

In The School of Mary

(Papal documents condensed by Deacon William Wagner)

First Published in the St. Bartholomew Bulletin: April, 2009

Pope John Paul II

Salvifici Dolores, On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, February 11, 1984.

We begin another of John Paul II's letters, although written some time ago, it seems most appropriate for today as well. He actually penned this work on the occasion of the Holy Year of Redemption, as he called it "an extraordinary Jubilee of the Church", in 1984. A further personal note: John Paul will use the term, *salvific*, one not in common American English usage. Its meaning is "to save" or as "offering salvation".

INTRODUCTION

Declaring the power of salvific suffering, the Apostle Paul says: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church." The Holy Father says that these words come as a final discovery that is accompanied by joy. So Paul could write: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake." His joy comes from the discovery of the meaning of suffering. It is also valid for each of us, - *to understand the salvific meaning of suffering.*

The theme of suffering, especially salvific suffering, is a universal theme that accompanies man at every point. It demands to be constantly reconsidered. What we express by the word "suffering" seems to be particularly *essential to the nature of man*. Suffering belongs to the transcendence of man so that through it, in a sense, he is "destined" to go beyond himself, having been called to this in a mysterious way.

Pope John Paul II says that the theme of suffering demands to be faced, especially during the Holy Year of Redemption, because the Redemption was accomplished through the cross of Christ, that is, through his suffering. In Christ, "every man becomes the way for the Church." In whatever form, suffering is almost inseparable from man's earthly existence. It is precisely on this long path of suffering that the Church at all times should meet man. Born in the mystery of the Redemption in the Cross, the Church must try to meet man in a special way on the path of his suffering and in this meeting, man "becomes the way for the Church."

Human suffering is the chosen focus of the Pope's reflection in this Year of the Redemption. Human suffering evokes compassion and respect. Yet in its own way it intimidates. For in suffering is contained

the greatness of an important mystery. This special respect is set by the deepest *need of the heart*, and also by the deep *imperative of faith*. The *need of the heart* commands us to overcome fear. The *imperative of faith*, formulated aptly by St. Paul, dares to touch what appears in every man so intangible: for man, in his suffering, remains an intangible mystery.

II The World of Human Suffering

Suffering seems almost inexpressible and at the same time it is not transferable. The Holy Father notes that nothing else requires as much, in its “objective reality,” to be dealt with, meditated upon, and conceived as an explicit problem. It is not a question here merely of giving a description of suffering. There are other aspects that go beyond the sphere of description.

Medicine, as science and also as the art of healing, discovers in the vast field of human sufferings the methods of “reaction,” namely therapy. Yet the field of human suffering is much wider. Man suffers in different ways not always considered by medicine. Suffering is still wider than sickness, more complex. At the same time it is still more deeply rooted in humanity itself. An idea of the problem comes to us from the distinction between physical and moral suffering. This indicates the bodily and spiritual element of the human being. Physical suffering is present when “the body is hurting” in some way, whereas moral suffering is “pain of the soul”. Moral suffering seems, as it were, less identified and less reachable by therapy.

III The Quest for an Answer to the Question Of the Meaning of Suffering

At the basis of the whole world of suffering, there arises the question: Why? It is a question about its meaning. What makes suffering precisely human suffering? Although physical pain is widespread in the animal world, only the suffering human being knows that he is suffering and wonders why. John Paul II acknowledges that this is a difficult question. Closely akin to the question of suffering is the question of evil. Why does evil exist? Why is there evil in the world? When expressed in this way, we are to a certain extent asking a question about suffering as well.

Both questions are difficult when put to other people and when put to God. Man puts these questions to God as the Creator and Lord of the world. Concerning these questions there arises many frustrations and conflicts. It also happens that people, at times, reach the point of actually denying God. Evil and suffering seem to obscure the benign image of God, sometimes in a radical way, especially in the many cases of undeserved suffering and of so many faults without proper punishment. The importance of the question of the meaning of suffering shows how much care must be taken both in dealing with the question itself and with all the possible answers to it.

Man can put this question to God with all the emotion of his heart and with his mind full of dismay and anxiety. In the Old Testament in the book of Job, the question has found its most vivid expression. This is the story of a just man, who through no fault of his own, is tried by innumerable sufferings. Three

acquaintances come to his house. Each one in his own way tries to convince Job that he must have done something seriously wrong. Suffering, they say, always strikes a man as punishment for a crime. It is sent by an absolutely just God. In their eyes suffering can have a meaning only as a punishment for sin, and only on the level of the justice of God, who repays good with good and evil with evil.

The point of reference here is the doctrine expressed in other Old Testament writings that show us suffering as punishment inflicted by God for human sins. The God of Revelation is the Lawgiver and Judge. The God of Revelation is first of all the Creator from whom comes the essential good of creation. The conscious and free violation of this good by man is not only a transgression of the law but at the same time an offense against the Creator, the first Lawgiver. Such a transgression has the character of sin. Corresponding to the moral evil of sin is punishment. From this there also derives one of the fundamental truths of religious faith, based on Revelation: God is a just judge who rewards good and punishes evil.

In the book of Job we find that the opinion expressed by Job's friends manifest a conviction that the moral order demands punishment for sinful transgression. From this viewpoint, suffering appears as a "justified evil." This conviction that explains suffering as a punishment for sin finds support in the order of justice, a conviction expressed by one of Job's friends.

Job however challenges the truth of the principle that identifies suffering with punishment for sin. From his own experience he is aware that he has not deserved such punishment. In fact, God himself reproves the views of his friends. Job's suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent and it must be accepted as a mystery.

The book of Job does not violate the foundations of the transcendent moral order. However, at the same time, this book shows with all firmness that the principles of this order cannot be applied in an exclusive and superficial way. The Holy Father points out that 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, having therefore the nature of punishment. Revelation, with complete frankness, presents the problem of the suffering of an innocent man, suffering without guilt. Job has not been punished even if he has been subjected to a grievous trial. In the introduction of the book, it is apparent that God permitted this testing as a result of Satan's provocation. The Pope concludes that if the Lord consents to test Job with suffering, he does it to demonstrate the latter's righteousness. The suffering has the nature of a test.

The book of Job is not the last word on this subject in Revelation. Anticipating in a sense the passion of Christ itself, it is, however, sufficient argument as to why the answer to the question about the meaning of suffering is not unreservedly linked to the moral order, based on justice alone. While such an answer has validity, at the same time it is seen to be not only unsatisfactory but even seems to trivialize the concept of justice encountered in Revelation.

In an acute way, the book of Job poses the question of the “why” of suffering. It also shows that suffering strikes the innocent, but it does not yet give the solution to the problem. Already in the Old Testament, we note the beginnings of a going beyond the concept that suffering has a meaning only as a punishment for sin. As seen in the sufferings inflicted by God upon the Chosen People, there is included an invitation to his mercy. These punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline his people.

Pope John Paul II affirms the personal dimension of punishment according to which suffering has meaning. First and foremost because it creates the possibility of rebuilding goodness in the one who suffers. This is an extremely important aspect of suffering. In both the Old and New Covenant suffering must serve for conversion, for rebuilding goodness in the individual. The purpose of penance is to overcome evil and to strengthen goodness both in man himself and in his relationship with others and especially with God.

For the answer to the “why” of suffering, we must look to the revelation of divine love. Love is the source of the meaning of suffering that continues to be a mystery for us. Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the “why” of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love. To discover the profound meaning of suffering, we must above all accept the light of revelation not only as it expresses the transcendent order of justice but also insofar as it illuminates this order with Love, the source of all existence. Love is also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the cross of Jesus Christ.

IV Jesus Christ: Suffering Conquered by Love

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” These words of Christ in conversation with Nicodemus introduce us into the very heart of God’s salvific work, into the theology of salvation (soteriology). Salvation means liberation from evil and so is closely bound up with the problem of suffering. The Pope notes that God gives his Son to “the world” to free men from evil. The very word, “gives,” indicates that this liberation must be achieved through his Son’s own suffering. This is love for man, love for the “world.” It is salvific love.

The Holy Father tells us that here we find ourselves faced with a completely new dimension of our theme. Different from searching out the meaning of suffering within the limits of justice, we are now in the dimension of Redemption. Job, still in the context of the Old Testament, uses words that already seem to refer to it: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last... I shall see God...” (Jb 19:25-26) The words of Jesus in conversation with Nicodemus surely refer to suffering in its fundamental and definitive meaning. God gives his Son so that man “should not perish... but have eternal life.”

Christ’s statement to Nicodemus in John’s Gospel is highly significant: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” The Holy Father states that this truth radically changes the picture of man’s history and his earthly situation. God the Father loves his Son in a lasting way and then he “gives” his

Son that He might strike at the very roots of human evil. By this he draws close to the whole world of suffering that man shares in.

In his messianic activity Christ drew increasingly closer to the world of human suffering. He was sensitive to every human suffering, whether of the body or the soul. At the heart of the teaching of Jesus are the eight beatitudes, addressed to people tried by various suffering.

Importantly, Christ drew close above all to the world of human suffering through the fact of having taken this suffering upon his very self. During his public ministry, he experienced not only fatigue, homelessness, and misunderstanding but other forms of suffering as well. As time progressed, he became ever more isolated. Christ, aware of his coming sufferings and death, spoke of it to his disciples. Christ goes towards his passion and death with full awareness of the mission that he had to fulfill. By means of his suffering he brings about that man should not perish but have eternal life. By means of the cross he strikes at the roots of evil in human history and souls. By means of the cross he accomplishes the work of salvation that in the plan of eternal love is redemptive.

For this reason Christ severely reproved Peter when the latter wanted to make him abandon the thought of suffering and death on the cross. In Gethsemane this same Peter, attempting to defend him, is rebuked with the words, "Put your sword in its place... Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" Christ was imbued with the thought that he had already expressed in the conversation with Nicodemus: *"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) The Pope notes that Christ 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.

As the Evangelist reminded us, the Scriptures had to be fulfilled. Many were the messianic texts in the Old Testament that foreshadowed the sufferings of the future Anointed One of God. Particularly touching is the so-called *Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant* in the Book of Isaiah. (cf Is 53: 2-6) The prophet presents an image of the sufferings of the Servant with an acute realism. The Evangelists' descriptions could hardly have been any more expressive and moving.

In Isaiah in the Song of the Suffering Servant we are able to identify the very stages of Christ's passion. What is even more striking is that in the words of the prophet we come to know the depth of Christ's sacrifice. "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all"; that is to say that all human sin in its breadth and depth becomes the true cause of the Redeemer's suffering. The suffering with which Christ burdened himself can be said to be "substitutive" suffering. More importantly, it is "redemptive." The Man of Sorrows of that prophecy is truly that "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He annihilates the evil of sin in the spiritual space of the relationship between God and humanity and he fills this space with good.

In the duality of his nature, he who by his passion and death on the cross brought about the Redemption is the only-begotten Son whom God “gave.” This Son who is of one substance with the Father suffers as a man. His suffering has human dimensions and is unique in human history. Only he, the only-begotten Son, was capable of embracing the full measure of evil contained in the sin of mankind.

The Holy Father says that at this point we arrive at Gethsemane and Golgotha where the subject of the Song of the Suffering Servant in the Book of Isaiah takes upon himself in a totally voluntary way those sufferings that had been spoken of him. (cf Is 53:7-9) Christ suffers voluntarily and he suffers innocently. With his suffering he accepts that question, posed by people many times and expressed in a radical way by the Book of Job. Christ not only carries within himself that same question but he also carries the greatest possible answer to this question. Christ gives the answer to the question about suffering and the meaning of suffering not only by his teaching of the Good News, but most of all by his own suffering. The teaching and suffering is integrated in an organic and indissoluble way on the cross. Here is the final, definitive word of his teaching: “the word of the cross,” as St. Paul one day would say. (cf 1 Cor 1:18)

Pope John Paul notes that the “word of the Cross” completes in stark reality the image of the ancient prophecy. At many points in Christ’s public teaching we witnessed how he accepted this suffering that was the will of the Father for the salvation of the world. His prayer in Gethsemane is the defining point: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Mt 26:39) The Pope says that his words prove the truth of that love that the only-begotten Son gives to the Father in his obedience, the proof of the truth of love through the truth of suffering. This real suffering demonstrates how human suffering is the undergoing of evil before which all of us shudder. We say as well, “Let it pass from me,” just as Christ said in Gethsemane.

The words of Christ attest to the unique depth and intensity of his suffering. The prophetic words of the Song of the Suffering Servant help us to understand that. Yet, they do not explain all but they do at least give us some understanding of the similarity that exists between every possible form of human suffering and the suffering of the God-man. The Pope tells us that Gethsemane is the place where this suffering, in all the truth expressed by the prophet concerning the evil experienced in it, is definitively revealed before the eyes of Christ’s soul.

After the words of Gethsemane come the words uttered on Golgotha. The words of Christ, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” tell us of the depths of the evil suffered by him. John Paul says that these words are borne at the level of that inseparable union of the Son with the Father, and are borne because the Father “laid on him the iniquity of us all.” They also foreshadow the words of St. Paul: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.” Christ, through the divine depth of his filial union with the Father, perceives in a humanly inexpressible way this suffering that is the separation, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God. But it must be noted that it is precisely through this suffering that Christ accomplishes the Redemption and that he is able to say, “It is finished.”

The Holy Father makes the point that the Scripture, encapsulated in the words of the Song of the Suffering Servant, has been fulfilled. "It was the will of the Lord to bruise him." (Is 53:10) Human suffering has reached its culmination in the passion of Christ. At the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order. It has been linked to love. The cross of Christ has become a source from which flow rivers of living water. (Jn 7:37-38) John Paul says that now in the light of this love we must also pose anew the question about the meaning of suffering, and read in it, to its very depths, the answer to this question.

V Sharers in the Suffering of Christ

The Song of the Suffering Servant also leads us, through the following verses, in the direction of this newly situated question and answer: "When he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days...

...by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities. ...he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (Is 53:10-12) John Paul II allows that with the passion of Christ all human suffering finds itself in a new environment.

In the cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but suffering, itself, has been redeemed. The experience of the evil in Christ's suffering became the price of the Redemption. The Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah spoke of this. We also have the words of Peter, "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." (1 Pt 1:18-19) St. Paul in the letter to the Galatians says, "He gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present, evil age", and in First Corinthians, "You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Every one has his own share in the Redemption. Each is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. The Holy Father emphasizes that in bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each of us, in our suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ. The texts of the New Testament express this concept in many places.

St. Paul speaks of the various sufferings in which the Christians become sharers "for the sake of Christ." The eloquence of the cross and death is, in truth, completed by the eloquence of the resurrection. For we find in the resurrection a completely new light that helps us to go forward through the thick darkness of doubts, hopelessness and persecution. The Apostle also writes in Second Corinthians, "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." In 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."

The Pope says that if we become sharers in the sufferings of Christ, this happens because Christ has opened his suffering to us and he himself became a sharer in all human sufferings. If in faith we discover the redemptive suffering of Christ, then in our own sufferings, through faith, we find that they have been enriched with a new content and a new meaning.

This discovery caused St. Paul to write strong words in the letter to the Galatians. (cf Gal 2:19-20) Faith enabled the author to know the love that led Christ to the cross. If he loved Paul in this way, then with this suffering and death he lived in the one whom he loved in this way and became united to the man, Paul, through this cross. So Paul could write, "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."

The Cross of Christ throws the light of salvation, in a most penetrating way, on our life and especially on our suffering. The witnesses of Christ's passion are the same time witnesses of his resurrection. Truly, the Apostle, Paul, first experienced the "power of the resurrection" of Christ on the road to Damascus, and only later, in the paschal light, reached that "sharing in his sufferings" of which he often spoke. The path of Paul was clearly paschal. His sharing in the cross of Christ came about through the experience of the risen One. Thus, in the Apostle's expressions on the subject of suffering, there so often appears the motif of glory that finds its beginning in Christ's cross.

The Holy Father tells us that the witnesses of the cross and resurrection were convinced that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." So, to share in the sufferings of Christ is, at the same time, to suffer for the kingdom of God. The just, through their sufferings, in a certain sense repay the infinite price of the passion and death of Christ that became the price of our Redemption. Christ led us into this kingdom through his suffering. Also through suffering those, surrounded by the mystery of Christ's Redemption, became mature enough to enter this kingdom.

The resurrection revealed this glory – the eschatological (end-time) glory that in the cross of Christ was completely obscured by the immensity of suffering. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ are also called, through their own sufferings, to share in his glory. In Romans, Paul writes: "We are ...fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us." Peter in his first letter will express the same truth: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

The motif of suffering and glory has a strictly evangelical characteristic that becomes clear by reference to the cross and the resurrection. In weakness he manifested his power, and in humiliation he manifested all his messianic greatness. The words uttered on Golgotha are a proof of this greatness: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Pope John Paul II recalls for us how suffering is also an invitation to manifest the moral greatness of man, his spiritual maturity. Proof comes through the martyrs and confessors of Christ who are faithful to

the words: "And do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul." Christ's resurrection has revealed "the glory of the future age," the glory that is hidden in the very suffering of Christ. Often this is mirrored in human suffering as an expression of man's spiritual greatness.

Pope John Paul II wants us to understand that suffering, in fact, is always a trial to which humanity is subjected. Sometimes it is most difficult. The Gospel paradox of weakness and strength speaks to us quite often from the letters of St. Paul. Not only did he experience it but it is also known to all who share Christ's sufferings. In the second letter to the Corinthians he writes, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weakness that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Again, in Philippians he says, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

Those who share in Christ's sufferings have before their eyes the Paschal Mystery of the cross and resurrection, in which Christ descends to the ultimate limits of human weakness. He dies nailed to the cross. In this weakness there is accomplished his lifting up that is confirmed in the resurrection. This means that the weakness found in all human suffering is capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's cross. In him God affirms his desire to act especially through a suffering that is our weakness and the emptying of ourselves.

The Pope recalls for us that in the letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul deals still more fully with the theme of this birth of power in weakness. (cf Rom 5:3-5) Suffering contains a special call to a virtue that we must exercise on our own part. This is the virtue of perseverance. In it we unleash hope that maintains in us the conviction that suffering will not get the better of us, that it will not deprive us of our dignity as a human being. This dignity is linked to awareness of the meaning of life. For the Holy Father, it is noteworthy that we rediscover ourselves more and more fully in suffering. We rediscover the "soul" that we thought we had "lost" because of suffering.

The Apostle's experience as a sharer in the sufferings of Christ goes even further. In Colossians we read what constitutes the final stage of the spiritual journey in relation to suffering, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church." In the Paschal Mystery Christ initiated his union with us in the community of the Church. In the act of Baptism we are configured with Christ. Then through his sacrifice, sacramentally through the Eucharist, the Church is continually being built up spiritually as the Body of Christ. In this Body, Christ wishes to be united with every individual, especially with those who suffer. This evangelical outlook that we have been considering highlights the truth concerning the creative character of suffering. This suffering of Christ created the good that is the world's Redemption, a good, inexhaustible and infinite.

No one can add anything to the sufferings of Christ. Yet, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. To the extent that man becomes a sharer in Christ's suffering, he in his own way completes the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world. It only means that the Redemption, secured in satisfactory love, remains

always open to all love expressed in human suffering. Christ achieved the Redemption completely but at the same time did not bring it to a close. The Holy Father concludes that it seems to be part of the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering that this suffering requires unceasing completion.

Important to note, redemptive suffering develops as does the Body of Christ, the Church. In this dimension then, every human suffering, by reason of its loving union with Christ, completes the suffering of Christ. It completes that suffering *just as the Church completes the redemptive work of Christ*. Only within the dimension of the Church, the Body of Christ, continually developing in space and time, can we think and speak of "what is lacking" in the sufferings of Christ. Paul makes this clear when he writes of "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the Church." (Col 1:24)

Pope John Paul II suggests here that this also highlights the divine and human nature of the Church, and that suffering seems to share in the characteristics of this nature. He therefore says that suffering has a special value in the eyes of the Church. It is a good, before which the Church bows down in reverence with all the depth of her faith in the Redemption, as well as she bows before the inexpressible mystery of the Body of Christ.

VI The Gospel of Suffering

The witnesses of the cross and resurrection of Christ have handed on to the Church, and to mankind, a specific Gospel of suffering. The Redeemer himself wrote this gospel, especially by his own suffering accepted in love, so that we "should not perish but have eternal life." It is particularly consoling to note that, in the first instance at the side of Christ, there is always his Mother through the exemplary testimony that she bears by her whole life to this special Gospel of suffering. In her, the many and intense sufferings were amassed not only as proof of her unshakable faith but also as a contribution to the Redemption of all. The Pope tells us that, in truth, from the time of Mary's secret conversation with the angel, she began to see in her mission as a mother her "destiny" to share in a singularly unique way in the very mission of her Son.

It is especially consoling that Mary was present on Calvary. From a human point of view, her suffering reached an intensity that can hardly be imagined. Yet that suffering was mysteriously and supernaturally fruitful for the Redemption of the World. Her presence along with that of the beloved disciple was a special sort of sharing in the redeeming death of her Son. John Paul II says that Mary offered a unique contribution to the Gospel of suffering, embodying in anticipation what St. Paul had said of himself, that "she completed in her flesh what was lacking in Christ's affliction." (Col 1:24) The unmatched example of Christ, reflected with singular clarity in the life of his Mother, thus becomes an inexhaustible source for the ever-new generations succeeding one another in the history of the Church.

Christ did not conceal from his listeners the need for suffering. He said very clearly, "If any man would come after me ...let him take up his cross daily." (Lk 9:23) The way that leads to the kingdom of heaven is "hard and narrow," and is contrasted by Jesus to the "wide and easy" way that "leads to

destruction.” On various occasions Christ also said that his disciples and confessors would meet with much persecution. It happened in the early days of the life of the Church and continues even in our own time. Our Lord indicated that this would be the time to bear testimony. He further said that he would give his disciples a mouth and wisdom that none of their adversaries would be able to withstand or contradict. He also told them that they would be delivered up even by parents and brothers and friends, that some would be killed, that they would be hated by all for his name’s sake. However, he promised that by their endurance they would gain their lives. (Lk 21:12-1)

The Holy Father reemphasizes that Jesus did not conceal the prospect of suffering from his disciples and followers. In fact, these persecutions and tribulations would be a particular proof of likeness to Christ and union with him. “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me they will persecute you...” (Jn 15:18-21) “In the world you have tribulation but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (Jn 16:33)

This first chapter of the Gospel of suffering contains at the same time a special call to courage and fortitude. Christ has overcome the world by his resurrection. Yet, because of the relationship between the resurrection and his passion and death, he, at the same time, has overcome the world by his suffering. Christ retains in his risen body the marks of the wounds of the cross in his hands, feet and side. Through the resurrection, he manifests the victorious power of suffering and he wishes to confer this on all those who desire to follow him. The Apostle Paul will say, “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Tim 3:12)

While the first great chapter of the Gospel of suffering is written down, the Pope says that another unfolds through the course of history, written by all those who suffer together with Christ. In these people is fulfilled what the first witnesses of the passion and resurrection wrote about sharing in the suffering of Christ. These now announce it to the people of their own time.

Down through the generations it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace. When the body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and we are almost incapable of living, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident. This constitutes a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal. To such a grace, saints like Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola owe their profound conversions.

This interior maturity and spiritual greatness in suffering are certainly the result of a particular conversion and cooperation with the grace of the crucified Redeemer. Christ reveals to the suffering brother and sister a wonderful interchange, situated at the very heart of the mystery of the Redemption. Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely that of eternal salvation. By his suffering on the cross, Christ conquered the author of evil, Satan, and his permanent rebellion against the Creator. To the suffering brother or sister, Christ discloses and gradually reveals the horizons of the kingdom of God. Slowly but effectively, he

leads into this kingdom of the Father, suffering man through the very heart of his own salvific suffering. Christ then acts within that suffering by the power of his consoling Spirit.

By a continuation of the motherhood through which by the power of the Holy Spirit the Son had been given life, the dying Christ conferred upon the ever Virgin Mary a new kind of motherhood - spiritual and universal - towards all human beings. The Holy Father says that Christ did this so that every individual might remain, together with her, closely united to him on the Cross. In this way every form of suffering is given fresh life by the power of this cross and becomes no longer the weakness of man but the power of God.

In general, it can be said that almost always the individual enters suffering with a typically human protest, with the question, "why." He seeks an answer to this question on the human level and he often puts this question to God and to Christ. Nevertheless, it often takes time, even a long time, for the answer to begin to be interiorly perceived. For Christ does not answer this human questioning in the abstract. We come to hear Christ's saving answer, as we ourselves gradually become sharers in the sufferings of Christ.

VII The Good Samaritan

In Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan, sympathy and compassion are the incentive to action aimed at bringing effective help to the injured man. Indeed, a Good Samaritan is one who brings help in suffering. He is one who opens himself to the other person, a key point in Christian anthropology. The Holy Father reminds us that "man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself". A Good Samaritan is the person capable of exactly such a self-gift.

The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for another world, the world of human love. The person who is a "neighbor" cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another. He must "stop," "sympathize," just like the Samaritan of the Gospel parable. The parable in itself expresses a deeply Christian truth, one that also is very universally human. It is not without reason that in ordinary speech we refer to persons engaged in such like activity as "Good Samaritans".

In the course of the centuries, this activity has taken on institutional form, a field of work in professions such as doctors, nurses, and the like. To an extent we are inclined to think here of a vocation rather than simply a profession. These institutions that from generation to generation have performed "Good Samaritan" services have developed even further in our times. In view of all this, the John Paul II thinks that the parable of the Good Samaritan of the Gospel has become one of the essential elements of moral culture and human civilization. To all involved, he feels that we owe a debt of gratitude.

These words are directed especially to those who freely undertake to provide "Good Samaritan" help, devoting the time and energy at their disposal outside of their professional work. The Pope feels that this kind of voluntary "Good Samaritan" activity, while it can be called social work, can also be called an apostolate when undertaken for clearly evangelical motives. This is so especially if it is in connection with

the Church or another Christian communion. Working in this way is particularly effective when it involves undertaking larger tasks that require cooperation and the use of technical means.

It is difficult to list here all the types and different circumstances of “Good Samaritan” work that exist in the Church and society. It must be recognized that these activities are numerous. Their contribution to fundamental moral values, framed in human solidarity and Christian love of neighbor combats the various forms of hatred, violence, contempt for others, or simple “insensitivity”; in other words, indifference towards one’s neighbor and his suffering.

The eloquence of the parable of the Good Samaritan is this: every individual must feel as if called personally to bear witness to love in suffering. The Church especially must make this motivation her own.

The parable of the Good Samaritan belongs to the Gospel of suffering and goes hand in hand with that Gospel through the history of the Church and Christianity. This parable witnesses that it is in no way to be identified with an attitude of passivity. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering. Christ himself is especially active in this regard and accomplishes the messianic program of his mission according to the words of the prophet that speaks of what he will accomplish when he comes. (Lk 4:18-19, cf Is. 61:1-2) He goes about “doing good,” and the good of his works becomes especially evident in the face of human suffering. The parable of the Good Samaritan is in profound harmony with the conduct of Christ.

John Paul II notes that this parable, through its essential content, will enter into those disturbing words of the Final Judgment as seen in Matthew’s Gospel. (Mt. 25:34-36) “Truly, I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” And “As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” (Mt 25: 40; 45) The first and second parts of Christ’s words about the final Judgment unambiguously show how essential it is, for the eternal life of every individual, to “stop,” as the Good Samaritan did, at the suffering of one’s neighbor, to have “compassion” for that suffering, and to give some help. The Pope says that suffering is present in the world in order to release love, to transform the whole of human civilization into a “civilization of love.”

Christ said: “You did it to me.” He himself is the one who through us experiences love. He himself is the one who receives help when it is given to the suffering person. He himself is present in this suffering person, since his salvific suffering has been opened to every human suffering. All who suffer have been called to be sharers “in Christ’s sufferings.” At one and the same time Christ has taught man to do good by his suffering and to do good to those who suffer. In this double aspect he has completely revealed the meaning of suffering.

VIII

Conclusion

The meaning of suffering is supernatural because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption. It is also deeply human because in it the person discovers himself, his dignity, his own mission. Suffering

is certainly part of the mystery of man. The Vatican Council reminded us that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. Christ, the final Adam, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddle of sorrow and death has meaning. Together with Mary, Mother of Christ, who stood beneath the cross, we ourselves pause beside all the crosses of contemporary man. May this suffering in union with the cross of Christ be victorious!