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EDITORIAL: SUFFERING AND THE CATHOLIC MIND

J.A.M.

NEWS

We apologize for referring to Rev. Kenneth Myers as Rev. Kevin Myers in the last issue, an error which is corrected in connection with the conclusion of his article on St. Theresa in the current number.

Readers may be interested in knowing that in 1983 a specialized philosophical journal was prepared for publication by the Society of Christian Philosophers under the title of *Faith & Reason*. We objected to their use of our title (which use in advance publicity had already confused several librarians). The matter was amicably settled when the principals agreed to change the name of the new publication to *Faith, Reason and Philosophy*.

Our new editorial board remains active (see inside front cover for the list). Fr. Berbusse has a tract on the origins of the Catholic Church being published by Christendom as this issue goes to press; Donald D'Elia is busy establishing with other scholars a series of scholarly cells around the country to assist young Catholic scholars in finding publishers; Thomas Fowler is continuing his series of translations of the words of the late Spanish philosopher of science, Xavier Zubiri; John Hammes has just finished a book on apologetics (currently being circulated to publishers, including Christendom); William Marshner is touring the country giving a new lecture on "Mary, Mother of the Church"; William May's book on Catholic sexuality will be forthcoming from Christendom in May or June; Fr. Most is also completing a book length treatment of apologetics; and Robert Rice is slowly compiling a series of classic selections to be published in the first of our "Christendom Reader" series covering the Catholic writing of the last century and a half (publication date as yet uncertain).

Special mention, of course, is due to Germain Grisez for the publication of the first volume of his summa moralia, *The Way of the Lord Jesus: Christian Moral Principles*, now available from Franciscan Herald Press (1434 W. 51 st St., Chicago, IL 60609) in hardback for \$35.00 (1,000 pp.).

Some time ago, we promised a major article on evolution and the principles of thermodynamics by Thomas Fowler. That article will appear in the Summer 1984 issue.

J.A.M.





POPE JOHN PAUL II'S APOSTOLIC Letter "Salvifici Doloris" ("The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering") (Feb. 11, 1984) provides ample opportunity for the reflection of Catholic thinkers on the purpose of suffering; and because the problem of suffering always stands near the center of man's resistance to God, the Catholic thinker needs this opportunity for reflection in order to better prepare his answers to those who ask, and to prepare himself for a happy death.

The basic outline of the papal letter is clear enough. Starting with the inescapability of suffering in every human life, John Paul searches the Scriptures for an explanation. Finding the correlation between suffering and God's justice to be incomplete (book of Job), he turns next to the complete correlation between suffering and God's love, or rather the absorption of suffering in the gift of the Only Son, that men should have eternal life. The Pope shows that Our Lord took upon himself the "iniquity of us all", voluntarily and completely, accepting suffering in His human nature and rendering it substitutive and redemptive in His Divine, so that, as He breathed His last, He could say of His entire mission, "It is finished."

Next the Pope teaches us that Our Lord is in us through His Mystical Body and that each man's suffering for Christ is also the suffering of Christ in him. At this level "Salvifici Doloris" gives three reasons for suffering: First, those who share Christ's sufferings "in a certain sense repay the infinite price of the passion and death of Christ" and so become worthy of the Kingdom (21); second, suffering opens man to an infusion of the power of God (says St. Paul: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor 12:9) (23); third, somehow by suffering we "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24) (24).

This last "explanation" brings the Pope to his final section, on the "Gospel of Suffering." Here the point is that the Christian good news is in some sense a call to suffer in a way that makes sense, first by those who suffer persecutions for Christ, then by those who unite their sufferings with Christ, and finally by those who, like the good Samaritan, give themselves to relieve the sufferings of their brothers and sisters in Christ. This embrace of suffering, which bears witness to the solidarity of the

members of Christ's body, marks the negation of the passive character of suffering by its positive and active acceptance at the foot of the Cross. And as men learn by experience this Gospel of suffering, they begin to learn also the interior meaning of suffering, and begin to find in suffering a paradoxical source of peace and joy.

There can be little doubt that "Salvifici Doloris" is the single most profound magisterial document on suffering issued to date. Though it is profound, however, it is not complete. Note that I do not say it is not correct, but there are two senses in which it is probably deliberately incomplete. The first is inconsequential to its purpose, but not to our own. I refer to its systematic, even scholarly style. A great problem with the theory of suffering is that, precisely as the Pope himself states, "Christ does not explain in the abstract the reason for suffering, but before all else he says: 'Follow Me!'"(26) And again, "Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him."(26) The consequence of this is that the Pope's own abstract reasons, while accurate and to a degree even consoling, do not ultimately satisfy, for one must embrace suffering to understand it. In lieu of this, the most satisfying explanations will be highly literate recreations of both the experience and the interior revelation of suffering, such as that found in Georges Bernanos' *The Diary of a Country Priest*-a kind of experience which the Pope can hardly provide in his role as an expositor of doctrine.

The second aspect of the document's incompleteness is more important doctrinally. For what John Paul has give us in "Salvifici Doloris" is an explanation which makes sense out of suffering only once the inevitability of suffering is fully accepted. The document starts with the premise that "in whatever form, suffering seems to be, and is, almost inseparable from man's earthly existence."(3) Once this hurdle is leapt, the doctrine flows cogently on. But what do we answer to the man who asks (and he is always asking) "Why did God create a world in which suffering has to exist at all? Why, in a word, does God permit evil, the source of suffering?" Given a different world, of course, the Father would not have had to send the Son, who would not have had to accept the iniquity of us all, who would not have to bother much about the Gospel of suffering. Since the Pope has simply not yet addressed this question, we may well ask what a sketch of the causality of suffering might look like if he had.

It might look very much like a treatise on original sin, and it might also be suffused with an only partially acceptable effort to deal systematically with the mystery of human freedom. For suffering is in some deep sense connected with sin, clearly and directly in many cases, indirectly over time in many more cases, and mystically in still others. Suffering is rooted in the primary rebellion of man against God in our first parents, and in all the secondary rebellions since that time. And that rebellion—that original sin—came through the awesome exercise of liberty.

There is something so great about God's Lordship over His creation that he does not rest content with slaves alone (like plants and animals), but desires also free men, full of dignity, clothed with rights and ornamented with privileges. Part of man's dignity consists in being made in the image and likeness of God with the possession of intellect and free will. The value of these gifts cannot be overestimated. Indeed, when we think that God might have created us with no free will, we are thinking nonsense, for without intellect and will we would be mere animals, no different essentially from dogs or cats; there would simply be no creature anything like man.

Now these gifts are surely worth having, and one reason we have them is so that we can return to God some of the love he bears for us. Again, to be chosen for this loving embrace of God and to be invited to give as well as to receive this love, is an awesome privilege nothing short of a miracle of God's own goodness. But these gifts and this relationship carry with them, by their very nature, the possibility of rejection, rebellion, refusal to love God above all else. As lords of nature, by yet another gift in keeping with the dignity in which God has created us, we have the option of dragging nature into rejection or rebellion. Adam and Eve faced this choice, chose wrongly, and so launched themselves and nature on a trajectory at odds with God's will and their own created purpose. The resulting privation of good was as inevitable as it was instantaneous; multiplied by countless later false choices, this privation has spread and developed. It is known as evil, and it causes suffering.

It cannot be part of this inquiry to do a thorough analysis of Genesis. But to the logical question of why God allowed us to suffer for our parents' sin—why He did not, in effect, reinstate each man in paradise—I may make at least one logical answer. If man fell through pride when he enjoyed the preternatural gifts, perhaps his subsequent

falls would be less likely, less frequent and less serious if he were taught humility by the difficulty of his new situation. Perhaps then he would recognize his need for and dependence upon God, and be more likely to remain in His presence for all eternity. This thesis, which is surely true if God truly desires our good, is also logical on its face. Nevertheless, after the Fall, there remained the new separation from God to be taken care of, there remained this injustice of sin to be punished, there remained this instability or concupiscence in man to be healed. In fact, it soon seemed, to rejoin John Paul II, that suffering "is almost inseparable from man's earthly existence." And so God sent His only begotten Son.

This is the merest sketch of the other half of the story, the introduction, as it were, to the Pope's remarks. What it means is simply that the possibility of suffering is inherent in man's very dignity, and to strip away the possibility of suffering would be to create a creature other than man. To be precise, under another dispensation—one that excludes the very possibility of suffering—we (you and I) would not exist in anything like the same form of life as we have now. It was not at all illogical, therefore, for the Pope to start his letter with suffering as a given.

But what has all this to do with the Catholic mind? Simply this: as pride goes before the Fall, so too after the Fall, pride renders it impossible for a man to understand and deal with suffering. The intellectual classes of the modern West are uniquely prone to the sin of pride for a variety of historical and anthropological reasons. We Catholics are no exception. I do not mean the pride of denying God, or of deciding Truth for ourselves, a temptation to which those reading this journal are not likely any longer to be prone. But among good Catholics there is a different kind of pride which blinds us to the real nature and value of suffering, and that is the pride of believing suffering to be under our control.

After all, what are the chief forms of suffering in the modern world? Perhaps three are noteworthy: 1) the chaos of life caused by lack of the knowledge of truth; 2) the psychological trauma of inordinate love for something other than God even when the inordinate character of that love is recognized (in a word, serious and prolonged temptation); 3) the loss of hope and physical distress introduced by insuperable obstacles, poverty, disease or injury. Now, consider the typical middle class orthodox Catholic intellectual. 1) By an act of his will, he has ordered his mind to the Magisterium; 2) He knows

God comes first and has little use for feelings to the contrary, because feelings ought not to govern; 3) Unless he has been the victim of serious disease or accident, he has sufficient intelligence to meet most problems with confidence, sufficient funds to live comfortably, and sufficient command over medical technology to postpone for a very long time his reckoning with the fundamental realities of life.

The presumption behind this description is that suffering is something to be mastered, overcome, laid to rest. But it is not so. Never mind that it probably never was very hard for us to accept the Magisterium (we were preserved from that temptation); never mind that we were always “head” oriented rather than “heart” oriented people (we were preserved from that temptation); and never mind that we only understand poverty, disease or psychological disorder as an intellectual puzzle (we were in most cases preserved from that temptation, too). The point is that we have often not been preserved from the temptation of thinking that we have again and again embraced suffering, when what we have again and again embraced is simply a challenge.

How much, after all, did all the “sufferings” of orthodoxy really ever bother us? Did we ever feel a strong temptation to go with the flow just because Father X, Sister Y, and half the parish (or school, or office) thought we were out of the mainstream? No, we were just meeting a little challenge; the issue was never in doubt. And I submit that the difference between a challenge and true suffering is the difference between our being active and our being passive. A challenge is something we see our way clear of, if we are clever and work hard. There are elements of suffering and certainly of sacrifice in meeting the challenge, to be sure; but the deepest suffering occurs when we don’t see our way clear at all. Real suffering occurs when we have to suffer without seeing the solution. Those older than I who have lost children to the faith

will know what I mean, or those who have had a child kidnapped or learned that a spouse is missing in action, or even those facing nothing more than persistent, never-ending feelings of inadequacy. But for others the reality of suffering could be a constant temptation to rebellion against papal authority; it could be the constant love of something or someone we shouldn’t love in a certain way or to a certain degree; it could be the loss of a limb, or economic ruin, or terminal illness. These sufferings go on and on; somehow we avoid sin, avoid despair, avoid going mad-but there is no way out. This is why John Paul II says early in “*Salvifici Doloris*”, “Even when man brings suffering on himself, when he is its cause, this suffering remains something passive in its metaphysical essence.” It is important for good Catholics, and especially good Catholic thinkers, to recognize this sort of suffering. When we meet it face to face, we will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we cannot accept it as a challenge as something we will conquer on our own. No, we are utterly incapable of conquering it; in fact we are utterly incapable of enduring it even for a single day, without God’s grace.

Without God’s grace. We are forced at last to humility, to dependence on God. In meeting this suffering we experience the inner meaning which Christ does not teach in the abstract, and which the Pope can only outline—we experience that we are part of the Mystical Body, engrafted upon Him who did indeed bear the stripes of us all. We experience His passion, His death, and only later His conquest. Self begins to seek its true proportions, and, in a way, we do become for the first time, as the Pope says, active ministers of the Gospel of Suffering. But now it is not we who do this, not we who are active, not we who live. It is not you; it is not I. It is Christ.

J. A. M.
April 4, 1984

