

# On the Mystery of Human Suffering

By Father Bill McCarthy, MSA

I write these words one year and almost 2 months after the awful tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> and 2 days before November, the month of the Holy Souls. Just this morning I received 2 phone calls, each from one of my sisters. My sister Kathleen, in a state of deep shock, informed me that her son's wife's brother, Kevin, had died during the evening completely unexpectedly.

My sister Alice called from Florida to inform me that my friend Joan Gray from Windsor Locks had lost her beloved son David also during the night. Father Jim Leary informed me yesterday that Father Frances Fries had died.

Why oh why is there such a vast ocean of human suffering? By the time you finish reading this article, 10,000 children will starve to death; 4,000 will be brutally beaten by their parents; 1,000 will be sexually abused; and 20,000 will be aborted. For almost 2 weeks we have heard about the needless shootings by snipers and also by a deranged student who killed 3 of his teachers.

## **Ivan's Question**

In *Brothers Karmazon*, Ivan asked the question, "Tell me frankly, I appeal to you - answer me: Imagine that it is you yourself who are erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men happy in the end, of giving them peace and contentment at last, but that to do that it is absolutely necessary, and indeed quite inevitable, to torture to death one tiny little girl who beat her breast with her little fist, and to found the edifice on her unavenged tears - Would you consent to be the architect under those conditions. Tell me and do not lie!" It is this type of question that all of us with aching hearts cry out to Heaven for answers.

## **Job's Answer**

In the best biblical book on human suffering, Job cries out to God for an answer. After the Lord asked him, "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?" Job answers, "I am unworthy. How can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer - but I will say no more. I know that you can do all things; no plans can be thwarted. Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears have heard of you but now my eyes have seen you, therefore I repent." In short Job's answer is a mystery.

## **The Philosophical Answer**

Philosophically we know that God could have created a perfect world with computerized bionic men and women who would talk perfectly and act perfectly. A world in which there would be no suffering and sin. In fact God did create in much of creation such a predetermined world. A world in which there would be no freedom and therefore would be no love, for the stars have to shine and the sun must give forth its light. However because God is love, he wanted to create men and women capable of love. Therefore he had to give them free will. Therefore God risked all the suffering in the world to get the little love we offer him.

## **Pope John Paul II's Answer**

Pope John Paul wrote an apostolic letter on *The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*. He stated in Section 6:

Sacred Scripture is a great book about suffering. Let us quote from the books of the Old Testament a few examples of situations which bear the signs of suffering, and above all moral suffering: the danger of death, the death of one's own children and, especially, the death of the firstborn and only son; and then too: the lack of offspring, nostalgia for the homeland, persecution and hostility of the environment, mockery and scorn of the one who suffers, loneliness and abandonment; and again: the remorse of conscience, the difficulty of understanding why the wicked prosper and the just suffer, the unfaithfulness and ingratitude of friends and neighbors; and finally: the misfortunes of one's own nation.

#### Section 7:

As we see from the examples quoted, we find Sacred Scripture an extensive list of variously painful situations for man. This varied list certainly does not exhaust all that has been said and constantly repeated on the theme of suffering by the book of the history of man (this is rather an "unwritten book"), and even more by the book of the history of humanity, read through the history of every human individual.

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. Suffering has indeed both a subjective and a passive character. Even when man brings suffering on himself, when he is its cause, this suffering remains something passive in its metaphysical essence.

This does not however mean that suffering in the psychological sense is not marked by a specific "activity." This is in fact that multiple and subjectively differentiated "activity" of pain, sadness, disappointment, discouragement or even despair, according to the intensity of the suffering subject and his or her specific sensitivity. In the midst of what constitutes the psychological form of suffering there is always an experience of evil, which causes the individual to suffer.

Thus the reality of suffering prompts the question about the essence of evil: What is evil?

This question seems, in a certain sense, inseparable from the theme of suffering. The Christian response to it is different, for example, from the one given by certain cultural and religious traditions which hold that existence is an evil from which one needs to be liberated. Christianity proclaims the essential good of existence and the good of that which exists, acknowledges the goodness of the Creator and proclaims the good of creatures. 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 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.

Considering the world of suffering in its personal 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, becomes as it were particularly concentrated. This happens, for example, in cases of natural disasters, epidemics, catastrophes, upheavals and various social scourges: one thinks, for example, of a bad harvest and connected with it - or with various other causes - the scourge of famine.

One thinks, finally, of war. I speak of this in a particular way. I speak of the last two World Wars, the second of which brought with it a much greater harvest of death and a much heavier burden of human sufferings. The second half of our century, in its turn, brings with it - as though in proportion to the mistakes and transgressions of our contemporary civilization - such a horrible threat of nuclear war that we cannot think of this period except in terms of an incomparable accumulation of sufferings, even to the possible self-destruction of humanity. In this way, that world of suffering which in brief has its subject in each human being, seems in our age to be transformed - perhaps more than at any other moment - into a special "world": the world which as never before has been transformed by progress through man's work and, at the same time, is as never before in danger because of man's mistakes and offenses.

### **The Answer**

God has given us the final answer to human suffering in the cross of Jesus in which the greatest of all human sufferings and evil was changed into our greatest blessing. For the worst thing that man has done upon this planet Earth is to crucify the holy son of God and hang him on a cross. What you might ask is the best thing? The best thing that has happened in all of the history of our world is that the Eternal Son of God suffered and died on that cross for our sins. Thus the worst became the best. God ends his silence and speaks his word. Christ is the Word, the answer of God. All the words of the prophets and philosophers converge in Jesus. God's answer is not just a word but The Word: not an idea but a person. In short, Christ did 3 things to solve the problem of suffering. First he came and wept with us and suffered with us. He shared with us our longings and our grief. Second, in becoming man, he transformed the meaning of our suffering which now becomes part of God's great work of redemption. Our death pangs become the birth pangs of Heaven. Third, he died and rose. Dying he paid the price for sin and opened Heaven to us; rising, he transformed death from a hole to a door. From an end to a beginning. The Resurrection and Heaven are God's final answer.

### **A Different View**

Therefore the Christian views suffering in a totally different way. The Christian sees everything else as a between, as existing between God and himself, as a gift from God, an invitation from God, a challenge from God. St. Paul said it succinctly, "I make up what is lacking in the cross of Christ."

In Section 20 the Pope continues:

#### *To Carry In Our Bodies The Death and Resurrection of Christ*

The texts of the New Testament express this concept in many places. In the second letter to the Corinthians the Apostle writes: "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 manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh..., knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus."

#### *The Eloquence Of The Cross*

St. Paul speaks of the various sufferings and, in particular, of those in which the first Christians became sharers "for the sake of Christ." These sufferings enable the recipients of that letter to share in the work of the Redemption, accomplished through the suffering and death of the Redeemer. The eloquence of the cross and death is, however, completed by the eloquence of the resurrection. Man finds in the resurrection a completely new light, which helps him to go forward through the thick darkness of humiliations, doubts, hopelessness and persecution. Therefore the Apostle will also write in the second letter to the Corinthians: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." Elsewhere he addresses to his recipients words of encouragement: "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ." And in the letter to the Romans he writes: "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

#### *Two Fold Dimension of Suffering*

The very participation in Christ's suffering finds, in these apostolic expressions, as it were a twofold dimension. If one becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ, this happens because Christ has opened His suffering to man, because He Himself in His redemptive suffering has become, in a certain sense, a sharer in all human sufferings. 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 a new meaning.

#### *Not I But Christ Who Lives In Me*

This discovery caused St. Paul to write particularly strong words in the letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Faith enables the author of these words to know that love which led Christ to the cross. And if He loved us in this way, suffering and dying, then with this suffering and death of His He lives in the one whom He loved in this way; He lives in the man: in Paul. And living in him - to the degree that Paul, conscious of this through faith, responds to His love with love - Christ also becomes in a particular way united to the man, to Paul, through the cross. This union caused Paul to write, in the same letter to the Galatians, other words as well, no less strong: "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

In Section 21: *The Cross, The Source of Light*

The cross of Christ throws salvific light, in a most penetrating way, on man's life and in particular on his suffering. For through faith the cross reaches man together with the resurrection: the mystery of the passion is contained in the Paschal Mystery. The witnesses of Christ's passion are at the same time witnesses of His resurrection.

*The Power Of His Resurrection*

Paul writes: "That I may know him (Christ) and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Truly, the Apostle first experienced the "power of the resurrection" of Christ on the road to Damascus, and only later, in this paschal light, reached that "sharing in his sufferings" of which he speaks, for example, in the letter to the Galatians. The path of Paul is clearly paschal: sharing in the cross of Christ comes about through the experience of the Risen One, therefore through a special sharing in the resurrection. Thus, even in the Apostle's expressions on the subject of suffering there so often appears the motif of glory, which finds its beginning in Christ's cross.

**Summary of Bishop Sheen**

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen summed it all up in this poem he made famous:

*I slipped his fingers, I escaped his feet.  
I ran and hid, for him I really feared to me.  
Then one day I met him being fettered to a tree.  
He turned his head and smiled and beckoned me.*

*He could not hold me nor grasp me if he tried.  
But with those eyes he had me reach his side.  
"For pity's sake," cried I, "I'll set you free."  
"No rather," said he "Take up your cross  
And come and follow me."  
This yoke is easy, this burden light.  
Not hard, nor grievous if you wear it tight.  
And so did I begin to follow Him.  
An uncaught captive in the arms of Love.*