

**SUFFERING AND PRIESTLY
MINISTRY AND LIFE**

‘Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great sufferings’ (Mark 8:31).

I. Suffering in the life of Jesus

Our aim here is to attempt to think about suffering in a way that respects what Jesus shows us about God as love and about ourselves as created to live in communion of love with God. It is an attempt to present a theology of suffering: a way of thinking about suffering in the light of faith. While acknowledging the limits of our understanding of anything that transcends the measurable surface of things, we know that if we are to avoid misunderstanding, we must try to point our thinking in the right direction. We begin our thinking by focusing on the suffering of Jesus, for, as Saint Paul writes:

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [scandal] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

– 1Corinthians 1:23-24

The way we understand the place of Jesus’ suffering in our redemption, and how Jesus’ dying on the cross reveals God’s love, affects our thinking about suffering. Any misunderstanding of Jesus’ suffering will certainly warp our way of looking at the suffering of others. Before we look again at the crucifixion we need to review our thinking in two important areas. The first concerns the relationship between historical events and the will of God. The second concerns the relationship between God and time. We begin by looking at the relationship between events and God’s will.

Events and God’s will

If a person is in tune with God and acts in obedience to God’s inspiration and with a pure heart, we can safely say that he or she is carrying out the will of God. If, by contrast, a person rejects God’s will and acts sinfully, we must conclude that what that person does is not the will of God. The statement that God permits such sinful actions is helpful only if we understand it properly.

We believe that God is love and that God has chosen to create us and endow us with the gift of free will. However limited this gift is, by hereditary and environmental factors as well as by our own misuse, there is an edge of freedom in decisions that define them as human. Since God is love and since God has created us to receive and to give love, God does not force the human will. God does not intrude or control. God loves, thereby respecting our freedom to act against God’s will. Only in this general sense can we say that God permits the evil we do. We would be wrong to think that God could intervene to stop evil, but chooses not to do so. To think in this way is to imagine God as a puppeteer controlling the creatures God creates and pulling or not pulling the strings at whim. It would also lay on God the ultimate blame for all evil.

Love does not control. Love loves. If we freely obey the loving inspiration of God we carry out God's will and what we do as well as its effects will always be loving. If we disobey, if we sin, if we reject God's loving inspiration, we will perpetrate evil and we will do so against the will of God. Such a conclusion is demanded by an acceptance of God as loving and of human beings as free. When it comes to a particular human action, therefore, we cannot simply say that what we do and what happens as a result of what we do is necessarily God's will. It is God's will insofar as we are obedient to God's inspiration. It is not God's will insofar as we are disobedient.

This does not mean that when we act sinfully God is a neutral observer. God is love and God never ceases loving the sinner and those caught up in the resulting evil. God is inspiring the person who is sinning to cease from sinning and to repent. God is holding in love the victims of the sinful action and inspiring others to come to their aid as instruments of God's healing and liberating love. Furthermore, we must not limit our thinking to this side of death. Just as God took his Son from the cross into his embrace and drew him into the risen life of eternal love-communion, so God reaches out in love to those whose lives are taken violently from them by those acting contrary to God's will. God draws them, too, into his embrace.

When terrible things happen in our world, let us not glibly resign ourselves to the thought that God's mysterious will is somehow being carried out. Such a thought is heretical and an insult to God. Rather we are taught by Jesus to name sin for what it is but at the same time to believe that God is present in the mess, loving all involved. This belief will sustain us in hope as we suffer, for we will not stop seeking for God's presence in the pain. We will find this presence wherever we find love.

Only the present moment is real

We turn now to our second consideration. All our experiences happen in time and space. It is quite impossible for us to imagine anything outside these categories, and so when we think of God we cannot but think of God as remembering and foreseeing, as though God, like us, has a past and a future. It is essential to realise that such thinking, though unavoidable, is false. We have to learn to discount such ways of thinking about God as well as any conclusions that we are tempted to draw because we think of God in these ways. God simply is. We should think of God only in the present tense. It is we who exist in time, not God. Like God, our actual existence is always present, but our present is in flux. We grow and change. We have a past and we can project in imagination into possibilities for our future. Of course any future we might have will be real only when it is present.

We sometimes picture time as a horizontal line. Would we be better to think of it as a vertical one, always concurrent with God's eternal present? Our past is always absorbed into our present, and our present, though constantly in flux, is always in God's present. God's will is that we live in love, and God has given us freedom to respond to his grace which is always inspiring us to live to the full.

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Good parents do not force their child along a pre-conceived path. They respect the child's freedom, while doing all they can to help the child make choices from his or her deepest self. In the same way, God does not have a plan to which he demands submission. God simply loves. When Luke has Peter say to the Jewish crowd on the day of Pentecost that Jesus was 'handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (Acts 2:23), he is not contradicting what we have just written. He is assuring his audience that everything that happens in our world, however sinful and contrary to God's will, falls within God's providence. As Paul says: 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself' (2Timothy 2:13). People may act unlovingly, but we must look beyond human sin to the presence and action and will of God. When, in our present moment, we are in tune with God's grace, our actions are in accordance with God's will and they and any effects from them will always be good. When, by contrast, we are not in tune with God's loving will, our actions and any effects from them are sinful. God, however, is always working everything for good, for 'God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1Timothy 2:4).

The crucifixion and God's will

Let us now turn our attention to the crucifixion of Jesus and let us look first at what is happening on Calvary all around Jesus without gazing yet upon Jesus himself. There are some points of light, for we can see some people responding in love to God's inspiration. We see Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple and Mary of Magdala and the other women standing nearby. We see a sympathetic soldier hold up some drugged wine to Jesus' lips. We see one of the criminals deeply moved by Jesus and the centurion gazing with wonder upon Jesus' face. No doubt there were others in the crowd who were stirred deeply and who came to regret their demand for Jesus' crucifixion. However, what stands out on Calvary is the prevailing darkness, for most are not responding to grace. The murder of an innocent man cannot be said to be God's will.

When we witness Judas betraying Jesus we are not watching a man responding obediently to God's loving will. Whatever his motivation, his action drew from Jesus the cry: 'My friend, why do you betray me with a kiss?' and Judas himself came to see the folly of his terrible deed. When we witness the high priest tearing his garments and condemning Jesus to death in God's name, we recognise hypocrisy. Likewise with Pilate washing his hands of responsibility as he degrades Roman justice in the face of the threat of the Jewish crowd. We are not watching the unfolding of God's will or the carrying out of an eternal and divine plan. We are watching sinful human beings resisting God's will and perpetrating injustice on an innocent man. Paul recognises this when he includes the crucifying of Jesus among acts that displease God:

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God.

– 1Thessalonians 2:14-15

Likewise, Stephen in his address to the Jewish council accuses them of 'opposing the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors did' (Acts 7:51). Jesus himself recognises that in rejecting him the religious leaders are failing to respect God's loving will. In his parable about the tenants who continued to kill the owner's servants to avoid paying rent, Jesus speaks of himself:

The owner had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

– Mark 12:6-8

Perhaps the people could find some excuse for rejecting the prophets, but how could they reject someone as loving as Jesus? In killing Jesus they are not respecting God's Son, they are acting contrary to God's will. On another occasion Jesus accuses the Jewish leadership of looking for an opportunity to kill him. This is not because they are carrying out God's will, but because, in Jesus' words, 'there is no place in you for my word' (John 8:37). Had they listened to Jesus they would have been converted from their blindness and would never have committed the crime of crucifying him. On yet another occasion, Jesus complained:

You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors ... Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

– Matthew 23:31-32, 37

However, as noted earlier, God is not an impartial bystander when injustice is being perpetrated. God was present in the ways we have already noted: in Mary and the other women, in the Beloved Disciple, in the centurion and others. God was also present when Pilate's wife sent him a message:

Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.

– Matthew 27:19

Beyond all of this God was present sustaining Jesus and at Jesus' death taking him into God's eternal embrace. Sermon after sermon in the Acts makes the point that the Jewish leadership and those who went along with it were responsible for the unjust crucifying of God's Son. God's part in what was happening is seen in the Resurrection (see Acts 2:23-24; 3:13-15; 4:10; 13:28-30). To see God's will on the hill of Calvary we have to turn our attention from the dreadful sin and focus on Jesus, for, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

– Hebrews 5:7-8

On the cross, Jesus kept listening to his Father, and, in spite of his feeling of being aban-

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done, he kept believing in his Father's love, entrusting his Spirit into God's hands. On the cross Jesus kept praying, kept forgiving, kept caring for those around him. On the cross Jesus continued to carry out his Father's will that he give his life, give himself in love, whatever the circumstances. Is this how we should understand his prayer in the Agony: 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want' (Mark 14:36)? Jesus did not want to die. From the evidence available, it would seem that he had not yet succeeded in carrying out the mission given to him by the Father. Judas has clearly missed the point. Peter is certainly not yet ready. The other disciples are afraid and will run away when things turn bad. The religious leaders seem as blind as ever, and the crowd just as fickle.

Was Jesus broken by self doubt? Did he wonder whether he had been too forthright in his frontal attack on the temple establishment? Did he wonder whether he had overlooked something? Whatever his thoughts, there is no doubt how 'distressed and agitated' he felt (Mark 14:33) as he complained of being 'deeply grieved, even unto death' (Mark 14:34) and as 'his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground' (Luke 22:44). We are not told what was going on in his mind and heart, but we are told that he came to a profound peace in accepting his Father's will. It was by no means his Father's will that people murder an innocent man, but it was his Father's will that Jesus continue to love whatever others might do. Jesus therefore found peace in this obedience. He resolved to stay on course. He knew what he was to do, however disobedient and perverse others may be, and so he faced the Jewish and Roman authorities with dignity and with love.

Jesus did not discover meaning in the terrible injustice perpetrated against him. He gave it meaning by making of it a gift of himself, a gift of love, and in so doing he revealed who God really is and how we humans are to respond to God whatever the darkness. Truly 'the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (John 1:5). Others brutally took his life, against the will of God. Jesus, in obedience to God, did not falter but made even of his dying a gift of love. It is this point that is being made at the Last Supper. His heart was breaking as he broke bread for the last time, and when he shared the blood-red wine it was his life that was being poured out in love:

This is my body, which is given for you ... This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

– Luke 22:19-20

We sometimes carelessly speak as though it was Jesus' death that saves us. This is not how Mark saw it. He wants us to stand looking at Jesus with the centurion. What impressed this soldier was not the fact that Jesus died. He has seen many deaths before. What caused him to explain: 'Truly this man was God's Son!' was not Jesus' death but *the way* Jesus died (Mark 15:39). It was Jesus' love even in this darkest hour that crowned Jesus' mission, for in dying the way he did he revealed for everyone to see the amazing love of God. It is here that we find our hope of salvation, because here we see that, however sinful we have been, God's forgiving love is offered unconditionally.

Of course we are not forced to accept it. Salvation is not automatic. To receive it we have to open our hearts freely to the love that God is offering us in the pierced heart of Jesus.

By the way Jesus accepted the crucifixion, perpetrated upon him by those who were not listening to God, Jesus shows us how we, too, are to respond to what happens to us. He not only gives us an example, for on our own we would not be able to follow him. He also gives us a share in his own Spirit, the love-communion that binds him to the Father. Through this gift of self, Jesus enables us to embrace him crucified and to live through our own 'dyings' sustained by his love. In this we find our salvation.

There is a sense in which we can say that we are saved by Jesus' death on the cross. However, we must distinguish between the sinful actions of those who crucified Jesus and Jesus' loving response. It is the latter which saves us not the former. It is the latter which is in accordance with the will of God not the former. It is not the death itself that saves us, it is Jesus' manner of dying — in prayer and faith and love and forgiveness and compassion. It is this that gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (John 15:13). It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to his Father's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's loving design.

When we turn our attention from Jesus' relationship to his Father, and focus instead on his relationship to us, a second consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God, no matter how terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us all that God will vindicate us just as God vindicated his Son. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us, we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12).

There is no point in speculating about what would have happened had Jesus not been crucified. It would have been wonderful if all Jesus' contemporaries had responded to him like the Beloved Disciple and so many others. The fact is that many rejected Jesus and what he revealed about God, and they crucified him. From the beginning, in attempting to make some sense of what happened, Jesus' disciples saw a certain rightness in the way Jesus witnessed to love. Suffering is very much part of the human condition, and Jesus' example would have had little power to persuade us, had he not suffered. Jesus' words and example are all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him. Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this which makes his message so convincing and which draws us powerfully to him.

In a sense we might say that we needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy, and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life as we reacted to sin with more sin, till we lost all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We are so dulled by sin and so prone to get stuck in it that we might almost say that we needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not have to stop our loving.

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving despite being faced with ultimate rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to

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us, we are able to ‘look on the one whom they have pierced’ (John 19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from becoming lost in a maze of sin. His example and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross make it possible for us to give meaning to our sufferings by making an act of faith in God and allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his.

If in our human way we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). This is God’s reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of his loving inspiration. As we have already noted, in making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love, and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. However – and this too we have already noted – God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent.

Through Jesus, it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the Beloved Disciple saw water and blood flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34), for the healing even of those who were crucifying him. There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity’s rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but he did will the love-response; for it is God’s love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus. It is in this sense that one can say that the death of Jesus came within God’s providential will, so that ‘by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone’ (Hebrews 2:9).

When Jesus said in his agony ‘Not my will but yours be done’ (Mark 14:36), he was expressing his determination to continue, in the face of death, to carry out the mission of love given him by the Father, whatever the cost. He trusted that, in spite of the apparently meaningless death and the apparent failure it represented, his Father would see that the cause entrusted to him would succeed. When Jesus’ early disciples searched the Old Testament in an effort to make some divine sense out of the crucifixion, they discovered there a constant pattern of God’s love persisting through rejection. In this sense, his dying fulfilled the Scriptures, bringing to a stunning climax the revelation of divine love in the history of God’s people. It is in this way that we are to understand words such as the following where Mark has Jesus declare that ‘the Son of man must undergo great suffering’ (Mark 8:31).

Jesus’ way of dying and God’s taking him into the divine embrace in the resurrection are at the centre of the Christian faith, revealing as they do God’s love-response to human disobedience. Our disobedience matters. It matters that we sin, and that our sin has such terrible effects on ourselves and on other people. God cannot pretend that things are other than as they really are.

Sin, however, cannot change the truth that God is love. This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope. If we believe it, we may dare the journey

out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope of realising Jesus' dream of God's will being done 'on earth as in heaven'(Matthew 6:10).

II. Suffering in our lives

We come now to look at suffering and its role in our lives. We wish to do this especially in the light of our understanding of the suffering of Jesus. Before we do this, however, let us reflect on two basic human needs. First of all there is the basic human need to develop and to respect the unique person that we are. In one sense this journey never ceases, for we are always discovering depths of mystery in our person that continue to surprise us. This journey of self discovery and acquiring self esteem is not always an easy one, but it does have the support of a natural instinct. We experience a natural urge motivating us to become a person who is worthwhile. We desire to be of value in our own eyes and, since we are social beings, we experience the need and the urge to be recognised and respected also by others.

We have another even more basic need. The need which is at the very core of being human is to be entirely reliant upon God, the giver and sustainer of our being. The problem is that we do not experience a correspondingly natural urge to rely on God. Even the experiences which we recognise as religious tend to be drawn into and understood in terms of our natural urge to be someone in our own right. So it requires a grace from God that is above and beyond our natural gifts (a 'supernatural' grace) to make us aware of our need for complete dependence on God and to motivate us to do whatever is needed to attain this transcendent good.

Again and again Jesus reminds us: 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it'(Luke 17:33). Ultimately we discover ourselves only in God's love and to enjoy God's love we must transcend our own ego; we must let go of our natural tendency to focus on ourselves; we must learn to love.

It is here that suffering plays its irreplaceable role, for suffering forces us to recognise the basic flaw in our thinking that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment except in dependence upon and communion with God. Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in a situation that works, that feels comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed. Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body.

We may choose simply to hold on, to stay put, and to defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go, and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered us in and through the suffering.

We are free to choose to avoid the pain of letting go our self-centredness, or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace,

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courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to undergo what feels like a kind of dying, believing that God will raise us up.

Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are 'dyings': the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes, dreams and expectations. The pain of 'dying' can sometimes be in proportion to the success and duration of the adaptation we have made to whatever it is that is being threatened.

To be human means to be finite, to be dependent, to receive all we are and have as a gift. As human beings, we are not immortal. Once life has been given to us as a gift, the only life we ever know comes through dying. The whole process of maturing is one of accepting the 'dyings' that the human condition and our own and other people's sinful decisions inflict upon us. This certainly does not mean submitting inactively to injustice. But it does mean that even when a 'dying' is laid on us unjustly, we must come to an acceptance of the reality of the dying if we are to find a deeper life through it.

Failure is the stock-in-trade of a priest. We are always dealing with unfinished business. It is our privilege to be invited into the most intimate areas of people's lives where we witness miracles of grace daily, but where we also come up against the ugliest aspects of human behaviour. We cannot live other people's lives. We cannot carry their burdens or solve their problems. Of course we feel helpless. We are comforted by the memory of Jesus' words about the widow. She gave more than anyone else because 'out of her poverty she put in everything she had, all she had to live on' (Mark 12:44). We think, too, of the miracle of the loaves. If we take our inadequate resources and place them in the hands of Jesus he can work miracles with them. If it is his will he can use our gifts to feed the hungry (Mark 6:42). God is loving those to whom we minister. What he asks of us is that we offer them the love which he gives us for them – no less, but no more. Thoughts like these can save us from thinking that we are the saviours and from any other unrealistic expectation we might have of ourselves or of our ministry. The fact is that we cannot avoid suffering, involved as we are with people's pain, disappointment and failure.

Then there are the failures of the Church to live up to the promise of Vatican II: failures to engage the world with a lively faith. Bruised by the sin of the world much of the Church seems to be retreating to the trenches. There are Church leaders who denounce the sins of society without awareness of how we have failed the world and without any real engagement or real love. That there are notable exceptions is some consolation but leaves a profound disappointment.

The Church of yesterday can be likened to a river barge. It was a large barge, with straight front and sides and with a flat bottom, well built for navigating a river and able to carry a huge cargo of churches, schools, presbyteries, convents and monasteries. There were tennis courts for the Catholic youth organisations, and mother's clubs, and the children of Mary in their regalia, and the Sacred Heart sodality and the Legion of Mary. The priest was trained to pilot the barge along the river. The river had many bends, and it was not by any means easy-going. There were alligators and swamps, and every now and then rapids had to be negotiated. But on the whole the river was fairly predictable. The pilot could learn his job in a seminary and carry it out well if he followed the instruction book. This is a caricature, but I hope it captures some truth.

Our problem is that in our time the river has hit the sea, with obvious results for the barge. There is nothing wrong with reaching the sea: that is where rivers are meant to go. But the barge which has done an excellent job in bringing us down the river is not built for breaking through waves and negotiating the open sea. The waves are coming against the flow of the river. They are pounding against the flat prow of the barge, causing it to shudder and break apart, with the loss of much that it was carrying.

It is understandable that those on the barge suffered shock and many became desperate. Some are still trying to row back up stream, but that is proving impossible. It also displays a lack of faith in the God of history and in the leadership of the Church which agreed that the modern world is where the church wants to be. Some jumped over-board in one's and two's hoping to survive in small dinghies, bobbing up and down amid the waves. But dinghies are too small to carry the mission of the church, and are little use in the open sea. Others, unable to face what was happening, sat in the pilot's cabin and painted river scenes on the windows, trying to convince themselves and others that they were still in the river and that everything would be all right if everyone kept on doing what they were trained to do.

What has to happen, of course - and no one is pretending it is easy while the waves are crashing around us - is that we need to put a keel on the barge, and re-shape its prow. We need to make institutional changes that are faithful to the direction and task that has been given us, but that can cope with the waves and take us through them to the sea. Jesus may appear to be asleep, but he is with us - he said he would be till the end of time. If we cry to him, he will inspire us, together, to refashion the craft so as to retain all that is good in it. We will be able to maintain direction and continue our journey in a new environment, impelled by the love of Christ, directed by his Spirit towards our Father's home.

Problems! Yes, but opportunities that have never existed before. Other rivers too have reached the sea. Communication media have made it possible for people throughout the world to become more aware of each other and this has reduced not only ignorance but also the kind of fear that breeds off ignorance. Questions and attitudes arising in one place tend to spread, and we have become aware of common human questions that transcend traditional boundaries. It is possible as never before for men and women of good will to speak to each other and listen to each other. It has become possible for the gospel to be preached to all nations.

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What has the Gospel to say to this world? What attraction has the church for those searching for truth, for love, for light, for God? When we see the Church losing heart, losing faith, it is hard to keep up morale.

There are the sins of members of the Church, especially of our brother priests that necessarily tarnish an image that we once enjoyed. All is not lost. Most people know not to generalise. Respect can be earned, but it has to be earned: it is no longer taken for granted. Tony Philpot speaks of another failure that hurts: 'My generation of clergy is the first one to fail so significantly to attract or inspire young people. It is a failure on a massive scale'(page 93). Few are interested in becoming priests. We all know the physical and psychological strain which this entails.

Finally, and most significantly, there is our own personal failures to follow Jesus faithfully along a road which brings much joy, but much suffering as well. Some of these failures are public and bring shame. Others are known only to us and involve their own private suffering. Jesus chose imperfect people to be his disciples. There are no others. If we are not to give up the struggle and throw in the towel we have to die to our perfectionism, while trusting in his mercy and thanking him for using such unworthy instruments to be vehicles of his compassionate love to others who, like us, are struggling to find meaning and to live loving lives.

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life, beyond our experienced horizons. But each acceptance of the offer requires a new dying. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been burned (purified) away by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love. We learn this difficult lesson by contemplating Jesus in his suffering. He gives us an example, and by sharing his Spirit with us, he encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of suffering. By keeping our eyes on Jesus, especially on his way of responding to suffering, it is possible for us to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us. In our weakness and suffering, we experience a special strength that is not our own. Let us listen to Saint Paul:

The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

– 2Corinthians 12:9-10

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to unjust suffering inflicted on us by others. We tend to hurt back. Or, when we do not do that, we store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on. If, however, we can bear suffering in love; if we can continue to offer love ('offer the other cheek'); if, while working against injustice, and while working to alleviate suffering, we are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because of Jesus — then indeed we are blessed, for the suffering stops with us.

What is more, it exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause us the suffering. It can give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we love outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. This was Paul's experience. He still wanted to live with Jesus and so he wanted to suffer with him:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

– Galatians 6:14

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

– Romans 6:5

We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

– Romans 8:17-18

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that, through it, Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Jesus' followers to find joy in their sufferings:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

– Colossians 1:24

Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

– 1Peter 4:13

It seems true that to experience Christ as exalted we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies.

The amount of good that is in our world, as a result of suffering borne in love, is immeasurable. Both Paul and James consider such suffering a privilege:

Suffering

God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.

– Philippians 1:29

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.

– James 1:2

There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives. At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by it, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer. Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection:

In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

– 2Peter 3:13

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

– Philippians 3:10

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be God's faithful servants in bringing about the reign of God here on earth, we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in the love-communion with God which we call 'heaven':

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

– Philippians 3:20-21

In a future life we are assured of being finally and totally drawn into God's own love-communion, the communion enjoyed by the risen Christ:

It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

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 made visible 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 made visible in our mortal flesh ... We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence ... So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling ... so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

– 2Corinthians 4:6 - 5:4

If we think that whatever suffering exists in this world is willed by God (either directly intended by God or permitted by God), we will see our task as one of accepting suffering in all its forms. We will see such submission as doing God's will, while trusting in God's wisdom and love.

If, on the other hand, we recognise that, whatever the circumstances, God's will is that we love and be faithful to love; if we recognise that suffering is part of life and that its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will, we will see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent, without letting it deter us from loving faithfully. When we experience suffering ourselves or experience others suffering, we will not automatically assume that it is God's will. Rather, we will trust that God is present to all who are suffering and loving us to draw closer to God through our suffering, whatever its cause. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

Jesus was willing to lay down his life, not to die but to continue in the intimate life of love which he had with his Father. He laid down his life willingly 'in order to take it up again'(John 10:17), and he is encouraging his disciples to do the same, for he has come not that we might die but that we may 'have life and have it abundantly'(John 10:10). Sharing his life we 'will not die'(John 6:50). 'Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes'(John 5:21). The power that makes possible the victory of life over death is the power of love which, like everything else, he has from the Father (see John 5:26).

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. Ultimately this will happen when we share glory with God's Son in heaven; but we can experience liberation here on earth when love heals, and when to be healed leads to greater love.

Suffering

If we continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our purification and redemption. Suffering is part of every life. Let suffering be a cross for us who are disciples of Jesus, for then we can embrace him who died there, knowing that he is embracing us.