

St. Thomas and the “Good News” of Punishment?

BASIL COLE, O.P.
Dominican House of Studies
Washington, DC

The Blessed Charles Foucault once wrote something like, “He who can suffer and love will do things which this world thinks is impossible.” Yet, no one needs a special revelation to know that suffering bodily and spiritual afflictions is an evil. And if God is infinite love, Job pushes the mind of the Christian to wonder how God can inflict evil, directly or indirectly, on his faithful people:

Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall go back again. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord! We accept good things from God; and should we not accept evil?” (Job 1:21; 2:10b)

Pure reason is faced with a mystery, but with divine faith, there is an answer given by Saint Thomas Aquinas:

This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.¹

It should be noted that the desire to hurt is present in a man of himself; but the power to harm comes from God’s permission. And God does not permit the wicked to inflict as much harm as they would like but he sets a limit. “Hitherto you shall come, and shall not go further; and here, you shall break your swelling saves” (Job 38. 11). So too the devil

¹ *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1, Translations from ST are taken from the New Advent site at newadvent.org/summa/.

harassed Job only as much as the Lord permitted. So too, Arius did not harm the Church, only as the Lord permitted.²

We are led to bear our troubles in patience. Although every created thing is from God and is good according to its nature, yet, if something harms us or brings us pain, we believe that such comes from God, not as a fault in Him, but because God permits no evil that is not for good. Affliction purifies from sin, brings low the guilty, and urges on the good to a love of God: “If we have received good things from the hand of God, why should we not receive evil?” [Job 2:10].³

Job asks the rhetorical question “should we not accept evil?”—but he gives no reasons why we should. That God produces good from evil and that there are limits to the evils he permits cannot always be known by experience in this life. Saint Paul assures the new followers of Jesus that “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength but with your testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13). However, for those enduring such trials, this does not seem to be the case. It requires the same faith that believes that the Blessed Sacrament is the body of Christ.

The problem is also mentioned in the Catechism:

§164. Now, however, “we walk by faith, not by sight,” we perceive God as “in a mirror, dimly” and only “in part.” Even though enlightened by him in whom it believes, faith is often lived in darkness and can be put to the test. The world we live in often seems very far from the one promised us by faith. Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it.

² *Super 2 Tim 3*, lec. 2, no. 111, in *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, O.P., ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcon (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

³ *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] III ch. 144, no. 3, in *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Book Three*, trans. Anton Pegis (Garden City, NY: Image, 1955).

Death as Relief from Suffering or the Greatest Suffering, Objectively Speaking?

Concerning the evil of death, a substantial change of profound consequences takes place. What causes death may be painful or may occur in one's sleep. That a particular judgment on one's life by God takes place leading to rewards or punishments is taught by the universal and ordinary magisterium of the Church and is clearly expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] (supporting Scripture citations from its footnotes included here in brackets):⁴

§1021. Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ [2 Tim 1:9–10]. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul—a destiny which can be different for some and for others [see Luke 16:22; 23:43; Matt 16:26; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; Heb 9:27; 12:23].

§1022. Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification⁵ or immediately⁶—or immediate and everlasting damnation.⁷

⁴ All quotations of Scripture, patristic sources, councils, and the like that are given as being quoted by the *Catechism* are given in the form in which they are found there, which may differ slightly from translations commonly used in the field or even on the Vatican's website. Often magisterial sources in the *Catechism* are taken from the edition of Heinrich Denzinger's *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum* edited by Adolf Schönmetzer (36th ed.), cited in their notes (which I reproduce here) by the DS numbers. When I draw on Denzinger myself, it is from the 43rd ed., edited by Peter Hünemann, in the English–Latin edition done by Ignatius Press (2012), edited by Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash, by DH numbers.

⁵ CCC note 592: See Council of Lyons II (1274; DS 857–58); Council of Florence (1439; DS 1304–6); Council of Trent (1563; DS 1820).

⁶ CCC note 593: See Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* (1336; DS 1000–1001); John XXII, *Ne Super His* (1334; DS 990).

⁷ CCC note 594: See Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* (1336; DS 1002).

Not only is death an evil, but being judged by God for one's life, while not an evil, is fearful because there can be bad consequences of this judgment. Likewise, the desire to live on in good health is based upon the first inclination of human nature to preserve its very being.⁸ From the purely natural point of view, it seems mysterious that no one achieves his or her fulfillment in this life because it comes to an end and then one is largely forgotten. While there is a desire for immortality and some philosophers claim to prove that the soul lives on, immortality cannot be known with absolute certitude by pure reason: how will one exist after death, and will there be retribution for evil persons, or rewards for good persons who tried to live upright lives? Naturally speaking, one lives in a conscious or subconscious fear of potential extinction in this life. Death seems to be the ultimate evil if it casts us into some unknown state of either continued existence in a vacuum, or even a return to non-existence.

The Cause of the Problem

Revelation illuminates both the misery of the human race and the possibility of this misery having a purpose in the providence of an all-merciful God. If Adam and Eve, the first human beings created by the Lord, who represent the future of the human race, had not sinned and been deprived of grace, their offspring would have inherited their gifts of grace given to them. But as a result of their sin, human beings after them are called "fallen," that is, born into an existence without grace, and so unable to enjoy ultimate bliss or the happiness of contemplation or moral virtue in this life. Death and suffering flow from this "original sin" of theirs, which makes the journey of life difficult. Its purpose is impossible to understand by weakened human reason and will, and with the passions somewhat in rebellion against reason and faith. While made for the happiness, fulfillment, and joy that they naturally desire, humans remain in a state of impotence to achieve it naturally. As Saint Thomas reminds his readers:

For in the state of innocence it would not have been necessary for anyone to make progress in virtue through painful exercise. Hence the very fact that there is pain in such cases is traced back to original sin as its cause.⁹

⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 3.

⁹ *ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 7.

Further Consequences of the Fall in Light of Today's Coronavirus

It has been noted by many professionals who have blogs that the quarantine imposed by state governments to quell the coronavirus has produced many ill effects on the populace: loneliness, depression among other mental problems, heart complications, hypertension, increased smoking and eating, insomnia, drug abuse, suicides, use of pornography, sexual abuse, and a loss of a sense of self-worth. So, a question arises in the minds of faithful, thinking Catholics: Could God have created a better universe? Saint Thomas Aquinas gives an answer which is not consoling:

Given the things that actually exist, the universe cannot be better. This is because of the utter appropriateness of the order that God has established among the things that actually exist, and it is in this order that the good of the universe consists. If just one of these things were better, then the balance of the order would be upset, in just the same way that if one string of a harp were tightened more than it should be, then the sound of the harp would be ruined.

However, God could make other things, or add other things to those He has in fact made, and in that case this other universe would be better.¹⁰

Unless one is a mystic or a victim soul who suffers for the sins of others, ordinary sinners who have serious physical and moral trials often find that their miseries are too great, and last too long for a loving God to have permitted them. They feel the need to make "deals" with God such as promising that if he takes the suffering or temptations away, they promise to do something special for him or for the Church. Likewise, elderly people in rest homes who are filled with loneliness, or pain, and are unable to do anything but lie in bed, often pray, and pray devoutly during many months or years for death to end their misery, only to be disappointed, when they wake up morning after morning still alive. Likewise, parents and spouses suffer deeply when their child or spouse has cancer and is slowly dying, with no hope of a cure. Unfortunately, professors and preachers often fail to instruct their flocks on the necessity to pray for the grace to suffer for the glory and God and to beg for the salvation of their friends and relatives who may be far from God.¹¹

¹⁰ STI, q. 25, a. 6, ad 3.

¹¹ Council of Trent (DH 1536 and 1568); see also Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 13 and St. Paul's observation that "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested

The Human Person: The Primary and Exclusive Cause of Sin

The evil of sin is “properly opposed to the uncreated good itself, since it is contrary to the fulfillment of God’s will, as well as contrary to the divine love by which God’s good is loved for itself.”¹² If God is neither directly nor indirectly the cause of sin, but permits or tolerates the evil of sin, is he the cause of a lonely, painful, and sickly life? On a contemporary matter, is he the cause of the coronavirus? Is not God supposed to protect his loved ones from sickness, unforeseen death, disasters? Does he merely allow them to suffer or does he directly cause these calamities of body and soul? On a much broader scale, why does he not answer prayers for healing, or on a yet much larger scale put an end to abortion, wars, floods, and fires that destroy towns and cities? Why these evils exist after many intense prayers offered by millions of his followers is a perennial question. The teaching Church in her *Catechism* answers, following Sacred Scripture, that original sin and personal sin have deleterious consequence which produce these evils both physical and moral:

§400. The harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul’s spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination [see Gen 3:7–16]. Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man [see Gen 3:17, 19]. Because of man, creation is now subject “to its bondage to decay” [Rom 8:21]. Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true: man will “return to the ground” [Gen 3:19; cf. 2:17], for out of it he was taken. Death makes its entrance into human history [see Rom 5:12].

Here the *Catechism* quotes §13 of the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes*:

What Revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn towards what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from his good creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his source, man has also upset the relationship which should link

beyond your strength but with your testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13).

¹² *STL*, q. 48, a. 6.

him to his last end, and at the same time he has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other men and all creatures.

Since God cannot be the cause of sin, humans are the primary or exclusive cause.¹³ God on the other hand is the primary cause of punishing the disorder introduced by sin, based upon his infinite justice, which has been flaunted by personal sin. Can there be any "good news" about the evils of adversity and torment for the guilty, and even for the innocent?

Punishment: What Is It?

Punishment is a harsh reality that goes contrary to a person's will, disordered desires, and delight in apparent goods. They are "not inflicted by God for their own sake, as if he delights in them, but they are for something else, namely, for imposing of order on creatures, in which order the good of the universe consists."¹⁴ Some kind of evil (real or perceived as such) is inflicted in this life on the body, or on the "heart" or core of a person, but not necessarily in this life; it may take place only after death can be voluntary, that is, by being accepted as purification in this life, or non-voluntary, and then by being simply endured.¹⁵ Suffering is an experience of harms that differ in kind and degree. These harms causing sorrow could be harsh words from neighbors that humiliate, or worse, the limitation of freedom imposed on convicted criminals by the authority of the state. Physical pain

¹³ See *ST* I-II, q. 79, a. 1: "Now God cannot be directly the cause of sin, either in Himself or in another, since every sin is a departure from the order which is to God as the end: whereas God inclines and turns all things to Himself as to their last end, as Dionysius states (*Div. nom.* i): so that it is impossible that He should be either to Himself or to another the cause of departing from the order which is to Himself. Therefore, He cannot be directly the cause of sin. In like manner neither can He cause sin indirectly. For it happens that God does not give some the assistance, whereby they may avoid sin, which assistance were He to give, they would not sin. But He does all this according to the order of His wisdom and justice, since He Himself is Wisdom and Justice: so that if someone sin it is not imputable to Him as though He were the cause of that sin."

¹⁴ *SCG* III, ch. 144, no. 10.

¹⁵ See *ST* Suppl., q. 2, a. 2: "A thing is said to be voluntary in two ways. First, by an absolute act of the will; and thus no punishment is voluntary, because the very notion of punishment is that it be contrary to the will. Secondly, a thing is said to be voluntary by a conditional act of the will: thus cautery is voluntary for the sake of regaining health. Hence a punishment may be voluntary in two ways. First, because by being punished we obtain some good, and thus the will itself undertakes a punishment, as instanced in satisfaction, or when a man accepts a punishment gladly, and would not have it not to be, as in the case of martyrdom."

from accidents or illnesses, psychological pain from disappointments, failures, losses, or the death of friends and spouses, and the like are not directly from God, but mysteriously integrated in his providential governance. They often arise from bad or mistaken behaviors that produce unwanted physical or psychological consequences, such as smoking or drinking too much alcohol. In our time, a slow process of dying may inflict such inner confusion on a person that his life itself comes to seem unreal, which adds to the sorrows of affliction.

Suffering as Purely Punitive or Purifying

Furthermore, someone can be inflicted with chastisements throughout life that remains purely punitive, seemingly endless and empty of personal meaning except for being occasions for brooding or getting angry with God.¹⁶ On the other hand, depending on one's attitude and assisting grace from God, suffering can purify one's mind and heart, by uprooting false motivations and desires, leading to a transformation of one's outlook on life.¹⁷ Punishment that is received well in faith can lead to aversion from a disordered love of the things of this world and a deeper conversion to God.

¹⁶ See *ST* Suppl., q. 15, a. 2: "Compensation for a past offense can be enforced either by the offender or by another. When it is enforced by another, such compensation is of a vindictive rather than of a satisfactory nature, whereas when it is made by the offender, it is also satisfactory. Consequently, if the scourges, which are inflicted by God on account of sin, become in some way the act of the sufferer they acquire a satisfactory character. Now they become the act of the sufferer in so far as he accepts them for the cleansing of his sins, by taking advantage of them patiently. If, however, he refuses to submit to them patiently, then they do not become his personal act in any way, and are not of a satisfactory, but merely of a vindictive character."

¹⁷ See *SCG* IV, ch. 158: "Now, man renounces sin in his will provided he repents his past sin and forms the intention of avoiding it in the future. So, it is necessary that a man who is rising again from sin both repent for past sin and intend to avoid future sin. Indeed, if he would not make up his mind to refrain from sin, then sin in itself would not be against his will. But, if he did will to refrain from sin, but was not sorry for past sin, then this sin that he had committed would not be against his will. Now, the movement whereby one moves away from something is contrary to the movement whereby one approaches it; thus, whitening is contrary to blackening. Consequently, the will must abandon sin by moving in a contrary direction from those movements whereby it was inclined toward sin. Now, it was inclined toward sin by appetite and enjoyment in regard to lower things. Therefore, it must move away from sin by means of certain penances whereby it suffers some injury because of the sin that it has committed. For, just as the will was drawn toward consent to the sin by means of pleasure, so is it strengthened in the detestation of sin by means of penances."

This results in a better ordered love of the goods of this world and, better still, a love of divine gifts bringing a closer intimacy with God. Thus, one is enabled to accept the designs of God's providence with a more authentic desire to change one's life from lukewarmness to more fervent love.¹⁸ The *Catechism* reminds the follower of the Lord Jesus that either new moral evils can flow from suffering or the reverse, a deeper desire for God and acceptance of his personal plan:

§1501. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.

Faith reminds the disciple of the Lord Jesus of his abiding presence as God in one's daily responsibilities.¹⁹ Therefore, God is in all things by his power, inasmuch as all things are subject to his power; he is by his presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to his eyes; he is in all things by his essence, inasmuch as he is present to all as the cause of their being. To achieve one's ultimate destiny as well as one's personal mission in this life, one also has to embrace the crosses of one's life, as expressed by the pithy saying "no cross, no crown." Some of these crosses could be simple inconveniences, irritating persons or serious physical pains and heart-aches of spirit. Those rare Christians who are highly advanced in their relationship with God will ask for a cross from God and will soar in their prayer and apostolic life. Others not so highly advanced will sometimes request the same sufferings, only to sin by presumption due to ignorance of their limitations. As a result, they will not soar higher in virtue and grace because they were not ready for such heroic desires and actions. They thought they could shoulder great crosses principally by their own efforts

¹⁸ See *ST I*, q. 20, a. 4, ad 4: "The penitent and the innocent are related as exceeding and exceeded. For whether innocent or penitent, those are the better and better loved who have most grace. Other things being equal, innocence is the nobler thing and the more beloved. God is said to rejoice more over the penitent than over the innocent, because often penitents rise from sin more cautious, humble, and fervent. Hence Gregory commenting on these words [Homily 34 on the Gospels] says that, 'In battle the general loves the soldier who after flight returns and bravely pursues the enemy, more than him who has never fled, but has never done a brave deed.'"

¹⁹ See *ST I*, q. 8, a. 1, sc: "A thing is wherever it operates. But God operates in all things, according to Isa. 26:12, *Lord . . . Thou hast wrought all our works in us*. Therefore, God is in all things."

and only secondarily with God's help. Their love for God and his will, perhaps from their own illusions about God, becomes diminished. If they fall into grave sin, the infused virtue of charity will be returned through the sacrament of reconciliation, sometimes diminished or sometimes greater, due to a more intense sorrow for past sins.²⁰

Recently I received a letter from someone very discouraged about the moral fabric of the United States. He penned the following:

The Eternal Father will no longer countenance so much impurity so inimical to human beings having been made in the Image and Likeness of God, including adultery, divorce, artificial contraception, other vices destructive of chaste marriages, abortion of children, organized human trafficking of children for perverse abuse, sodomy and sodomite unions, pornography, drug addiction, neglect of the poor, especially children and widows, etc., etc. I think that a number of massive natural disasters are on the horizon and that the U.S.A. has so lost its special role in the End Times that there is no further need for the U.S.A. as a distinct country with any role in Christian leadership in Divine Providence.

The author could have been prophetically speaking not only about the United States but also about many countries from the First World to the Third World. Nevertheless, Saint Thomas Aquinas would say that the worst punishment God can inflict on these countries is not natural disasters but letting people continue to sin and become so hardened that they die unrepentant.²¹ And at the same time, the mystery is that in tolerating such

²⁰ See *SCG* IV, ch. 158: "In principle this can happen but it is rare. It should be kept in mind, however, that when the mind is turned away from sin the displeasure with sin can be so forceful, and the attachment of the mind to God so strong, that no obligation to punishment will remain. For, as may be gathered from things said earlier, the punishment that a person suffers after the remission of sin is necessary so that the mind may adhere more firmly to the good; since man is chastised by punishments, these punishments are, then, like remedies. It is also necessary so that the order of justice may be observed, in the sense that he who has sinned must stand the penalty. But love for God is enough to set the mind of man firmly in the direction of the good, especially if this love be strong; and displeasure for a past fault, when intense, brings great sorrow. Consequently, through the strength of one's love for God, and of one's hatred of past sin, there is removed the need for punishments of satisfaction or of purification. Moreover, if this strength be not great enough to set aside punishments entirely, nevertheless, the stronger it is, the smaller will be the punishment that suffices."

²¹ *ST* I-II, q. 79, a. 2; cf. q. 87, a. 2.

horrible evils, it is absolutely certain that God can bring good out of all this morass, though it is not immediately evident what that good is, or will be, in this life.²² As the *Catechism* teaches about God's infinite goodness:

§311. Angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice and preferential love. They can therefore go astray. Indeed, they have sinned. Thus has moral evil, incommensurably more harmful than physical evil, entered the world. God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil.²³ He permits it, however, because he respects the freedom of his creatures and, mysteriously, *knows how to derive good from it* [emphasis mine].

The *Catechism* here quotes Saint Augustine in support:

For almighty God, . . . because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works if he were not so all-powerful and good as *to cause good to emerge from evil itself* [emphasis mine].²⁴

The *Catechism* continues:

§312. In time we can discover that God in his almighty providence can *bring a good from the consequences of an evil, even a moral evil, caused by his creatures* [emphasis mine]. . . . From the greatest moral evil ever committed—the rejection and murder of God's only Son, caused by the sins of all men—God, by his grace that "abounded all the more" [Rom 5:20], brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption. But for all that, evil never becomes a good.

§313. "We know that in everything God works for good for those who love him" [Rom 8:28]. The constant witness of the saints confirms this truth.²⁵

²² ST I-II, q. 79, a. 4, ad 1.

²³ CCC note 176: St. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 1.1.2 (*Patrologia Latina* [PL], 32:1221–23. [See also] St. Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 79, a. 1.

²⁴ CCC note 177: St. Augustine, *Enchiridion* 2.3 (PL, 40:236).

²⁵ Here the *Catechism* provides quotes from St. Catherine of Siena, St. Thomas More, and Julian of Norwich (CCC notes 181–83).

§314. We firmly believe that God is master of the world and of its history. But the ways of his providence are often unknown to us. Only at the end, when our partial knowledge ceases, when we see God “face to face” [I Cor 13:12], will we fully know the ways by which—even through the dramas of evil and sin—God has guided his creation to that definitive sabbath rest [see Gen 2:2] for which he created heaven and earth.

What that definitive Sabbath rest is remains either obscure or simply unknown, either by experience or reason. Simple faith amid the trials of daily life is required to affirm that God is producing something good from them without necessarily knowing how he is doing it or what that good is. The evil of physical suffering, really distinct from the evil of sin, must be placed within the context of the goodness of God without being able to experientially understand that goodness. The *Catechism* is not naive about the trials and sorrows of this life when it teaches that, of themselves, notwithstanding potentially good outcomes, these evils may also, and often do, cause tumults in people’s lives:

§1500. Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death.

The Positive Side of the Gospel We Prefer to Hear

The most attractive and positively motivating revelations of the Gospel begin with the raising of human nature to a heavenly life by grace, which in turn brings infused theological and moral virtues to elevate the acquired virtues to supernatural motives, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit for more difficult acts of virtue, the indwelling of the Holy Trinity, either ordinary or exceptional charisms for service to others, and an openness to receive assisting or actual graces for one’s due responsibilities, inspirations of the Holy Spirit, as well as power to resist temptation to commit grave or deliberate venial sin.²⁶ Further, sins can be forgiven throughout one’s life by receiving the sacrament of penance or by the prayer of perfect contrition itself. In addition, it is revealed in Sacred Scripture that each person

²⁶ See *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 8, ad 2: “Man can avoid each but not every act of sin, except by grace, as stated above. Nevertheless, since it is by his own shortcoming that he does not prepare himself to have grace, the fact that he cannot avoid sin without grace does not excuse him from sin.”

has a guardian angel as a companion on the way of salvation, assisting by persuasion and even bringing actual graces to the person.²⁷ Jesus Christ is with his people in the Blessed Sacrament and also comes to us in the other six sacraments through the institution of the Church, all of which serves to bring us to the final goal of human life, namely, the beatific vision and the final resurrection of the dead. This final goal is unknown to pure reason but can be known by faith.²⁸ Sacred Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit to communicate truths that are necessary for our salvation. Sacred Tradition, partially oral and partially written by the Fathers of the Church, also brings the revelation of truths not explicitly found in Sacred Scripture as interpreted by the universal and ordinary magisterium. Over the centuries, the follower of the Lord Jesus has a certain blueprint to follow in his pilgrimage, whether in consolation or in desolation, if he or she is willing to discover and deepen an understanding of revelation.

Eternal and Temporary Punishment

However, there is a portion of the Gospel that is not uplifting without reflection. There is the possibility not only of physical pain and interior suffering in this life but also of perpetual and total unhappiness and pain that is called damnation after death. The fact that such a possibility exists is intended for the correction of those now living so as avoid it.²⁹ The *Catechism* reminds us of what remains the clear New Testament teaching, and in words that can be understood by anyone:

§1035. The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire."³⁰ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.

While the nature of "eternal fire," a secondary punishment, remains unknown, the primary punishment is the deep pain and frustration of

²⁷ There are over 365 references to angels in the Bible, such as: "He will give His angels charge concerning you to guard you in all your ways" (Ps 91:11); "See that you despise not one of these little ones: for I say to you, that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 18:10).

²⁸ See St. Paul VI's *Solemn Profession of Faith: Credo of the People of God*, among other creeds.

²⁹ *ST I*, q. 99, a. 1, ad 4.

³⁰ CCC note 615: DS 76; 409; 411; 801; 858; 1002; 1351; 1575; Paul VI, *Solemn Profession of Faith: Credo of the People of God*, §12.

losing the beatific vision. Fire on earth is analogous to the “eternal fire,” whose character cannot be known in this life save for the pain of burning, which is more easily understandable than losing the beatific vision.³¹

There is also the presence in the world of evil spirits who have a relative dominion over the world, and they can tempt humans easily due to the weaknesses of fallen human nature (concupiscence).³² This bad news makes the desire for God, doing his will, and seeking to know him through prayer and study difficult, but not impossible with his assisting grace. The Christian knows this fact so that he or she can be prepared to meet the temptations of the evil one and not be naive about the trials of the spiritual life.

The suffering of the body and spirit, wars, earthquakes, droughts, and epidemics among other diseases, and finally death itself are the consequences of original sin.³³ However, in the afterlife, there is also a temporary state of painful existence (purgatory) that causes a suffering accepted by separated souls to purify them from the effects of previous sin on earth, grave or not so grave. This “satispassion,” as Thomas calls it, willingly desired, disposes them for the beatific vision.³⁴ From different points of

³¹ This fire outside of time and space never consumes nor does it ever cease, which are not properties of earthly fire.

³² See *ST* I, q. 114, a. 1, ad 1: “Firstly by instigating them to sin; and thus they are not sent by God to assail us, but are sometimes permitted to do so according to God’s just judgments. But sometimes their assault is a punishment to man: and thus they are sent by God; as the lying spirit was sent to punish Achab, King of Israel, as is related in 1 Kings 22:20. For punishment is referred to God as its first author. Nevertheless, the demons who are sent to punish, do so with an intention other than that for which they are sent; for they punish from hatred or envy; whereas they are sent by God on account of His justice.” See also where the Council of Trent speaks of a certain limited dominion of the devil over human beings (DH 1511).

³³ *ST* I-II, q. 85, aa. 1–6.

³⁴ See CCC §1031: “The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned [see Council of Florence (DS 1304); Council of Trent (DS 1820; 1547 in DS 1580); see also Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* (DS 1000)]. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire [see 1 Cor 3:15; 1 Pet 1:7]. As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come [St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4.39 (PL 77:396); see also Matt 12:31].”

view, it also is a state of terrible sufferings, which somehow includes a "fire," far more painful than earthly fire, whose species we cannot fathom. Unlike the fire of damnation, it somehow purifies the dregs or leftovers of sin. However, there are great joys as well as an effect of being in the state of grace and knowing with absolute certitude that heaven will certainly be attained.³⁵ From a certain point of view, the souls in purgatory want these sufferings as the means for entering the bliss of heaven.

Furthermore, the journey of the spiritual life to heaven is a war, and all things considered, not an easy road, which is traditionally called a battle with the world, the flesh, and the evil one.³⁶ So, an essential aspect of the good news is the harsh reality called "punishment," which goes against the unruly human desires and dispositions that are called *fomes peccati*, or the first movements of sin that results from original sin. Besides, from past illegitimate desires and psychological dregs of sin come sinful dispositions that are ready to spring forth into sinful actions like lava from volcanoes.³⁷ These interior upsurges are afflictions that not only come from within the person but also emerge from the exterior trials of daily life. Nevertheless,

³⁵ Perhaps, when "Jesus descended into hell," he remained there not only to preach to the just in limbo of the just (which would have included his earthly adoptive father, St. Joseph), but also when visiting purgatory, perhaps he endured their fire, while explaining the good news of their future freedom to those there. If he did suffer the pains (a mere remote and speculative pious opinion neither taught nor condemned by the Church) and thereby identified with those in purgatory, he gave those undergoing this suffering consolation and deepened their certitude for heaven.

³⁶ See Aquinas *Super 2 Cor* 5, lec. 2, no. 169: "They please God by resisting evil. Hence he says, therefore, because our whole desire is to be present with God, we labor, i.e., we make great effort, i.e., we strive and fight against the temptations of the devil, the flesh and the world: 'Strive to enter by the narrow gate' (Luke 13:24). To please him, namely, God, with whom we desire to be present, whether we are at home or away: because unless we strive to please him in this life, while we are absent, we shall not be able to please him or be present with him in the other life: 'There was one who pleased God and was loved by him' (Wis 4:10)" (trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P. [Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012]).

³⁷ See *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 6, ad 17: "First movements do not have the complete nature of sin or demerit but are in a way dispositions for demerit just as venial sin is a disposition for mortal sin. The movements of sensuality themselves, then, do not have to be directly meritorious, because what is meritorious cannot be anything but a voluntary act, as has been said. But those passions are sometimes called vices or sins inasmuch as acts of the will or even habits are designated by the names of passions. Moreover, vices against nature are called passions even though they are voluntary acts, inasmuch as by such vices nature is disturbed from its proper order." See also *ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 6.

there is a call to steady one's life course with the moral virtue of penance—satisfactory acts, namely, prayer, fasting, and works of mercy—which requires effort and its own hardship.³⁸

The Virtue of Penance: Keeping Vigilance during Times of Temptation and Trials

In the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the word “punishment” occurs at least two thousand times and in the *Catechism* twenty-two times. In the Sacred Scriptures which Saint Thomas analyzes, this painful reality is connected to justice when God directly inflicts it.³⁹ Finally, individuals must reasonably punish themselves in order to grow in the virtue of penance and thereby expand the theological and moral virtues in their lives. This is precisely what contrition or sorrow for sin is:

For just as the inflation of one's own will unto wrong-doing implies, in itself, a generic evil, so the utter undoing and crushing of that same will implies something generically good, for this is to detest one's own will whereby sin was committed. Wherefore contrition, which signifies this, implies rectitude of the will; and so it is the act of that virtue to which it belongs to detest and destroy past sins, the act, to wit, of penance.⁴⁰

³⁸ See *ST* Suppl., q. 4, a. 4: “Since contrition, so far as it is a kind of displeasure seated in the rational appetite, is an act of the virtue of penance, there can never be excess in it, either as to its intensity, or as to its duration, except in so far as the act of one virtue hinders the act of another which is more urgent for the time being. Consequently, the more continually a man can perform acts of this displeasure, the better it is, provided he exercises the acts of other virtues when and how he ought to. On the other hand, passions can have excess and defect, both in intensity and in duration.”

³⁹ See *SCG* III, ch. 158, no. 5: “After a man has secured remission of his sin by grace and has been brought back to the state of grace, he remains under an obligation, as a result of God's justice, to some penalty for the sin that he has committed. Now, if he imposes this penalty on himself by his own will, he is said to make satisfaction to God by this: inasmuch as he attains with labor and punishment the divinely established order by punishing himself for the sin, which order he had transgressed by sinning through following his own will. But, if he does not exact this penalty of himself, then, since things subject to divine providence cannot remain disordered, this penalty will be inflicted on him by God. Such a punishment is not called one of satisfaction, since it is not due to the choice of the one who suffers it; but it will be called purificatory, because through being punished by another he will be cleansed, as it were, until whatever disorder there was in him is brought back to proper order.”

⁴⁰ *ST* Suppl., q. 1, a. 2.

Making amends means doing works of penance called acts of satisfaction, namely, prayer, fasting, and the works of mercy.⁴¹

Sometimes, physical pains produced by natural causes are inflicted by a merciful and just God directly or through angels, or even demons by his permission, for many good purposes. The outcomes are good, though not always perceived, provided one cooperates with God's assisting grace during any trials. Accepted punishments for false attitudes and intentions, errors in the mind, weaknesses in the will, as with souls in purgatory who willingly accept their punishments, become purifications for someone who cooperates with grace. This cooperation then intensifies both the theological and moral virtues, by the inspirations of actual grace and even more with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁴²

Another major teaching of the good news of punishment is the Passion and death of the Lord Jesus. Here, the *Catechism* reminds us that the many evils suffered by the Lord Jesus have wonderful effects on those who believe and ponder his extraordinary example in order to follow him by a life of virtue:

§478. Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony and his Passion, and gave himself up for each one of us: "The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me" [Gal 2:20]. He has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, "is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that . . . love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings" without exception.⁴³

§1505. Moved by so much suffering Christ not only allows himself to be touched by the sick, but he makes their miseries his own:

⁴¹ *ST* III, q. 27, a. 3.

⁴² See CCC §1742: "The grace of Christ is not in the slightest way a rival of our freedom when this freedom accords with the sense of the true and the good that God has put in the human heart. On the contrary, as Christian experience attests especially in prayer, the more docile we are to the promptings of grace, the more we grow in inner freedom and confidence during trials, such as those we face in the pressures and constraints of the outer world. By the working of grace, the Holy Spirit educates us in spiritual freedom in order to make us free collaborators in his work in the Church and in the world: Almighty and merciful God, in your goodness take away from us all that is harmful, so that, made ready both in mind and body, we may freely accomplish your will."

⁴³ CCC note 118: Pius XII, *Haurietis Aquas* (DS 3924; cf. DS 3812).

“He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” [Matt 8:17; cf. Isa 53:4]. But he did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover. On the cross Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away the “sin of the world” [John 1:29; cf. Isa 53:4–6], of which illness is only a consequence. By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion.

Christological Insights into Suffering for Others

From another perspective, virtuous suffering on the part of Jesus leads to a personal reconciliation with God objectively on behalf of humankind, but those who hear this teaching are required to appropriate that reconciliation in their own thoughts, words and good works:

§615. “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” [Rom 5:19]. By his obedience unto death, Jesus accomplished the substitution of the suffering Servant, who “makes himself an offering for sin,” when “he bore the sin of many,” and who “shall make many to be accounted righteous,” for “he shall bear their iniquities” [Isa 53:10–12]. Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.⁴⁴

The key that opens up the potential goodness of the physical or psychological evils of punishment, then, is cooperation with the graces that accompany such punishment. Such cooperation can either restore a relationship with God, or deepen an existing bond with God. Rebelling against punishment, on the contrary, can either cause someone to turn away from God or intensify one’s present distance from God even more. Also, one can so resist those graces as to hate God, and in the worst case, God may temporarily not give grace to those who undergo suffering, if they do not want his help. This latter situation exists when particular individuals have become “hardened of heart” by their love of sin.⁴⁵ Never-

⁴⁴ CCC note 445: see Council of Trent (DS 1529).

⁴⁵ See *ST* I-II, q. 79, a. 3: “Spiritual blindness and hardness of heart signify two things: One of them is a movement of the human soul when it adheres to evil and is turned away from God’s light. And in this respect God is not a cause of spiritual blindness and of hardness of heart. However, the other one is the withholding of

theless, given the fact that human beings do not have angelic intellects and wills, so as to make absolute and definitive choices, often after much pain and suffering, those in a state of resistance may turn to God out of desperation and repent of an entire life of sin as a pure gift from God. This why Saint Thomas teaches that "God allows some to fall into sin so that, acknowledging their own sin, they might become humble and be converted, as Augustine says in *De natura et gratia*."⁴⁶ Further, as a consequence of one friend's suffering for another, God may give graces of repentance to a great sinner to turn away from sin and adhere to God's offer of friendship. Saint Thomas has something insightful to say about this aspect of suffering for others:

It is written (Gal 6:2): "Bear ye one another's burdens." Therefore, it seems that one can bear the burden of punishment laid upon another. Further, charity avails more before God than before man. Now before man, one can pay another's debt for love of him. Much more, therefore, can this be done before the judgment seat of God.⁴⁷

Why "much more"? The power of charity or divine love in the soul has a certain efficacy when it comes to suffering for others. As Aquinas teaches:

Now, what we do by our friends, we do apparently by ourselves: because friendship, especially the love of charity, binds two persons together as one. Wherefore as a man can satisfy God by himself, so can he by another; especially when there is urgent need for it. For a man looks upon the punishment which his friend suffers for his sake, as though he suffered it himself: and so he is not without punishment, seeing that he suffers with his suffering friend, and he suffers all the more, according as he is the cause of his friend's suffering. Again, the love of charity in him who suffers for his friend makes the satisfaction more acceptable to God, than if he suffered for himself: for the former comes of the eagerness of charity, but the latter comes of necessity. Hence we infer that one man may satisfy for another, so long as both remain in charity: wherefore the Apostle says (Gal 6:2): "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so ye shall fulfil the law of Christ."

... But this is by way of merit rather than of satisfaction. On the other hand, as regards the payment of the debt, one man can satisfy for another,

grace, from which it follows that the mind is not divinely illuminated in order to live in an upright way and that the man's heart is not softened in order to live in an upright way. And in this respect God is a cause of spiritual blindness and hardness of heart."

⁴⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 79, a. 4.

⁴⁷ *ST* Suppl., q. 13, a. 2, sc.

provided he be in a state of charity, so that his works may avail for satisfaction. Nor is it necessary that he who satisfies for another should undergo a greater punishment than the principal would have to undergo (as some maintain, who argue that a man profits more by his own punishment than by another's), because punishment derives its power of satisfaction chiefly from charity whereby man bears it. And since greater charity is evidenced by a man satisfying for another than for himself, less punishment is required of him who satisfies for another, than of the principal: wherefore we read in the *Lives of the Fathers* (5.5) of one who for love of his brother did penance for a sin which his brother had not committed, and that on account of his charity his brother was released from a sin which he had committed. Nor is it necessary that the one for whom satisfaction is made should be unable to make satisfaction himself, for even if he were able, he would be released from his debt when the other satisfied in his stead.⁴⁸

At the heart of punishment in general is God's justice and his rights over human persons. Humankind's unreasonable tendency to choose the goods of life against the law of God leads to punishments, either temporarily in this life (though not always) or eternally in the next life, or both. The *Catechism* explains this in the context of indulgences:

§1472. To understand this doctrine and practice of the Church, it is necessary to understand that sin has a double consequence. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. On the other hand, *every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory* [emphasis mine]. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain.⁴⁹

On the other hand, punishment can be reasonably self-inflicted with ascetical practices such as prolonging prayer instead of wasting time on

⁴⁸ SCG III, ch. 158.

⁴⁹ CCC note 83: See Council of Trent (DS 1712–713; DS 1820).

the internet, fasting or eating unappetizing foods, accepting harsh weather conditions, or depriving oneself of sleep.⁵⁰ Doing personal penance makes satisfaction for previous sin. This can include the works of mercy (corporal and spiritual).⁵¹ These works are meant to inflict some kind of penalty on self in addition to helping others, so as to rectify the disorders introduced into one's spiritual faculties, be it the intellect adhering to error, or the will weakened to follow right reason and faith, or the passions charming one away from reason and faith.⁵² Restoring and/or strengthening virtuous behavior and rebuilding good moral habits and dispositions is one of the goals of penance. One is attempting to prevent oneself from disobeying God's precepts. This sums up the ascetical life of Christians who wish to grow in their intimacy with God, since sin violates God's rights over humankind. The Church attempts to help her children grow in this virtue of making satisfaction for past sinning by reminding the people of God of the obligation of doing penance, especially on the Fridays of the year and during Lent (some might include Advent as well).⁵³

Looked at from a positive point of view, the virtue of penance looks to the rehabilitation of one's inner self by restoring the faculties and appetites that have become blinded, weakened, and enslaved to sin. As one grows and sustains this virtue of penance, so one is restored in grace and virtue, which incorporates the divine theological virtues into the properties of the soul (intellect and will), and promotes a stronger presence of the

⁵⁰ See *Super Iob* 8, lec. 1, where Thomas Aquinas maintains that prayer is at the forefront of the works of satisfaction.

⁵¹ *ST* III, q. 27, a. 3.

⁵² See *SCG* III, ch. 158: "By this, then, it becomes evident that, after a man has secured remission of his sin by grace and has been brought back to the state of grace, he remains under an obligation, as a result of God's justice, to some penalty for the sin that he has committed. Now, if he imposes this penalty on himself by his own will, he is said to make satisfaction to God by this: inasmuch as he attains with labor and punishment the divinely established order by punishing himself for the sin, which order he had transgressed by sinning through following his own will. But, if he does not exact this penalty of himself, then, since things subject to divine providence cannot remain disordered, this penalty will be inflicted on him by God. Such a punishment is not called one of satisfaction, since it is not due to the choice of the one who suffers it; but it will be called purificatory, because through being punished by another he will be cleansed, as it were, until whatever disorder there was in him is brought back to proper order. Hence, there is this statement of the Apostle in 1 Corinthians (11:31–32): 'if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged, but whilst we are judged, we are chastised by the Lord, that we be not condemned with this world.'"

⁵³ See *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983), §§839, 1245, 1249–50, 1252.

indwelling of the Trinity in the depths of the soul. During this journey, these efforts are sustained by grace intensified by prayer, reception of the sacrament of penance and the fervent offering of Mass and reception of Holy Communion.

The question is, does God punish? It seems for a Catholic to be obvious, since the word in Greek and Hebrew is used throughout the Old and New Testaments. However, the final and even the efficient cause of the punishment can be obscure. On a personal level, punishment eliminates the leftovers or dregs of forgiven sin. As the *Catechism* teaches concerning the virtue of penance, punishment relates to restoring one's inner personal life:

§1473. The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains. While patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death, the Christian must strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace. He should strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the "old man" and to put on the "new man" [Eph 4:22, 24].

Conclusion

If God had chosen not to create other beings of a spiritual nature such as angels and humans there would be no need for punishment, nor would the justice and mercy of God be activated. Punishment consists of painful realities that go contrary to one's will, such as physical pain and/or psychological sorrow and fear.⁵⁴ The good news of punishment is relative because it is a mixed reality, both good and bad, though not on the same level as moral evil. It is a consequence of moral evil, whether personal or derived from original sin, or (in very special cases) permitted by God for someone to endure as a victim soul for the sake of the salvation of others who are not disposed and so cannot receive the usual graces of conversion or re-conversion in their present state of mind and heart. The Passion and

⁵⁴ See *ST I-II*, q. 87, a. 2: "For the act of sinning renders a man deserving of punishment insofar as he is transgressing the order of God's justice, and he does not return to that order except through some sort of compensatory punishment, which leads him back to the equality of justice. More specifically, someone who has indulged his own will more than he should, acting contrary to God's commandment, must, in accord with the order of God's justice, undergo, whether willingly or unwillingly, something contrary to what he wills."

death of Jesus are necessary precisely because no human being can forgive sins, bestow heaven, or repair the damage due to sin.

There is a kind of just punishment that is merciful because it is accepted as a way to share in the mystery of redemption, that is, suffering for others to pay their debt to God for sinning against him. One and only one kind of punishment lasts eternally, that is damnation both physical (the mysterious fire) and mental (anguish at the loss of ultimate happiness).⁵⁵

All other punishments are endured temporally, sometimes prolonged even until death (such as fatal illnesses), other times more or less so, with many degrees within that spectrum of the life of a person or even a nation. Some punishments are inflicted by deleterious circumstances (such as corrupt or tyrannical governments), others by God with the help of his angels and occasionally demons, for reasons known only to God, and others by the moral corruption of peoples, as can be known in principle by faith. Some punishments come from mistaken choices due to ignorance, or lack of experience, or new circumstances that have painful consequences. These reverses of good fortune may come about through acts such as eating certain foods that are toxic for some bodies (allergies), or making bad investments that lead to destitution, with its sorrows, fears, and worries. Others come about from situations where one is not in control, such as being stranded for days in airports during major snow storms, or falsely incarcerated for crimes not committed. These examples can be multiplied exponentially.

No matter what bad things happen to the followers of the Lord Jesus, the good news is that with his assistance in this life, they can become occasions of grace and greater union with him. Knowing about the absolute punishment of damnation also is good news because it is always a timely warning when facing grave temptations against the way to heaven. While this sector of good news is not immediately consoling, it is however realistic and, when pondered in light of the other aspects of faith, keeps one from becoming lukewarm and induces one to keep up the struggle for the sight of the Triune God. N.V

⁵⁵ For St. Thomas, the punishment of the babies in limbo is something objective, namely, not being able to possess supreme happiness, but in no way do they suffer any pain and therefore possess a natural happiness, unless God chooses to bring them to the beatific vision in another way unknown at this time since this possibility has not been revealed. See my article "Is Limbo Ready to be Abolished?" *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6, no. 2 (2008): 403–18.