

### Why suffering?

This subject was addressed in our late Holy Father Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris – On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* written in 1984. Following is an excerpt of that document:

The word “suffering” seems to be particularly *essential to the nature of man*. It is as deep as man himself. It assumes different dimensions; nevertheless, in whatever form, suffering seems to be, and is, almost inseparable from man's earthly existence.

Man suffers in different ways, ways not always considered by medicine, not even in its most advanced specializations. Suffering is something which is *still wider* than sickness, more complex and at the same time more deeply rooted in humanity itself. A certain idea of this problem comes to us from the distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering. *Physical suffering* is present when the “body is hurting” in some way, whereas *moral suffering* is “pain of the soul”.

It can be said that man suffers whenever *he experiences any kind of evil*. In the vocabulary of the Old Testament, suffering and evil are identified with each other. Thus the reality of suffering prompts the question about the essence of evil: what is evil?

Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good. We could say that man suffers *because of a good* in which he does not share, from which 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.

Considering the world of suffering in its personal and at the same time collective meaning, one cannot fail to notice the fact that this world, at some periods of time and in some eras of human existence, *as it were becomes particularly concentrated*. This happens, for example, in cases of natural disasters, epidemics, catastrophes, famine and war.

Within each form of suffering endured by man, and at the same time at the basis of the whole world of suffering, there inevitably arises *the question: why?* This is a *difficult question*, just as is a question closely akin to it, the question of evil. Why does it exist?

Both questions are difficult. For man does not put this question to the world, but he puts it to God as the Creator and Lord of the world. And it is well known that concerning this question there not only arise many frustrations and conflicts in the relations of man with God, but it also happens that people reach the point of actually *denying* God. For, whereas the existence of the world opens as it were the eyes of the human soul to the existence of God, to his wisdom, power and greatness, evil and suffering seem to obscure this image, sometimes in a radical way, especially in the daily drama of so many cases of undeserved suffering and of so many faults without proper punishment.

God expects the question and listens to it as we see in the Revelation of the Old Testament, in the Book of Job. The story of this just man, who without any fault of his own is tried by innumerable sufferings, is well known. He loses his possessions, his sons and daughters, and finally he himself is afflicted by a grave sickness. In this horrible situation three old acquaintances come to his house, and each one in his own way tries to convince him that since he has been struck down by such varied and terrible sufferings, *he must have done something seriously wrong*. For suffering—they say—always strikes a man as punishment for a crime; it is sent by the absolutely just God and finds its reason in the order of justice.

Job however challenges the truth of the principle that identifies suffering with punishment for sin. For he is aware that he has not deserved such punishment. In the end, God himself reproves Job's friends for their accusations and recognizes that Job is not guilty. His suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent and it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence.

While it is true that suffering has a meaning as punishment, when it is connected with a fault, *it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment*.

The Book of Job is not the last word on this subject in Revelation. In a certain way it is a foretelling of the Passion of Christ. But already in itself it is *sufficient argument* why the answer to the

question about suffering is not to be unreservedly linked to the moral order, based on justice alone.

Already in the Old Testament we note an orientation that begins to go beyond the concept according to which suffering has a meaning only as a punishment for sin. Thus in the sufferings inflicted by God upon the Chosen People there is included an invitation of his mercy, which corrects in order to lead to conversion.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). Man “perishes” when he loses “eternal life”, which is definitive suffering: the loss of eternal life, being rejected by God, damnation.

As a result of Christ’s salvific work, man exists on earth *with the hope* of eternal life and holiness. And even though the victory over sin and death achieved by Christ in his Cross and resurrection does not abolish temporal suffering from human life, nor free from suffering the whole historical dimension of human existence, it nevertheless *throws a new light* upon this dimension and upon every suffering: the light of salvation.

In his messianic activity in the midst of Israel, Christ drew increasingly closer *to the world of human suffering*. He went about doing good, and his actions concerned primarily those who were suffering and seeking help. He healed the sick, consoled the afflicted, fed the hungry...And at the same time he taught, and at the heart of his teaching there are *the eight beatitudes*, which are addressed to people tried by various sufferings in their temporal life.

In the Cross of Christ, not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also *human suffering itself has been redeemed*. 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. Christ *has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption*.

For, *whoever suffers in union with Christ*, not only receives from Christ that strength already referred to but also completes by his suffering what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. 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.

And for this reason suffering also has a special value in the eyes of the Church. It is something good, before which the church bows down in reverence with all the depth of her faith in the Redemption.

It is especially consoling to note that at the side of Christ, in the first and exalted place, there is always his Mother...she began to see in her mission as a mother her “destiny” to share...in the mission of her Son. It was on Calvary that Mary’s suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view but which was mysteriously and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world.

Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that *in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ*. 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.

Michael Dosen

