking conditions of capitalist kyriarchy?<sup>2</sup> Thus the first step for any adequate social ethics must be to listen to stories representing diverse perspectives and experiences, listening for both differences and common threads. Time permits only a few examples today, but you will encounter others as we journey through this course, and each day in your ministries if you are open to them.

We have paid for that debt through the lives of our children, through being deprived of education and health and all the social services . . . When I think of our women who have paid by filling in the gaps . . . for government and social services . . . It's because of what women have been willing to do that the governments in Africa have even been able to service that debt. So we have paid it.<sup>3</sup>

No alarm sounded, only a growing chorus of screams told the 300 workers that the factory was on fire. In the panic atmosphere of smoke and noise, young women ran and stumbled their way to the only door that was not locked. The Zhili stuffed toy factory fire (1997) killed 87 of these workers. . . . Management of the jointly owned Hong Kong-Chinese company had locked doors and welded steel bars on windows to keep workers from stealing or leaving the work site early. The factory had been built as cheaply as possible and had no alarms, sprinklers, fire hoses or fire escapes.<sup>4</sup>

I don't think people realize what living like this (in poverty) does to a person. . . . All sense of hope is taken away. You become oppressed and can no longer function. You suffer physically, because you are not eating, emotionally because social contact is lost, spiritually because all hope is gone.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>. Ada María Isasi-Díaz defines "lived-experience" as "that experience upon which [a person] reflects in order to understand its significance and to value it accordingly." En *La Lucha: In the Struggle: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 73.

<sup>2</sup>. "Kyriarchy" is the term Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has suggested to indicate that dominance is not only a function of gender, but also of race, class, age, sexuality, ability and so on, and that these constitute multiplicative and interstructured oppression. See *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 8, 117, 122-25; "Introduction: Feminist Liberation Theology as Critical Sophiology," in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis Books and London: SCM Press, 1996), xxi.

<sup>3</sup>. Division of World Outreach, United Church of Canada, *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God's People. Guide for Study, Action and Worship* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 2001), 18, quoting Hellen Wangusa, African Women's Economic Policy Network.

<sup>4</sup>. *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup>. Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition, *Our Neighbours' Voices: Will We Listen?* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co., 1998), 46, cited in *ibid.*, 108.

The fight continued, and each time a little more aggression was applied. He was using weapons, furniture and very colorful verbal abuse . . . Sometimes the side effects of the domestic violence left me sick for days, which made me not attend work.<sup>6</sup>

What are the common threads and differences in these stories, and what bearing do they have on women's moral agency? If I think about these experiences in their wider social context, I perceive an acceptance—even an expectation—that life for many people will entail such experiences—that poor working conditions and structural adjustment are simply a cost of creating a global economy or that violence is a failure in personal development or a sign of the erosion of traditional values and norms. Yet the stories shared by women around the world, and the work of feminist scholars in many fields belies this too-easy acceptance, insisting that critical analysis will reveal thought patterns and power structures that function to legitimate the subordination and subjugation of women (and others within the dynamics of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.) and to normalize the socio-economic inequities and pervasive violence of the culture. At the same time, a more attentive hearing also reveals the strong threads of women's resistance, solidarity and survival woven throughout their stories, demonstrating moral agency which works to create new patterns of living committed to flourishing and right relation for all creation.<sup>7</sup> For those engaged in Christian ethics, there are additional questions. What has been the role of theologies of suffering and sacrifice in shaping the patterns and structures of oppression, and what resources does our faith offer for survival and new life? In order to address these questions I will consider separately what are in fact closely woven concepts, and then conclude with a “re-braiding” of the strands.

### **Suffering**

The theo-ethical construction of women's suffering is deeply rooted in suspicions of women's bodies and their power, reflected back to us in a tradition that defines humanity's relationship to God in terms of fall and redemption, with Eve as the temptress whose legacy to her daughters is pain, submission and desire. On this ground is constructed a heritage of “texts of terror” (including some less terrifying on the surface and perhaps more pernicious in effect), in which women's bodies, literally and metaphorically, become the sites of the sins and sufferings of the people. (That this heritage found a place in the early church requires only a review of the household code-texts of Colossians and Ephesians<sup>8</sup> or the Book of Revelation<sup>9</sup> to be affirmed.) Consistently, subtly, profoundly we have learned these connections—the negation of our bodies, the subordination of our desires, the endurance of our pain. If moral agency requires, as Moore suggests, conditions for self-respect and self-assertion,<sup>10</sup> there is much in the scriptural witness to deny such possibilities.

---

<sup>6</sup>. Rebecca Alman, “Personal Testimonies of Survivors,” in “*Your Story Is My Story, Your Story Is Our Story*”: *The Decade Festival, Harare, November 1998. Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women, World Council of Churches* (Geneva: Justice, Peace and Creation Team, World Council of Churches, 1999), 48.

<sup>7</sup>. See Pamela Dickey Young, *Recreating the Church: Communities of Eros* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 13-18.

<sup>8</sup>. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind: Domestic Violence Against Women,” in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 49 and *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 251-84.

<sup>9</sup>. See Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup>. Allison Mauel Moore, “Moral Agency in a Battered Women's Shelter,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1990): 131.

Into this trajectory is wound the church's interpretation of the community's report of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Without any real loss of the conviction that suffering is the legacy we must bear for our sins, we are offered another lesson: suffering as the source of redemption. Whatever effort may be made to posit resurrection as a promise that suffering is not finally our lot, the dominant theology has portrayed a god who requires suffering of a beloved child, and a saviour whose suffering we should glorify and emulate. In terms of moral agency, we are left with the conclusion that to suffer is deemed a virtuous moral choice. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has described the relationship of this theology to the treatment of women as "inferior-object:"

The Christian proclamation of the kyriarchal politics of submission and its attendant virtues of self-sacrifice, docility, subservience, obedience, suffering, unconditional forgiveness, male authority, and unquestioning surrender to God's will covertly advocates in the name of God patriarchal practices of victimization as Christian. . . . A Christian symbolic universe that proclaims an Almighty Father God whose will and command is revealed in the patri-kyriarchal texts of Scripture legitimizes and reinscribes religiously not only misogyny but also racism, status inferiority, homophobia, and xenophobia.<sup>11</sup>

A final strand that needs to be considered in this review of tradition is the effects of the mind/body dualism transmitted from Greek thought through Christianity and into the Enlightenment. The disembodied focus on the development of the mind, and the superiority of reason as a source of knowledge and progress, suggests that bodily experience—even of suffering—is of little account, unless as a spur to the exercise of the mind's control over the body. When this mind/body split is paired with the dualism of male/female, the denigration of women's bodies, and acceptance of whatever may befall them, is given still further support.

How this legacy has been reproduced in particular women's histories and lives has multiple dimensions and has been the basis for a range of theological and ethical reflection. To illumine the experiences of female slaves and their descendants in the United States, womanist theologian Delores Williams has focused on the story of Abraham's use and rejection of the slave Hagar in his efforts to be assured of descendants.<sup>12</sup> She contends that the suffering of black women has been rooted in the dehumanization of being treated as an instrument to meet the needs of white society. Williams identifies black women's bodies as a site of suffering—sexually and economically exploited in slavery and freedom, victims of a system which reinforces daily the unequal valuing of black and white women's bodies and their offspring that is enacted by Sarah and Hagar. Williams finds one link in the role of surrogacy that was demanded of Hagar:

All forms of coerced surrogacy evidence the exploitation of the slave woman by the slavocracy. Like the slave system among the ancient Hebrews (Abraham and Sarah), slavery in the United States demanded that slave women surrender their bodies to their owners against their wills. Thus African-American slave women (like the Egyptian Hagar) were bound to a system that had no respect for their bodies, their dignities or their motherhood, except as it was put to the service of securing the well-being of ruling-class families. . . . Surrogacy has been a negative force in African-American women's lives. It

---

<sup>11</sup>. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Ties That Bind," 49.

<sup>12</sup>. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

has been used by both men and women of the ruling class, as well as by some black men, to keep black women in the service of other people's needs and goals.<sup>13</sup>

In light of this experience, Williams raises concerns about the role of Jesus as “the ultimate surrogate figure,” and the sacralizing of surrogacy in relation to redemption. She insists that black women must question “whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy.”<sup>14</sup>

The moral agency of African-American women, assert womanist scholars, has been systematically restricted, with the expectation that they will accept their role as servants in the systems that define them—both the dominant society and the patriarchal structures promoted in some versions of black community. Katie Cannon speaks of black women ethicists' investigations of Black women's status as “purely ancillary” and asks “What qualitative judgements and social properties establish a chasm between the proposition that Black women, first and foremost, are human beings and the machinations that allow glaring inequities and unfulfilled promises to proceed morally unchecked?”<sup>15</sup> *Mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz extends this analysis to the situation of minority women generally in the United States, showing how a dominant view of minority cultures as “deviant” can take root and destroy the sense of self that is a condition for agency:

The most destructive aspect of imperialism over minority women in the USA, however, is . . . what it makes minority women do to themselves. Little by little they internalize the way the dominant culture sees them, when it sees them, for they are always obliged to act according to the image society has of them. Little by little their own cultures, their self-understandings become as invisible to them as they are to the dominant culture. And that invisibility finds expression in a rejection of their own cultural customs and values, in a rejection of themselves all the more insidious because of how imperceptible it is, even, or perhaps primarily, to their own selves.<sup>16</sup>

A number of scholars have probed the significance of a theology that glorifies suffering, while simultaneously dismissing embodiment, for the social tolerance of violence against women. That suffering might be inflicted, and borne, in the name of love, is a lesson not easily uprooted from psyches that have inherited this message from Christianity; nor are the corresponding lessons about the exercise of power and expectations of relationship soon lost. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker declare: “The image of God the father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression. Until this image is shattered it will be almost impossible to create a just society.”<sup>17</sup> A world where domination is the prevailing mode of relationship,

---

<sup>13</sup>. Ibid., 71, 81.

<sup>14</sup>. Ibid., 162.

<sup>15</sup>. Katie G. Cannon, “Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: The Womanist Dilemma in the Development of a Black Liberation Ethic,” in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 37.

<sup>16</sup>. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Economic Violence Against Minority Women in the USA,” in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 95.

<sup>17</sup>. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 9.

whether economic or sexual, and violence is eroticized<sup>18</sup> has little hope of creating real commitment to ending abuse. Reinhild Traitler-Espiritu, reviewing the patterns of violence against women's bodies, and the ideas associated with those patterns, concludes that "women are the body that men have defined for them, and that men continue to control," and that the power relations reflected in such violence will be overcome only as women define for themselves and integrate into human rights legislation their own understandings of body and sexuality.<sup>19</sup>

The suggestion that suffering, for whatever reason, may be a value in itself, necessary to teach important lessons, build character, or provide particular access to the Divine, is one that feminist scholars dispute. Williams declares: "Humankind is . . . redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross."<sup>20</sup> Without denying that some suffering is inevitable,<sup>21</sup> and that suffering is likely to come to those who struggle for justice, efforts at meaning-making based on a god who would will suffering are rejected. At the same time, there is caution about the desire for freedom from suffering which translates into denial and apathy, and in refusing to feel with the other, closes off possibilities for transformation.<sup>22</sup> Thus, emphasis is placed on identifying and ending the suffering inflicted by people, institutions and systems which perpetuate exploitation and oppression, while creating spaces of compassion and care for those who suffer.

What happens to moral agency in conditions of suffering? Moore's study of women in shelters shows that when women internalize the message that suffering is deserved and/or to be expected and endured, agency is undermined. Doubts about self-worth interact with an inability to conceive possibilities of making choices for one's own well-being, or to acknowledge harm done.<sup>23</sup> Yet when suffering is met with "the power of anger" and a conviction that compassion and justice are possible, this demoralization<sup>24</sup> may be overcome. Emilie Townes has cited Audre Lorde's distinction between suffering as "a static process which usually ends in oppression" and pain as "an experience that is recognized, named, and then used for transformation" to suggest that moral agency is generated as the oppressed move from suffering to pain and the decision to struggle for change: "To live and work through pain acknowledges our human ability to effect change in individual lives and in the lives of others. We must learn to move from the reactive position of suffering to that of the transforming power of pain, to use it as a critical stance and

---

<sup>18</sup>. See Karen Lebacqz, "Love Your Enemy: Sex, Power, and Christian Ethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 244-261.

<sup>19</sup>. Reinhild Traitler-Espiritu, "Violence Against Women's Bodies," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 71.

<sup>20</sup>. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167. Emphasis in the text.

<sup>21</sup>. It is important to recognize also that critical analysis will show that what often seems "unavoidable" suffering may not be so, or could be made less severe. For example, the impact of "natural disaster" is exacerbated by poverty, war, international debt, and the lack of infrastructure and resources to respond.

<sup>22</sup>. See Dorothee Sölle, trans. Everett R. Kalin, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 33-45; Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers," in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 13-17; Denise Ackermann, "The Alchemy of Risk, Struggle, and Hope," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 145.

<sup>23</sup>. Moore, "Moral Agency," 132-33.

<sup>24</sup>. Debra Shogan cites Sarah Hoagland's helpful definition of demoralization as "the undermining of someone's ability to make choices and her ability to perceive herself as being able to make choices, even in difficult situations." Sarah Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Values* (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), 213, cited in "Conceptualizing Agency: Implications for Feminist Ethics," in *A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Debra Shogan (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 1993), 334.

refuse to accept the “facts” handed to us.”<sup>25</sup> It is only as women can name their suffering as injustice, and recognize that the God who suffers with them offers sacred power for resistance and healing, that we will find resources to imagine and work for a world not constructed on the denigration and destruction of bodies and the earth.

### Sacrifice

The legacies of a theology of suffering have been joined with sacrifice as a model of discipleship. *Agape* or sacrificial love is held out as an ideal for relationship—the “paradigm of Christian love”<sup>26</sup> that is disinterested and willing to lose the self for the sake of the other. Again the theology is layered. In the purification structure of ancient Israel, sacrifice was a way of restoring wholeness—a means of atonement. But sacrifice was also used as a sign of commitment or seal on a promise—thus Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the sacrifices of women recounted in Judges<sup>27</sup>, where the beloved one is offered as a sacrifice to prove a still greater love or loyalty. For Christians this tradition culminates in the story of the greatest sacrifice of all—that God’s love for the world would compel the sacrifice of God’s own son “for the sake of our salvation,” and that Jesus would submit willingly as a sacrifice for our sins.

These sacrificial motifs continue to shape our interpersonal relations and social order, even when their overt theological roots have been forgotten. Framed in the discourse of sacrificial love, the consequences of such sacrifice may go unexamined. Yet critical reflection invites questions. Who/what is being sacrificed, and on what grounds? Who benefits? Who decides what constitutes a ‘necessary sacrifice?’

Both Barbara Hilkert Andolsen and Christine Gudorf have pointed out how conceptions of sacrifice as a moral good have played out in interpersonal relations and family life. Tracing discussions which designate *agape* as a realizable norm only in private life, and feminist critique of *agape* as resulting in “destructive self-abnegation,” Andolsen concludes that “the present division between the public and private has been made possible largely because of women’s sacrifice of themselves for the sake of other family members.” She suggests that *agape* must be redefined as mutuality and applied as a norm for economic, political and family life.<sup>28</sup> Gudorf argues that insisting on disinterested sacrifice in such areas as parenting ignores the reality that love involves both need and gift, and if we fail to acknowledge and seek this mutuality, “we end up disguising our needs by calling them gifts for others. This can seriously damage the other, distorting his/her real needs and desires.” Gudorf contends that sacrifice—“in the interest of the disadvantaged other”—must always aim at interdependence and mutual love, declaring that “*agape* is valuable in the service of *eros* and does not exist otherwise.”<sup>29</sup>

Dorothee Sölle challenges this sacrificial system, and the discourses of obedience which accompany it, with the vision of an alternative ethic in which fulfillment and “phantasy” are the

---

<sup>25</sup> Emilie M. Townes, “Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 84, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, “Agape in Feminist Ethics,” in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 147.

<sup>27</sup> See Judges 11: 29-40; 19:1-30; 21: 6-25.

<sup>28</sup> Andolsen, “Agape in Feminist Ethics,” 146-153, 156.

<sup>29</sup> Christine E. Gudorf, “Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice,” in *Women’s Consciousness, Women’s Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen et al. (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985; reprint, San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 185, 190-91.



norms. She insists that a more life-giving interpretation of Jesus' ministry would see him as modeling "joyous self-realization," a "boundary-breaking phantasy" that "acknowledges but a single principle: the creation and propagation of well-being." Sölle contends that from this perspective "all self-sacrifice, all self-denial, and all suffering which is expressed without this harmony, that is simply because it has been demanded by others, is senseless and produces nothing. It cannot issue in resurrection."<sup>30</sup> For women who have been taught that their role is to maintain relationship and family by giving themselves without counting the cost—and have often lost selves in the process—Sölle offers the possibility of giving that is the expression of wholeness and giftedness, conditioned by a mutuality that is able also to receive and expect the enhancement of well-being. Sölle makes clear that only from such a place can women exercise life-affirming moral agency, as new selves, freed to "thrust themselves into the adventure of new life—in the phantasy which produces freedom and devises opportunities for others to experience true selfhood."<sup>31</sup>

Another perspective on the construction of sacrifice in today's society is derived from an analysis of how discourses of sacrifice have been called upon to undergird the socio-economic arrangements of the global economy. It is widely agreed that we are now living in a society which has conferred on the global market the status of a god, source of all we can know of ultimacy and hope. However, it is made clear daily that access to the gifts of the market will require sacrifice. Governments will have to pay their debts, and citizens will need to accept social service, education and health care cutbacks, currency devaluations, and user fees in structural adjustment programmes. Scarcity and competition are realities on the road to prosperity, but jobs, wages and safe working conditions will be the necessary sacrifices. Closer examination of these processes reveals that payment of these sacrifices is highly correlated with gender, race and other markers of marginalization. Thus we are confronted again with the question: who is demanding sacrifice of whom, who chooses, and who benefits? Franz Hinkelammert has observed how classical and religious narratives of sacrifice soon degenerate into a spiral in which each act of sacrifice requires another to ensure the efficacy of the first. In like manner, each promise of economic prosperity for all gives way to a new demand which must be fulfilled to continue the market's 'efficient' functioning. Yet those of whom the demand is made are generally without voice in economic decision-making.<sup>32</sup> Thus we find, all over the world, mothers sacrificing their own health to feed their children; women's bodies and spirits daily put at risk in *maquiladoras*, sweat shops, and plantations; children receiving inadequate schooling, health care or nutrition in order to keep foreign investment flowing and economic engines pumping.

Discerning the linkages between sacrifice and moral agency is not uncomplicated. Clearly, there are moments in every life when a decision aimed at expanding justice and well-being for all will entail sacrifice on the part of some, and the discernment and choice involved may well affirm and enhance moral agency. It is also apparent that many women have made choices for engagement in the global economy, seeing them as moral choices for the survival of self and family in the spaces circumscribed by global capitalism. Equally apparent is that women have sought ways in the cracks and fissures of globalization to exercise agency in the form of resistance, solidarity and

---

<sup>30</sup>. Dorothee Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 56, 53, 52, 57.

<sup>31</sup>. *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>32</sup>. Franz J. Hinkelammert, "The Sacrificial Cycle as a Justification for Western Domination: The Western Iphigenia in Latin America," in *Sacrifice and Humane Economic Life* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development, 1992?), 46-80.

struggle—for unionization, policy change or alternative means of making a living. Yet the impact of the exclusions and dehumanization of this sacrificial order cannot be ignored. Lives are quite literally being sacrificed at the altar of consumerism, and the ability of many people to take action conducive to right relationship and flourishing, or even basic survival, is being destroyed. What different effects on agency would result from a social and economic order committed to enlivening values of mutuality and fulfillment in every aspect of life?

## Survival

The stories of women's endurance of suffering and sacrifice are not complete without attention to all the ways women have found resources for survival in the midst of conditions of injustice, violence and impoverishment. Here again, care must be taken in the analysis. As Debra Shogan has noted, "survival" in conditions of injustice which are unchanging is not unambiguously cause for celebration; nor is the struggle to survive necessarily a heroic model of agency.<sup>33</sup> And Denise Ackermann emphasizes the importance of honouring the memories, and the courage, of those who do not survive, as well as those who do, "us[ing] our anger to sustain actions to end this terrorism."<sup>34</sup> However, where 'survival' names engagement in life-affirming practices in resistance to all that is death-dealing in women's lives, it marks a space where resistance to injustice and the "transcending creativity"<sup>35</sup> of new forms of life together may be enacted. As Ackermann affirms, "survival implies hope," the risk of believing there is a future, and engaging with life as an expression of that hope.<sup>36</sup>

Ada María Isasi-Díaz has shown how survival is a key theme in the *mujerista* theology which Hispanic American women express through reflection on their lived-experience. For Isasi-Díaz, survival involves both bread and celebration, individual and community, "being fully" and taking an active role in society. It is the struggle for survival which illuminates the meaning of moral agency. "What locates us in life is not suffering but *la lucha* to survive. . . . If what locates Latinas is *la lucha*, then we will be seen . . . as historical, moral subjects, aware of our own role in defining and bringing about a preferred future."<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Williams argues that Hagar's journey in the wilderness spoke to the suffering of black women a promise of strength and courage to survive, with a vision of life on the other side—survival of a people is what's at stake. Thus the ethical principle that arises from a reconstruction and revaluing of African-American women's experiences is "survival and a positive quality of life for black women and their families in the presence and care of God."<sup>38</sup> Mercy Oduyoye writes from the African context of survival as the basis for a commitment to resistance and transformation: "One needs to survive in order to be fully human to face the challenge of living as God intended for us to do."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup>. Debra Shogan, "Conceptualizing Agency: Implications for Feminist Ethics," in *A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Debra Shogan (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 1993), 334-35.

<sup>34</sup>. Ackermann, "Alchemy of Risk, Struggle, and Hope," 142.

<sup>35</sup>. See Grace D. Cumming Long, *Passion and Reason: Women's Views of Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 15-21.

<sup>36</sup>. Ackermann, "Alchemy of Risk, Struggle, and Hope," 143-44.

<sup>37</sup>. Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha*, 16, 168-69.

<sup>38</sup>. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 20-33, 175.

<sup>39</sup>. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 161.

Feminist theologians in Canada have also named survival as a strong theme in Canadian women's history and narratives. The struggle to survive—on the land, at the margins of society, or in situations of violence—have brought forth resources of strength, cooperation and creativity. As women tell stories and engage in analysis from a variety of contexts in Canada, the challenges to survival and the many ways that women have engaged in resistance and the construction of moral agency in the particular structures of oppression and exclusion existing in Canada are being revealed.<sup>40</sup>

Linking survival to suffering and sacrifice reveals a number of key dimensions in feminist understandings of moral agency. One is the claim of the intrinsic value of women's lives as embodied, relational beings. Moore suggests that this claim is the basis for the self-respect and self-assertion that enable moral competence.<sup>41</sup> Beverly Harrison names embodiment as one of the basepoints for feminist moral theology, asserting that “failure to live deeply in “our bodies, ourselves” destroys the possibility of moral relations between us.”<sup>42</sup> To recognize ourselves as embodied moral agents, according to Margaret Farley, is to acknowledge historicity and contextuality, potential to grow or be diminished, and the constitution “by complex structures of freedom, physiology, intelligence, affectivity, etc.” which marks our uniqueness and shared humanity.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, feminist theory challenges the tradition that equates agency with autonomy as independence, self-sufficiency and control. Instead, as Jennifer Nedelsky suggests, feminists assert that the power many marginalized persons exercise for survival is “the capacity for creative interaction of relational, embodied selves.”<sup>44</sup> As the formation of “persons in relation” is more carefully assessed, it becomes clear that moral agency is a function of the “web of identity”<sup>45</sup> in which we exist, and that, as Nedelsky points out, a key task is to understand the conditions that foster or undermine “creative interaction.”<sup>46</sup> Understanding moral agency in terms of relationship also calls forth dimensions of accountability and responsibility that have not always been clear in traditional linkages of agency and autonomy. Harrison reminds us that a fundamental element in the exercise of moral agency is awareness of the capacity “through acts of love or lovelessness literally to create one another,” and thus the choice (and responsibility) “either to set free the power of God's love in the world or to deprive each other of the very basis of personhood and humanity.”<sup>47</sup>

In addition, the rubrics of survival lead to a consideration of the reality and meaning of struggle. South African theologian James Cochrane suggests that struggle must be privileged as “a locus of knowledge of considerable importance for theology,” a stance that suggests that questions about specific conditions of life and death—suffering and survival—must be at the root of our theologies.

---

<sup>40</sup>. See for example: Charlotte Caron, *To Make and Make Again: Feminist Ritual Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Marilyn J. Legge, *The Grace of Difference: A Canadian Feminist Theological Ethic* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson, ed., *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1999).

<sup>41</sup>. Moore, “Moral Agency of Battered Women,” 140.

<sup>42</sup>. Harrison, “Power of Anger,” 13.

<sup>43</sup>. Margaret A. Farley, “Feminist Theology and Bioethics,” in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 203.

<sup>44</sup>. Jennifer Nedelsky, “Rights and the Fully Human Self,” unpublished manuscript, 24 November 1997 (photocopy), 10. See also “Meditations on Embodied Autonomy,” *Graven Images* 2 (1995): 159-170.

<sup>45</sup>. Morwenna Griffiths, *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 93.

<sup>46</sup>. Nedelsky, “Rights and the Self,” 8.

<sup>47</sup>. Harrison, “Power of Anger,” 11.

Isasi-Díaz affirms this connection: “we participate in this struggle [for survival and justice] by doing *mujerista* theology.” In the struggle, Latinas enact their moral agency, as persons capable of speaking, naming and reflecting on their own experiences, understandings and practices.<sup>48</sup>

For the Women’s Collective of St. Columba House in Montreal reflection on the struggles of their community for survival and flourishing led to the recognition that “hope is the struggle.” Further, as they have engaged scripture in the light of their experiences, they assert that Christ is not primarily met in suffering or sacrifice but in struggle:

The work of the people *is* the Christ in our midst—the ongoing presence of God in our suffering, pain, despair, joy and celebrations—the continuing struggle to build a more just community.<sup>49</sup>

Sölle’s concept of phantasy takes into account this dimension of struggle in agency. She says: “[Jesus] expected us to engage in changing the world—and it was to this end that he set free our phantasy. . . . The phantasy of faith holds fast the picture of a just society and never allows itself to be talked out of the kingdom of righteousness.”<sup>50</sup> And as Sölle and others affirm, the vision which animates such struggles reads survival not in terms of scarcity and deprivation, but as an invitation to share abundance within the appropriate care for creation’s limits.

Finally, attention to women’s strategies for survival affirms the importance of solidarity as a constituent factor in moral agency. Janet Jakobsen has proposed that models of agency which are premised on an assumption of and willingness to work with multiplicity and complexity permit an engagement of difference that supports alliance-building for social change.<sup>51</sup> As Eleanor Haney has noted, within such alliances, people are provided opportunities for challenging inequalities of power, sharing dreams and fears, and relating with honesty, trust and vulnerability, all qualities integral to a feminist vision of moral agency.<sup>52</sup> Haney cites Delores Williams’ identification of survival resources and solidarity:

We must, like Hagar, obtain through our God-given faith *new vision* to see survival and quality-of-life resources where we have seen none before. Since feminists and womanists come from many cultures and countries, womanist-feminist dialogue and action may well provide some of the necessary resources. Recognizing and honoring our differences and commonalities can lead in directions we can perhaps both own.<sup>53</sup>

Harrison connects solidarity and agency in her description of solidarity as “accountability” which “means being vulnerable, capable of being changed by the oppressed, welcoming their capacity to critique and alter our reality.”<sup>54</sup> Lives understood as constituted by connection are empowered in relationships of mutuality and acts of solidarity, to create resources for survival and flourishing, and to stand together in struggle.

---

<sup>48</sup>. Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha*, 178-179.

<sup>49</sup>. Melissa Chamberlain et al., *Hope is the Struggle* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1996), 66.

<sup>50</sup>. Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 51, 64.

<sup>51</sup>. Janet R. Jakobsen, “Agency and Alliance in Public Discourses about Sexualities,” in *Feminist Ethics and Social Policy*, ed. Patrice DiQuinzio and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 192-99.

<sup>52</sup>. Eleanor H. Haney, *The Great Commandment: A Theology of Resistance and Transformation* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), 12-13

<sup>53</sup>. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 203. Cited in *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>54</sup>. Beverly Wildung Harrison, “Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 244.

## Braiding

Ruth Smith has offered a classic statement of the importance of women becoming “moral subjects,” describing a process of weaving together women’s experiences of suffering, sacrifice and survival in a search for agency and transformation:

The moral subject is not a completed, closed entity but is unfinished and open. The terms and implications of this process are particularly relevant to women and others currently involved in their own liberation struggles. Becoming the subject of one’s own actions is a social and historical process key to liberation politically, socially, and psychologically so that we no longer collude in our own oppression and so that we can attempt to change conditions of life negation and alienation into conditions of affirmation and fulfillment. . . . Becoming a moral subject means recognizing that morality is a structure of socio-historical relations, not a detached calculus performed by autonomous individuals.<sup>55</sup>

Claiming moral agency from women’s multivalent experiences of suffering calls women to resistance and responsibility within communities of mutuality and justice. Refusing hegemonic definitions of good, moral agency in this mode is constituted within a relational matrix that can call forth gifts of the self offered in full consciousness of one’s own worth and powers of discernment, and that will issue in critically reflective action. Re-imagining women’s lives and communities as places of wholeness and healing, risk and celebration, women have shared narratives of struggle and the survival that nurtures hope. Self-critical reflection reveals that moral agency is a process in which women negotiate and re-negotiate the terrain of old patterns promising redemption through suffering and sacrifice, to find new mappings which locate renewal in the fragile and complex encounters of interdependent agents who choose life, aware always of the conflict, ambiguity and fallibility that attend our moral choices, but compelled by a dream that “to survive” may one day evoke conditions of well-being for all creation.

---

<sup>55</sup>. Ruth L. Smith, “Feminism and the Moral Subject,” in *Women’s Consciousness, Women’s Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, et al., (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985; reprint, San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 250.

# **BIBLE STUDY ON SUFFERING AND HOPE**

**by Neil Bergman  
(Christian Church – Disciples of Christ)**

I begin with a list of notable persons and a question of what they have in common. One of the persons is Randy Travis, the country singer. All of the persons were or are members of Stone-Campbell churches, of which the Disciples of Christ are the denominational manifestation.

I play a song of suffering, the emotional kind: “Digging up bones” (Randy Travis), followed by another: “Tracks of my tears.”

How we suffer emotionally! As if we did not have to face enough suffering without bringing our spirits into it. Yet, we find that all suffering is connected, just as we are connected physically, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually. We are a unity, as the Old Testament assumes.

Quoting Regina Coupar, Nova Scotia artist in her book *Echoes of the Remnant*, p. 64:

“As our spirituality is awakened we become aware of our spiritual nature. As shown by Jesus’ temptations, which took place after his baptism, the phase after awakening is followed by suffering. We examine our past in light of awakened consciousness. We see the past and the future, but we seem unable to move back or ahead. Our old life is no longer fulfilling, yet we are unable to aspire to the new life which we have glimpsed. We feel misunderstood, rejected and frustrated. We suffer as Jesus suffered during his life on earth. The more we validate the awakening of our spirituality, the more we seem to suffer humiliation and abuse from the material-centered world in which we live. As the struggle escalates between our ‘old’ and ‘new’ selves, we often echo the words of Jesus, who echoed the words of the Psalmist: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

It is important to remember that rich or poor, young or old, intelligent or unintelligent, suffering is a natural part of life. Our goal is not the avoidance of suffering (which would be unnatural), but freedom from suffering which comes through acceptance and transcendence.”

Then Regina introduces the dark night of the soul. I did not really know what this meant until after my father died. Even my divorce, as devastating as it was, and the wrenching of children’s lives, my children; the back and forth of custody, did not prepare me for dark night of more recent years. But do not fear, I am not bringing you a testimony. Let us hear Regina again about this spiritual suffering:

**dark night of the soul**

the beginning  
of darkness  
is the most terrible

as the sun sets  
I panic  
fixing my eyes  
upon the fading light

as the last flicker  
dies

I am left alone  
in the silence  
of darkness  
with my fears

as I befriend  
the darkness  
it comforts me

and when I emerge  
in the morning light  
I am renewed  
and strengthened

**chapter one**

once  
a flame  
burned brightly within me  
it was grand

and all who came near  
could see it  
and touch it

**chapter two**

people loved the flame  
and I let them carry pieces of  
it

away with them  
until  
all that remained  
was a single  
coal  
burning deep inside  
where no one could see or  
touch it

**chapter three**

I fanned the coal  
hoping it would burn  
again  
but the flame did not return  
and  
when the people came  
there was nothing left  
to give them

**chapter four**

I cried  
and my tears  
almost drowned  
the coal

**chapter five**

I became accustomed  
to the absence of the flame  
and began to observe the coal  
to my surprise  
I saw that  
it gave the same light and  
warmth  
to the inside  
as the flame gave  
to the outside  
instead  
of being consumed  
by the flame  
I was warmed  
by the coal

**chapter six**

I was contented  
and it was enough  
(pages 78; 82-83)

We remember that the gospel was preached first to those who suffer. The call of Moses came because the people suffered. Hope was brought to those who were the losers, those in darkness, those who were lost, those who were oppressed.

Mental and physical suffering are not separated in the OT. Both result from the same root, and the OT dwells not so much on the cause of evil and suffering as the purpose of it. It was punishment for sin, one's own, or the sin of your family/ ancestors, even the king. Hope of release from suffering and help from Yahweh lay in the not too distant future. But later in the OT that help was moved to the more distant Day of Yahweh. When the Messiah comes.

Secondly, suffering was accepted as divine education, as people were led back to God. Thirdly, in deuterio-Isaiah, suffering of the people is interpreted through the solidarity of God with the people, and the Servant of God takes vicariously upon himself the punishment of his nation.

Finally there is the sense of atoning suffering. The IBD concludes that it is remarkable that, with all their experience of terrible suffering, the Israelites were never moved to take a pessimistic view of life. Since God is Lord, even Ecclesiastes, the gloomiest of the Old Testament writers, counsels his readers to enjoy life (1:2-11, 9:7-10, 11: 7-10)

In the New Testament, suffering is interpreted as a divine necessity. Suffering is the rightful fate of all people in this evil age. (Rom 8:18, Gal 1:4,). But as Paul especially will point out, the believers who thus accept suffering not only serve Christ's cause (e.g. Phil. 1:29), but also being united with the risen Lord, continue his suffering for mankind, because the church is his body.

Evils and suffering are experienced with greater intensity under the New Covenant than under the Old, the faith of Christ attains to a level never reached in the Old Testament – viz., joy over suffering (Matt. 5:12, John 14:28, 16:20,22, Acts 13:52; Rom 5:2, 12:12, Phil 2:17, I Thess. 1:6; James 1.2. ) Similarly, while in the OT the believer becomes so preoccupied with his own suffering that he seems to lose sight of the rest of the world, the follower of Christ feels as a result of his suffering a deep compassion for the suffering of others.

I did have to get some therapy. But there I discovered that the values we hold in the church are not those of the world. My psychiatrist does not see any value in suffering. Pain is only to be alleviated. I once told him that I was willing to play the part of the sacrificial lamb in a situation.

The modern world rejects the Book of Job.

William James saw a value in suffering: “There is an element of real wrongness in this world, which is neither to be ignored nor evaded, but which must be squarely met and overcome by an appeal to the soul's heroic resources, and neutralized and cleansed away by suffering.”

Did Jesus not identify the path of suffering in Mark 8: 34-35?

And in last Sunday's New Testament lesson, did Paul not parallel that thought by counting everything as loss so that he might be better prepared to “suffer loss.”? In verses 10-11 of Philippians 3, the sharing of Christ's suffering (3:11) a hope and a promise, not an attainment.

I conclude with two more songs that represent first the whole theme of suffering and hope and then a song about hope alone.

The first is by Johnny Cash: “Give My Love to Rose”

Then another by Randy Travis: “Point of Light”



# **PAIN AND SUFFERING IN THE ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE**

**by Fr. Dr. Jaroslaw Buciora  
(Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada)**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recently, while visiting one of my parishioners who was facing the ultimate challenge of life – death, I looked into her horrified eyes. Although she was looking at me, I knew that she was also looking for something beyond me and this world. Remembering her face full of life, I wanted to say something which could explain this moment of pain, suffering and eventual separation. Although I desperately tried to find words of comfort, I could not say one word, except the words of prayer. Only silence and prayer to our loving Father permeated in this room full of loneliness and pain. Because the reality of cancer was so excruciating, prayer to our loving heavenly Father became her only hope at her moment of death.

The question of suffering, pain, and hope is a very complex theme, which can be discussed from so many different perspectives: theological, scientific, medical, empirical and others. For our purpose, we will be analysing this subject from the theological perspective of the Orthodox Church. This perspective is inseparable from Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition, the writings of the Fathers and the liturgical life of the Church<sup>1</sup>. It is also imperative to introduce this subject within Greek classical philosophy, which inaugurated this discussion and greatly influenced the parameters of the discussion among later generations of philosophers and Christian theologians. The “metamorphosis” of Orthodox thought in the last century and a return to the Fathers of the Church gave a new direction for contemporary Orthodox theologians in order to articulate a response for this subject. The theological analysis carries with itself general observations that have very important pastoral implications in the daily life of the Church. It is our hope, that this presentation will further broaden the research of theologians as they analyse this theme. At the same time, this analysis can in no way be taken as a full presentation of the subject from the Orthodox perspective, as this subject is enormous in its volume and difficulty.

It has also to be emphasized that the question of pain and suffering is an universal phenomenon which permeates everything that existed and lived in the history of creation. This theme challenges the faith in God of Christianity from the very early Church. In fact, the question of pain and suffering is an existential dilemma, that, from the philosophical perspective, embraces the ontology of all creation including God. It is also a question that faces other monotheistic religions including Judaism and Islam. Christianity, as well as Judaism and Islam, have still to answer satisfactorily the question of theodicy and suffering.

## **PAIN AND SUFFERING IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY**

In the perspective of Greek classic philosophy, the problem of pain and suffering was an ontological question concerning all creation including God. Because of the difficulty of this theme, classic philosophical literature begins the discussion of this subject from the perspective of the concept of God. In order to get a general interpretation of the subject for our purpose, we

---

<sup>1</sup> Wacław Hryniewicz, *Meka Chrystusa w teologii i duchowości prawosławnej*, in: *Meka Chrystusa wczoraj i dziś*, (H. D. Wojtyński, J. J. Kopec eds.), Lublin Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, 1981, p. 170.

will discuss only two philosophers namely: Plato and Aristotle who became the pillars of the future development of philosophy and early Christian literature.

For Plato, the entire discussion of pain and suffering begins from the impassibility and immutability of God. Plato discusses this theme in relation to perfection and change. According to Plato, the eternity of God is neither creation, nor disappearance<sup>2</sup>. The perfect divine being is immutable. Because of this immutability, God is beyond any change. In consequence, the divine being is unrelated to the problem of pain and suffering. This conclusion made by Plato had an immense impact on the discussion of this question among later philosophers and Christian Fathers of the early Church. An almost identical conclusion is derived from the philosophy of Aristotle. According to his philosophy, God is perfect, eternal, and beyond time. God is life, happiness and goodness<sup>3</sup>. Because of the impassibility of divine nature, God is above any concept of pain and suffering. In the perfection of God suffering ceases to exist. The further development of the question of pain and suffering in classic philosophy was characterized by the synthesis of Plato and Aristotle. In general, for classic Greek philosophy God is beyond any concept of pain and suffering. God is defined and characterized by impassibility and immutability.

In the development of early Christian thought, the philosophy of the Greek classic philosophy became the vital source for the interpretation of the question of pain and suffering. It is essential to emphasize, that in early Christianity there is almost no systematic concept of the nature of God<sup>4</sup>. The early Church was not as much interested in the definition of the nature of God, for the memory of Christ was still vividly strong among Christians. The fresh memory of Jesus Christ and the reinforcement of this memory in the sacramental life of the Church were the main realities of life<sup>5</sup>. The conceptualization of this kind of reality we can find in the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch, whose main goal was to preserve the unity of the Church that was achieved in the Eucharist. Only further erroneous theological doctrinal development on the teaching of Jesus Christ pressed the early Church to define and systematize the doctrine of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. One of the characteristic of the writing of St. Ignatius of Antioch is the emphasis on the fact, that Jesus Christ suffered. From the other perspective, St. Ignatius is still attached to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, emphasizing the fact, that the Divine nature of Jesus Christ was never penetrated by evil and suffering. In effect, the impassibility of God in the writings of St. Ignatius, that was already defined by classic philosophy, was maintained intact<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Great Dialogues of Plato*. Translated by W. H. D. Rose and edited by Eric H. Warmington and Philip G. Rouse, New York, The American Library, 1964, p. 105, (209C-211C). It is also interesting to mention, that for Plato the beauty, that characterizes God's being, exists only in the perfect form, that is ontologically independent in itself. The entire creation is on the way to this perfection of beauty, that doesn't know any change. Because of its perfection, this being can't become anything else. The perfection of God, that is described by Divine beauty, doesn't allow for incarnation, that will have immediate impact on the theology of Arius.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descending of God; Divine Suffering in History and Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991, p. 2. In the analysis of the early Church, Hallman states that the philosophy of Stoics of the early Christianity had a direct impact on the theology of the early Church.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> A. Schmemmann, "Liturgy and Theology", in: *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol. XVII, No. 1, 1972, p. 92; Archbishop Peter, "Authority in the Church", in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, vol. XXI, No. 1, 1977, p. 10; Paul Evdokimov, "The Principal Currents of Orthodox Ecclesiology in the Nineteen Century", in: *Eastern Churches Review*, vol. X, No. 1-2, 1978, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> St. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, chp. 7, in: *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, Grand rapids, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993.

A very similar interpretation of the concept of pain and suffering is found in the writings of St. Justin the Martyr, St. Irenaeus, and St. Clement of Alexandria<sup>7</sup>. According to Origen, God's impassibility does not allow Him to experience pain and suffering<sup>8</sup>. Although for Origen God is beyond suffering, God uses suffering for salvation. The human race was given salvation through suffering by the One who is beyond suffering<sup>9</sup>. This concept will be later elaborated in the perspective of Trinitarian theology of Immanent and Economic Trinity by John D. Zizioulas and D. Staniloae (briefly introduced in our analysis). For the later Fathers of the early Church, God is beyond suffering, although some of them like St. Athanasius are deeply perplexed by this question. It is St. Athanasius that discerned in the Divine life some kind of suffering, though it was not of Divine origin<sup>10</sup>. St. Gregory of Nyssa follows the same principle of the impassibility of God. According to St. Gregory, it is exactly the impassibility of God that distinguishes Creator from creation<sup>11</sup>. Although St. Gregory of Nyssa still maintains the line of classical philosophy, his close friend St. Gregory Nazianzen, as one of the first Fathers of the Church, gradually developed his line of thought defining Jesus Christ on the cross as: "God, who suffered". In the process of development of this theme, one of the most profound statements was formed by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) where the Fathers of the Church agreed to emphasize "theopaschism": the fact that One of the Holy Trinity - Son of God suffered and died on the cross according to the flesh (sarki): "if anyone does not confess that our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified in the flesh is true God and the Lord of Glory and one of the Holy Trinity, let him be anathema"<sup>12</sup>. As we have noticed this at the very beginning, the statement of the Fifth Ecumenical Council is embraced in the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Orthodox Church, where the Church professes: "One of the Holy Trinity, you were crucified for us". In order to comprehend the statement of the Council regarding "theopaschism" we have to apply the theology of Leontius of Jerusalem, who made a very profound distinction between the Divine hypostasis and essence. According to this distinction, impassibility and immutability, as characteristics for the Divine Being, are applied for the Divine essence, while the attributes of the Divine essence are not absolutely binding upon the hypostatic existence of God<sup>13</sup>. The synthesis of those two statements regarding the "theopaschism" and the distinction between the attributes of the Divine nature upon the hypostatic existence of God consolidated in the same approach two different theological directions regarding the question of suffering and God. From one side, the synthesis safeguards the existing classical character of impassibility and immutability of God and from the other side, it broadens the sphere of theological search to analyse the quest of pain and suffering. The distinction made by Leontius of Jerusalem would have a tremendous implications on the further development of this theme by twentieth century theologians.

A further development of the concept of pain and suffering was characterized by the Scholasticism of the Western Church. Although Scholasticism is characterized by a very negative development of Eastern theological thought, there was a tendency to interpret suffering based on

---

<sup>7</sup> Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descending of God*, op. cit., pp. 30-38.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, 6.64, in: *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, op. cit.,

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Arseniev, Three Chapters from an Unpublished Book, in: *St. Vladimir's seminary Quarterly*, vol. IV, No. 1, 1960, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descending of God*, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 80. According to Joseph M. Hallman, although the writings of St. Gregory are penetrated by a slight concept of Divine suffering, this was never elaborated in a certain concept.

<sup>12</sup> Waclaw Hryniewicz, *Meka Chrystusa w teologii i duchowosci prawoslawnej*, op. cit., p. 170; John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, New York, Fortham University Press, 1979, p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology. Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, op. cit., pp. 155-56.

the empiricism developed by classic Greek philosophy<sup>14</sup>. According to this hypothesis, we will never comprehend the concept of pain and suffering unless we experience it<sup>15</sup>.

For a further development of the concept of pain and suffering, that greatly influenced Christian understanding of this subject, we have to wait until the eighteen and nineteenth centuries for the philosophies of F. Hegel (1770-1831) and A.N. Whitehead (1861-1941). According to the philosophy presented by F. Hegel and A.N. Whitehead, God is perfection, where perfection is characterized by change<sup>16</sup>. The Philosophy of F. Hegel and A.N. Whitehead is characteristic for the philosophy of Idealism and Empiricism of nineteenth century Europe that envisioned God's suffering. This hypothesis will have an immense influence on the theology of a Reformed theologian J. Moltman<sup>17</sup> and the contemporary development of Liberation theology<sup>18</sup>.

### CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO PAIN AND SUFFERING

In the history of Christianity and in the development of the question of pain and suffering, there was a traditional division of the answer into two equally significant answers. The first one is based on the physical pain and suffering of everything in the world. The other answer is based on the moral aspect of our free will that is based on faith and cause. The answer based on faith and cause is very valuable for our analysis. According to the argument based on the aspect of faith, humanity will never understand the reason why God allows for so much suffering in our world. As a consequence, we are not able to comprehend the concept of pain and suffering. We will be able to explain certain aspects of pain and suffering in the world, but we cannot explain the suffering of small children or the suffering and pain of those who spend years bedridden. From this perspective, where faith is the only basis for an answer, we can say that God is a God of providence. This means that God not only maintains our life but also He protects those who suffer. In this context, Christianity stands before a trial to develop faith and trust in God regardless of the pain and suffering in the world. This thesis is very similar with the explanation given by one of the contemporary Roman Catholic theologians of the last century Carl Rahner. According to him, before developing our hypothesis about God and suffering, we have to research and develop the concept of "impassibility" of God in order to explain and to understand the concepts of pain and suffering<sup>19</sup>. To develop this concept in a proper way, we have to include the concept of pain and suffering in the teaching about the impossibility to understand God. According to Carl Rahner, God allows pain and suffering for the reason known only to Him. Pain and suffering exist but their explanation we leave as part of the impossibility of God.

To understand the concept of pain and suffering correctly we have to turn to the Books of the Old and New Testament that, in fact, are an attempt to find the answer for this very difficult question.

---

<sup>14</sup> It is Christos Yannaras, that accuses St. Augustine and Scholasticism for the development of nihilism in middle ages, in: Christos Yannaras, An Orthodox Comment on "The death of God", in: *Orthodoxy and the death of God; essays in contemporary theology*, ed. By A.M. Allchin, London, Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1971, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Bp. Anthony of Surozh, The Suffering and death of Children, in: *Eastern Churches Review*, vol. VIII, 1976, p. 107

<sup>16</sup> N. Berdiaev, The Will for Life and Will for Culture, (in Russian), in: *Philosophical and Sociological Thought Journal*, No. 11, 1989, p. 88.

<sup>17</sup> J. Moltman, *The Crucified God*, New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1974. Some of his most important works are: "Theology of Hope", "The Crucified God", and "The Church in the Power of the Spirit".

<sup>18</sup> Olivier Clement, "Orthodox Reflection on Liberation Theology", in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, vol. 29, No. 1, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Context of Faith: the best of Karl Rahner's theological writings*, edited by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, New York, Crossroad, 1993, p. 143.

Based on the Holy Bible and Holy Tradition we have to affirm, that we cannot find one definite place where we would be able to find the final and definite answer for this question. What is more interesting, is that in the Bible we find many of different explanations regarding the question of pain and suffering which are connected with very strong warnings. Because there are so many different answers in the Bible regarding pain and suffering, it is impossible to make absolute any of the answers in our analysis. For our discussion we will present only three such explanations.

On the basis of Holy Scripture, we can say that God leads our life. Everything that we have in our life is a gift from God. Together with this affirmation we are facing a very challenging question. If God manages our life and the life of everything that lives in the world than we can say that pain and suffering also come from God. As a consequence, pain and suffering are punishment from God. From the other side, there is also a contradiction to this affirmation that emphasizes the aspect of our free will. Very characteristic in this context is the history of Adam and Eve. Because of the free choice given to Adam and Eve, the consequences are found in the separation from God in pain and suffering. Based on the argument of free choice, we can say that evil has its source not in God, but in human reasoning of will<sup>20</sup>. For most of the contemporary Orthodox theologians, pain and suffering are the consequences of the Fall. As a consequence, pain and suffering were not in the original plan of God's creation. It is an unwilld and unintended intrusion in everything that lives.

Continuing this line of thought, some of the traditional, conservative Christian theologians affirm that on the basis of the Book of Genesis, the devil - Satan is the source of all evil, pain and suffering<sup>21</sup>. This interpretation of pain and suffering in the world, given by traditional theology, is strongly criticized by modern Orthodox theologians who see in this kind of explanation the influence of scholastic theology. According to V. Lossky, one of the most influential Orthodox theologians of the last century, Satan became the personification of the dark powers of apocalyptic literature<sup>22</sup>. The paintings and images from the XVI-XVII centuries representing a hideous caricature of Satan are a very simplistic and educational representation of the reality of evil, pain and suffering in the life of humanity<sup>23</sup>. At the present time, most of the contemporary Orthodox theologians remove themselves from this kind of traditional interpretation of evil, pain and suffering emphasizing rather the aspect of our free will. One of the realities emphasized by modern Orthodox theological thought and development based on the writings of the Fathers of the Church is the emphasis on the paradoxical existence of evil. For the Orthodox Church, evil, although it does not have an independent hypostasis, exists in non-existence<sup>24</sup>. To use other

---

<sup>20</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, vol. seven in the collected works, Vaduz, Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987, p. 45. The source of evil in human reasoning is derived from the writings of St. Athanasius of Alexandria.

<sup>21</sup> It is very interesting, that this line of thought is still strong among the contemporary Russian Orthodox theologians, look in: Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, "Christ the Conqueror of Hell. The Descent of Christ into Hades in Eastern and Western Theological Traditions. A lecture delivered at St. Mary's cathedral, Minneapolis, USA, on 5 November 2002," in: <http://orthodoxeurope.org/print/11/1/5.aspx>.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, St. Vladimir's seminary Press, 1976, pp. 128-129.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Kasper, "The Theological Problem of Evil", in *Faith and Future*, New York, 1982, pp. 115-116.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, op. cit., p. 191. At this point St. Gregory of Nyssa comes close to the interpretation of St. Maximus the Confessor who defines evil as of an "elliptical nature". It is very important to mention, that according to Dumitrou Staniloae, the greatest of all evil is non-being, look in: Father D. Staniloae, *The World as Gift and sacrament of God's Love*, in: *Sobornost* 5(1969)9, p. 664.

terms, evil exists only as the absence of good. It is a mystery, that goes beyond human comprehension. Evil is not to be explained but faced and fought. God never explained evil, but send His only begotten Son to be crucified and ultimately to destroy the reality of death<sup>25</sup>. As the only analogy to the mystery of evil is the mystery of human nature. For the patristic and modern

Orthodox theological thought, the ultimate foundation for man's being is inaccessible to us<sup>26</sup>. The emphasis on the mysterious ultimate foundation for man's being is based on the reflection of God's image in our existence. Based on this reflection would it be correct to ask ourselves a question whether the portrayal of evil on the paintings and images of the XVI-XVII centuries is not a personification of reality that does not exist?. If evil receives the hypostatic reality because of human will, it suggests that every personification of evil will be different and unique. The personification of the reality of evil on the paintings suggests the possibility of identifying the correlation of the free will of human being and the hypostatic realization of evil in the world. The other question is whether we are equipped with the methodology and language to analyze this theme?

The second explanation of pain and suffering found in Holy Scripture and emphasized by some Christian theologians is based on the association of pain and suffering with Divine punishment. According to this interpretation, God punishes humanity for their choice of separating themselves from the Divine life. What is very characteristic for this interpretation is the fact that people became stronger in their faith. Divine punishment has a very positive attitude on people towards God. The life of the saints is the best example where pain and suffering are considered as a part of their spiritual trial. Divine punishment becomes the ability to grow spiritually in the image and likeness of God. Very characteristic for this interpretation is the passage from the letter to the Romans:” We rejoice in our suffering, 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) If pain and suffering are experienced within the limits of human tolerance, they can be decidedly beneficial to foster communion with God and others<sup>27</sup>. The interpretation of pain and suffering, as a Divine punishment, has a purpose in correcting ourselves and it encourages people in a time of suffering. To analyze this interpretation of pain and suffering based on a pastoral perspective, we have to be quite careful. We cannot absolutise the punishment of God in regard to every pain and suffering in the world. The punishment of God has a divine intention, which we can not use in concrete circumstances of our daily life. God does not inflict suffering as vengeful retribution or vindictive punishment for our sins. Although God uses pain and suffering as part of a “divine pedagogy”, we cannot simply assume that God wills tragedy in human experience<sup>28</sup>.

In the Bible we can also find another very interesting explanation regarding pain and suffering. According to Holy Scripture, we can say that pain and suffering are impossible to explain in this

---

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and Spirit - a Liturgical Study of Baptism*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Tomas Spidlik, *Mysl rosyjska. Inna wizja czlowieka*, (Janina Dembska przekl.), Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Ksiezy Marianow, 2000, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> John Breck, *The sacred Gift of Life; Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*, Crestwood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998, p. 216. Metropolitan John of Pergamon identifies pain and death from the other perspective. For him, if pain and death are not caused intentionally, they should lead to metanoia, look: John of Pergamon, *Communion and Otherness*, in: *Sobornost* vol. 16 (1994) 1, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> John Breck, *The sacred Gift of Life; Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics* op. cit., p. 218.

life. It can only be properly understood in the age to come-eschatology<sup>29</sup>. As such, suffering has a communal ecclesial character<sup>30</sup>. According to this explanation, all theories and hypothesis introduced by theologians and philosophers lose their credibility. All those who suffered and still suffer in this life will be rewarded in the life to come.

### **THEODICY OF GOD IN ORTHODOX THOUGHT**

Contemporary Orthodox theology, regarding the theodicy of God, is in retrospect similar to the theology of J. Moltman. Because God is love and God loves everything created by Him, in His Divine life there is a sort of inexplicable suffering, which is related to the suffering of creation. According to the theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa, the suffering of Jesus Christ opens the potential of the infinite love of God towards the entire created world. At this point, Orthodox theology is careful not to commit an unforgettable mistake. We have to emphasize, that although Jesus Christ suffers, He doesn't suffer in His Divine nature. At this moment, contemporary Orthodox thought is identical with classic Greek philosophy and the Fathers of the Church, as was previously emphasized. The distinction made by Leontius of Jerusalem between the impassibility and immutability of the essence of God and the attributes of the Divine essence as not necessarily binding upon the hypostatic existence of God, opens a new dimension of seeing this dilemma in a different light. One aspect that is emphasized by modern Orthodox theologians goes beyond this traditional concept of God's suffering by emphasizing the will of God. Jesus Christ suffers in His will against His Divine nature. It is His will that chooses suffering for the goodness of His creation. In other words, although God doesn't suffer in His Divine nature, He embraces suffering in His only begotten Son - Jesus Christ. In order to elaborate this concept in a wider context we have to introduce one of the previously mentioned concepts of Trinitarian theology. In modern Orthodox theological analysis, there is a distinction made between the Economic Trinity and the Immanent Trinity. According to this thought, the Economic Trinity (God as He reveals Himself) is the Immanent Trinity (God as He is eternally) but the Immanent Trinity is not the Economic Trinity<sup>31</sup>. The distinction made between those two interpretations of the Holy Trinity by St. Basil allows us to interpret the theodicy of God in a different dimension. The suffering of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity on the cross doesn't in any way lessen the Immanent Trinity. The Economic Trinity allows us to interpret this question still in the Trinitarian context. It would be desirable to continue our analyse of this question only in this dimension. Further analysis of our question of suffering and hope in the dimension of Immanent and Economic Trinity, which is too broad for our analysis, could direct us into a new dimension of analysis which is necessary for modern theological thought.

As we continue our analysis we have to emphasize that the economy of God allows us to reveal the reality of suffering as a temporary reality where the dynamism of moving towards perfection

---

<sup>29</sup> John Zizioulas, Suffering, history and the eschaton, in: *Whither Ecumenism? A dialogue in the transit lounge of the ecumenical movement* (Thomas Wieser ed.), Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1986, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> John Breck, *The sacred Gift of Life; Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*, op. cit., p. 221. The same is emphasized by D. Staniloae, where he says that man not only live for others, but he dies for others also, look in: Father D. Staniloae, *The World as Gift and sacrament of God's Love*, op. cit., p. 666.

<sup>31</sup> J.D. Zizioulas, The Doctrine of God the Trinity. Today's Suggestions for an Ecuemncial Study, in: Alasdair I.C. Hewall (ed.), *The Forgotten Trinity*, London, BCC/CCBI, 1991, p. 24; Dumitru Staniloae, The Economy of salvation and Ecclesiological "Errors", in: *Diakonia* V(1970)3, pp. 226-229.

brings us the aspect of hope<sup>32</sup>. In the economy of God, there was no time where the unity of God the Father was broken with His only begotten Son. We may assume, that if God suffers with all those who suffer, the suffering of all of them is mysteriously absorbed in the economy of Divine being<sup>33</sup>. The universal economy of God, as an eternal thought of God, enables us to embrace in God the question of suffering of the entire cosmos<sup>34</sup>. The mystery of the cross, according to the modern Orthodox theological thought, is the cross of the very God. Every person is a joyful kenosis of God. It is this kenosis, that allows every human being to be liberated in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ<sup>35</sup>. The suffering of every human person is the kenosis of God. Whenever we are deliberating hope, we are speaking of the Kingdom of God. Because the cross is the gate to the kingdom, Jesus Christ offers no other way<sup>36</sup>. It is remarkable to observe, that in the Orthodox icon of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, suffering does not overcome the reality of hope. Far beyond the aspect of excruciating tragedy of the suffering in humanity of Christ there is an emanating source of hope found in the Resurrection. This is the main reason why in the Orthodox Church, the mystery of Great Friday is inseparable without the mystery of Easter Sunday. The mystery of suffering leads to the mystery of eternal hope with the resurrected Christ. For the Orthodox Church, the entire liturgical cycle leads precisely to Easter Sunday, where the consummation of man's longing for liberation from the oppression of suffering is found. This is exactly the interpretation of the icon of the Resurrection, where Adam and Eve are shown being liberated from the chains of suffering and death.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of what has just been said, from a theological perspective, we can make a partial conclusion, which will be very important in our pastoral approach to those who are suffering. Anytime we have to deal with the suffering of a human being, we need to be very sensitive. We have to become a source of humility that puts ourselves into the suffering of the other person<sup>37</sup>. From the theological perspective, we can never absolutise this or any other explanation of pain and suffering. Because the question of pain and suffering is a very complex subject, it is better for us not to hurry with an explanation of this problem. The best explanation for the question of pain and suffering might be our silence and presence with the one who is in pain and suffering<sup>38</sup>. It is within the silence of prayer where we say together with the entire Church: "Let us commend ourselves and each other, and all our life to Christ our God". We have to know our pastoral and theological limitations. In the Book of Job the only answer we find is the silence of the presence of God. As soon as we try to explain the question of pain and suffering based on theological speculation, we lose our trust and truthfulness in the person who is suffering. We have to say that there might be a time that we will be put to the test where there is no explanation at all. Because

---

<sup>32</sup> It is very interesting to notice, that for J.D. Zizioulas and Dumitru Staniloae, there is an economy of God, where J.D. Zizioulas identifies it with the Immanent and Economic Trinity, and Dumitru Staniloae defines it as the economy of God.

<sup>33</sup> This question is inseparable from the Theodicy of God, that is briefly characterized by: N. Berdiaev, *Iz Rozmiszlenij o Teodyceji*, (in Russian), in: *Put*, No. 7, 1927.

<sup>34</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *The Economy of salvation and Ecclesiological "Errors"*, op. cit., p. 230

<sup>35</sup> S. Bulgakov, in: Tomas Spidlik, *Mysl rosyjska. Inna wizja czlowieka*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> John Zizioulas, *Suffering, history and the eschaton*, in: *Whither Ecumenism? A dialogue in the transit lounge of the ecumenical movement*, op. cit., p. 72. It is important to affirm at this moment, that because of the kenosis of God in the Economic Trinity, the Orthodox Church cuts itself off from the Greek classic philosophy.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph J. Allen, *The Orthodox Pastor and the Dying*, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, vol. 23, No. 1, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Carl Nighswonger, "Ministry to the Dying as a Learning Process", in: *Journal of Thanatology*, 1 (March, 1971), pp. 101-108.



there is no systematic teaching on pain and suffering, our speculation is not the final answer for the question. It is not, as some would say, our theological weakness, but a part of our faith as Christians. We have to accept the reality of pain and suffering as a mystery which we cannot grasp<sup>39</sup>. It is a mystery which goes beyond our comprehension and human limitation. If death is a mystery we can assume that pain and suffering which precedes death also becomes part of this mystery. It is our conviction in faith, that if there is life after death, it is impossible to find the final explanation for the question of suffering and pain. The image of the Mother of God, who being present at the moment of the death of her Son, accepts this mystery in silence and faith, is the only proper presentation of this reality<sup>40</sup>. It is also impossible to find the final answer for this question without contemplating the mystery of the cross and the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is very important to analyze the suffering of Jesus Christ who went through suffering. Because the cross and suffering are not final in themselves, pain and suffering are not eternal but temporary. The death and suffering of Jesus Christ are the only and true explanations for the question of pain and suffering<sup>41</sup>. Because the suffering of Jesus Christ belongs to God's plan, our explanation of pain and suffering belongs to the future of God<sup>42</sup>. But as long as there is suffering in the world, "Christ is in agony until the end of the world"<sup>43</sup>. The Risen Lord remains forever the crucified One. The Orthodox Church contemplates the mystery of the cross and at the same time advises us not to go with our speculation beyond the cross. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is the edge of human speculation<sup>44</sup>. It is only appropriate at this point to recall the words of St. Gregory, who paraphrasing Plato wrote: "It is impossible to express God, but to understand Him is even more impossible"<sup>45</sup>. The edge of any further theological speculation brings us the aspect of hope, that emphasizes that God assists us in our suffering. The hypostatic unity of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity with humanity assures us that God in His economy is not only aware of it, but He shares it to the fullest. One of the indications of the kingdom of God is the aspect of perfection towards which all of us are moving<sup>46</sup>. This process of transition is characterized by pain and suffering which all of us experience. Because Orthodox Christians wait for the age to come, the future becomes the final explanation of the reality of our life, where pain and suffering cease to exist.

---

<sup>39</sup> Walter Kasper, *The Theological Problem of Evil*, op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> Metropolitan Anthony of Surozh, *The Suffering of Children*, in: *Eastern Churches Review*, vol. VIII, 1976, p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Arseniev, *The Suffering*, in: *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, Fall 1953, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Vaselin Kesich, *Hypostatic and prosoponic Union in the Exegesis of Christ's Temptation*, in: *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, vol. IX, No. 3, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life*, op. cit., p. 221.

<sup>44</sup> P. Evdokimov, *Prawoslawie*, Warszawa, PAX, 1964, p. 63.

<sup>45</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, op. cit., p.126.

<sup>46</sup> For N. Berdiaev, the world is in transition from the original state of absence between goodness and evil towards the absolute new perception of this dualism which comes with a new experience for humanity, look in: Tomas Spidlik, *Mysl rosyjska. Inna wizja czlowieka*, op. cit., p. 307.

# **“FROM FEAR TO TRUST”:**

## **A THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ON THEODICY**

**by Fr. Dr. Jaroslaw Buciora  
(Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the contemporary theological discourse, there is a constantly growing interest in the subject of Theodicy. As the discussion on the subject develops from a variety of theological perspectives, numerous approaches become evident. Any discussion on Theodicy is mostly contextual and requires analysis. From one side, the contextualization of Theodicy incarnates essential elements of human life, but from the other that limits the discussed subjects to a particular approach. From the other perspective, contextualization of theological exercise brings us a living and valuable experience of people with God. This living experience with God broadens our perspective of the approach to the subject of Theodicy as a living reality.

The issue Theodicy is very stimulating question that elicits other very essential questions regarding our relationship with God and humanity. At the present time, when the concepts of the all-powerful God and God as a Judge are so far removed from societal beliefs, very rarely will we hear the terms "fear" and "trust" as they apply to our life. Despite all the negative convictions and beliefs in the all-powerful and almighty God, the Orthodox Church brings the concept of "fear" forward and underlines it especially in its worship: the Divine Liturgy.

The main purpose of this discourse is to analyse the theological element of Theodicy that is contained in a simple acclamation: "Fear of God". Although, this is a very short phrase, it contains in itself a tremendous amount of theological content that will be discussed in our discourse.

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The initial interpretation of the phrase of "fear of God" has, at first, a negative connotation that prevails in contemporary society. As everything is understood in modern society in the context of individual rights and privileges, this phrase even has a very offensive content, that is very difficult to reconcile with the modern concept of beliefs in God.

As we begin our analysis of modern man's approach to God and Theodicy, we have to direct our foremost attention to the historical background of Western Society that portrays God and a "fear of God" in a harmful light. This conclusion can be also applied to medieval Eastern Christianity, which was heavily influenced by the Western way of thinking. The best example of this mindset in Western Europe can be found in the frescos of Michaelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, or in some medieval Eastern Orthodox iconography. "The fear of God" was portrayed as an image of a horrifying "Judgement" in the centre of which there was an all-powerful God on a throne judging the entire human race. This concept of the "fear of God", as this was portrayed in the paintings of medieval Western Europe, had one main objective: to educate people in a visual manner and to deliver a message to Christians of the final consequences of man's separation from God. This approach was similar to the approach taken by St. Gregory the Great regarding the use of icons in early Christianity. According to St. Gregory, the icons were regarded as books of the

“illiterate “<sup>1</sup> This was a “psychological methodology” to describe the metaphysical reality of human life outside of the Divine realm. We can call this kind of approach to Theodicy as an “educational methodology”. The use of pedagogical language was directed towards those people who were unable to comprehend or grasp the reality of distortion of life on earth. The final goal was always the same: educational salvation.<sup>2</sup>

Analyzing the later development of medieval European Western Christianity, we have to emphasize a dramatic shift of methodology used by the Church in its quest for expansion. A continual separation from the sacramental experience of God in the Christian’s life dramatically changed the orientation of people towards Theodicy. A negative shift in the experience of God by people was filled by the separation and removal of God from Christian life. God came to be known as the God of vengeance and judgement. In order to understand the development of defining God in the term “order of justice” as this was presented in the medieval Western Europe, we would have to go back to the early Christianity of the Roman Empire and Blessed Augustine, whose works together with Tertullian, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas were proclaimed as the official teaching of the Western Church at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The oversimplification and one-sided exegetical literal interpretation of the Old and New Testament verses by the Western scholastic theologians contributed to an environment of biblical fear of apocalyptic magnitude. This approach also distorted, via legalistic interpretations of biblical images, the Christ’s incarnation and death on the cross. As a final outcome, medieval theological thought followed the Roman juridical tradition that developed a theory of “ransom” and “satisfaction of the divine justice”. In the end, the Christianity was transformed into a moralistic religion with a “sadistic God” in the centre. Because of the complexity of the subject and its importance in the development of Western theological thought, it would be appropriate to study it in a different context. Analysing this kind of approach towards Theodicy from the contemporary perspective, we have to be critical. On the one hand, the fearful presentation of the image of God, as was presented during medieval times, could frighten people. On the other hand, God was robbed of the essential element of faith: love. It is because of Divine love that God manifested Himself in the divine-human flesh of Christ, transforming the entire human life into a restored relationship with God. Faith in God without the hope of love tyrannizes people and brings them into a faith of slavery. We must underline the thesis that it is not the fear of God that should mobilize people to faith. It is not because of hell that man lives by faith, hope and love. The most fundamental principle for Christian life is not fear but love. It is love that overcomes fear. Overemphasis on the fear of God and the sinful nature of man by the medieval theologians created a mentality that paralysed and destroyed the presence of God in the mind of man. According to contemporary Orthodox thought, the basic mistake made by medieval Christian theology was the over-emphasis of one of the elements of eschatology: fear over love. The medieval moralists concentrated themselves exclusively on the subject of eschatology: the end of the world, condemnation of man and Divine retribution. This methodology was used to present an image of a fearsome God primarily as a method to convert pagans.<sup>3</sup> From the Western perspective, the most thorough investigation on the subject of the theology of fear and guilt was presented by a French historian J. Delumeau, who describes the centuries from XIII -XVIII as the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Michael Azkoul, *Perichoresis: The Christology of the Icon*, in: *The Patristic and Byzantine Review*, vol. 7(1)1988, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Look in: Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith. An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, op. cit., p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> It is very interesting to notice, that the idea of a fearful God was inherited, according to some historians, by the Western world from the pre-Christian beliefs. In the period of time, the beliefs in God of vengeance, influenced by the Greek and German culture, was integral for this type of image.

centuries of the “murderous man and horrifying God”.<sup>4</sup> In reality, God’s revelation was used by a particular religious group as a weapon to annihilate the opponents.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, the Church of the medieval age became an institution of law, punishment and Divine justice. In essence, for the medieval Western theologians, God became a heavenly police man who, for the purpose of keeping law, order, justice, and punishment, was envisioned as a horrifying Judge. It was a process of Divine treachery.<sup>6</sup> It was the French Revolution and the Enlightenment in Western Europe that brought the final blow to the “theology of fear”. At the end of the eighteenth century, people rebelled against the belief in a fearful God and, as a consequence, the other extreme of God’s non-existence appeared. It was Jean-Paul Sartre and Hegel who were the first ones in Western Europe to proclaim the death of the scholastic God. The final touch to this proclamation was made by Nietzsche, who categorically stated that “God is dead”.<sup>7</sup> In reality, the last three centuries were in the history of the Western world a “moral protest against a religion of fear”.<sup>8</sup> We must quite honestly state that centuries of the presented “theology of fear” tremendously weakened the Church and considerably discredited it. For S. Bulgakov, it is essential for Orthodox theology at the present time to re-establish the authentic balance between eschatological fear and love. In the Orthodox perspective, eschatology can not be reduced to the doctrine of God as Judge and Avenger.<sup>9</sup> Orthodox theology has to redefine a true image of God in the retrospective of the holistic theology. Even the grievous distress of our separation from God can not harm the authentic image of the Loving-kindness of God.<sup>10</sup> A patristic approach to the discussed subject is necessary and fundamental for proper theological discourse. In general, the Orthodox approach has to be holistic and embrace all the spectra of Church life. A further analysis of the “pedagogy of fear” was introduced by N. Berdyaev and N. Fedorov in the first part of the twentieth century, which in itself deserves to be studied. The rebellion against the “theology of fear” in Western Europe is without any doubt one of the reasons, according to P. Evdokimov, of contemporary atheism.<sup>11</sup> We are a part of this process as we are a part of Western society. If the Orthodox Church wants to be relevant to the philosophy of modern society, the Church has to address this question in the perspective of the historical mindset that is essential for our analysis.

### CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOX APPROACH TO THE “FEAR OF GOD”

The contemporary Orthodox interpretation of the term "fear of God" has a positive interpretation. The "fear of God", as it originates in the Old Testament", has a rather paternal and educational purpose. One of the characteristics of man in the Book of Psalms is the drama of human

---

<sup>4</sup> J. Delumeau, *Grzech i strach. Poczucie winy w kulturze Zachodu XIII-XVIII w.,* przeł. A. Szymanowski, Warszawa, 1994, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to notice the entire discussion on the subject of “death of God” by the Orthodox theologians in the seventieth of the twentieth century, in: *Orthodoxy and the death of God; Essays in Contemporary Theology.* Edited by A.M. Allchin. London, Fellowship of St. Sergius, 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith. An Introduction to Orthodox Theology,* T&T Clark, Edinburg,, 1991 T&T Clark, Edinburg,, 1991, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Christos Yannaras, *An Orthodox Comment On “The Death of God”,* in: *Orthodoxy and the death of God; Essays in Contemporary Theology.* Edited by A.M. Allchin, (London), Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1971, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to notice, that this conclusion was presented not to long ago by the General Synod of the Church of England, look in: *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God’s Gift. A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England,* Church House Publishing, London, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom,* St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1988, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Repentance and Confession in the Orthodox Church,* Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, 1990, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> P. Evdokimov, *L’amour fou de Dieu,* Paris, 1973, p. 32.

existence. Psalm 111:10 illustrates the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom and all those who live by it grow by understanding. In its content, the psalms reveal the internal conflict of man and his cry for God. Because God is “life” our approach to God, disregarding our alienation from Him, can be only a positive one. It is a progression towards the knowledge of God and our recognition of our separation from the source of life. It is man’s recognition of a rapture of the paradisiacal relationship with God which is being experienced in an existential loneliness. In contemporary Orthodox theological discourse, the experience of loneliness is the first sign of human mortality.<sup>12</sup> This process can be characterized as a passage from slavery to the level of a child.<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this internal conflict of man which presented in the psalms, we will use one element in the modern development of society that can help us immensely with a proper approach to this phrase. Two disciplines that have an immediate effect on our understanding of the concept “fear of God”, are psychology and sociology. Using the discipline of child psychology, allow me to illustrate an example of a child facing the reality of a wrongdoing. When a child does something wrong in front of his/her parents, there is a sense of fear in the heart of the child for the committed act. But regardless of the committed act, this child knows (in most cases) that the parents still have a sense of deep parental love. It is the pure trust of child that the parents will forgive and continue to love. This concept of complete love towards parents, that goes beyond human logical comprehension, has to be applied to our quest for an answer. In our life, we are alienating ourselves from God. This alienation from God has different forms and characters. One of the characteristics of alienation is the personal facet of this reality which becomes even more painful. The fact that we are continually hurting ourselves, suffering and dying are the most meaningful examples of our alienation from God. We may try to justify ourselves and even, using today’s individual rights, legitimize our action. But deep down in our conscience, we know every action that separates us from God. We may camouflage our faces, we can even portray other masks of life in our daily activities, but the final outcome is constantly revealed in our separation from the source of all life-God. In effect, it is a manifestation of anxiety over the lost immortal life.<sup>14</sup> Using an analogy, we are like the prodigal son (Lk. 15, 11-32), that while living his own life removed from God, eventually comes home for the restoration of his life to the original state. In the prodigal son’s conversion, we can perceive an internal urge to contemplate the lost dignity. While the prodigal son was on his own, he was living his own life, that is being described by the Gospel as living in a “far removed country“. It is a life that does not have a name or description. It is life that disappears in self-confinement. It is very characteristic to notice that our alienation from God, although always personal, also avoids any name. It is a sphere of our life that constantly urges us to look for “something other“. But at the very end, as it is portrayed in this story of the Gospel, the prodigal son comes back to his own original senses. He comes to the point of realization that the life he lives is not the life he inherited from his father. With this heavy burden on his shoulders, he comes home expecting the worst. In his mind, he created different scenarios of punishment and rejection from his father and family. In his conscience there was a deep sense of shame that was portrayed in the degradation to the level of a complete loss of human dignity. In the Judaic tradition, the image of swine being taken care of by an individual, was interpreted as total abandonment and isolation of this particular individual from society and family. As we observe the development of the story, there is the most wonderful example of the response from his father. While his son was still far away from home, the elderly father runs to him, embraces him, and cries with him. For the father, it is not important that his

---

<sup>12</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith. An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, op. cit., p 86.

<sup>13</sup> Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Cistercian Publication Inc., 1986, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith. An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, op. cit., p. 82

son spent his inheritance on a lavish life. This father cries as his son comes back from isolation and self-determination. From one side, we see the immeasurable love of the father towards his son, but from the other, we see a son who comes home with a sense of hope in forgiveness. Based on the above, it is imperative to characterize the conversion of two polarities. Conversion is not only a directive of man's return towards the Divine, but it is also God's kenosis towards humanity.

In the same perspective, we can definitely say that the concept of "fear of God" has two different polarities that are so characteristic to our life and to the story of the prodigal son. The first polarity is embraced in the definition of "fear". The phrase warns us about the consequences of our alienation from God. For the Orthodox Christian, this subject is especially emphasized in the third week before Holy and Great Lent: the Week of the Prodigal Son. The entire week of the Prodigal Son, especially the reading of the daily Gospels, underlines this aspect of eschatology. One of the characteristic icons of the Last Judgement, which embraces in itself the Orthodox teaching on the Last Judgement is the fresco of A. Rublev from 1408 that is being preserved at the Holy Dormition Cathedral in Vladimir. This fresco, as opposed to the fresco of Michelangelo, portrays Last Judgement as an optimistic and joyful event. Even the fire of the Last Judgement is represented on the icon as the fire of the infinite love of God towards the human race. The Fathers of the Church, who composed the services of Holy and Great Lent, were deeply convinced about the negative character of our alienation from God. As we look at all the Lenten services we observe a deep sense of our longing for God. There is a deep call made by those services to the personal soul to awaken and to realize the lost relationship with God. There is a deep sense of the distortion of our human life and a call to overcome the extreme alienation from God as it is portrayed in the personalities of the Old Testament. The constant reference to the Old Testament is an attempt to reverse the course of our life and a call to God to have mercy on the human race. In a sense, it is a call to God to liberate humanity from the oppression and sorrow of loneliness as the nature of our life is communion. We may say that the services of Holy and Great Lent, and particularly the first week, lead us towards recognition of our state of alienation from God. From the other side, it is a call to rebuild the lost relationship with God, experienced by Adam in paradise.

The other polarity which is particularly characteristic for Holy and Great Lent, is the evidence of the restoration of our pristine and unique place in God's creation. The first Sunday of Great Lent leads us to the prophetic personalities of Moses and the prophets. The one common characteristic for those prophetic personalities of the Old Testament was the vision of God. The Fathers of the Church of the first seven centuries infiltrated into Christian worship the conviction that God never abandoned us in this world. God continues to care for His creation despite the deep alienation of man. From this perspective, the concept of the "fear of God" brings us the positive assurance that God is present in the suffering and alienation of humanity. This assurance is exceptionally evident on the fifth Sunday, where the example of St. Mary of Egypt prefigures the final restoration of creation. St. Mary of Egypt becomes a role model for the Church to rebuild and to redefine life. In other words, the Church in prayer leads us from a total alienation of humanity to the total restoration of our relationship with God. The conversion of St. Mary of Egypt is finalized on the day of Resurrection where the restoration of humanity becomes final. The "fear of God" leads us from the fear of alienation from God to the joy of being with God again in paradise. The image of St. Mary of Egypt as the final restitution of human destiny towards the Kingdom of God might be the answer to the icon of the Last Judgement written by A. Rublev. Even in the understanding of the Last Judgement, as this is represented by A. Rublev there is joy as a recapitulation of humanity towards its original place.

The most beautiful example of total conversion of fear into joy and trust is the Theotokos - the Mother of God. On the Feast of the Annunciation, the angel of God tells the Blessed Virgin Mary not to be afraid of the Divine presence, because “*she has found favour with God*”. The fear of humanity, as it is expressed by the Blessed Virgin, is transformed by the assurance of God’s presence in the world. The total transformation of this polarity is finalized by the will of the Blessed Virgin to give herself totally to the will of God. In the Blessed Virgin Mary, the entire human race finds a road to its original destiny. The complete trust of Blessed Mary to the will of God is the only answer of humanity to God.

If we apply this analogically to ourselves, we may be enlightened by the very fact, that God loves us regardless of our transgressions and alienation. The concept of the "fear of God" leads us to the concept of complete hope and trust in the Divine. Based on the example of a child and the story of the prodigal son, trust and hope are the ultimate answers to the concept of the "fear of God". In our prayerful life and longing for God, "fear of God" transforms itself into a tremendous hope, joy and happiness, based on the fact that God still accepts us regardless of our alienation and refusal to share with Him His Divine life. In other words, it is the proclamation of a glorious chant in which we express our total dependence on God. We realize the supreme sovereignty of God and His power over the entire creation. It becomes a confirmation of the total dependency of human life on God. The “fear of God” has a positive and educational character that warns us that life without God is a meaningless utopia and the complete annihilation of any purpose to life. Without the concept of God, we become a temporary anomaly that turns itself back into the madness of non-existence. This phrase also warns us about the alienation and degradation of our high calling. In other words, the fear of God should exorcize all fear of what is not God.<sup>15</sup> From the other side, this phrase informs us that the ultimate act of human will is to love God and to be in unity with Him. The refusal to accept God’s invitation to share His Divine life pulls us into sphere of total depravity and loss of human dignity. Where there is no God, there is no shame. Where the human consciousness is eradicated, shame acquires a form of righteousness. In this context we can only agree with Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky who concluded that without God everything would be permissible.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the phrase “fear of God” acts as a constant reminder of the higher Divine call which constantly pulls us into the realm of the discovery of our angelic destiny. It helps us to realize that we are in the process of rediscovering our own human authenticity. As we reverse the “fear of God” into the complete trust of the loving God, our life completes itself in the radiant glow of God’s presence in our life. Trust in God leads us directly to the realization of our eschatological transcendence.<sup>17</sup> In the words of Blessed Augustine: “Let us fear prudently that we may not fear vainly” (Hom. 15:1). It is the radiant glow of Moses in the Old Testament and the total transformation of St. Mary of Egypt. It is the glory of God that brings the saints to the ultimate beauty as it is seen in God’s presence. It is a living experience in the life of God: it is a Theophany. Fear of God transformed into a complete trust in God becomes a “face to face “ relationship with Him who is the origin of our life who: “...used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend“ (Exodus 33:11).<sup>18</sup> Using the phrase of the contemporary Orthodox theologians P. Evdokimov, we become the “walking icons” in the midst

---

<sup>15</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew 10:26-31 and the Problem of Evil*, in: SVTQ, vol. 32(4), 1988, p. 301.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Azkoul, *Prolegomena to a Critique of Western Culture*, in: GOTR, vol. 4(2), 1958-59, p. 160.

<sup>17</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith. An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit., p. 66.

of God's creation. In retrospect, it is a gift of God's holiness to humanity.<sup>19</sup> For a Christian, the "fear of God" becomes a life's passion, which is totally embraced by the state of sainthood.

### ECCLESIOLOGICAL CHARACTER

It is essential to confirm another very essential aspect of this phrase. It is very important that this phrase is being presented in the context of a worshipping community: the Church. The call to be fearful of God leads us also into an established relationship with God. It is not a generic proclamation, but a precise and characteristic directive to all those who have established unity with God. In this context, the phrase contains a conviction of certain privilege and honour to all those who belong to His Church. It is not only privilege and honour, but also responsibility to preserve this unique and divine calling. The place to hear and to accept this calling is the community: the Church.

The call has two dimensions: God and man, and man's interrelationship within the community. In the context of community, it is not an individual call but a communal action of the worshipping Church. As a worshipping community, the Church realizes this dimension as a process that is being achieved in a communal life. In this perspective, the phrase "fear of God" is being realized not only in personal unity with God, but it is also extended to the entire Body of Christ.<sup>20</sup> The unity with God is also extended to the other members of the community, whom we also approach with tremendous joy and honour. Consequently, the "fear of God" brings the entire community into the presence of God. It is exactly the presence of Holiness that is causing the fear, trembling, and reverence which belong to the core of religious feeling.<sup>21</sup> We will be right to present this experience as a sweet feeling being caused by the presence of God which has no "equal on earth".<sup>22</sup> The experience of man's participation in God's life, according to Evagrius, is man's knowledge of God which brings him so much pleasure.<sup>23</sup> Those words were once again recalled by St. Maximus, who defined the acceptance of God's love as a "divine and inconceivable pleasure".<sup>24</sup> It is the sweetness of inclusivity, in opposition to exclusivity, which puts us in front of the Divine presence. In an ecclesial life, it is the living faith of the worshipping community in front of the awesome God.<sup>25</sup> In the context of the community, the "fear of God" brings us the aspect of hope that in extension is offered to the entire Church.<sup>26</sup> We can't forget that it is a "fear of God" as hope and not a human initiative that brings us together. From the liturgical point of view, the "fear of God", as it is expressed right before the distribution of the Eucharist, is transformed by the very Body and Blood of Christ. The "fear of God" leads us ultimately to the very life in God. It is from this vision and participation in God's life that the Orthodox Church can't detach its gaze in fear and admiration.<sup>27</sup> Because the call for participation in the Divine takes place within the Sacrament of the Eucharist, our life is essentially sacramental, and leads us

---

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith, volume I: Doctrine*, The Department of Religious Education. The Orthodox Church in America, New York, 1976, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom*, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Arseniev, *Transcendence and Immanence of God*, in: SVSQ, vol. 3(4)1959, p. 2; Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom*, op. cit., p. 182

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom*, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> In: Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, op. cit., p.43. In the ascetic literature fear is an effect of solitude and tears that brings foresight, p. 205.

<sup>24</sup> Look in: Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith. An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, op. cit., p. 119

<sup>25</sup> Op. cit., p. 56

<sup>26</sup> It is very interesting to notice that according to the desert Fathers, the fear of God comes only after man's ability to liberate itself from judgement and in a total humility, in: M. Borowska, ks. M. Starowiejski, ks. M. Rymuza, *Apoftegmaty ojców pustyni*, Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, Warszawa, 1986, p. 136.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Arseniev, *Three Chapters from an Unpublished Book*, in: SVSQ, vol 4(1)1960, p. 41.



ultimately to a new dimension of life. The Eucharist, according to liturgical papyrus of DorBalyzeh, feeds the “hope of eternal life”.<sup>28</sup> In its foundation, it is the ultimate thirst of humanity for God which feeds and transform man’s life. The fundamental characteristic of the sacramental life of a Christian is trust that suprisingly comes out from the “fear of God”. In fact, the sacramental aspect of our life is an invitation from God to enter into the relationship with Him. We are invited to direct and shape our life as it is found in the Eucharist.<sup>29</sup> In effect, the Eucharist is the place, where the relationship of God and humanity is restored.<sup>30</sup> In the eucharistic community, God becomes the final transformation of our life. Life in God is our hope that is constantly accompanied by the elements of fear and trembling (Phil. 2, 12). In the eschatological perspective, the elements of fear and trembling are transformed in our life into an actual manifestation of the life of Christ. The Eucharist forms Christ within us.<sup>31</sup> It is the reason why the members of the early Church called themselves Christians. (Acts 11:26). The actual manifestation of Christ in our life brings us back to the original destiny that is found in the Kingdom of God. In the original context of God’s creation, “we were created in paradise and for paradise, we were exiled from paradise, and Christ “leads us back into paradise”.<sup>32</sup> In this context, man finds himself again in paradise, where he trembles and fears, like Adam in the garden, before God. It is a process that leads us from the horrifying image of God of the scholastic West to total transformation and joyful participation in the very life of God. It is the experience of the Apostles of Jesus Christ after the Resurrection: from fear to joy, from uncertainty to glorification.

It has to be emphasized that the phrase “fear of God”, as this is presented in the liturgical context, is correlated with the additional phrase which, according to our analysis, complements the first one: “ With fear of God and with faith and love draw near”. If the first part of the phrase reveals the awesome presence of God and, according to our analysis, our “total unworthiness”<sup>33</sup> to participate in His life, the second part of the phrase overflows with love, and the assurance of God’s love for humanity. God descends in His kenosis to the level of humanity in order for all those members of the worshipping community with “faith and love” to ascend to His Divine life. God calls His creation to participation in His Kingdom. As we look at the phrase from this particular perspective, it is entirely God’s initiative to share His life. From one side, the phrase reflects the reality of our alienation from God, but from the other side, the phrase never abolishes the indescribable will of God for humanity to ascend to the original destiny. It is important to notice at this point that, according to Orthodox theological thought, our way of theologizing about God is immediately rooted in our approach to the Divine in worship.<sup>34</sup> It might be seen as a logical paradox that goes beyond anything known in the aspect of human life. The entire relationship of the Divine and humanity is the paradox of paradoxes. Although man can reject the relationship and participation in the Divine, God, like a loving father, patiently waits for His creation to return His call. As we look at this particular phrase, we might be overwhelmed by the reality of paradoxes and unknown contradictions. It is exactly here that the theological

<sup>28</sup> In: Nicholas S. Arseniev, *The Glory of God in the Liturgies of the Christian East*, SVSQ, vol. 9(3)1965, p. 113.

<sup>29</sup> One of the studies on this particular subject is offered by Nicholas Arseniev: Nicholas S. Arseniev, *The Glory of God in the Liturgies of the Christian East*, in: SVSQ, op. cit..

<sup>30</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith. An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, Edinburgh, p. 76

<sup>31</sup> It is very important to mention the conclusion made by Alexander Schmemmann. In his conclusion, the aspect of unworthiness to approach Eucharist that prevailed over the centuries is the main cause of the creation of fear of God in the mentality of Christians, in: Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom*, op. cit., p 231.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom*, op. cit., p 174.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Confession and Communion. Report to the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America*, February 17, 1972.

<sup>34</sup> A.M. Alchin, *Orthodoxy and the Death of God; Essays in Contemporary Theology*. op. cit., p. 17.

perspective on Theodicy enters another dimension.<sup>35</sup> It is here that Theodicy deals with the infinite love of God for creation and the extreme possibility of an ultimate rejection of God by man. We have to remember that the entire phrase is an invitation from God to participate in His Divine life. At this particular moment man can reject this call and return to his own illusionary perfection. It is a mystifying risk on the part of God to give man such an ultimate choice. Regardless of the choice man makes in life, there is a constant will on behalf of God to share His Divine life. It might be correct to point out that the phrase enters another level of the analysis of Theodicy which must to be studied with tremendous humility. It is only with the prophetic humility that we can approach what St. Ignatius referred as “ the medicine of immortality and antidote of death”<sup>36</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As we can observe, based on this very brief analysis, the phrase “fear of God” contains in itself an enormous amount of theological content. It would be a great oversight to analyze this phrase based only on a historical or contextual approach. The Orthodox Church, as was presented in our short discourse, rejects the idea of analysing the phrase in separation from the second part of the acclamation which carries in it a theological completion. The traditional presentation of the phrase by the medieval Western Church has to be approached with a critical and constructive analysis. The centuries of presentation of the phrase “fear of God” in the negative Scholastic theological mind set created a culture of the negation of God in man’s life. In order to redefine an authentic Orthodox theological perspective on this subject we have to reconstruct the proper approach to Theodicy which would avoid reductionism.

As we study this phrase, we can easily perceive the difficulties that arise from our analysis. The constructive theological approach has to be comprehensive and holistic. The analysis in this approach would enter an other dimension of Theodicy which is instrumental for our approach and comprehensive in its content. The holistic approach is critical for our analysis in order to avoid the misinterpretations made in the past. Our brief analysis of this subject indicates that the holistic approach to the subject is dictated by the very experience of the Church. The Divine liturgy, where the phrase “fear of God” finds its appropriate place, defines the theological approach to Theodicy. Further analysis on Theodicy also has to include anthropology and Christology as constitutive elements. Without these elements the entire analysis would be automatically inadequate. As was shown in our discussion the “fear of God” in our further analysis of Theodicy enters the very life of God. Behind the initial negative impression of the phrase, which was emphasized by the medieval West, we discover the assurance of God’s presence in our life. If the “fear of God” is attributed to the fall of man, the infinite love of God leads our discussion to the original destiny with the Divine that is articulated in the second part of the phrase. The assurance of God’s presence in our life, despite our alienation, comes in the very life of God: the Sacrament of the Eucharist. God not only assures His creation of His constant presence in the world, but He gives His only begotten Son in order to bring man to His original place. It is exactly here, entering the field of Theodicy, that we have to enter the entire discussion with extreme humility. This new entrance defines the limitations of our speculation. This also demands us of further analysis of Theodicy. Let us only hope that analysis of Theodicy will continue in the future, and that it will be relative to the life of man and to the entire creation of God.

---

<sup>35</sup> For Alexander Schmemmann, the entrance into another level in the liturgical context begins at the very beginning of Anaphora at the time, when the priest says: “Let us stand! Let us stand with fear! Let us attend, that we may offer the Holy Oblation in Peace”, in: Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist. Sacrament of the Kingdom*, op. cit., p 159.

<sup>36</sup> Ignat., Ephes., 13.



## **REFLECTION ON ROMANS 8:16-28, 31-39**

**by Rev. Fred Demaray  
(Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec)**

Romans 8 may be one of the most difficult passages of all of Paul's teaching to get our minds around. On the surface it seems to suggest that suffering should be sought after, that suffering is acceptable all of the time. In fact Paul does suggest that "the creation was subjected to futility (and suffering) not of its own will but by the will of [God] who subjected it. Unfortunately, this passage has sometimes been used to justify the suffering of segments of the population or individuals because it is the will of God. That is not actually what Paul intended. In fact, Paul is speaking to a group of Christians who know what suffering is all about, and who are indeed suffering for their faith. For them suffering is simply a fact of life. In that context, Paul is not justifying suffering, but trying to give it meaning. At no point in this passage does he really advocate that we should seek out suffering, even though it may sound like it. Instead, he is suggesting that when suffering comes, we should not avoid it, because the only way to avoid suffering, in the context of the religious persecution his people were experiencing, was to deny the faith itself. So, for his readers, suffering is to be received and interpreted as part of the life of a Christian living in such a time as theirs. Although our context in Canada is not the same as that of Rome in Paul's day, this passage is a gold mine for our reflection on suffering and hope.

Paul has been leading his readers through a discussion of the nature of the Law and its ability to indicate to us the nature of our separation from God. However, he argues, when we are in Christ we are set free from the law of sin and death by the dwelling of the Spirit of God in us. He boldly announces that "if the spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead, dwells in you, God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through God's spirit that dwells in you" (8:11). Those who are in Christ are a new Creation, as Paul puts it in his Corinthian letters. The nature of this new creation is that God's spirit dwells in us, filling our very natures with the life and power of God.

The suffering that Paul's readers experienced, because they remained loyal to Christ often led to following Christ to the cross in very real terms. It will also lead to a similar type of glorification that Christ received far beyond the imagining of our minds. Ultimately, he says, all of God's creation will be set free from the suffering and futility that marks our living when our adoption as children of God is fully realized. There is an "already, not yet" aspect to Paul's sense of our suffering and our hoping.

Hope lies in the involvement of God through the Spirit in the suffering of our lives. We are not alone, as the creed of one of our CCC member churches begins. The Spirit of God groans with us and with all creation as we yearn for the fulfillment of our adoption as God's children. If, as we affirm, God was in some way present in the very being of Jesus in his earthly life, then God participated in the suffering of Jesus on the cross, thereby participating in all human suffering. God suffers with us. We are not alone. This is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead! In that knowledge there is hope, even in the midst of suffering.

The greatest difficulty with this passage lies in the words, "we know that all things work together for good for those who love God." In the midst of any suffering, one may wonder at this affirmation. Sometimes the outcome just does not feel all that good for us. We need to remember that Paul does not say that everything is good. One of the possible translations of this verse suggests that "God is at work for good in all things." This is possibly closer to what Paul was

intending. Even in the midst of apparent evil, God is working for good for us behind the scenes. Most of us can recall times when in the midst of the struggle it seemed nothing good could come but at the end of the struggle we could see some good that has come out of it.

Our hope lies in the affirmation that if God is for us, who can be against us. Again, it is the death of Christ that affirms this for us. In that death all humanity is implicated. It is symbolic of all the evil that can happen in the world. Out of this greatest evil that could be imagined, the death, at the hands of the powers, of God's own beloved one, God still works our good. God does not abandon us. God works for us in the outcome of this deep suffering. As Paul puts it "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Thanks be to God for this unimaginable grace to us and to the world. Amen.

**CROSS WORDS WITH GOSPEL REFLECTIONS -  
A RESPONSIVE READING ON THE  
SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS**

**by Rev. Fred Demaray  
(Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec)**

Roles: Leader 1; Leader 2; Congregation.

Leader 1:

Two others also, who were criminals,  
were led away to be put to death with him.  
When they came to the place that is called The Skull,  
they crucified Jesus there with the criminals,  
one on his right and one on his left.  
And they cast lots to divide his clothing.  
Then Jesus said,

Leader 2:

“Father, forgive them;  
for they do not know what they are doing.”

Congregation:

Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you,  
pray for those who abuse you.  
If anyone strikes you on the cheek,  
offer the other also;  
and from anyone who takes away your coat  
do not withhold even your shirt.

Leader 1:

When Jesus saw his mother  
and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her,  
he said to his mother,

Leader 2:

“Woman, here is your son.”

Leader 1:

Then he said to the disciple,

Leader 2:

“Here is your mother.”

Congregation:

“Who are my mother and my brothers?”  
 And looking at those who sat around him, he said,  
 “Here are my mother and my brothers!  
 Whoever does the will of God is my brother  
 and sister and mother.”

Leader 1:

One of the criminals crucified with him said, “Jesus,  
 remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Leader 2:

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Congregation:

There will be more joy in heaven  
 over one sinner who repents  
 than over ninety-nine righteous persons  
 who need no repentance.

Leader 2:

“I thirst.”

Leader 1:

A jar full of sour wine was standing there.  
 So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch  
 and held it to his mouth.

Congregation:

Truly I tell you,  
 whoever gives you a cup of water to drink  
 because you bear the name of Christ  
 will by no means lose the reward.

Leader 1:

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land.  
 About three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice,

Leader 2:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Congregation:

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 made visible  
 in our bodies.

Leader 1:

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the  
whole land until three in the afternoon,  
while the sun's light failed;  
and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.  
Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said,

Leader 2:

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Congregation:

Keep awake and pray  
that you may not come into the time of trial;  
the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Leader 1:

When Jesus had received the wine, he said,

Leader 2:

“It is finished.”

Congregation:

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.



# GOD DOES NOT WANT SUFFERING -

## A PATRISTIC APPROACH TO SUFFERING

by Dr Paul Ladouceur  
(Orthodox Church in America)

### 1. Introduction: The Early Church Fathers and Suffering<sup>1</sup>

The early Church Fathers had two major concerns: firstly, pastoral, the salvation of the faithful; and secondly, theological, the safeguarding of the faith against erroneous teachings – which in their eyes affected the possibility of salvation. Although the expression of their interests may seem at times somewhat abstract, behind this language lies their concern for salvation and the proper expression of the teachings of Christ as transmitted in the Church. The Fathers often appealed to philosophical concepts to express their ideas, but the ultimate grounding of their theology was sacred writing, particularly the Gospels.

The Fathers' attitude towards suffering is closely related to their thinking on evil in general; for them "evil" includes both moral evil and other negative acts or events, including suffering. Two questions dominated the Fathers' thinking on suffering:

1. What is the origin and the nature of suffering?
2. How should Christians regard and deal with suffering?

It is important to keep in mind the historical and social context in which the Fathers lived. Suffering, especially physical suffering, was much more frequent and widespread in the early centuries of the Church than in modern times – medicine was in its infancy; pain control was rudimentary; communicable diseases were virtually uncontrollable; infant mortality rates were high; violence was widespread; the administration of justice was harsh, with frequent application of torture and physical punishment; in summary, average life expectancy was much less than in modern times, probably about 30-35 years, comparable to the poorest developing countries today. Thus the Fathers had a much closer contact with physical suffering than we do today. In modern societies, psychological suffering is much more prevalent than formerly, while physical suffering is greatly diminished.

### 2. The Origin and Nature of Suffering

For the Church Fathers, it was clear that God did not create suffering: suffering did not form part of God's intention or plan for Creation and was not created by Him, nor will suffering exist in the Kingdom of Heaven, where God wishes that humans find happiness. Part of the Fathers' argument is based on Genesis 1, where it is said of every day of the creation: "God saw that it was good"; and at the end of creation: "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Gn 1:31).

---

<sup>1</sup> This article makes considerable use of the book by Jean-Claude Larchet, *Dieu ne veut pas la souffrance des homes*, (Paris: Cerf, 1999 ; hereinafter JCL), with some material from chapter 9 "L'épreuve de la souffrance" (hereinafter EPS) of Larchet's book *Le chrétien devant la maladie, la souffrance et la mort* (Paris: Cerf, 2004). For the purposes of this text, Biblical and patristic references are kept to a minimum. Full references may be found in the two books by Jean-Claude Larchet. The title of Larchet's first book is from Saint Isaac the Syrian: "God does not want humans to suffer. He wants you to offer your own suffering as an sacrifice of love. This is perceived by all those who love God... In effect, those who choose to live in the fear of God support affliction and endure persecution. And He accords them his hidden treasures" (*Ascetic Discourses*, 3).

To believe that God created suffering was heretical for the Fathers and they attacked this doctrine in its various forms over the centuries: Platonism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism, Neo-Platonism, Pelagianism. Instead of this pernicious doctrine which casts doubt on the goodness of God, the Fathers taught that suffering is contrary to nature and consists of an absence of good; suffering is in this sense a form of evil. The suffering of those who are innocent “only adds to the ‘abnormal’ character of suffering and reinforces its negative and to some extent ‘scandalous’ nature.”<sup>2</sup> Man and woman in Paradise – that is, as created by God – were not subject to suffering and were beyond both pain and pleasure, experiencing rather spiritual joy and happiness in their communion with God.

The Fathers’ consideration of the nature of suffering focuses extensively on the relationship of suffering and sin. There are two major aspects of this relationship:

(1) Suffering as a consequence and effect of ancestral sin<sup>3</sup>: The first cause of suffering was Adam’s sin: “The Fathers are unanimous in considering that it was the sin of the first man which brought (suffering) into the world, and that suffering has its origin in his free will, more exactly in the act by which he rejected the divine precept, separated himself from God and thereby excluded himself from the paradisiacal state.”<sup>4</sup>

Suffering is thus a consequence of ancestral sin and is inscribed in fallen human nature without, however, men and women born after Adam being either responsible or somehow bearing guilt for ancestral sin. All humanity, the children of the first parents, inherit the *consequences* of the ancestral sin, but not the *guilt* associated with it; in the teachings of the Fathers, guilt for wrongdoing is always personal and cannot be transmitted.

The principal consequence of ancestral sin was the introduction of death into human nature and into the world in general, and everything that is associated with death, such as aging, illness, pain, suffering, or what the Fathers refer to as “passibility”, that is, subject to change, in contrast to “impassibility,” not subject to change – a characteristic of God and the first parents before the “fall”. The other major consequence of ancestral sin is a tendency towards evil. This tendency is not an immutable “law” or fact of human existence, but a natural tendency which requires the exercise of free will in order to be actualised, to turn an “inclination” into reality. And with God’s help, this natural tendency can be overcome.

The Fathers identify two other sources of suffering. Suffering may originate in personal sin but is not necessarily the effect of sin or personal guilt. The Fathers also saw diabolical activity in the world as another cause of suffering. It is important to stress that suffering is not a divine punishment for sin, but it may be a natural and necessary consequence of sin.

(2) The second major aspect of the relationship of suffering and sin is the role of suffering as a source and “occasion” of sin. It is perhaps well known that the Fathers had a generally negative view of pleasure, especially physical pleasure, but it is perhaps less well known that they had an equally negative view of pain and suffering. For the Fathers, both pleasure and pain appeared in human nature as a result of ancestral sin, since man became “passible” i.e. subject to change, including feeling and suffering, aging and illness, leading ultimately to death. Passibility is not evil of itself, nor necessarily a principle of sin or evil passions, since all sin requires the exercise of free will: “Nevertheless passibility – and hence the natural ‘passions’ [or tendencies of fallen

---

<sup>2</sup> EPS, p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> In this document, we avoid the use of the expression “original sin,” because the teaching of the early Fathers – other than saint Augustine – on the sin of Adam and Eve is quite different from the notion of original sin as it developed in the Western Church.

<sup>4</sup> JCL, p. 23-24.

nature] which flow from it, such as hunger, thirst, sexual desire, fear etc. – are a suitable ‘ground’ for the birth, development and survival of evil passions.”<sup>5</sup>

The natural tendency of human beings to seek pleasure and to avoid pain lies at the origin of a modification of moral conscience, and exercises a tyrannical influence on humans, favouring an inclination towards sin and evil passions. Hence, pleasure and pain are easily exploited by diabolical influences to turn humans away from God.

The Fathers saw Job of the Old Testament as an important example of dealing with suffering: The devil uses suffering as a source of temptation for Job to denounce God, but Job’s attitude towards suffering makes him a precursor and a prefiguration (“type”) both of Christ and of Christians.<sup>6</sup>

### **3. Christ’s Attitude towards Suffering and His Victory over Suffering**

There are two important aspects of Christ’s attitude towards suffering: firstly, the suffering which Christ Himself endured; and secondly, His attitude towards suffering, especially those in direct contact with Him.

The Fathers consider that Christ’s human nature was impassible in principle, but that Christ voluntarily accepted suffering, and ultimately death, in order to free humanity from them. This is in keeping with a key patristic principle: “That which was not assumed cannot be healed”; that is, those aspects of humanity, other than sin, all the consequences of the ancestral sin, which Christ did not take upon Himself through His Incarnation, life, Passion, and Death, could not be healed. Christ voluntarily took all the consequences of the ancestral sin, including suffering and death, upon Himself in order to free humanity from them. Christ’s victory over suffering and death destroyed the power of suffering and death over humanity, and over diabolical influences which attempt to utilise suffering to turn humans away from God.

One could apply to suffering the well-known expression employed by Saint Paul, citing Isaiah and Hosea, with respect to death: “Suffering is swallowed up in victory. O suffering, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” (cf. 1 Co 15:54-55). Just as Adam, bearing in his nature that of all humanity, caused all to fall with him, so Christ, as the “New Adam”, recapitulating all humanity in the human nature which He assumed, benefits all humanity through His own victory (cf. Rm 5:12-17).

“This means that for all those who will be united with Christ, passibility (the source of suffering) will no longer be the abode of evil powers nor the means by which they can dominate humanity and submit persons to sin and passions, but on the contrary become an aspect of themselves which the faithful will have reclaimed and by which they will be able, like Christ and because of Him, dominate evil, reject evil powers and conquer sin.”<sup>7</sup>

Christ did not consider that suffering is a necessary consequence of personal sin, as is shown clearly in two Gospel episodes, that of the man born blind (Jn 9:1-3) and that of the paralysed man (Mt 9:1-6). Certain words of Christ have been interpreted to mean that He justified and even exalted suffering: His remarks concerning the sickness and death of Lazarus (Jn 11:4); the second Beatitude (in certain translations) (Mt 5:4); and His statement concerning the necessity for His follower to carry his cross (Mt 16:24; Mt 10:38; Lc 9:23; Lc 14:27). The Church Fathers reject the “dolorist” interpretations of these passages and attach a spiritual rather than a literal meaning

---

<sup>5</sup> EPS, p. 147; JCL, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. JCL, chapter 4, p. 49-66; EPS, p. 151-152.

<sup>7</sup> JCL, p. 78.

to these texts, and certainly do not read these passages to mean that Christ called on His followers to seek suffering as a condition of salvation.

On the contrary, the will of Christ is that humans should no longer suffer. Christ's objective is the abolition of suffering; the final realisation of this will occur only in the Kingdom of Heaven, when the human body will resurrect as a spiritual body and the human soul, freed from the constraints of fallen human nature, will no longer be subject to natural passions. By healing the suffering and infirmities of those who came to Him, Christ already prefigured the abolition of suffering. It ensues from the attitude and actions of Christ that Christians have the duty to ease suffering in all its forms, physical, psychological and moral.

#### 4. Suffering in the Life of the Christian

Christians, even though they are members of the Church and participate already in some way in the Kingdom, are still subject to the consequences of sin which keeps the cosmos in a certain disorder. Christ has given us effective means to face suffering on a spiritual level in order not only that suffering will not interfere with the Christian life, but in order that Christians may draw spiritual benefit from suffering. Incorporation into Christ by baptism provides Christians with the means to resist temptation towards evil often associated with suffering and in this sense Christians are as privileged as the Just of the Old Testament, such as Job, or even more so.

“Christ has in effect abolished the necessity of sin, destroyed the domination of the Devil, terminated the tyranny of pleasure and pain and rendered death innocuous, but He has abolished neither sin, nor the actions of demons, nor suffering and other passions, nor corruptibility, nor physical death, nor in general the consequences of sin, in order not to force human free will.”<sup>8</sup>

Among the temptations associated with suffering are sadness, defeatism, discouragement and especially revolt against God, blaming God for suffering, blasphemy and denial of Christ, and also sins against other persons in the form of anger, criticism, resentment, envy, ill-will etc.

“Thus the Christian – by the grace of God and not solely by his or her own strengths – does not surrender *spiritually* to suffering, is not dominated and tyrannised *spiritually* by suffering; that is, is not induced by suffering (and by the demons which utilise suffering to this end) to sin and to develop evil passions which pervert his or her relation with God.”<sup>9</sup>

Ideally, the spiritual attitude of the Christian towards suffering should be one of detachment and “impassibility” – just as it should be towards pleasure and all forms of pain; the Christian should not allow suffering to alter his spiritual attachment to Christ, nor to be dominated and tyrannised by suffering. In this way, the Christian can turn suffering to spiritual advantage, as a means of progressing in the spiritual life, of seeking purification, of being liberated from negative passions and of warding off new passions.

The Fathers frequently emphasize the purification function of suffering, following Saint Peter in 1 Peter 4:1: “He who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.” This purification effect comes not from suffering itself, but from divine mercy; God manifests His compassion and elicits an attitude of repentance in the midst of suffering.

Suffering is not a goal of the spiritual life nor even a means to be sought and Christians should not seek suffering for the purpose of spiritual benefit: “To value suffering not only as a goal but as an essential means of the spiritual life is foreign to the spirit of the Greek Fathers in general.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> JCL, p. 96; EPS, p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> EPS, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> JCL, p. 114; EPS, p. 163.

“All the spiritual benefits which a person may acquire from suffering can most often be found in other circumstances and by other means<sup>11</sup>”; suffering is an non-essential occasion for spiritual benefit.

The positive side of suffering is that suffering can provide the Christian with the means to develop and practice Christian virtues, especially patience and humility, which in turn foster steadfastness in one’s faith (fidelity) and hope, as saint Paul highlights (Rm 5:3-4). Suffering also provides an occasion to intensify a Christian’s prayer life.

The conditions for the “good usage” of suffering are thus:

- Patience;
- Hope;
- Prayer;
- Love of God.<sup>12</sup>

These characteristics are thus both conditions and outcomes for a Christian approach to suffering in the context of spiritual growth and development.

For the Christian, Christ is the model and the pedagogue in dealing with suffering. The person who suffers is also helped by the hope and even the certainty not only that the suffering will cease, but will be followed by eternal joy and beatitude in God. To cite Saint Maximus the Confessor: “ ‘Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith’ (He 12:2), let us valiantly support all that happens to us. For the end of all tribulation is joy, of all pain, rest, of all dishonour, glory. In short, the end of all suffering endured for the sake of virtue is to be with God in all things and to enjoy eternal rest... ”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> JCL, p. 114-115; EPS p. 163-164.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. JCL, pp. 108-112; EPS pp. 160-163.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in EPS, p. 161.

## **REFLECTION ON THE BOOK OF JOB:**

### **JOB, THE GREAT SUFFERER OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

**Dr Paul Ladouceur  
(Orthodox Church in America)**

The Book of Job is a profound and powerful meditation on the nature of evil and suffering and the story of Job conveys a number of important lessons for Christians. The story itself, expressed in highly poetic and imaginative language, is simple. Job is a just person, faithful in his duties to God, a wealthy and highly-considered member of his society. God, we are told, permits Satan to tempt Job by taking away first his wealth and his children, and then attacking Job's body, covering him with painful boils. Job, puzzled by what has happened to him, refuses to blame the Lord for his misfortunes. He receives the visit of four friends, who, in accordance with ancient notions of justice and retribution for evil, attempt to convince Job that he must have done wrong to have merited such a punishment and that he must therefore confess his errors. In the face of all the arguments put forward by his well-meaning but single-minded friends, Job continues to plead his innocence. Finally Job receives the visit of the Lord, who essentially shows Job that it was necessary for him to pass through these trials in order to better appreciate God's mercy. God then restores in abundance everything that Job had lost earlier.

Job in some fashion represents every person and a reader can therefore identify with him as he proceeds through the drama of the story. The first important lesson in the book of Job is that God is not the cause of the misfortunes that befall Job. God permits Satan to tempt Job but it is not God himself who directly causes Job to suffer. This is an important principle: God is good, "in Him is no darkness at all", says saint John (1 Jn 1:5). Evil has come into the world as a result of the God's goodness in granting liberty, freedom of choice, to His rational creatures, angels and human beings. Evil has its origin in the rejection of God, symbolised in the story of Job by Satan. It is Satan, motivated by jealousy and hatred of good, who is the cause of Job's misfortunes: evil cannot have its origin in God. As the story makes clear, however, God does impose limits on the evil that Satan can produce. In the first instance, God refuses to allow Satan to touch Job's body, and in the second instance, to take Job's life (cf. Jb 1:12; 2:6). Job does consider that somehow God is behind his misfortunes (cf. Jb 3), but despite the depths of Job's misery, he refuses to cast doubt on God's justice and goodness (cf. Jb 1:22; 2:10). Instead, Job reflects that everything that he had came from God and it lies within God's justice to take away what He has freely given. Saint Paul has a similar line of thought when he asks: "What do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Co 4:7). Job utters some of the finest lines of the Bible on this subject: "Naked came I from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Jb 1:21).

The second lesson of the Book of Job is that Job's misfortunes are not a punishment for his personal sins or failings. The lengthy middle section of the Book of Job (chapters 3-37) is a dialogue between Job and his friends on this question. Job's friends approach the issue on the basis of a rationale dominant, but not exclusively so, in the Old Testament, according to which God rewards the just in this world and punishes those who do evil. Job's friends represent a pretentious, rigid and sterile moralism which is incapable of providing Job with a satisfactory explanation of his suffering and even more incapable of uplifting Job so that he may actually benefit from his woes. The same problem is still before us, as we see good persons suffer

unjustly, while those who do wrong appear to escape the consequences of their acts. The resolution of this seeming dilemma comes only in Christ and in Christian faith in both the justness and the goodness of God, whatever may appear to the contrary.

To return to Job's friends, in the face of Job's continued protests of his innocence, they are convinced that that therefore God must have committed an injustice in punishing Job without cause; thus they remain in the same line of thinking, that there is a necessary relationship between goodness and reward and evil and punishment. Job himself berates his friends for daring to associate God with evil (Jb 17,7) and Job's fourth friend, Elihu, also criticizes the others for daring to associate God with wickedness (cf. Jb 34), all the while berating Job for his self-righteousness and maintaining that Job must indeed have done wrong (cf. Jb 35). Elihu speaks at length about God's justice, goodness and majesty (cf. Jb 34; 36; 37). At the end of the story, God reveals His omnipotence to Job and God himself expresses his anger towards Job's friends for not having spoken truthfully of him (Jb 42,7).

Thus it is clear from the Book of Job that there is no necessary connection between a person's misfortunes and his personal failings; although in some cases there may well be such a link, there is no inherent causality.

Another important lesson is Job's humility. Job's personal attitude in the dialogue with his friends is significant. While proclaiming his innocence, he is prepared to recognize that he may have committed errors: "Teach me and I will hold my tongue; cause me to understand wherein I have erred" (Jb 6:24). Job undermines the simple logic of his friends by pointing out, as do other passages of the Old Testament (for example Ps 72:3-12; Jr 12:1; Ml 3:15), that many of those who do evil prosper in this world (cf. Jb 21:7-18). Towards the end of the narrative, Job recognizes the limits of a strictly rational approach to the world and specifically to suffering, as represented by his friends.

One can, in fact, turn the reasoning of Job's friends on its head: it is because Job is just and good that he suffers, since he has aroused Satan's jealousy. Satan is hoping that Job will stumble and will commit blasphemy because of his suffering. Job's tribulations can thus be seen as so many temptations – as so many "attempts" or trials to make him falter in his faithfulness to God. Satan hopes that Job will accuse God as being the author of his troubles, will revolt against Him and will ultimately reject Him. In this sense, the remarks of Job's wife (Jb 2:9) become a caricature of these temptations – the temptations that we all face in suffering: to lose patience; to yield to anger in an attempt to flee from suffering; to accuse and curse God; to commit suicide. The final exclamation of Job's wife – "Curse God and die!" – expresses the devil's ultimate goal: both the physical death of the suffering person and his or her spiritual death, for the devil is the instigator and ruler of death.

But Job remains faithful until the end: "My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned aside; I have not departed from the commandment of His lips" (Jb 11-12), says Job to his friends. The commentary on Job's reactions to his misfortunes, before the arrival of his friends, confirms his fidelity: "In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong" (Jb 1:22). Job opposes the temptations brought about by his suffering with a firm patience amidst the trials, an unshakable faith in God, and boundless hope in God's mercy. Job's perseverance in the face of adversity is exceptional: he constantly calls upon the Lord to reveal the meaning of his suffering (cf. Jb 23:3-7); he unceasingly seeks God (Jb 23:9-12), without yet finding Him, but ever confident that God will reveal Himself (cf. Jb 19:25-27). In the light of the New Testament, the One whom Job is seeking is in effect Christ, who will bring the answer that Job, as a symbol of humanity, is seeking: by His Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection, Christ has

overcome death, Satan's kingdom, and provided a spiritual response to the question of the meaning of suffering.

Going beyond the simplistic and legalistic approach of his friends to suffering, in the face of God's revelation of Job's knowledge and power, Job recognizes the greatness of God, and despite his innocence, Job accepts his need for repentance, because he has been presumptuous and self-satisfied; he thought that God "owed him something" because he was just. Job does have a weakness: a certain smugness, self-satisfaction as a "just" person. He says, for example: "I delivered the poor who cried out, the fatherless and the one who had no helper... I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban" (Jb 29:12;14). By showing Job just how inconsequential he really is in the universe, God shows Job that nothing is due to him. All is a free gift and it is in the light of Job's recognition of this that God restores and doubles Job's external wealth, symbol of his renewed and expanded inner treasure. Job replies to God towards the end of the book: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Jb 42:2-6).

As the figure of the suffering just one, Job prefigures Christ, the totally Just One who suffers in a completely unjust fashion all human sufferings, to the death on the Cross. This injustice is explicitly highlighted in the statement of one of the criminals crucified with Jesus: "We indeed justly [are condemned], for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this Man has done nothing wrong" (Lk 23:40). Job's unshakable patience, faith and hope in the midst of his suffering also announces and prefigures Christ's own attitude during his Passion.

Early Church Fathers, like many commentators since, saw in Job a forerunner of the Gospel and the evangelical way of life, a model for the Christian and for holiness; Job prefigures the Christian in his attitude towards suffering. John Chrysostom sees the Book of Job as an inspiration for patience for those struck by affliction, even those who are the most pious, so that they will not be scandalised by affliction but will see the benefits of patience, since God will reward them (*Synopsis of the Book of Job*). Chrysostom praises Job for his "truly Evangelical behaviour" in making his wealth available for the poor. God permits Job to suffer all sorts of calamities, so that his virtues may appear all the more evident (*On Divine Providence*). Gregory of Nazianze refers to Job as an example of holiness that it is possible to achieve as a result of suffering (*Discourse 24, 34*).

Job in fact comes to see his suffering in a spiritual context, as an occasion for spiritual growth. This is not to say that suffering should be actively sought, but when it comes, we should greet it with the same magnanimity as something good: "Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" asks Job (Jb 2:10). Looking beyond the temporal to the eternal, the eyes of the soul ever fixed on the Lord: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope... With the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption" (Ps 130:5;7).



## SUFFERING ACCORDING TO JOHN PAUL II

by Dr Christophe Potworowski  
(Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops)

My purpose in this paper is quite modest, namely to present in summary fashion the contents of John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, published on February 11, 1984. The very title of the Letter, on "Salvific suffering", signals the orientation of the document. The first line cites Col 1:24: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church". (1, numbers in parentheses refer to the document). Suffering is seen as a mystery whose meaning is found in Christ's redemption. An ambitious and lofty objective, yet John Paul is quick to point out that Paul's insight into the meaning of suffering comes at "the end of a long road", it comes as a "final discovery," but is still "valid for others." Still, we will need to ask whether this works in actually giving meaning to the experience of suffering, and how the experience of suffering is illuminated by this meaning.

The decision to look at suffering under the light of redemption, that is under its salvific meaning, is partially derived from the fact that this was the Year of Redemption in the Catholic Church. Upon reflection, however, it becomes clear that for a Christian, no other standpoint is possible.

John Paul frequently cites *Gaudium et spes* 22 in his writings. This was first done in *Redemptor Hominis*, his first encyclical. The present letter is no exception. The Conclusion of letter contains the following: "...only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. In fact..., Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of mystery of the father and his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and makes his supreme calling clear." If we are looking for a hermeneutical key to the document, it is to be found here. There is no purely anthropological viewpoint in John Paul, and the letter on suffering confirms this: "This is the meaning of suffering, which is truly supernatural and at the same time human. It is *supernatural* because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply *human*, because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission." (31) But, as with Paul's statement in *Colossians*, this is the end point of a long journey and the discovery of one's mission and vocation with regard to suffering and its role in human life can be quite dramatic.

Suffering, for John Paul, manifests in its own way human transcendence, specifically, we are called, even "destined", in suffering to go beyond ourselves. Such is the human mystery (see 2).

Inevitably, when attempting any sort of description of suffering, one comes up against evil. As opposed to the Old Testament, where suffering and evil are identified with each other and where there is no specific word in the vocabulary to indicate suffering, in the New Testament "suffering is no longer identifiable with (objective) evil, but expresses a situation in which man experiences evil and in doing so becomes the subject of suffering." (7) In this sense, the question of evil and the question of suffering are related. Contrary to certain cultural traditions, Christianity proclaims the good of existence. When we suffer, it is on account of evil "which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good." He goes on: "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. Thus, in the Christian view, the reality of suffering is explained through evil, which always, in some way, refers to a good." (7)

Notable also, is John Paul's inclusion of a larger category, namely the "world" of suffering. Although existing in "dispersion", there is a interhuman and social dimension to suffering, creating, as it were, its own solidarity, and thus presenting a particular challenge to ecclesial communion and solidarity. (8)

The basic form of the question that arises from suffering is *why?*: "It is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning." (9) This question determines suffering as human suffering. The question is important and inescapable. If the very existence of the world points to a presence that has created it, evil and suffering can "obscure this image" and in fact lead someone to deny God.

The Book of Job, in a dramatic fashion, shows that "it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment." (11) The question of the meaning of suffering cannot be adequately answered by the moral order or that of justice.

Still in the Old Testament, there is thread that speaks of suffering induced by punishment, whose goal is not only to repay evil, but to create "the possibility of rebuilding goodness in the subject who suffers." (12) This pedagogical function of suffering is difficult to understand, especially as it may lead to false justifications and abuses. Still, it is present in the biblical account of the people of God. A "full" answer to the question about the meaning of suffering comes only with a consideration of the revelation of divine love, because here lies "the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists," and therefore "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." (13)

### **Jesus Christ and Suffering**

The focus here is of course on Christ's work of salvation, his soteriology. Salvation is first of all liberation from evil and thus closely bound up with suffering. The question for us is concretely how suffering is conquered through salvation.

The heart of the work of salvation is found in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

According to the words spoken to Nicodemus, God gives his Son to "the world" to free man from evil, which bears within itself the definitive and absolute perspective on suffering. At the same time, the very *word "gives"* ("gave") indicates that this liberation must be achieved by the only-begotten Son through his own suffering. And in this, love is manifested, the infinite love both of that only-begotten Son and of the Father who for this reason "gives" his Son. This is love for man, love for the "world": it is salvific love. (14)

John Paul stresses that we find ourselves here faced "a completely new dimension of our theme," one that refers to suffering "in its fundamental and definitive meaning." This "definitive" meaning locates suffering as the loss of eternal life. The opposite of salvation is not only temporal suffering, or any other kind of suffering, but the loss of eternal life. But Christ's work also affects the toil and suffering undergone in this world that is in its temporal and historical dimensions. This redemptive work strikes at the transcendental root of evil by conquering sin and death.

By his salvific work, the only-begotten Son liberates man from sin and death. First of all he *blots out* from human history *the dominion of sin*, which took root under the influence of the evil Spirit, beginning with Original Sin, and then he gives man the possibility of living in Sanctifying

Grace. In the wake of his victory over sin, he also takes away the dominion of *death*, by his Resurrection beginning the process of the future resurrection of the body. Both are essential conditions of "eternal life", that is of man's definitive happiness in union with God; this means, for the saved, that in the eschatological perspective suffering is totally blotted out. (15)

As a result of this work, the human person can now live in hope of eternal life. Suffering in this world is not abolished, but a new light is thrown on the experience of suffering, the light of salvation. Such is the Good News, the truth which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus.

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 in which man shares. (15)

Christ draws close to human suffering in all its forms throughout his life, and, in a dramatic and heightened fashion, in the passion, by taking this suffering upon his very self. (16) The work of redemption is accomplished precisely by this activity which culminates in the Cross. This is the reason for reproving Peter and his suggestion of avoiding the suffering. Christ is fully conscious of this mission he has received from the Father: "Christ goes toward his own suffering, aware of its saving power; he goes forward in obedience to the Father, but primarily he is *united to the Father in this love* with which he has loved the world and man in the world." (16)

With this suffering, innocent and voluntarily accepted, Christ not only accepts the human question about the meaning of suffering, but he also carries the answer, "the greatest possible answer to this question." The question and the answer are carried not only by his teaching but by the word of the Cross (cf. 1Cor 1:18) This word point to "the truth of love through the truth of suffering." (18)

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: *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 (cf. Jn 7:37f). In it 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. (18)

### **Sharers in the Suffering of Christ**

The Passion of Christ causes all human suffering to be seen differently. Job already foresaw this when he said: "I know that my Redeemer lives..." Concretely, The horizon of human suffering is now the Passion,

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 the Redemption*. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ. (19)

How does this “sharing” occur? Because the suffering borne by Christ is the suffering of this world, we can by faith, recognize our own suffering in the suffering of Christ, but now within a redemptive meaning, that is, within the mission carried out by the Son. This mission is so to speak open for sharing: “Man, discovering through faith the redemptive suffering of Christ, also discovers in it his own sufferings; he *rediscovers them, through faith*, enriched with a new content and new meaning.” (20) The key element in this new content is the linking of suffering and love. Just as Christ, in emptying himself to the point of Death, fulfilled the will of the Father and his mission, so too by sharing in the sufferings of Christ we can discover and fulfill our mission, our destiny. In this sense, the glorification by the Father of the Son on the Cross is mirrored in human suffering and is the expression of human spiritual greatness: “This glory must be acknowledged not only in the martyrs for the faith but in many others also who, at times, even without belief in Christ, suffer and give their lives for the truth and for a just cause. In the sufferings of all of these people the great dignity of man is strikingly confirmed.” (22)

Human suffering is given meaning. It is not eliminated, but its seeming meaninglessness, the origin of the “why,” is transformed into the redemptive work of Christ. “In such a concept, *to suffer* means to become particularly *susceptible*, particularly *open to the working of the salvific powers of God*, offered to humanity in Christ.” (23) This was the intention of Paul when he wrote about completing what was lacking in the suffering of Christ (24, cf. 1Cor 6:15).

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. In so far 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. (24)

Even though the Redemption was accomplished once and for all, it lives on in human history, it lives on as the Body of Christ, the Church.

### **The Gospel of Suffering**

In this section of the letter, John Paul focuses on the witnesses of the suffering of Christ, but in the Gospel, in the first generation of Christians, and throughout human history. He calls this witness the Gospel of suffering. The term does not merely point to the presence of suffering in the Gospel, but more significantly to “the revelation *of the salvific power and salvific significance* of suffering in Christ's messianic mission and, subsequently, in the mission and vocation of the Church.” (25) This is human suffering for Christ, “for my sake.” In sharing the suffering of Christ, one not only receives the meaning of this suffering, but one discovers one's true vacationland destiny. It is not only one's suffering which is transformed, but one's whole life. One becomes a new person. One discovers a new dimension.

This discovery is a particular confirmation of the spiritual greatness which in man surpasses the body in a way that is completely beyond compare. 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, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal.(26)

It is difficult not to see this paragraph as applying to John Paul himself. In the last months of his life, with his agony visible to the world, he was penning another chapter in this Gospel of suffering. (cf. Denise Bombardier, “L'agonie en direct,” *Le Devoir* 2005).

**The Good Samaritan**

The last section of the letter concerns the response to suffering. Taking a cue from the parable, John Paul looks at the function and role of neighbour. Suffering is present in the world also to elicit a gift of self: “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.” (30)

## SUFFERING AND HOPE: ANGLICAN PERSPECTIVES

by Rev. Dr. Ian Ritchie  
(Anglican Church of Canada)

More than that, 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. (Romans 5:3-5)

The Christian church arose in England in ancient times, and a date of 304 CE. is given for its first martyr, St. Alban. But the theological tradition engendered in England, which later acquired the name "Anglican", was born of a theological compromise between medieval Catholicism and the voices of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. As such, it does not have a single voice on theological issues, but rather a comprehensive ethos that embraces a wide diversity of viewpoints. Nevertheless, there are voices that mark that ethos, which may be identified here.

In the western world of the 21st century, Anglicans on the average, tend to be in the most comfortable of economic brackets, and their experience of suffering is not, as a general tendency, as deep or widespread as it was in the first century world in which St. Paul wrote his epistles, or in the fourth when St. Alban gave his life for the faith. But there are times and places when we all experience suffering as individuals, and all of us need hope at all times.

The Anglican Divine John Donne, in the early 17th century wrote on suffering and hope in many poems. In his Hymn to God my God in my Sickness<sup>1</sup> he concludes with the line: "Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down." This perspective reflects a view that was common in Donne's time, that God causes suffering in order to raise up the person, that a greater good may come of it. That greater good cannot always be seen at the time, but is only experienced through trust in God.

George Herbert (1593- 1633) a much beloved Anglican priest and leading metaphysical poet, wrote many poems that reflected on the meaning of suffering and affliction. In the second half of Easter Wings, he writes:

My tender age in sorrow did begin:  
And still with sicknesses and shame  
Thou did so punish sin,  
That I became  
Most thin.  
With thee  
Let me combine,  
And feel this day thy victory:  
For, if I imp my wing on thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dated 1631, eight days before Donne's death, according to Izaak Walton, Donne's first biographer.

Here, Herbert holds his sicknesses and shame to be clearly a punishment for sin, but if his wings can be grafted onto God's wings, then "Affliction shall advance the flight in me." This is the insight George Herbert's suffering can contribute to the mystery of suffering and hope. Not the suffering in itself, but the impulse to throw oneself upon God produces a higher flight than could be achieved in any other way.

William Wilberforce, the leader of England's fight to abolish the slave trade from the 1770s to the 1810s, went through many years of discouraging results in this thirty year battle. In some years the abolition movement actually seemed to be losing ground. But he acquired spiritual strength to face the discouragement by daily prayer. He found that suffering can indeed lead to hope. St. Paul tells us "endurance produces character," which in turn produces hope.

St. Alban established a tradition of martyrdom that is followed up to the present day, though today it is chiefly in the churches of the global south where martyrdom is most commonly found. The Uganda martyrs of the 19th century, Bishop Janani Luwum, and countless martyrs in Sudan over the past thirty years set an example of sacrificial love that triumphs over suffering. Many of them have experienced persecution for their Christian beliefs, and grew in their ability to endure - we should marvel at the mystery of faith which produces such endurance.

St. Paul tells us that suffering produces endurance, but not all people who suffer tell us that its effect was to produce endurance. For some, it has resulted in a sense of defeat, powerlessness, and alienation. We must always be aware of this crushing aspect of suffering, and the production of character compels our attempts to help those who suffer.

That suffering can produce hope in some, while it produces defeat in others is a mystery we probably can never understand. But Paul suggests that for those in whom it produces hope, this happens because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."

In 1940 Anglican writer C. S. Lewis authored *The Problem of Pain*. This offering reflected, for the educated lay person, a view of pain that was found compelling by many readers of all denominations in the mid 20th century, and is still read by many today. However, Lewis himself later came to reject this piece as inadequate.

The mood of the (post)modern age seems generally inimical to selfless action. In the midst of this, the church is called to swim against the flow. Yet often those who immerse themselves in compassionate action eventually experience "burn out" from the unrelieved fatigue of it. There are some whose journey has taught us lessons in how to persevere: amongst those who are highly respected for their dedication in the fight against the suffering caused by injustice, the name of Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu stands out.

The Anglican Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa, explores the relationship between forgiveness and release from the long term legacy of suffering, in his work *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Tutu says:

There had been so many moments in the past, during the dark days of apartheid's vicious awfulness, when we had preached, "This is God's world and God is in charge!" Sometimes, when evil seemed to be on the rampage and about to overwhelm goodness, one had held on to this article of faith by the skin of one's teeth. It was a kind of theological whistling in the dark and one was frequently tempted to whisper in God's ear, "For goodness' sake, why don't You make it more obvious that *You are* in charge?" (4).

Desmond Tutu sees hope being born out of suffering. He concludes his book saying: "We [South Africans] were a hopeless case if ever there was one. God intends that others might look at us and take courage.... No problem anywhere can ever again be considered to be intractable. There is hope for you too." (282).

Also from South Africa comes the response of current Primate Njongkulu Ndungane. In response to the suffering of AIDS, Ndungane says<sup>2</sup>: "AIDS is not God's punishment for the wicked...AIDS is a disease." This quote is what scrolls across the home page of the new Anglican Church HIV & AIDS web site, launched on 10 Feb. 2005. The statement implies that we no longer assume that a disease is a punishment from God. That assumption may be a bit over generalized, but it is probably an accurate reflection of where a significant number of Anglicans currently are today, especially in the western world.

The suffering caused by natural disasters has been on the minds and hearts of many since Dec. 26th, 2004. Following the tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean, the Bishop of Norwich, confessed that a week before he would not have known what a tsunami was. He said: "We all now understand the terrifying power of a wall of water 30 feet or more high travelling at several hundred miles an hour. Words seem cheap when the cost of lives has been so expensive... God has given us an Earth that lives and moves. It is not inert, it is alive - that is why we can live. Last week's events were the starkest possible reminder that what gives life also takes it away."

"As scientists tell us, randomness is something that is built into the fabric of creation and is the mainspring of the Earth's capacity to change itself and develop," he said. "This reality is something each generation has to come to terms with as we try to make sense of life... God does not prevent suffering but instead promises to redeem it. And it is this promise that we see fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

He continued: "In response to the question 'Where is God in all this?' I have two things to say... that God is the crucified one, the one who is in the midst of the pain not separate from it, secondly, God is to be found in the hands of those who are helping to bury the dead, to bring clean water to the living, to administer medicine to the ill and counsel to those in darkness. This is the faith of the church."<sup>3</sup>

Anglican Bishop of Durham N. T. Wright said there is a sense of a very, strange, dark, presence of God, being at the heart of the storm, not to make the world all right for those who happen to say a prayer at the right moment, but to be with us in the mess. "That is precisely what the Gospel writers are getting at when they write of Christ on the cross crying out: 'Why have you forsaken me?' It is the church's job to be there in prayer in order that God himself will be there too. God himself is groaning at the heart of that agony."<sup>4</sup>

The Anglican Church of Canada's Primate, Andrew Hutchison's reflections on the suffering caused by the tsunami is in a similar vein and equally helpful. In a webcast Hutchison said:<sup>5</sup> "God is in the glimmer of hope for the future of humanity seen through the overwhelming response to the victims from all over the world...the hope that arises from the response to the

---

<sup>2</sup> In Anglican Communion News Service press release (ACNS 308) 09-February-2005 - *Anglican Church launches new HIV/AIDS web site.*

<sup>3</sup> The Bishop of Norwich, quoted in David Virtue *TSUNAMI, NATURAL EVIL AND A GOD OF LOVE* Commentary, *Virtuosity Online*, Fri, 7 Jan 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop N.T. Wright, quoted in David Virtue *TSUNAMI, NATURAL EVIL AND A GOD OF LOVE* Commentary, *Virtuosity Online*, Fri, 7 Jan 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Toronto, Jan. 19, 2005 -- Where is God when 150,000 people lose their lives in a natural disaster? [www.anglican.ca/webcast/](http://www.anglican.ca/webcast/)



tsunami is that the people of the world could come together in a similar way to address other preventable disasters such as AIDS and genocide.”

In this response, Hope is produced not in the immediate suffering itself, but in the call to great response that it can and did invoke. And then, going beyond that specific response, that it would give us further hope that an even more widespread compassionate response to all suffering might also come from the global community, including also the suffering of AIDS, to which the world has otherwise been slow to react. If that could be the result, then it may be possible that the tsunami will have reduced the amount of long term suffering and pain in the world more than anyone could have asked or imagined.

If that result arrives, then it would be a live demonstration of the truth expressed in the doxology concluding the Book of Alternative Services Eucharistic liturgy: “Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”

(Revision Date: October 4, 2005)

\* \* \* \* \*

## APPENDIX

I include the following piece from journalist David Virtue, which catalogues a wide variety of responses to the suffering following the tsunami in the Indian Ocean. I advise great caution in regard to his quotation of Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, as it appears his bias against the Archbishop may colour his reading of the text. Further, David Virtue’s accuracy and general reliability has very much been called into question on a number of occasions. There are a number of errors in the first two pages of this text. This having been said, the later quotations may be taken as helpful.

Ian Ritchie.

\*\*\*\*\*

Date: Fri, 7 Jan 2005 02:29:36 +0000

From: David Virtue <DVirtue236@AOL.COM>

Subject: **TSUNAMI, NATURAL EVIL AND A GOD OF LOVE**

Commentary By David W. Virtue

"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will also perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem. I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish." (Luke 13: 1-3)

Natural evil, unlike moral evil, genocide and terror remains one of the most intractable of human problems that defy simple solutions or pat answers.

It is not in the same category as when Edmund Burke wrote so succinctly, "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing", or Albert Einstein's famous statement, "the world is too dangerous to live in - not because of people who do evil, but because of people who sit and let it happen."

No one did evil on December 29th 2004. No one just sat back and let it happen as in the Sudan or Rwanda. A geological kink in nature threw up a wave that washed away the lives, hopes, homes and aspirations of tens of thousands of ordinary people because they happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. One commentator described it as the day that shook the earth. On Sunday December 26, 2004, a tsunami wave with the power of more than 1,000 atomic bombs hit coastlines around the Indian Ocean.

Some commentators have said that if people saw the sea receding suddenly they should have known what was coming and high-tailed it to higher ground in anything that moved. Perhaps, but that begs the question. A lot of smart, well educated people died including a lot of Europeans and even more poor died for no better reason than that they were at the wrong place when it hit. The truth is a lot of innocent people died.

It tests one's faith in a personal and loving God, said an anguished VirtueOnline reader. What kind of God lets nature strike such a blow, wrote an Eastern Orthodox theologian. The tsunami is an example of how "mother nature" is a child abuser, wrote another. Those who worship nature (The Great Earth Mother) must contend with the fact that nature cares not in the least for human life or human suffering (or animals either).

On hearing the news the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote in the London Telegraph newspaper that the Asian tsunami disaster should make all Christians question the existence of God. In a deeply personal and candid article, he says "it would be wrong" if faith were not "upset" by the catastrophe which has already claimed more than 150,000 lives. Dr Williams said prayer provided no 'magical solutions' and most of the stock Christian answers to human suffering do not "go very far in helping us, one week on, with the intolerable grief and devastation in front of us".

He also said the paralyzing magnitude of a disaster like this naturally makes us feel more deeply outraged - and also more deeply helpless. He added: "The question, 'How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?' is therefore very much around at the moment, and it would be surprising if it weren't - indeed it would be wrong if it weren't."

Williams later berated the Telegraph for putting a headline on his story suggesting that he was questioning God's existence. Lambeth Palace insisted that Dr Williams had merely hypothesised that it would be wrong for Christians not to question what God was up to.

The Telegraph fired back that if Dr Williams was indeed misrepresented by the newspaper's headline, he himself must accept much of the blame. "His prose is so obscure, his thought processes so hard to follow, that his message is often unclear. If Dr Williams was indeed misrepresented by our sister paper's headline, he himself must accept much of the blame. His prose is so obscure, his thought processes so hard to follow, that his message is often unclear. What, for example, is the lay reader to make of the following passage from his article? "They [believers] have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift; they have learned to be open to a calling or invitation from outside their own resources, a calling to accept God's mercy for themselves and make it real for others; they have learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement and silence." Dr. Williams, they said, was a victim of his own erudition.

Williams's solution was a "passionate engagement with the lives that are left". Indeed they are doing so, and mostly, one should hastily add, from the Christian West. The Hindus said that it was due to Dharma, the Buddhists said it was due to Karma, and the Muslims said that it was Allah's judgment.

Archbishop Yong Ping Chung, (South East Asia) whose own country got hit by the Tsunami had an entirely different reaction. He wrote, "On behalf of the Province of the Anglican Church in South East Asia, I send our heartfelt condolence and deep sympathy to all those who have lost their loved ones. We deeply grieve with them and we share their pain. With such a devastating tragedy we could no longer keep silent. We turn to our sovereign and merciful God in prayers." He then called on all the church's Intercessors in his Province to have a special day of prayer and fasting.

So one archbishop says he doubts God's existence, and another turns to God in prayer. One tries to make sense of it, when there isn't any, and the other casts himself and his people on the mercy of God

The erudite scholarly Anglican Bishop of Durham N. T. Wright said there is a sense of a very, strange, dark, presence of God, being at the heart of the storm, not to make the world all right for those who happen to say a prayer at the right moment, but to be with us in the mess. "That is precisely what the Gospel writers are getting at when they write of Christ on the cross crying out: 'Why have you forsaken me?' It is the church's job to be there in prayer in order that God himself will be there too. God himself is groaning at the heart of that agony."

The evangelical Anglican Dean of Sydney, Phillip Jensen, triggered a debate after saying disasters were part of God's warning that judgment was imminent, while South Sydney Anglican Bishop Robert Forsyth said Jesus Christ used the example of disasters to bring people to God. "Without explaining the disaster, even Jesus drew peoples' attention to let the disasters be a warning to them of their own mortality and their need to be right with God," Bishop Forsyth said. "So at this point the Dean's point is echoing the point of Jesus," he wrote.

The Right Rev Alan Smith, Bishop of Shrewsbury, England told his congregation that the wave was the stuff of nightmares and cited the Old Testament prophet Job, who lost his family in an earthquake.

At Sandringham, the Queen and the royal family prayed for the victims of the disaster and heard the Right Rev Graham James, Bishop of Norwich, confess that a week before he would not have known what a tsunami was: "We all now understand the terrifying power of a wall of water 30 feet or more high travelling at several hundred miles an hour. Words seem cheap when the cost of lives has been so expensive... God has given us an Earth that lives and moves. It is not inert, it is alive - that is why we can live. Last week's events were the starkest possible reminder that what gives life also takes it away."

"As scientists tell us, randomness is something that is built into the fabric of creation and is the mainspring of the Earth's capacity to change itself and develop," he said. "This reality is something each generation has to come to terms with as we try to make sense of life... God does not prevent suffering but instead promises to redeem it. And it is this promise that we see fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

He continued: "In response to the question 'Where is God in all this?' I have two things to say... that God is the crucified one, the one who is in the midst of the pain not separate from it, secondly, God is to be found in the hands of those who are helping to bury the dead, to bring clean water to the living, to administer medicine to the ill and counsel to those in darkness. This is the faith of the church."

Faith helps in times of disaster, said Pope John Paul II from the Vatican. "Faith can be helpful during catastrophes like the Indian Ocean tidal waves by reminding sufferers of God's continued presence. Faith teaches us that even in the most difficult and painful trials, as in the disasters

which struck in these days southeast Asia, God never abandons us." The pontiff has made repeated appeals for assistance for the victims of the tidal waves.

Other Christians stressed God's presence with the suffering; Hindus resigned themselves to fate, while Iqbal Sacranie, the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain said the tsunami "is the will of God almighty. It is this aspect that is beyond us. Allah knows best. None of us is going to live for an indefinite period. Death always takes place but what form it takes is always beyond us. People of faith need to have a very firm belief in God almighty. It is for God's will. It is for the betterment of mankind at large." A British rabbi said Judaism is an attempt not to ask why but then, what should I do? How can I help?

But the origin of natural evil, like moral evil, resides in The Fall. Such horrendous acts of nature did not exist prior to the sin of our first parents, it came as a result. The universe groans and has been in travail since then. The record of Jesus' words seem not to take in unimaginable suffering, he simply calls his followers to repent.

Orthodox Episcopal theologian the Rev. Dr. Ephraim Radner touches a nerve when he writes, "No persons of "faith", who have not themselves been a part of a social conflagration - now well-studied in recent memory, from World War II to Rwanda, with many human and "natural" disasters in between -- dare dismiss the depth of woundedness, sometimes unto mental death, that is bound up with going through and surviving these events. Christmas can indeed seem "bitter", as a priest I know in Haiti wrote us this year, even for believing Christians, who have been through and perhaps are still mired in a place of unrelenting and all-extending loss. We pray, as Christians, that we be spared such a dangerous challenge to our hearts (cf. the Great Litany in the Prayer Book)."

The Rt. Rev. Dr. C. FitzSimons Allison (SC ret.) told VirtueOnline that "natural disasters always provoke questions of God's goodness in the face of excruciating tragedy. It has always been so and disasters will always continue. It has not been given to Christians to dispel the mystery of evil. The cynic in us is tempted to resolve the issue by removing God from all consideration and doing what Job refused to do: curse (consign to oblivion) his own hope. Yet this choice saves no one from the terrible waves of water and leaves us with no hope or meaning beyond the devastation."

"Jesus does not attempt to explain why the tower of Siloam (Lk. 13) fell on those 18 people but he carefully and adamantly denies that it was because they were worse sinners than others in Jerusalem. He acknowledges therefore, that there is innocent suffering but he goes on to say what seems at first unpastoral "...but unless you repent you shall likewise perish."

"Is He saying to us, as we watch scenes of such sudden and unimaginable suffering and death, that unless we repent we shall likewise perish? It is difficult to make sense of the text short of saying "yes" to this question. The key to the sustaining hope in these conditions is Thomas Cranmer's wisdom about repentance, what he called 'renewing the power to love'."

"Leaving God in the arena of such disasters with Jesus' admonition to repent does not resolve the mystery of evil but clearly it does not identify God with tsunamis as in the current pantheism and panentheism. Instead, it affirms a personal love above, beyond and amidst any disaster as we repent, "renewing the power to love."

# TEACHING ON SUFFERING AND HOPE

## IN THE SALVATION ARMY

by Major Kester Trim  
(The Salvation Army)

For the purposes of the discussion it is helpful to notice several changes in the teaching of suffering and hope in The Salvation Army. Examples of the positions taken can be seen in the *Handbook of Doctrine*, which has received revisions at various points in history. In this instance four editions of the handbook illustrate the changing thinking on the topic of suffering and hope.

### ***Handbook of Doctrine, 1923 & 1955.***

These editions of the handbook take a similar approach to the question of human suffering<sup>1</sup>. “Why “, they ask, “would God allow so much suffering and sorrow in the world?”<sup>2</sup> In response two answers are offered. First, sorrow and suffering are usually the outcome of sin:

“*Sin is the root cause of nearly all human misery.* Affliction, poverty, war, death, and other sorrows can be directly or indirectly traced to sin, either in the individual or the race. God has joined sin and suffering together, both in this world and in the world to come. The entry of sin into this world was immediately followed by sorrow, pain, death, and cursing of the ground.”<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, sorrow and pain are permitted for Man’s highest good. God allows suffering as an instrument through which people will be brought to him:

“Through suffering many sinners have been brought to God, many of God’s people have been purified in character and more perfectly fitted to be of service to others. The fact that suffering often fails to bring about these blessed results is due to the fault of man, and in no way proves that such is not God’s purpose.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Handbook of Doctrine, 1969.***

By 1969 there is a substantial shift in the presentation of the question of suffering and hope. Unlike earlier versions of the handbook of doctrine there is no reference in the index. It doesn’t warrant a separate discussion but is considered through the general discussion of the problem of evil:

“As a moral being man possesses a free will which he can assert against the will of God, whose government allows for disobedience and its consequences.”<sup>5</sup>

For the individual who is a faithful believer and encounters suffering there is a special grace:

---

<sup>1</sup> The two *Handbooks* have virtually retained verbatim the same language and approach to the question of suffering. The 1955 edition, however, elaborates the point that responsibility for suffering cannot be “placed upon God”, suggesting that God indeed may be “the greatest sufferer of all”. 1955 edition, page 29.

<sup>2</sup> *The Handbook of Doctrine*, 1923 edition page 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, page 56

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 29

<sup>5</sup> *The Handbook of Doctrine*, 1969, page 36.

“Those who through living in obedience to the law of God’s Kingdom are exposed to opposition and suffering, He regards with special tenderness and enables them to triumph in and over adversity (Ps. 121:7; Rom. 8:32, 37)<sup>6</sup>

### ***Salvation Story: Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine***

This treatment of suffering is the most extensive to date. In contrast to the 1969 edition suffering and hope have regained their place in the index and appear under the doctrinal categories of the nature of God, the Holy Spirit, and anthropologically through the discussion of Full Salvation.<sup>7</sup> Further, the subject is amplified in the companion study guide.<sup>8</sup>

When the nature of God is considered there is an immediate admission that “much suffering appears cruel and pointless and no attempts at rational explanation are satisfactory.”<sup>9</sup> This contrasts earlier presentations that emphasized that there is purpose in suffering, namely to refine character and bring people to salvation.

The Holy Spirit empowers people for mission. He convicts individuals of their sinfulness, and in turn lead them to repentance, faith, regeneration and sanctification. When we are sanctified we are made whole and this wholeness points to the comprehensiveness of Christ’s saving work and the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work.

The Gospels portray Jesus as caring about every dimension of human life:

“... his ministry demonstrated a healing response to human suffering and disease in all its forms. Again and again, the New Testament as a whole records the healing work of the Holy Spirit. The restoration of the covenant required restoration of health in every relationship of human life: spiritual, social, physical.<sup>10</sup>

This way of viewing Christ’s ministry has important significance for the salvationist’s understanding of holiness. Through the saving and sanctifying work of Christ one is made whole. Not that physical health, emotional stability, prosperity, or social adjustment mean that a person is holy. Nor does sickness, emotional instability indicate that a person is sinful. What the salvationist is trying to say in claiming holiness is that one can be whole in all states of life:

“The holy life is then the Spirit-led journey toward wholeness in Christ”<sup>11</sup>

In turn, the holy life leads to mission:

“God sanctifies his people not only that they will be marked by his character, but also in order that the world will be marked by that character. God changes the structures of society through a variety of means, but he changes them as well through the mission of his sanctified people, empowered and gifted by his Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> *Handbook of Doctrine*, 1969 edition, page 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Salvation Story: Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine*, 1998, pp. 29, 32, 33, 42, 57, 93.

<sup>8</sup> *Study Guide to Salvation Story*, 1999, pp. 25 – 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Salvation Story: Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

### **THE SALVATION ARMY: POSITIONAL STATEMENT**

The Salvation Army believes in the sanctity of human life. It considers each person to be of infinite value and each life a gift from God to be cherished, nurtured and redeemed. Human life is sacred because it is made in the image of God and has an eternal destiny (Genesis 1:27). Sacredness is not conferred, nor can it be taken away by human agreement.

All persons, including those who are physically or mentally impaired, possess God-given humanhood.

Euthanasia is a deliberate act causing the intentional death of a person in order to relieve that person's suffering. Withholding or withdrawing medical treatment that only prolongs the dying process is not euthanasia. Using drugs to adequately control the pain of a dying person, even if the secondary effect may result in shortened life is not euthanasia. To respect a competent adult's refusal of treatment or request to discontinue treatment is not euthanasia.

Assisted suicide is defined as directly helping or encouraging someone to end his/her own life. Therefore, The Salvation Army believes that euthanasia and assisted suicide undermine human dignity and are morally wrong regardless of age or disability.

The Christian faith puts death into proper perspective as the transition from earthly life to eternal life (2 Timothy 4:6-8). It is appropriate to make suitable preparation for death, especially spiritual preparation, and to inform loved ones and caregivers about one's wishes. Advance health care directives, which take effect when one is no longer able to make decisions about one's own medical care, can provide valuable assistance. However, the possibility does exist that subtle pressure will be placed on the sick, the elderly, the disabled and the dying to act contrary to their own wishes in order not to become a burden.

The Salvation Army believes it is important to communicate by word and deed to the sick, the elderly and the dying that they are worthy of respect, they are loved, and that they will not be abandoned.

Approved by International Headquarters, March 1999

### **THE SALVATION ARMY: POSITIONAL STATEMENT**

The Christian faith puts death into proper perspective as the transition from earthly life to life eternal. In this context, The Salvation Army believes that man does not have the right to death by his own decision, whether procured by his own act or by the commissioning of another person to secure it.

The common experience of Christians throughout the ages has been that the grace of God sustains heart and mind to the end. To many, the end of life is clouded by pain and impaired judgment, and while we believe that it is right to use all and any medical treatment to control pain, experience denies the rightness of legalising the deliberate termination of life by a doctor, authorised by a statement signed by the patient while in health. Such euthanasia threatens to debase the function of doctors and impairs the confidence of their patients.

As an extension of this subject, The Salvation Army accepts that a patient's next of kin is justified in agreeing to medical advice to remove life support systems where brain death has occurred.

Approved by International Headquarters, 1992.

### **THE SALVATION ARMY: POSITIONAL STATEMENT**

The Christian faith puts death into proper perspective as the transition from earthly life to life eternal. In this context, The Salvation Army believes that man does not have the right to death by his own decision, whether procured by his own act or by the commissioning of another person to secure it.

The common experience of Christians throughout the ages has been that the grace of God sustains heart and mind to the end. To many, the end of life is clouded by pain and impaired judgment, and while we believe that it is right to use all and any medical treatment to control pain, experience denies the rightness of legalising the deliberate termination of life by a doctor, authorised by a statement signed by the patient while in health. Such euthanasia threatens to debase the function of doctors and impairs the confidence of their patients.

As an extension of this subject, The Salvation Army accepts that a patient's next of kin is justified in agreeing to medical advice to remove life support systems where brain death has occurred.

Approved by International Headquarters, 1980.

### **THE SALVATION ARMY: POSITIONAL STATEMENT**

Modern medicine allows people to survive illness and injuries which would previously have proved fatal, though possibly with long-term or permanent disability and impaired quality of life. This could be as a direct result of the initial pathology or as a consequence of side effects of the treatment given.

Since the Bible displays so clearly that every person is important to God, The Salvation Army, like other Christian communities, places great value on the life of all people. For this reason Salvationists oppose actively taking or shortening human life through rational choice, with or without medical assistance.

In non-emergency situations medical workers have a responsibility to ensure that patients clearly understand the likely benefits of any treatment offered and the possible risk or cost to quality of life. This would allow patients, or their legally designated representative, to make informed decisions regarding their management. Refusal to undergo treatment is not the same as deliberately sanctioning death.

Full palliative care should be available to those with a terminal illness. Optimal pain control and the overall comfort of the individual should be the goals, even though this could shorten life. The Salvation Army accepts that where brain death, as defined by the relevant authorities, has already occurred, the next of kin is justified in agreeing with medical advice to terminate life support systems.



Guidelines for Salvationists available on request.

## **THE SALVATION ARMY: POSITIONAL STATEMENT**

### **Euthanasia, Assisted Suicide and Advance Health Care Directives**

Human life is a sacred gift from God. The Salvation Army believes, as a consequence, that euthanasia and assisted suicide are morally wrong. The Christian faith puts death into its proper perspective as the transition from earthly life to life eternal. It is appropriate to make suitable preparation for death, especially spiritual preparation, and to inform loved ones and caregivers about one's wishes.

Euthanasia undermines, rather than enhances, human dignity. "Euthanasia" is defined as a deliberate act undertaken by one person with the intention of ending the life of another person, intended to relieve that other person's suffering, where that act is the cause of death. Euthanasia does not include withholding or withdrawing medical treatment which serves only to prolong the dying process where the burden of the treatment on the dying person outweighs its benefit. Euthanasia does not include the proper medical use of pain controlling drugs for a dying person, even if the secondary effect may be to shorten life. Nor is it euthanasia to respect a competent adult's refusal of treatment or request to discontinue treatment.

Assisted suicide undermines, rather than enhances, human dignity. "Assisted suicide" is defined as counselling, abetting, aiding or otherwise assisting someone with the intention of ending the life of the person being assisted.

Advance health care directives which take effect when one is no longer able to make decisions about one's own medical care can provide valuable assistance to loved ones and caregivers. However, the possibility does exist that subtle pressure will be placed on the sick, the elderly, the disabled and the dying to act contrary to their true interests and wishes in order not to become an unwanted burden. It is important to communicate by word and deed that all persons are worthy of respect, that they are loved and that they will not be abandoned.

Palliative care, as a program of active, compassionate care provided to patients and their families when the hope for cure is no longer medically possible, is promoted by The Salvation Army.

Approved by International Headquarters, 1997.

# **SUFFERING AND HOPE:**

## **A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE**

**by Rev. Beth Wagschal  
(Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada)**

Martin Luther identified 7 marks or signs by which the Church is “externally recognized.” These 7 signs include: Holy Scripture, Baptism, Holy Communion, Confession, Ministry, Worship, and the Cross or Suffering. Suffering is part of the whole Christian life; it is normal and inevitable. Luther states in his Commentary on Romans, (chapter 5: 1-5), that if you are unwilling to suffer tribulation (the cross of Christ), then you are not a Christian. How foreign this understanding is to us in our culture and time when suffering is hidden, denied, and resisted.

What is the purpose of suffering in life? Luther thought that afflictions and suffering could be punishment for past deeds. But even in this, the suffering was for human benefit and to glorify God. A key purpose in suffering is so “that God’s works might be revealed” as Jesus indicated in the case of the man born blind. (John 9:2.) Luther thought that in suffering a person learns what kind of a person he or she is; the traits one has (good or bad) become stronger. So, self-knowledge comes as a result of suffering.

Suffering as a testing or proving leads to the highest goal of suffering: to teach us to lean on God completely and not on ourselves or on the gifts of life. In this way we come to love God solely for God, not for the gifts that God gives. Without this sort of testing that suffering brings, “hope would founder, indeed it would no longer be hope, but presumptuousness; in fact, it would be worse, for it would be the enjoyment of the creature instead of the Creator.” Here Luther weaves his pivotal theological understanding of salvation not by works but by grace through faith. Suffering in effect prevents us from having confidence in our own works or in our own righteousness. We “hit the wall” so to speak. When we suffer, we can only live by the grace of God through faith. In this way, suffering is even seen as part of God’s grace. Luther says, in his Commentary on Romans, that for those not in the grace of suffering, “suffering works impatience, and impatience rejection, and rejection despair, and despair eternal confounding.”

It is in Luther’s theology of the cross that the Lutheran contribution to the understanding of suffering and hope is most helpful. The problem is not so much how to get rid of suffering but how to suffer or how to find meaning in suffering. Martin Marty talks about finding a meaning in suffering that corresponds to one’s beliefs about God. The question of the sufferer is: “where is God in my suffering?” The theology of the cross interprets God as hidden in suffering, weakness, lowliness and so connects suffering with God in a way that is congruent with beliefs about God; God is right there in your suffering. In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther emphasizes that “the cross of the powerless Christ” is the way God is shown and how God acts in the world. Christ is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 who suffers for others.

A theology of glory, on the other hand, is a theology that “has an answer for everything.” In terms of illness and suffering a theology of glory would emphasize “a successful outcome;” i.e., extension of life, cure, release from pain, and recovery. In the Lutheran tradition, relief from pain and suffering, healing, and miracle are prayed and worked for, but there is no sense of failure if those outcomes do not happen. Suffering in the theology of the cross is a bridge to faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke about the “secret discipline of suffering” needing to be learned again,

particularly in times in which the culture is overwhelming to the Christian. He sees “human suffering and weakness” as a “sharing in God’s own suffering and weakness in the world.”

So, the theology of the cross identifies the sufferer with God in Christ and in this identification, suffering can open up a process that leads ultimately to hope. Not all suffering naturally leads to hope but rather certain ways of bearing suffering lead to hope. One could look at suffering by means of a threefold schema: suffering can be inherent, imposed, or voluntary. Inherent suffering is suffering that comes to all simply from being alive; e.g., illness, pain, infirmity, dying. Imposed suffering is suffering that is forced on one by outside factors; e.g., abuse, oppression, racism, torture, war, etc. Voluntary suffering is suffering that is taken on willingly for some greater good, or for the life of the world; e.g., the cross of Christ. Voluntary suffering that is given freely, inherent suffering that is offered as part of God’s redemptive work, and imposed suffering that is overcome through justice or truth or goodness are ways that suffering leads to “hope that does not disappoint us.”

In suffering we try to figure out why this is happening to me or to another. We analyze the suffering. What did I do wrong? What can I do now to get rid of this suffering? How will this affect my future? This is focusing on the suffering itself and an attempt, in effect, to save ourselves by our own means. It is to try to work our way “up and out.” The Lutheran understanding of salvation by grace says that God always “comes down” -down from heaven to earth (the incarnation) and down into the weakness and shame of suffering for the life of the world (the cross). God “comes down” into human suffering wherever and however suffering is experienced. It is the knowledge and experience of that presence of God that gives hope.

Revised October 2005

#### Sources Cited and Consulted:

Fryer, Kelly. *Reclaiming the “L” Word*. Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

Luther, Martin. Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*. Ed. Timothy Lull. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989.

*Luther’s Works*. St. Louis: Concordia & Philadelphia: Fortress, v.d.

Commentary on Romans (1515-16), v. 25 (1972)

Church and Ministry III (1539-1545), v. 41 (1966)

Marty, Martin E. *Health and Medicine in the Lutheran Tradition*. New York: Crossroads, 1986.

## THE DOOR OF HOPE

by Fr. Lev Gillet  
 (“A Monk of the Eastern Church”)

*And I will give her her vineyards from thence,  
 and the valley of Achor for a door of hope. (Hosea 2:15)*

As soon as we have spoken the words “Limitless Love”, or rather as soon as we have given a place in our hearts to this supreme reality, we have opened a door. It is the door that leads into the kingdom of liberty and light.

What is the meaning of this “door of hope” of which the prophet Hosea speaks? The beginning of the book of Hosea is a strange but profound and moving parable. The Lord tells the prophet to take a prostitute to wife. Hosea does so. The woman abandons herself to a multitude of lovers. She does not find peace or happiness with them. God takes everything away from her, reducing her to a state of nakedness and dryness: “I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees” (Ho 2:12). Then the woman says, “I shall go and return to my first husband” (Ho 2:7). God sees her change of heart. He pardons her: “Behold, I will allure her... and speak comfortably unto her (Ho 2:14). He restores the vines he had taken away, and transforms the valley of Achor into a door of hope. The importance of this change can be appreciated if we remember that the Hebrew word *achor* means “trouble”. The valley of trouble becomes a door of hope for the forgiven soul.

The inner meaning of the story of Hosea, in its original context, obviously concerns the children of Israel. It relates to the spiritual prostitution and adulteries committed by the Hebrews, their violations of the precepts of Yaveh, their compromises with foreign idols, but it also shows Israel’s repentance and the forgiveness granted by God – the forgiveness granted to the penitent adulteress “as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt” (Ho 2,15).

All this is a direct historical interpretation of the text. But the words that the Spirit spoke by the mouth of Hosea hold infinitely more than this particular meaning. The story of Hosea’s wife is the story of each one of us. To each of us, however unfaithful we may have been to God, the Lord of Love opens the door of hope.

In the term “door of hope” we find the conjunction of two words, two ideas. There is hope and there is the door. These two ideas have much in common; both of them express – the one psychologically, the other graphically – the idea of a threshold, an entrance, an introduction. Let us examine more closely what hope is, and what a door is.

Hope means first of all a period of waiting, of waiting for someone or something. It implies “faith” in a certain kind of coming – in “the coming”. One does not know but one believes. It is a moral certainty, an inner certainty, not a scientific certainty. This waiting is inspired by love. Indeed love is its very foundation. One hopes only for what one loves. Thus hope is not only a matter of waiting. It is waiting permeated by love.

Here we must distinguish between our “hopes” – in the plural – and our “Hope” in the singular. I shall use the plural word for those particular things, those limited things, which we want to see happen, but which often merely signify our egotistical will. In this sense we may hope to recover from an illness, succeed in an enterprise, pass an examination. These are “hopes”. But Hope is something quite different.

Hope is a wish, a desire, a waiting, that has a bearing not merely upon a special object, but upon the whole of our destiny. There is the same difference between hopes and Hope as between

sections of a curve and the curve in its entirety. If we consider only one part of the curve of our life, we may get an impression of failure, defeat, frustration. But we ought to be looking at the whole curve of our existence with a confidence inspired by love. Death itself, a moment of unique importance, is only a moment, a point, on the curve. The curve of our life is not an inverse curve. It is an outward curve, thrown outwards by our Creator towards the divine Limitlessness. We are not, by ourselves, limitless. Nothing created is limitless. But if we have received into ourselves the Love that is without limits, we have already become participants, by grace, of this divine Infinity.

What is the summit of Hope? It is the moment when we think that hope no longer exists, and when nevertheless we refuse to despair. Saint Paul spoke of Abraham “who against hope believed in hope” (Ro 4:18). Here we are touching upon the problem of suffering, so intimately linked with the ideas of Hope and of Limitless Love. I believe that the deepest response to the questions arising from human suffering and the existence of evil, not only human but cosmic, is given to us by the belief in a suffering God, a suffering Love. But you must be quite clear what I mean by this : there is no question of a diminished or defeated God. We are concerned with a victorious God who takes all human suffering on himself in order to surmount it, a God in whom the Passion and the Resurrection co-exist eternally, a God who is no stranger to any of our afflictions, who is indeed more intimately close to them than we ourselves. I wish I had time to reflect with you upon the theme of the suffering God and the supreme Pity.

But this is not the time or the place. I would simply like to remind you of two passages in Holy Scripture. One is about the three children whom King Nebuchadnezzar cast into the burning fiery furnace (and here we rediscover one of the aspects of the Burning Bush): “Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire . . . and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God” (Dn 3:25). And here is the other passage: “Love is strong as death. . . . Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it” (Song 8:6-7).

Hope will cease to exist for those who, after death, see God. Faith and Hope will then pass away, and Love alone will remain. But during our earthly lives, during the time of our journey and our pilgrimage, Hope acts as a stimulant and an impetus to Love. We must stop thinking and speaking about our little individual hopes. Their disappointment is trivial compared to the limitless Hope which, because it springs from Limitless Love, can never be disappointed. Let us instead give ourselves to the power of this great Hope. When a stone is thrown into water the ripples radiate in ever wider and wider circles, and thus it is with Hope. If Hope sinks deep into us, its repercussions radiate through us to infinity.

Everlasting Hope is the hope of the dawn and the brightness of the morning. There is a difference between the way we ourselves count time and the way God counts it. We start our reckoning with the morning, with the joy of the sunrise, and our day proceeds towards the darkness, sadness, tragedy of night. But no less than six times in the first chapter of Genesis (Gn 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31) God is shown as creating days which begin in the evening and progress towards morning and then high noon. This brings us back to the fullness of the light of the Burning Bush and of Limitless Love. Each day of our lives should consist of this progression from limited hopes and from a love threatened by death towards the brightness of the morning and the high noon of Limitless Love.

Now let us return, if you agree, to the book of Hosea, and to our text on the door of hope. You have already seen how Hope is the spontaneous reaction, the first response, to the discovery of Limitless Love. We enter into Limitless Love through the door of hope. This entrance means the beginning of possession, though not yet complete possession (and besides, it is Limitless Love who can possess us; we ourselves cannot be the possessors). And here I want to remind you of a

text in the Book of Revelation, addressed to the Church of Philadelphia: “Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it” (Rev 3:8). These words are spoken to each one of us. Before each of us is opened Hosea’s door of hope, and this is the very same door of which the Apocalypse tells, the door which no man can shut, which gives access to the Kingdom of Love.

What is this door? It is the door of the present opportunity, whatsoever that may be. Glancing back over the whole course of our lives, our chief impression may be of a succession of missed opportunities. Oh, if only I had known! Oh, if I had acted differently in those circumstances! Oh, if it could happen over again! But we cannot live our lives again. Admittedly there have been lost chances. They will not return. But these lost chances are as nothing compared to the new chances God will offer to us – compared to those he offers us at this very moment. And even though I should be given only one more chance before I die to seize a divine opportunity, so long as I do seize it this last-minute fulfilment will compensate for all the previous chances I have missed, will indeed annul them.

It is thus, so it seems to me, that one must understand the gospel parable of the five foolish virgins. They had missed their chance. They had been late: “And the door was shut” (Mt 25:10). How can we reconcile this stern parable with the compassionate saying about the door which is open before us, which no man can shut? The foolish virgins (and we ourselves, how often!) had been asleep, had left their lamps without oil, had missed the coming of the Bridegroom, had found themselves outside a closed door. Nevertheless, later on, new opportunities may have presented themselves to the foolish virgins, and to us God is offering them constantly.

Every day, at every moment, the door of hope opens before us. The resulting opportunity is different for each one of us. It may be that the door opens onto some exceptional task for which God has chosen us. But usually the opportunity or possibility brought to us by the present moment is not something spectacular and sensational. The door opens before us not so that we may do extraordinary deeds, but so that we may do the most ordinary things in an extraordinary way, thereby imparting to these ordinary things the temperature and the flame of the Burning Bush and the Love without Limits.

The door is about to open before me now. It is now – never tomorrow – that I must go through it. Perhaps the door appears to be shut. But what a lamentable mistake to sit in front of it, merely looking at it, waiting for someone else to come and open it for me! I have only to push gently (the beginning of an effort, or at least an intention, is necessary on my own part) and it will open of itself. What am I saying? I need only advance towards it, and already it is opening of its own accord, like the automatic doors at an airport.

We must remind ourselves, however, that the door of hope is no more than an approach to Limitless Love. Participation in this same Love, in eternal life, is something quite different. There is a parallel here with engagement and marriage. The betrothal coincides in meaning with the door of hope. The ring is already placed on the finger of the betrothed. It is a time of joy. But Limitless Love calls us, from henceforth, to a closer union.

This brings us back once more to the prophet Hosea: “I will give her ... the valley of Achor for a door of hope, and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be at that day ... that thou shalt call me Ishi, and shalt call me no more Baali” (Ho 2:15-16). *Baali* means “my master”, *Ishi* means “my husband”. From the moment when we pass through the door of hope, Limitless Love comes towards us. Is this Love still that immeasurable gift, the promised Love? No, it would be an understatement to say that. This Love is already the Love which is bestowed. Love says to us: “From now on I shah

no longer be thy master. Dost thou not desire me as thy husband? In this world our union will doubtless be very imperfect. Yet it is my own wish that thou shouldst call me 'husband' ”.

From Fr. Lev Gillet, *The Burning Bush*,  
Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, Oxford, 1976;  
Templegate Publishers, Springfield IL, n.d.