

Salvifici Doloris

Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, 11
February 1984

On the Redemptive Suffering of Christ (abridged from sections 14-21)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." [27] These words, spoken by Christ in His conversation with Nicodemus, introduce us into the very heart of God's salvific work. They also express the very essence of Christian soteriology, that is, of the theology of salvation. Salvation means liberation from evil, and for this reason it is closely bound up with the problem of suffering. According to the words spoken to Nicodemus, God gives His Son to "the world" to free men 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.

The words quoted above from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus refer to suffering in its fundamental and definitive meaning. God gives His only-begotten Son so that man "should not perish" and the meaning of these words "should not perish" is precisely specified by the words that follow: "but have eternal life."

Man "perishes" when he loses "eternal life." The opposite of salvation is not, therefore, only temporal suffering, any kind of suffering, but the definitive suffering: the loss of eternal life, being rejected by God--damnation. The only-begotten Son was given to humanity primarily to protect man against this definitive evil and against definitive suffering. In His salvific mission, the Son must therefore strike evil right at its transcendental roots from which it develops in human history. These transcendental roots of evil are grounded in sin and death: for they are at the basis of the loss of eternal life. The mission of the only begotten Son consists in conquering sin and death. He conquers sin by His obedience unto death, and He overcomes death by His resurrection.

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. This is the light of the Gospel, that is, of the Good News. At the heart of

this light is the truth expounded in the conversation with Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." [31] 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.

Christ goes towards His passion and death with full awareness of the mission that He has to fulfill precisely in this way. Precisely by means of this suffering He must bring it about "that man should not perish, but have eternal life." Precisely by means of His cross He must strike at the roots of evil, planted in the history of man and in human souls. Precisely by means of His cross He must accomplish the work of salvation. This work, in the plan of eternal Love, has a redemptive character.

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. And for this reason St. Paul will write of Christ: "He loved me and gave himself for me." [40]

The Scriptures had to be fulfilled. There were many messianic texts in the Old Testament which foreshadowed the sufferings of the future Anointed One of God. Among all these, particularly touching is the one which is commonly called the Fourth song of the Suffering servant, in the Book of Isaiah. The Song of the Suffering Servant contains a description in which it is possible, in a certain sense, to identify the stages of Christ's passion in their various details: the arrest, the humiliation, the blows, the spitting, the contempt for the prisoner, the unjust sentence, and then the scourging, the crowning with thorns and the mocking, the carrying of the cross, the crucifixion and the agony.

Even more than this description of the passion, what strikes us in the words of the prophet is the depth of Christ's sacrifice. Behold, He, though innocent, takes upon Himself the sufferings of all people, because He takes upon Himself the sins of all. "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all": all human sin in its breadth and depth becomes the true cause of the Redeemer's suffering. If the suffering "is measured" by the evil suffered, then the words of the prophet enable us to understand the extent of this evil and suffering with which Christ burdened Himself. It can be said that this is "substitutive" suffering; but above all it is "redemptive." The Man of Sorrows of that prophecy is truly that "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." [42] In His suffering, sins are canceled out precisely because He alone as the only-begotten Son could take them upon Himself, accept them with that love for the

Father which overcomes the evil of every sin; in a certain sense He annihilates this evil in the spiritual space of the relationship between God and humanity, and fills this space with good.

Here we touch upon the duality of nature of a single personal subject of redemptive suffering. He who by His passion and death on the cross brings about the Redemption is the only-begotten Son whom God "gave." And at the same time this Son who is consubstantial with the Father suffers as a man. His suffering has human dimensions; it also has unique in the history of humanity a depth and intensity which, while being human, can also be an incomparable depth and intensity of suffering, insofar as the man who suffers is in person the only-begotten Son Himself: "God from God." Therefore, only He--the only begotten Son--is capable of embracing the measure of evil contained in the sin of man: in every sin and in "total" sin, according to the dimensions of the historical existence of humanity on earth.

Christ suffers voluntarily and suffers innocently. With His suffering He gives the answer to the question about suffering and the meaning of suffering not only by His teaching, that is, by the Good News, but most of all by His own suffering, which is integrated with this teaching of the Good News in an organic and indissoluble way. And this is the final, definitive word of this teaching: "the word of the cross," as St. Paul one day will say.[44]

The prayer in Gethsemane becomes a definitive point here. The words: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will,"[45] and later: "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done,"[46] have a manifold eloquence. They prove the truth of that love which the only-begotten Son gives to the Father in His obedience. At the same time, they attest to the truth of His suffering. The words of that prayer of Christ in Gethsemane prove the truth of love through the truth of suffering.

His words also attest to this unique and incomparable depth and intensity of suffering which only the man who is the only-begotten Son could experience; they attest to that depth and intensity which the prophetic words of Isaiah in their own way help us to understand. Not of course completely (for this we would have to penetrate the divine-human mystery of the subject), but at least they help us to understand that difference (and at the same time the similarity) which exists between every possible form of human suffering and the suffering of the God-man. Gethsemane is the place where precisely this suffering, in all the truth expressed by the prophet concerning the evil experienced in it, is revealed as it were definitively before the eyes of Christ's soul.

After the words in Gethsemane come the words uttered on Golgotha, words which bear witness to this depth unique in the history of the world--of the evil of the

suffering experienced. When Christ says: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?", His words are not only an expression of that abandonment which many times found expression in the Old Testament, especially in the psalms and in particular in that Psalm 22(21) from which come the words quoted.[47] One can say that these words on abandonment are born at the level of that inseparable union of the Son with the Father, and are born because the Father "laid on him the iniquity of us all." [48] They also foreshadow the words of St. Paul: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin." [49] Together with this horrible weight, encompassing the "entire" evil of the turning away from God which is contained in sin, Christ, through the divine depth of His filial union with the Father, perceives in a humanly inexpressible way this suffering which is the separation, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God. But precisely through this suffering He accomplishes the Redemption, and can say as He breathes His last: "It is finished." [50]

In the cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed. Christ without any fault of His own took on Himself "the total evil of sin." The experience of this evil determined the incomparable extent of Christ's suffering, which became the price of the Redemption. The Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah speaks of this. In later times, the witnesses of the New Covenant, sealed in the Blood of Christ, will speak of this. These are the words of the Apostle Peter in his first letter: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." [55] And the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Galatians will say: "He gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age," [56] and in the first letter to the Corinthians: "You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." [57]

With these and similar words the witnesses of the New Covenant speak of the greatness of the Redemption, accomplished through the suffering of Christ. 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.

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." [62] 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." [63]

The witnesses of the cross and resurrection were convinced that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." [65] And Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, says this: "We ourselves boast of you..for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering." [66] Thus to share in the sufferings of Christ is, at the same time, to suffer for the kingdom of God. In the eyes of the just God, before His judgment, those who share in the suffering of Christ become worthy of this kingdom. Through their sufferings, in a certain sense they repay the infinite price of the passion and death of Christ, which became the price of our Redemption: at this price the kingdom of God has been consolidated anew in human history, becoming the definitive prospect of man's earthly existence. Christ has led us into this kingdom through His suffering. And also through suffering those surrounded by the mystery of Christ's Redemption became mature enough to enter this kingdom.

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