

THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

There is a reality that is very difficult to understand and just as arduous to proclaim, and it is the reality of suffering.

Already in the Old Testament, the sacred author presents Job to us as the symbol of humanity that is oppressed and anguished because of the accumulation of physical and moral ills.

Really the great scandal in the world, the reason many refuse religion, is suffering, and more particularly the suffering of innocent victims. "How can God who is a Father allow man to suffer?" many ask.

However, the answer to that question can never be simply intellectual, or come solely through reasoning, for a comprehension of it lies at another level. The answer is to be found in faith, and even more than that, the answer is to be found only and solely in Jesus!

Only the revelation of Christ, the Crucified One who shares in our suffering, can give true meaning to that question. To the prayer of the afflicted and oppressed man, God replies in a much greater manner than he could ever have desired: He sends him Jesus Christ, His only Son. This Son is the true Liberator from all evil and the Redeemer from all sins.

Nevertheless, Redemption does not consist in eliminating suffering from this world, but in transforming it into a means of salvation, making of it a source of merits. With Jesus and through Jesus, suffering can become an instrument to increase our hope in the final victory which will reach its fullness when "God will wipe away all tears from the eyes of His elect."

An example might help us understand a little how God, who loves us with the tenderness of a Father, can permit suffering.

"Lord, explain suffering to me," a woman said in her prayer. And here is how the Lord replied to her entreaty:

"Our young son," she said, "was in the hospital, his hands and feet tied to his hospital bed, to prevent him from pulling out the transfusion tube that would save his life.

"As soon as he saw us, his eyes lit up with hope. 'Mom and dad are here, they will free me.'

"On the contrary, we stayed with him for an hour, an hour that seemed endless, listening to his cries, without responding to his prayer, without freeing him from his bonds to hold him tightly in our arms, because it was necessary and even indispensable that he endure this suffering. However, for us to act in this way was totally incomprehensible to him, and even cruel. And yet, who would dare say that we did not love our child, and that we were not suffering with him?"

Thus it is that it sometimes seems as though God is not listening to us, that He is indifferent to our lot. Then we doubt His love, and perhaps we blame Him, even, for the evil befalling us.



May 1981, Gemelli Hospital, Rome – Pope Jean Paul II recuperating slowly from the attempt on his life during the General Audience of May 13 in St. Peter's Square.

In fact, how is it that so much suffering still exists in spite of all the scientific progress and all the efforts made to eradicate it. The answer to this question which is as old as the hills and was exemplified in Job, only God was in a position to reveal it to us in Jesus. However, Jesus does not give us an intellectual answer; He gives us His presence; He does not explain, but He gets involved. The Son of Man did not come to abolish suffering on this earth, but He came to suffer with us. He came to give it a meaning, a dimension, a fullness. Jesus did not destroy the cross; instead, He lay on it, accepting the death it brought Him so that, through it, we might have salvation and victory.

Suffering is not a penalty proportionate to our personal sins, for the greatest saints suffered more than the others. However, suffering is certainly bound in

with sin. After original sin, man began to suffer and experienced death. All evils stem from that day when, through Adam, all of humanity sinned. Thus, evil is a sign that, one day, man separated himself from the Supreme Good in order to satisfy his egoism.

Jesus came to change the meaning of suffering. He came to repair the rupture in us, binding us again to the God we had forsaken. That is why, from the time of the sacrifice on Calvary, suffering can help bring us closer to God and love Him more. With Jesus, suffering becomes a means of purification and even a means of sanctification.

Henceforth, all our crosses can become participation in the mystery of the Redemption. And even the suffering of innocent victims is no longer absurd because it is configured to the Divine Innocent Crucified One. It is transfigured into an unimaginable spiritual effectiveness.

However, only faith and love allow us to enter into this divine Mystery. Over and above our reason, there is faith which knows and which is certain that God is love. And our trust in Him fills our path with His light, no matter how harsh and steep it may be.

"O Mary, you who know what it means to hold in one's arms one's dead child; you who know what suffering is and what it means to have one's soul pierced by a sword of sorrow, teach us to never doubt God's love.

"Teach us to remain with you at the foot of the cross, to receive from it the grace of Redemption and to be co-redeemers with you.

"We beseech you, most holy Mother, may the wounds of our crucified Lord be most deeply graven into our hearts." (Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, February 11, 1984)

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