

The Christian Meaning of Suffering¹

JOHN M. McDERMOTT, S.J.
Sacred Heart Major Seminary
Detroit, MI

WITH ITS ATTENDANT TRAVAIL mortality weighs heavily on man. Like all corruptible creatures composed of soul and body, he is born to die. Yet he alone knows his threatening fate. This fate, which he might postpone but can never evade by his own powers, reveals a strange rupture within his own being. His nature strives to perpetuate itself, but by the same nature he is doomed to death and corruption. As St. Paul wrote, “Wretched man that I am! Who can save me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24). He was not the first to lament the calamity inherent in human existence. Our attempt at understanding commences by considering the responses of men to death and suffering apart from Christian revelation, contrasting ancient pagan with modern atheistic views. Once the problem of God’s relation to suffering is identified, we can examine suffering from a purely philosophical perspective. Third, Christ’s revelation illuminates suffering and indicates its positive meaning. Only in Christ, as understood within the full ambit of Catholic doctrine, does suffering find an explanation satisfying man’s head and heart. This answer serves to assuage human pain even as it lays the foundation for a Catholic apologetic in world wracked by dissension yet fearful of the Cross, mankind’s only salvation.

¹ This article expands a lecture delivered most recently at the centenary celebration of Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit. The University of Notre Dame Press will publish its shorter form in *Enter by the Narrow Gate: Contractions of the New Evangelization* in the series *Global Perspectives on the New Evangelization*, edited by John Cavadini and Donald Wallenfang. I express gratitude to Laura Ring for suggested improvements and Victor Salas for philosophical clarifications. Neither agrees with everything in the article. Responsibility for errors is my own.

The Pagan Predicaments

Classical Paganism: Gilgamesh and Achilles

Since almost 2000 BC the myth of Gilgamesh was retold throughout Mesopotamia in Akkadian, Hittite, Hurrian, and Babylonian versions.² In it, Gilgamesh, Uruk's king, confronting death's mystery, attempts to escape its doom. Two-thirds divine, one-third human, mighty Gilgamesh meets his equal in Enkidu, and from their struggle arise mutual respect and friendship. Together they decapitate the monster Huwawa and destroy the Bull of Heaven that was devastating the earth at the instigation of Ishtar, whom Gilgamesh insulted by refusing to become her consort. As punishment for killing the bull, the gods decree that one of the heroes must die; they decide on Enkidu. Distraught, Gilgamesh mourns his friend's departure "to the house which none leave who have entered it" (7.4.34),³ a land bereft of light where food consists of dust and clay. Fear of death then invades him and he roams far from home in the effort to avoid his fate. The divine Siduri advises him to be content with his mortal lot and enjoy earthly pleasures: "When the gods created mankind, death for mankind they set aside, life in their own hands retaining" (10.3.1-4). But Gilgamesh persists and voyages over the waters of death to meet Utnapishtim, who promises immortality if Gilgamesh can resist sleep for six days and seven nights. The hero fails the challenge. In pity Utnapishtim reveals "a secret of the gods": if Gilgamesh can pluck a particular plant from the sea's depths, its eating will rejuvenate him. After consuming a morsel, Gilgamesh pauses on his return home to bathe in a cool well, leaving the plant aside. A serpent smells its fragrance, steals it, eats it, and sloughs off its skin. Despairing Gilgamesh laments his fate: "For whom . . . have my hands toiled? For whom is being spent the blood of my heart? I have not obtained a boon for myself" (11.293-95).

Homer's *Iliad* similarly describes man's plight. Doom hovers over all: "The generation of men is as the generation of leaves. The wind pours leaves upon the earth, but the vibrant forest generates others when spring becomes seasonally present. So one generation of men flourishes, another ceases" (6.146-48). Each lifetime harbors manifold woes, as Zeus

² See *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 72-73. The translation of the reconstructed text follows on 73-97 of *ANET* and will be cited parenthetically here by tablet, section, and line or tablet and line.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are my own; for the Old Testament, however, I rely on the RSV, while making occasional changes in view of the original.

acknowledges: "Of all things that breathe and creep upon the earth none is more wretched than man" (17.446–47). That harsh truth is illustrated in Homer's tale. Achilles loses his friend Patroclus at Hector's hands while defending fellow Greeks against a Trojan onslaught. Informed by his goddess mother, Thetis, that if he reenters the fray, he will lose his life under Troy's wall, Achilles accords greater weight than life to his duty to avenge a friend. Entering battle, he kills Hector and dishonors his body by dragging it behind his chariot. After Patroclus's funeral games Achilles's wrath retains Hector's body. In pity benevolent gods preserve it from decay, and Zeus orders a reconciliation. Achilles bows to the divine command, and Priam, likewise acceding, gathers a ransom for Hector's body. Entering Achilles's tent as a suppliant, the Trojan king embraces the knees and kisses the hands that destroyed his son to request the corpse's restitution. His presence reminds Achilles of Peleus, his father, whom he will never see again. Achilles's heart is moved by the plight of the old man who lost his son and of his own father soon to lose his only son. Both weep at fate's cruel blows, and Achilles reflects: "The gods destined poor mortals to live in grief, while they are themselves without care" (24.525–26). He counsels the grieving father to bear disasters divinely sent: "Be stout. Let not your heart lament without abating, since your mourning can do nothing for your son, not raise him up, before you suffer another evil" (24.549–51). Priam reclaims Hector's corpse and return it to Troy amid general lamentation. The world's greatest epic concludes with a second funeral and the "burial of Hector, tamer of horses."

Those early sagas define the human condition: life begins with a cry, ends with a sigh, and in-between a world of woe does lie. Why did men not despair, but struggle to live on? One reason may lie in their expectation of the afterlife. Consuming dust and clay did not appeal to discerning palates in Gilgamesh's audience. In the underworld Achilles's shade informs Odysseus that it is preferable to be a poor farmer's serf than to dominate the dead. His sole consolation comes from hearing of the glorious accomplishments of Neptolemus, his only son (*Odyssey* 11.488–91; 11.505–40). Wretched as is this life, the next shadowy existence is worse.

Modern Revisions

Current Western culture is far removed from its heroic age. Then people knew that life was challenging, often short and brutal, but they struggled not to leave it. Too many familial relations and friends depended upon them. Today in the United States, a bellwether for technological societies, the suicide rate among young people 17–25 has been climbing

even faster than in the general population, and males are four times more likely than females to end their lives. Approximately forty-seven thousand suicides occur annually, the second leading cause of death among youth 10–34. Almost 2 percent of youth 18–25 contemplated suicide in 2017. The suicide rate increased 31 percent in the period 2001–20017.⁴ Yet no previous generation was so richly endowed with technological improvements facilitating life's tasks; medical expertise prevents and heals diseases or injuries which previously involved permanent impairment. Pain has been alleviated as never before. Yet people are obviously unhappy. Surveys reveal that 27 percent of the population rarely or never feel that anyone really understands them, and loneliness peaks in the 18–37 age group. In a 2019 survey, 61 percent of those polled say that they are lonely; among millennials the percentage climbs to 71%, and for generation Z the loneliness index reaches 79 percent.⁵ And these dire statistics reflect a state of the country previous to the imposed Covid restrictions which aggravated societal isolation. Centuries earlier Aristotle remarked: "Without friends no one would choose to live."⁶ Perhaps the privileged expectation of achieving happiness, whose pursuit the U.S. Declaration of Independence guarantees, leads to too many rebuffs.

The heroic age embodied an aristocratic order; each had to accomplish challenging duties incumbent upon rank. Today's egalitarian ideology breeds a sense of entitlement which mutates readily into a mentality of victimization: because I desire, yet lack what my equals possess, society conspires against me willfully or systemically. Such a mind-set, conducive to neither happiness nor achievement, augments frustration and anger. Revolutions generated in envy usually wind up devouring their children, a truth exemplified in Danton and Robespierre. During its revolution (1789–1804) France went from shouting "liberty, equality, fraternity" and "decapitate aristocrats" to "long live the emperor." Any revolution promising justice is doomed to disappoint its devotees. Justice bifurcates into two principal types: commutative and distributive. The former treats everyone in abstract equality before the law, tit-for-tat; the latter treats all people according to their needs, skills, and achievements, that is,

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Suicides Rising across the US," *Vitalsigns*, cdc.gov/vitalsigns/suicide; National Institute of Mental Health, *NIMH*, nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml.

⁵ Cigna Insurance, *CIGNA U.S. Loneliness Index, 2018*, www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1.1155a 5.

differently according to situation, history, status, merit, and in view of the common good. Obviously what is justice to one is injustice to the other. Anyone raised in a family recognizes how children insist on strict equality in parental treatment when it is to their advantage, yet defend their privileges vis-à-vis siblings by pointing out differences in age, sex, achievement, experience, and so on, when benefits accrue to them. Analogously in civil society some groups insist on strict individual equality before the law and reward according to merit while others demand recompense for disabilities foisted upon their particular group in past times. Pure justice seems a utopian ideal.⁷

A comparison of heroic and present ages reveals very different family experiences. The ancients knew parents and relatives. Patronymics identified them. Family, clan, and city-state provided a sense of secure belonging. Fathers and mothers ruled families. Modern Western society, precisely qua egalitarian, isolates individuals. In my youth people identified themselves by surname and baptismal name; today people habitually introduce themselves by their first name alone. Often American college students do not know their friends' family names. Technology doubtless contributes to isolation. Students regularly wander around campus staring into iPhones and punching out crabbed attempts at intelligible communication; they fail to notice the wider world.⁸ Isolation is intensified through the family's decay. While in the United States the divorce rate has been gradually lessening from the 1990s, when over half of marriages seemed doomed to dissolution, a main reason is the decline in the number of marriages. People enter various cohabitations instead. Unfortunately these temporary alliances are becoming ever more transient. Sadly, painful consequences persist. Children from broken homes are four times more likely to suffer divorces in their own marriages than children from stable families, not to mention more out-of-wedlock pregnancies, transient cohabitations, lower academic and professional achievements, and general

⁷ The volume *Equality: Selected Readings*, ed. Louis Pojman and Robert Westmoreland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), offers a broad gamut of diverse interpretations of "equality." Underlying the confusion rests the philosophical conundrum of the one and the many, same and different, continuous and discontinuous, infinite and finite, absolute and relative, etc., which manifests itself in the physical sciences; see John McDermott, S.J., "Mystery of Matter," *Angelicum* 87 (2010): 993–1014; McDermott, "Matter, Modern Science, and God," *Angelicum* 88 (2011): 481–508. A hierarchical society has its own problems, but that is matter for another study.

⁸ The abolition of the distinction between "Mrs." and "Miss" in social addresses witnesses the egalitarian reduction of everyone to amorphous, unrelated individuals. Now that some wish to delete gender references, it is no wonder that people become confused.

insecurity and unhappiness.⁹ How can anyone be happy when a basic human relation is destroyed, especially if solemn pledges of fidelity were given? How can one overlook one's own children deprived of a parent? Many unhappy, even guilty people must be walking around America's cities and villages, and their children often find themselves unmoored and rudderless in the swirling tides of accelerated societal change, as the media permeates conscious life and post-modern academe, the media's nursemaid, insists that meaning is created by will and language.¹⁰

Current secular society finds itself in a contradiction, caught between modernism and post-modernism. On one hand people justify trespassing traditional moral norms by insisting on their freedom to do what they feel like doing, that is, doing what comes naturally; the Enlightenment jettisoned original sin, freeing *philosophes* to "follow their nature," to seek happiness, to encourage self-love, to embrace passions, pride, and sexual pleasure, even in promiscuity.¹¹ Modern seekers of "self-fulfillment" are the

⁹ Jane Anderson, "The Impact of Family Structure on the Health of Children: Effects of Divorce," *Linacre Quarterly* 81 (2014): 379–83; Wayne Parker, "Key Statistics about Kids from Divorced Families: What Research Tells Us about the Effect of Divorce on Children," *verywellfamily*, July 15, 2020, [verywellfamily.com/children-of-divorce-in-america-statistics-1270390](https://www.verywellfamily.com/children-of-divorce-in-america-statistics-1270390); Children-and-Divorce.com, "Children of Divorce Statistics" children-and-divorce.com/children-divorce-statistics.html.

¹⁰ Paul Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), a popular textbook, presents a society choosing its own values without reference to nature or any objective structure. Statements are made apodictically, e.g.: "Humanness is socio-culturally variable. In other words, there is no human nature in the sense of a biologically fixed substratum determining the variability of sociocultural formations. . . . Man constructs his own nature, or more simply, . . . man produces himself" (49). Even more simply: "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product" (61). Hence language must be controlled: "Language provides the fundamental superimposition of logic on the objectivated [*sic*] social world" (64). "In sexual matters, man is capable of almost anything," since "human sexuality is characterized by a very high degree of pliability" (49). The authors never inquire which societies function better. Apparently sociology can establish no objective standard of judgment. John Bowlby's psychological studies, however, show how a child's early attachment to both parents explains success and satisfaction in later life; *A Secure Base* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988) well summarizes his attachment theory explicated in his publications. Sociology digressed even further from scientific "objectivity" after Berger and Luckmann. Instead of describing the world, sociologists seek to change it, see Jackson Toby, "Left-Wing Politics and the Decline of Sociology," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 26–27, 2019, A15. They have become partisan, ideological politicians.

¹¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 2 (New York: Knopf, 1969), 170–74, 187–207, 281–82, 303–4, 526–27; Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the*

Enlightenment's heirs. On the other hand they insist that, since man is free, transcending nature, he should create his own values. This view devolves from the Enlightenment's equation of nature with Newton's mechanistic physics; man, standing above nature, can manipulate it to fulfill his needs. But such transcendental freedom changes nature and thus abrogates the laws of physics. With mechanistic physics's demise under Einstein's theory of relativity in the macro-physical realm and Heisenberg's postulation of indeterminism in micro-physics, the notion of universal natural laws has been radically questioned. So much does man consider himself nature's master that he even undertakes to alter his gender. Existential philosophers, like Sartre, noting man's inability to grasp the individual as such, deny universal concepts the ability to grasp reality. Since existence—self-conscious individuality—precedes essence, the notion of an objective order grounded in nature is outmoded. Readers are urged to create their own values by arbitrary choices. "To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all. . . . Man makes himself."¹² Unfortunately individuals rarely agree on what the good entails and resist its imposition by others. Sartre interprets life as a struggle to prevent the Other from objectivizing and thereby controlling oneself, even as one's subjectivity strives to protect itself by objectivizing the dangerous Other. His play "No Exit" culminates in the insight, "Hell is—other people!"¹³ Similarly post-modern professors, like Michel Foucault, undercut universal scientific knowledge by insisting on the relativity and arbitrariness of abstract categories applied to nature.¹⁴ Nonetheless science's success in controlling nature heightens expectations of happiness. If man can tame rivers, conquer disease, and fly to the moon, why can't he create a perfect society of satisfied desires? Sadly, frustration facilely tempts to drugged euphoria. In freedom's name Americans vote for unimpeded access to marijuana, whose employment deprives them of freedom's exercise. Even worse, almost twenty million Americans—almost

Eighteenth Century, trans. J. May (Cleveland, OH: World, 1963), 14–25, 162–69.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. B. Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 19–21, 47. See also Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1966 [originally 1953]), 340–65, 474–93.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "No Exit," trans. S. Gilbert, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Random House, 1973 [originally 1949]), 47.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1973 [originally 1971]), xi–xii, xxi–xxiii, 157–62. The same tension existed in the Enlightenment, but most philosophers refused to recognize it.

7 percent of the population over the age of 12—suffer some form of substance abuse, be it drugs or alcohol.¹⁵ They cannot do what they want to do; they fettered their freedom.

God and the Problem of Suffering: The Context of the Atheistic Protest

Perhaps the greatest contrast between the heroic age and our own consists in diverse attitudes toward the divinity. Gilgamesh and Achilles knew that the gods could arbitrarily, even unjustly intervene into human affairs. Yet they recognized the need to obey them lest worse befall themselves. Born into a world of obvious, superhuman, established natural powers, they could hardly imagine that forces superior to themselves would be less than conscious and free. They accommodated themselves, obeying and offering sacrifice to propitiate the immortals. Current secular culture, having suffered religious wars and fearing lest sectarian differences result in societal conflict, banishes God from public policy. God's absence from public consciousness easily results in denial of His existence. What exercises no pragmatic effect is readily ignored. Ludwig Feuerbach reduced God to a projection of human need, opening the path to Karl Marx's insistence that man make himself in his own image and create heaven on earth. Apparently Christian monotheism's triumph over polytheism invited its reversal. Paradoxically the most brazen rejections of God arise in the culture formed by the biblical tradition. For the Bible confronts man with an ineluctable choice: his eternal salvation or damnation is at stake.

Mesopotamian and Greek divinities had their disputes, affairs, and deceptions which involved human beings willy-nilly. Woe betide you if Hera went into a huff or if, like Hippolytus, you snubbed Aphrodite. It was hard to live in a universe of squabbling gods, when the unexplained thunderbolt might emerge from above at any moment. Monotheism offers a great advantage in simplifying human lives. Moses's words recognize the basis of Jewish religion and furnish the daily prayer of pious Jews: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:4–5). If only one God exists, men can unify their lives in His service; they need not worry about foreign forces derailing them. All stands under God's control. But that advantage can metamorphose

¹⁵ J. Bose, S. Hedden, R. Lipari, E. Park-Lee, and SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, [samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHF2017/NSDUHF2017.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHF2017/NSDUHF2017.pdf).

into a problem: why does God allow the virtuous to suffer? This question is all the more pressing when, unlike many Buddhists or Hindus, one believes in a personal God. Despite the Enlightenment's initial, rational optimism, Job's dilemma resurfaced in Western society with Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially after the 1755 Lisbon earthquake.¹⁶ Militant Marxism insisted on the incongruity of a good God and human suffering. Passionate protests assailed a deaf heaven when the industrial revolution accentuated the proletariat's sufferings, and rage intensified when social crusaders depicted the innocent sufferings of children tormented for others' sins. Perhaps no one denounced the Christian dilemma more poignantly than Ivan Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoevsky's embodiment of atheistic socialism. He refused to accept a world in which innocent children must suffer. Yet Dostoevsky, an Orthodox believer, eviscerated Ivan's complaint by inserting into it internal contradictions and by portraying his mental collapse under the strain of guilt, which reason could not absolve. He concluded *The Brothers Karamazov* with a reconciliation achieved by Alyosha's free acceptance of suffering love, a ringing affirmation of the resurrection, and three cheers for Karamazov.¹⁷ Nonetheless, twentieth-century epigones, failing to perceive Dostoevsky's pious purpose, re-enchanted Ivan's passion. Albert Camus directed a theatrical presentation of *The Brothers Karamazov*, reserving Ivan's role for himself. He so identified with Ivan that he considered Dostoevsky the first thinker to understand rebellion, allegedly more at ease with Ivan than with Alyosha. Camus championed Ivan's cause in *The Plague*, employing the plague to portray the suffocation felt by all who confront evil, especially innocent suffering. After witnessing a child's tormented death, the Jesuit Paneloux refuses to abandon belief in God: "We must believe everything or deny everything. And who, among you, I ask, would dare to deny everything?" When Dr. Rieux, the secularist hero, feels "mad revolt" in the face of evil, the priest invites him: "That sort of thing [the child's death] is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand." Rieux rejects the

¹⁶ Hazard, *European Thought*, 309–10, 316–24.

¹⁷ F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. A. MacAndrew (New York: Bantam, 1981 [originally 1970]), 280–96, 933–36. Among the internal contradictions are: Ivan's postulation of God in order to complain about the world He created; Ivan's protest in behalf of innocent children despite his claim that they are not in solidarity with adults, not of the same essence; his initial demand for truth, but not at the cost of suffering; his protest for love of humanity while upholding the impossibility of loving one's neighbor.

plea, declaring: "No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture." Ultimately Paneloux's faith in a recompense beyond this world alienates him from others in the struggle against evil; he dies, a "doubtful case." Since the sufferings of children are inexcusable, Camus affirmed life's absurdity, finding meaning only in rebellion against the sufferings suffusing human existence.¹⁸ More calmly the linguistic analyst Anthony Flew challenged believers to justify their belief in a loving God. If God really loves us like a father, why does He remain so distant from our world? A human father does everything possible to save his child racked by inoperable cancer, but his heavenly Father does nothing. This heavenly Father is either incapable of changing things or unconcerned. If the former, He is not God. If the latter, men should be unconcerned about Him.¹⁹

The Secular Impasse

Complaining is always easier than discovering and implementing practical answers. Camus admitted that for secular man there is no resolution to the tension between the demands of justice and the need of freedom; man is always tempted to become God and impose a totalitarian vision. Hence the struggle against totalitarianism permits no conclusion; in the final analysis unrequited suffering remains—and perpetual rebellion. Yet Ivan Karamazov confesses, "I don't believe that it is possible to live in rebellion—and I want to live!"²⁰ Most secularists are not so clear-sighted. Secularism finds God otiose except when it wants to complain. Complaining obscures its own inability to handle suffering, its own Achilles heel. Secularism cannot respond adequately to suffering, and that incapacity is, one suspects, the deepest reason for the culture of death which John Paul

¹⁸ A. Camus, *The Plague*, trans. S. Gilbert (New York: Random House, 1948), 202–3, 208, 217. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. J. O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), esp. 12–14, affirms life's basic absurdity. In *The Rebel*, trans. A. Bower (New York: Random House, 1956), 55–61, 246–52, 280–306, Camus develops his philosophy of continual rebellion. See also C. Petersen, *Albert Camus*, trans. A. Gode (New York: Ungar, 1969), 74, and Ronald Batchelor, "Dostoevskii's Ivan Karamazov: Inspiration to Albert Camus," *fifteen-eightyfour* (blog), March 27, 2014, cambridgeblog.org/2014/03/dostoevskiiis-ivan-karamazov-inspiration-to-albert-camus/.

¹⁹ A. Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1964 [originally 1955]), 96–99, 106–08.

²⁰ Camus, *Rebel*, 100–04, 145–48, 173–76, 233–52, 294–306; Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 296.

II identified as the blight of our civilization.²¹ Because the world finds no sense in pain, it seeks to abolish suffering and frustration by all means possible: scientific taming of nature, universal hospital coverage, unlimited “safe sex,” no-fault divorce, abortion, euthanasia, “trigger warnings,” “safe spaces,” and so on. To paraphrase Flannery O’Connor: “Compassion leads to the gas chamber.”²² The more one flees suffering, the more terrifyingly and intolerably it permeates one’s existence.

Complaints about God’s providence come easily to mind when bad things happen to good people. As just noted, while atheists and agnostics frequently focus on innocent suffering to justify their repudiation of God, a perusal of atheistic literature reveals that no matter how ferociously they reject God, they shed little light upon life’s meaning. Human existence is a mystery. The world existed long before the human race came into it and it will endure long after the demise of protestors. What is its purpose? What meaning has my individual existence in it? Definitive answers to such immense questions surpass every mortal mind, yet hints of meaning appear. Alongside all the suffering arise moments when the heart leaps in gratitude and joy: a beautiful sunrise or sunset, friendship given, truth’s discovery, courage and honesty manifested in fidelity, parental sacrifices. Are these lasting values or delusions? If there is no God, all such values crumble with mortal mankind into dust. If there is no God, to whom does one render thanks? If there is no God, why sacrifice in a world condemned to frustration? Are life’s positive experiences merely the carrot dangling before the dumb donkey to motivate mankind’s endless motion on a purposeless evolutionary treadmill? Or are they omens of deeper meaning? Such is life’s mystery. If meaning exists beyond mortal finitude, God exists. Yet within his horizon of meaning every believer should recognize why suffering is so intricately entwined in human life. John Paul II wrote: “Suffering seems particularly proper to man’s nature. It is as deep as man himself, precisely because it manifests in its own way the depth proper to man, and in its own way surpasses it.”²³ Philosophical analysis and

²¹ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), §§12–30.

²² The original version comes from Flannery O’Connor, introduction in *A Memoire of Mary Ann* by the Dominican Sisters of Perpetual Help Home (Savanah, GA: Beil, 1991): “When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness [i.e., Christ], its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.” We cite it from Marion Montgomery, “Walker Percy and the Christian Scandal,” *First Things*, no. 32 (April 1993), 38–39, who quotes Percy to the same effect from his *Thanatos Syndrome*.

²³ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (1984), §2.

theological insight illuminate why suffering permeates human life, a truth bitter to bear but ultimately liberating.

Philosophical Analysis:

Suffering Is Humanly Irradicable

No mortal can exterminate all pain from human existence. Any attempt to do so is doomed to increase suffering. Consider first the human predicament and suffering's conditions of possibility. All humans have sentient bodies. They require feelings to maneuver in a material world. Sensations cause pleasure and warn against danger. Physical pain derives from excess sensation. Coming inside on a cold day one can steer a frozen backside toward a great fire; its warmth is very pleasant. But if one stays too close too long, warmed cheeks become burned buns. Even in Paradise Adam could have stubbed his toe; that improves on continually banging his brains against walls through which he tried to walk. Abolishing all possibility of physical pain entails abolishing sensation and, with it, all bodies and physical pleasure. Pain and pleasure, Plato noted, are practically inseparable: two beings fastened at their acme (*Phaedo* 60b). But physical pain's total abolition does not render men impervious to injury. Pure spirits can and do suffer. Human beings are limited in body and spirit—they exist in relation to others and are dependent upon others for weal and woe. This truth especially regards other freedoms. People can reject or accept each other. Further, finitude, when perceived, is always transcended; once a limit is recognized, the spirit is already beyond it. As long as a baby in a playpen does not recognize bars as restrictions, he does not feel constricted. Once he perceives them as limitation, he is already beyond them in knowledge and desire. Thence springs a longing for something more; but nothing finite can satisfy a desire for the always more, and the finite cannot reach pure infinity on its own. Man can never be totally fulfilled through finite experience, and the more finite consciousness is elevated to awareness of its limits, the more exquisite become its spiritual sufferings. For that reason most variations of Buddhism and Hinduism aim at desire's total eradication; for desire is the cause of evil. Ultimately this option leads to suppression of the self, the extinction of individual consciousness.²⁴

²⁴ R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 4–5, 59–63, 66–72, 74–79, 114–20; Robert Hume, "An Outline of the Philosophy of the Upanishads," in *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, trans. Robert Hume, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 66–69; Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism* (Woodbury, NY:

Some preliminary conclusions offer themselves. First, the only sure way to nullify all pain is to escape the body and either become the infinite God or reduce all others to automata controlled by oneself, a pure spirit. Implicit in many modern protests against God lurks the hidden desire to become God, to determine good and evil by rendering one's arbitrary freedom supreme. Who aspires to create such a loveless world?

A second conclusion follows: because sufferings are tied to finitude, they can be relativized. Just as no best possible world can exist, neither can a worst possible world. Irish and Polish optimists console themselves: things can always get worse. Since different viewpoints are possible on finite realities, one's perspective on sufferings can increase or diminish them.²⁵ For example, were anyone to threaten to kill the average citizen unless he ran twenty-six miles in under four hours, he might well reply: "Shoot me now; why bother with that agony?" If the same threat were delivered to a world-class marathon runner, Wilson Kipsang could reply, "No problem; I do that before breakfast every other morning." Perhaps a reader recalls gridiron glory. Did you feel the bruises as you smashed through the line for Hobash High's greater glory? You might have been half-maimed, but the battle was exhilarating and adrenaline was pumping. The next day you might groan in the hospital, but on the field you were Superman. Should Lois Lane visit the hospital and gush over your fabulous feats, what are yesteryear's wounds on St. Crispin's day? At the opposite extreme dwell the fabled princess who excruciatingly feels the pea under twelve mattresses and the spoiled brat who, in intolerable torment, insists on his Wheaties instead of the Corn Flakes served by his mother.

A final conclusion flows from finitude: human beings depend upon each other. The most rugged individualist needs a Mommy and a Daddy to give him life, feed him, and teach him to talk. Old Testament scholars recognize "corporate personality": the individual is a representative as well

Barron's Educational Services, 1968), 33–39, 41–47, 49–52, 54–60.

²⁵ In modern civilization pangs of childbirth are much anticipated and empathized. But George Engelmann, *Labor among Primitive Peoples*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis, MO: Chambers, 1883), 7–10, noted how labor pains increase with civilization: among primitives, "labor may be characterized as short and easy." An extreme interpretation of subjectivity's influence over pain is found in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 382–84, 397, 400, 408–9, 414–18, 458–59: Jesus enjoyed "imperturbable blessedness" of his God-consciousness even in his Passion. Schleiermacher lacks a proper understanding of the hypostatic union; he places Jesus's human nature—i.e., his human self-consciousness—in direct contact with the divine nature, which is understood as bliss.

as a constitutive member of the group to which he belongs.²⁶ The group influences him, and what he does affects the group: David's sin caused the plague striking his people (2 Sam 24); Moses's prayer saved Israel (Exod 32:7–14; Ps 106:23); Abraham's fidelity explains why God so loves the Jews (Gen 23:15–18; Sir 44:19–22). The Israelites identified themselves with their ancestors and knew that their conduct had repercussions upon fellow Jews. God punishes to the third and fourth generation but shows mercy to the thousandth generation (Exod 20:5–6). Orthodox Jews today become upset with Conservative and Liberal Jews. One Jew's infraction of the Law has negative repercussions on all Jews (Deut 29:18–19). Corporate solidarity also explains how the Suffering Servant bore the sins of others and how Adam's sin affected his children. However antithetical to modern susceptibilities, this biblical view contains a great truth. Men are their brothers' keepers. No one is a mere individual, responsible for himself alone. That insight undermines the complaint of those protesting against the injustice whereby children suffer for their parents' sins. Can a child be independent of all other human beings until he performs a free act? Can she be isolated from her parents? Can he be a new Adam at creation's beginning, responsible for himself alone? If such isolation were possible, how might anyone protest in the child's name, in solidarity with the child? Ivan Karamazov's blustery rebellion quickly sputters and perishes of asphyxiated isolation.

Suffering Is Humanly Unintelligible

Original sin's mystery has been foreshadowed, but first suffering should be analyzed from a different angle. No human can fully explain suffering. Unique to each person, it is *my* suffering or *yours* or *his* or *hers*. Even your sympathy does not let you suffer *my* sufferings. Suffering is individual, and the individual as such cannot be captured in any science. Science employs universal concepts—"the soul knows bodies through the intellect with an immaterial, universal, and necessary knowledge" and "science is not of singulars."²⁷ Yet universal concepts cannot comprehend the individual as such. Goethe's axiom identifies science's predicament: *Individuum est*

²⁶ H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Jean de Fraine, S.J., *Adam and the Family of Man*, trans. D. Raible (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965).

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 84, a. 1, corp.; *In I analyt. post.*, lec. 44, no. 396.

ineffabile.²⁸ Men are mysteries to themselves, especially in their freedom, individuality, and sufferings.

Human science's limitations become obvious once the ultimate reason for unjust sufferings is sought. Seeking something's reason means seeking its cause, and that presupposes a necessary connection between cause and effect; otherwise only an event's occasion or condition is named, not a cause. Hence in seeking the cause one seeks a necessity. But if the reason, or cause, for injustice is discovered, injustice is made necessary. That absurdity would not only make God, the First Cause, responsible for injustice but also insert men into a warped moral universe against which their moral sense protests. Actually, injustice presupposes freedom, a free act deliberately gone awry, whereas a cause's "necessity" removes freedom. Clearly finite minds cannot understand evil choices in themselves. From a human perspective no total answer to the conundrum of unjust suffering or any suffering is to be expected. This conundrum undercuts particularly philosophies based upon natures.²⁹ For pain indicates a nature's malfunctioning, and what is contrary to nature falls outside the parameters of such philosophies. Consequently, if men cannot understand evil, physical and moral, they can never banish it. No human plan can liberate mortals from suffering. The solution to suffering's dilemma must come from beyond man.

Suffering's Positive Value

If suffering is not an absolute evil—sin alone is an absolute evil—some positive meaning can be discovered in it. First, suffering alerts against greater physical evil: being singed by fire warns against being burned. Second, to grow physically stronger athletes have to break down muscle tissue: no pain, no gain. Physical exercise hurts, but it strengthens and tones muscles. On the spiritual level, suffering stands at the service of growth. Men learn more quickly and more thoroughly through suffering. When my father attributed his education to the school of hard knocks, he was paraphrasing the popular adage—knowledge makes a bloody

²⁸ Wolfgang Janke, "Individuum/Individualismus I: Philosophisch," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 16 (1987): 117, notes that, although this expression has not been found in any medieval thinker: "It derives [*stammt*] from a good Aristotelian family." Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.15.1039b 27–40a 7.

²⁹ Lest anyone conclude that man cannot know God's existence by his natural reason—contrary to Catholic doctrine (First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*; see Denzinger-Schönmetzer [DS], nos. 3004 and 3026)—see a proof of God's existence based on freedom apart from revelation in John McDermott, S.J., "Faith, Reason, and Freedom," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 67 (2002): 307–32.

entrance—which reflects Aeschylus’s wisdom, “[Zeus] regularly joins learning to suffering” (*Agamemnon* 177).³⁰ Moreover, suffering can break down selfishness. Leon Bloy wrote consolingly to a friend who lost his young daughter: “Man has places in his heart that as yet have no existence; pain has to enter before they can be.”³¹ At the least suffering can function as a punishment for sin, recalling sinners to themselves and to concern for others. It can also awaken compassion and force men to live with others. An economic depression can reinforce family cohesion in a common struggle whereas economic prosperity allows individuals to ignore their need for and appreciation of others. A maimed child often brings his family to greater unity and assistance.³² Love in mutual self-sacrifice produces greater joy than countless material comforts. Finally, ordinary people often become aware of their value as free persons when they freely suffer for duty or an ideal. Nobility is manifest when someone willingly dies for a belief. Martyrs illustrate to what heights of fidelity humanity is capable under grace. Many people make smaller, analogous sacrifices in daily life, finding meaning in them and testifying to man’s transcendence of natural tendencies to self-perpetuation and self-fulfillment.³³

Imagine a world without the possibility of suffering. Every challenge and adventure would disappear. No dragons would be slain nor princesses rescued. Scaling Mount Everest would be as dangerous as scratching one’s nose. Men would remain on their spiritual backsides all day, consuming fruit dropping from the mango tree. A world of ennui would ensue since no risk could be involved. No one wins since no one loses. Even suicide out of boredom is excluded lest people hurt themselves. In short, a finite world without the possibility of suffering is intolerable.

The Mystery of Death

Most men mightily fear death, which is anticipated in suffering. Satan employs fear of death as his principal means of enslaving men (Heb 2:14–15). Nonetheless death cannot be an absolute evil. First, insofar as

³⁰ Repeated in *Agamemnon* 250–51: “Justice inclines the scale in order for those suffering to learn.”

³¹ Cited by Yves Congar, O.P., “The Problem of Evil,” in *God, Man and the Universe*, ed. Jacques de la Bivort de la Saudee (London: Burns & Oates, 1954), 401.

³² See Jerome Schulman, *Coping with Tragedy* (Chicago: Follett, 1976), for examples.

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785), ed. Bernd Kraft and Dieter Schönecker (Hamburg: Meiner, 1999), 18–21, 61–63, 87–89; Kant, *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft* (1788), 9th ed., ed. Karl Vorländer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1928), 95–98, 177–79, connected human dignity to moral freedom suffering for moral duty.

this life is replete with sufferings, death liberates from them. Reflecting on his brother's death, St. Ambrose remarked: "From the beginning God did not institute death, but He bestowed it as a remedy. . . . There ought to be an end to evils in order that death might restore what life lost."³⁴ Second, imagine, if possible, a material world without death. It would be stupefying. Greek mythology recounts how Aurora, goddess of dawn, became enamored of Tithonus and abducted him (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 218–45). In the felicity of passionate love she entreated Zeus to grant him immortality and eventually prevailed. Alas, she neglected to request perpetual youth. He constantly aged, continually shrinking in size. Aurora eventually locked him in her bedchamber, while she sought other paramours. In another version he is transformed into a ceaselessly chirping cicada.³⁵ In retelling the myth Tennyson has Tithonus pray for mortality and speak "of happy men that have the power to die, / And grassy barrows of the happier dead." A similar fate befell the Cumaean Sibyll, who negligently besought immortality without eternal youth from Apollo and withered into a cicada. Kept in a cage in a tavern, she endlessly repeats her chant, *thelo thanein, thelo thanein*—"I wish to die, I wish to die." T. S. Eliot placed that phrase as a motto at the beginning of "The Waste Land," describing modern culture, which has no reason to perpetuate itself but cannot quite die. Before Elliot, Jonathan Swift concocted the race of Struldbruggs, humans born with a mark upon their foreheads indicating their immortality. They are condemned to "the dreadful project of never dying." Grown old, they become "opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative." They gradually lose their spiritual faculties, retain only envy and impotent passions, and wander friendless in a perpetual daze. These most pitiable creatures lose their teeth and hair as well as their appetite, yet remain subject to diseases of all sorts.³⁶ Even if their spiritual faculties and bodies did not deteriorate, would they not become utterly bored as the same experiences keep repeating themselves without end, the eternal return of the same? In J. R. R. Tolkien's myths about Middle-earth, the elves, who retain their powers and cannot die except by violence, ultimately grow weary of living there and, following their hearts' desire, depart freely for Valinor's Blessed Isles. Death is rightly called the Gift of

³⁴ Ambrose, *De excessu fratris* 2.47; (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 72:274). The subsequent quote has the same reference.

³⁵ Herbert Rose and Charles Robertson, "Eos," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. N. Hammond and H. Scullard, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 385.

³⁶ Jonathan Swift, "Gulliver's Travels" (1735), pt. 3, ch. 10, in *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Robert Greenberg and William Piper (New York: Norton, 1973), 181–83.

Men as well as the Doom of Men.³⁷ Life without death would be dreary. As Ambrose remarked: "Immortality is more a burden than enjoyment unless grace breathes upon it." In this life death cannot be entirely bad.³⁸

In many ways death bestows a poignant value on human life. Shakespeare's sonnet 73 notes how various earthly realities perish before concluding: "This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong, / To love that well which thou must leave ere long." The very fragility of mortal things endears them. Parents' love for a child endangered by sickness witnesses that truth. Their love grows through shared sufferings.³⁹ The good and the beautiful should be protected. The Roman forum in its dilapidated state is rendered more romantically and entrancingly beautiful because it no longer gleams like the proximate, garish monument to Victor Emmanuel; its brokenness touches men's imaginations and feelings.

Finally, consider the relation of morality to suffering. As noted above, men become aware of their worth when they are ready to suffer for an ideal or another person. In life, conflicts emerge between what one feels like doing and what one should do. Moral conscience opens men to a universe transcending the ordinary world with its search for self-fulfillment. Heroes give their lives for duty and love. The very appeal for justice reveals that one suffers at recognizing injustice. Hence moral awareness, which differentiates man from beasts, is bound up with suffering. If justice prevailed in this world and only the evil suffered, it would be impossible to distinguish self-interest from moral altruism. If morality immediately received its just reward, only the invincibly stupid would be immoral.

God's Relation to Suffering

Denying God does not solve the problem of suffering. One can imagine God's extirpation, but the suffering remains, and the injustice remains, and

³⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 234, 308–10, 315, 342–43, 406; Tolkien, *The Simarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Norwalk, CT: Easton, 1999 [originally 1977]), 41–42, 88, 104–05, 264–65.

³⁸ In view of Gen 2:16–17 and 3:22 and Rom 5:12, many have assumed that physical death is due to sin alone. But death is natural to man (Pius V, *Ex Omnibus Afflictionibus* [1567; DS, nos. 1926, 1978]; Pius VI, *Auctorem Fidei* [1794; DS, no. 2617]), and as such cannot be evil. Sin renders it a terror instead of the transition to eternal beatitude. See John McDermott, S.J., "Is Death Evil? A Question for Father Peter Ryan, S.J.," *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2008): 21–33, and *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2008): 31–40; McDermott, "Do Charismatic Healings Promote the New Evangelization? Part II," *Antiphon* 24 (2020): 205–23.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.7.1168a 21–27, noted the same.

there is no hope for a solution. If this world is all that is, what is justice? So many predators escape punishment for their iniquitous actions. "Justice" becomes a phantasmagorical figment of imagination, a term exploited by media moguls to manipulate the masses. Justice does not exist in a world of injustice. Justice's standard must transcend this world. And "justice" cannot be an impersonal norm; it must be capable of judging human hearts. Only a personal God can afford any hope of making sense out of this piebald world. As my Irish grandmother prognosticated, "There has to be a heaven since there's no justice on this earth." But why does God permit innocent suffering? That is the question's nub. The Christian God alone supplies a satisfactory answer.

The Theology of Suffering

Two cautions must be issued initially. First, suffering is real. Some religions deny suffering's reality, as Christian Science does, and types of Buddhism and Hinduism see all finite realities as "appearance," *maya*. Nonetheless, since the appearances hurt, they must be somehow real. All philosophies distinguishing appearance from reality face the impossible challenge of explaining how appearances, the non-real, somehow exist in the world or the mind. Second, an immediate appeal to religion is short-sighted and contradictory. Whoever says, "Don't worry about all the sufferings here, God will make it up hereafter," risks divorcing God from His creation. If God can do justice later, why doesn't He do it here, now? If this world is abandoned to injustice, how can a God of justice be recognized? Pious assurances to the contrary seemingly contradict experience. The basis for affirming God's justice and love must be discovered in this world.

What are innocent sufferings? Who are innocent? The modern world has enshrined a juridical notion of innocence whereby no guilt is incurred before a malevolent free act is performed. Hence all children are considered innocent. Nonetheless all cultures insist that they be trained to self-discipline and regard for others. No one wants little Johnny to poop perpetually in his pants or howl incessantly for comfort at 2 a.m. The urges of children must be conquered for freedom's growth. Human nature seems fundamentally egocentric, seeking to fulfill basic, inborn impulses before learning civility. Adults too confess that they sometimes suppress inspirations to do good and help others for fear of being hurt or seeming ridiculous. The tendency to selfishness is inborn. St. Augustine recalled a child raging against his brother who was sharing his mother's milk, even though the first child was already sated (*Confessions* 1.7). Freud's success

at convincing countless intelligent people that little boys want to kill their fathers and rape their mothers indicates that many readily recognize deep distorted passions in human psyches.⁴⁰ The Church identifies concupiscence as an inborn tendency deriving from and inclining to sin.⁴¹ St. Paul's "indwelling sin" (Rom 7:17–23) afflicts humans from conception. It is restrained only through freedom's proper discipline under grace. That entails a struggle. Full innocence requires mastering temptations. Who then are fully innocent in not succumbing to egoism? Catholic theology responds: only Jesus and His mother; both went to the Cross without recriminations.

A simple clarification refutes another atheistic objection. The Bible never proclaims God the Father of all men. In the Old Testament Yahweh is Father to Israel, the king, and the just man by his election. The New Testament acknowledges Jesus alone as Son of God by nature, by His eternal birth from the Father. He alone dared to address Yahweh as *Abba*, Dad or Daddy. Men are not sons by nature but become sons by adoption, by rebirth in baptism. Jesus gives them the courage to call His Father "Our Father." He always distinguished "My Father" from "your Father." Only once He enunciated "Our Father," when teaching His disciples how to pray (Matt 6:9).⁴² Jesus, revealer of the Father, enables men to become God's children. St. John stated it simply: "To those who received Him [Jesus], believing in His name, He gave the power to *become* God's children; they were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12–13). This reality bestowed in faith and baptism Paul named "adoptive sonship" (Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15.23; Eph 1:5). Consequently, Christians should understand God's Fatherhood as Jesus did. His innocent sufferings did not cause Him to deny His Father. Rather in His agony, foreseeing his torments, He affirmed God's omnipotence and fatherhood: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Remove this chalice from me. But not what I will but what you

⁴⁰ Abraham Arden Brill, "Introduction," in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Modern Library, 1938), 3–32, esp. 4 and 31–32, witnesses the adulation accorded to Freud. Bowlby, *Secure Base*, offers a saner view of children's psychology.

⁴¹ Council of Trent, *Decretum de peccato originali* (1546; DS, no. 1515).

⁴² Gottlob Schrenk, "Patēr," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 5:974–1014; H. F. D. Sparks, "The Doctrine of the Divine Fatherhood in the Gospels," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 241–62; Witold Marchel, *Abba, Père!* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971); Joachim Jeremias, "Abba," in *The Prayers of Jesus*, trans. J. Bowden, C. Burchard, and J. Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 11–65.

will" (Mark 14:36). On the Cross His last words were "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit" (Luke 23:46). For Christian disciples, who receive Jesus's Spirit, innocent suffering does not contradict but reveals God's love. John affirmed God's love for the universe "because He gave His only-begotten Son" (John 3:16), and Paul argued that because God sacrificed His only Son for us nothing in creation can separate us from God's love in Christ (Rom 8:28–39). It is a strange religion in which the suffering of the innocent proves God's love for men. Such is Christian faith, the key to suffering's meaning.

Christian Suffering: Original Sin

What is the sense of Christian suffering? The Bible offers many reasons for suffering: the evil are punished while the good are rewarded—that is justice; God brings sinners to a fall to convert them; after conversion they still require purification; eradicating sinful habits entails a painful going against the warped grain. Men are tested by God insofar as God's love involves a choice, a preference of Him over everything else, and the sacrifice involved can be painful. Furthermore, Christians do not suffer only for themselves, just as they do not live for themselves alone. They suffer for others. That truth devolves from the mysteries of original sin and redemption.⁴³

God created man, male and female, in the image of His love. He wanted to share His life with men, to divinize them. For God is tri-personal Love, pure mutual self-giving from eternity to eternity. What other reason might move philosophy's self-sufficient, blissful, omniscient, omnipotent God to create a world that would only give Him trouble? Mankind's original parents' sin broke the primordial unity of love existing among men and between men and God. Without encountering love in the world no one can know the God who is Love. In a loveless world men lose their freedom; they have no reason for any choice; every finite reason for acting can always be relativized and put into question. "Why should I prefer another person to myself?" Divorce and abortion are available. Without love the world's meaning becomes opaque, or at best ambiguous: Does God love us? Does God exist? What reason remains for living, for enduring so much pain, if death frustrates all plans and hopes?

After the primordial sin all human beings are born into a world from which their progenitors tried to banish God, a loveless world. "We were

⁴³ The biblical basis for these answers is expanded in John McDermott, S.J., *The Bible on Human Suffering* (Middlegreen, UK: St. Paul, 1991).

by birth [*physis*: nature] children of wrath, like the rest" (Eph 2:3). The perpetuation of such a world involves hell. No one has access to God, and since man was originally created out of love for love, fallen man is doomed to eternal frustration. God could have abandoned men to the world which they attempted to create exclusively for themselves. Is it unjust that all humans are condemned for what Adam and Eve did? "Why should I have to suffer for what someone else did so long ago? How unfair of God!" Such is mankind's plaint.

Another question answers that question. Who can name the wheel's inventor, the tamer of fire, the first shipbuilder? How many good things humans take for granted without gratitude, yet once something inconveniences them, how swiftly they groan and protest! Can anyone live in human society and expect to accept only good things from predecessors while reviling them for whatever goes wrong? Expressed more personally: suppose your father committed a crime that turned everyone against him. What would your reaction be? Should you say: "I want nothing to do with him. He is not my father"? Is not such a rejection patricide and ultimately the wish for self-annihilation? Into that predicament we are born as a result of original sin: either we love our parents and share their fate or we reject them and prove ungrateful children. Original sin springs the trap: either we identify with sinner-parents or refuse them love and repeat their sin, further polluting the race. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't. Who can redeem our sinful situation? Who can restore humanity's fractured unity and let men find love and God again?

Frequently philosophers construct an anthropology dealing with individual natures without recognizing that "man" never exists alone. All depend on parents for life, nourishment, and flourishing. No one learns a language in isolation, and without language thought hardly stirs or quickly atrophies. Communality defines man primordially. Everyone exists in himself and in relation. The very notion of finite being implies that it is limited (*finitum*) by others. As John Paul II's analysis of freedom indicates, a person is both in himself and in relation.⁴⁴ This explains how man

⁴⁴ Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. A. Potocki with A. Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), 276–300; Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," *Review of Metaphysics* 33, no. 2 (1979):273–308, esp. 283–306. When Wojtyła, "Person," 303, presupposes "the particular priority of the subject as person in regard to the community," that reflects his starting point in individual consciousness; earlier, however, he admits: "The whole process of understanding man must embrace both the others and my own self and . . . I may start from either" (273). He also writes: "The person and the community may be said to coalesce together" (*Acting Person*, 276). The self-conscious

is created in God's image, that is, in freedom for love. "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:27). By oscillating between singular and plural in describing the culminating object of creation the sacred writer recognized the unity and plurality implicit in being human. Man cannot be fully human without relations to others, indeed without loving them. St. Maximus the Confessor recognized that "man" is primarily a concrete whole encompassing the individuals constituting it: the individual only exists within that whole in relation to others. Further, in the hypostatic union he identified the basic principle of divine love which effects the greatest unity while maintaining the greatest diversity of natures. "Insofar as [the union] comes together it does not entirely obscure their essential and natural elements but perfectly preserves the difference."⁴⁵ His insight applies to humanity as well as to the ontological structures of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Husband and wife, the basis of family and society, are intended to be two in one flesh (Gen 2:24; Mark 10:7–10; Eph 5:31). Though each spouse desires complete union with the other, both wish the other to remain fully himself or herself. Love provides the greatest unity while maintaining the greatest diversity. Recent Thomistic thinkers like Pierre Rousselot, Erich Przywara, and Hans Urs von Balthasar have insisted on mankind's fundamental, primordial unity in diversity.⁴⁶ That insight facilitates understanding the eschatological Adam's redemption as well as original sin.

Redemption

No part of the broken whole can reconstitute the whole. Mankind's shattered state recalls Humpty Dumpty; all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put him back together again. No man can constitute himself the new beginning by demanding everyone else's love. Besides, based on

subject's in-itself cannot be separated from his relation to others.

⁴⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, trans. B. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 159–65; Maximus the Confessor, *Epistola ad Nicandrum* (*Patrologia Graeca* [PG], 91:96D–97A), and *Ambiguorum liber* (PG, 91:1044D–1045A; 1056CD).

⁴⁶ P. Rousselot, S.J., *L'Intellectualisme de saint Thomas*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1924), 124–32; E. Przywara, S.J., *Analogia Entis*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1962), 135–41, 199–210; Przywara, *Deus Semper Major*, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1938), 54–61, 70; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik* II/1 (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1976), 334–61; Balthasar, *Theo-logic* I, trans. A. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 153–58, 168–70. Aquinas's polymorphic "nature" includes a concrete universal; see John McDermott, S.J., "On Nature, Freedom, and Person in Aquinas and Beyond," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 9, no. 3 (2011): 798–99.

experience, who can assure us that God is love and really cares? Only the one who is personally eternal Love can assure men of Love's reality, and He assumed a human nature to communicate love in a language intelligible to men. He called all to conversion, to follow Him, to unite themselves to Him and share His fate. He submitted to creaturely limitations and suffered death since sinners rejected admitting their needy sinfulness. All except His mother betrayed, abandoned, and killed Him, but on Easter morning He rose from the dead to prove Love stronger than death and sin, to offer Himself to men again, converting their hearts. When men love Jesus, God Himself in person, they are one with God where they are most themselves, in their personal freedom, where each says "I." In love human beings are most free, most themselves, yet most joined to their beloved, letting Him rule their lives. "Now live no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). This profound union with God banishes sin, love's refusal. Jesus paid redemption's price in His Cross and resurrection, setting sinners free to love Him without fear.

All those who love Jesus are united with Him entirely, body and soul. Thus is established the Church, Christ's Body (1 Cor 12:12–31; Eph 5:21–33), where Jesus remains present through all time, offering Himself in word and sacrament to sinners. Christians desire conformation to Christ crucified (Gal 2:20; Phil 3:8–11; Rom 8:17). The Church is the place of crucified love, where men should let God's love penetrate their hearts. Consequently, the Eucharist stands in the Church's center, the place of love's concrete commitment and her daily nourishment. The Church also engenders resurrected joy, for there love conquers human hearts. When believers live for Jesus, crucifying fleshly desires, they are liberated to love (Gal 5:1.24; Rom 6:6–11; 8:2; Col 3:5–15). From self-sacrificial Christians a marvelous community results. But none should join the Church to enjoy a personally enhancing community; the ultimate reason for entering the Church is that she is the ordinary means of salvation joining repentant sinners to Jesus.⁴⁷ Precisely because the Church embraces concupiscential men, living with them entails crosses.

Jesus's liberating love resolves the dilemma of original sin. It no longer matters that men are sinners; they can confess their sins without fear; they can identify with their sinful parents, for God loves sinners (John 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 John 4:10). They need no longer defend and justify

⁴⁷ Council of Florence, *Cantate Domino* (1442; DS, nos. 1351), and Pius IX, *Quanto conficiamur moerore* (1863; DS, nos. 2865–67).

themselves. Justification is God's gift in Christ (Rom 3:21–30; 5:1–2). Jesus has broken the vicious circle of sin, guilt, and recrimination. Christians can and should love their parents. If Jesus bears their sins, in union with Him they can and should bear their parents' sins.

Salvific Suffering

This union in love explains the meaning of Christian suffering. Christians suffer for personal sins and to root out habits of sin, which, congealed in concupiscence, deform them. Created by love for love, humans want to be loved. Love entails opening oneself to the beloved, rendering oneself vulnerable. Yet all fear being hurt. Consequently, in a fallen world men seek protection by heaping up money, property, and power. Since such things invariably distort friendships, they console themselves in love's absence with purchased pleasures, love's sickly substitutes. This internal contradiction renders people miserable: they refuse to attain what they really desire (Rom 7:14–25). Seeking to save their lives, they lose them (Mark 8:35). Christ alone liberates men (Gal 5:1). For conformity to Christ, achieved in loving Him, reforms sinners into the image of God in which they were originally created. Christ is the eschatological Adam in whose image man was created (1 Cor 15:45; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15–20; Eph 1:3–10). Consequently, reformed sinners strive to overcome their inborn selfishness and gladly bear the sufferings entailed in the struggle.

Christians suffer with Christ for others. They are baptized into Christ's death in order to be crucified with Him, to die to sin, and to share His eternal, resurrected life (Rom 6:3–11). They enjoy the communion which Christ's love creates. Looking upon Jesus crucified, suffering for their sins, how can they remain distant, neutral observers? No! Love wants to suffer with the beloved. If God let His heart be broken to break the hardness of calloused hearts, how can anyone refuse to share His crucified love?⁴⁸

⁴⁸ That God suffers for men is in accord with Christian faith. Catholic doctrine defines God's immutability (Fourth Lateran Council [1215; DS, no. 800], Vatican I, *De Filius* [DS, no. 3001]), but that immutability need not depend upon Scholastic arguments from potency to act. Change occurs in God if He freely created the world, chose to redeem it, and responds to prayer (Luke 11:9–13). God is immutably infinite, tri-personal Love; he cannot be otherwise, and he will definitively conquer death and sin. John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986), §§39–40, and Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (2007), §39, and *Deus Caritas Est* (2006), §§10–12, allow for God's compassion due to man's sin. Earlier Pope John II approved the orthodoxy of the expression "one of the Trinity suffered" (John II, *Olim quidem* [535; DS, nos. 401]; see also Constantinople II, *Anathematism de tribus Capitulis* [553; DS, nos. 423 and 432]). For a speculative grounding of divine immutability allowing change see McDermott,

If Jesus invited a doubting Thomas to insert his hand into His wounded side (John 20:27), why do others hesitate to touch the heart of God?

Love creates communion. Paul uses the Greek word *koinōnia* to describe the relationship between Jesus and the Christian and among Christians. It signifies primarily community, communion (as in Holy Communion), participating in, and sharing actively with. He twisted the Greek language to express the Christian mystery's novelty. For the first time *koinōnia* involved a sharing not just in material realities or ideas but in persons: a communion in the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:13) and in Christ's Body and Blood (1 Cor 10:16); likewise, *koinōnia* for the first time indicated an active sharing, not just passive participation (Gal 6:6; Phil 4:15–16). *Koinōnia* embraced material as well as spiritual realities (Rom 15:26–27); also for the first time it indicated a monetary collection, the one destined for Jerusalem's poor (Rom 15:26). This word *koinōnia*, pregnant with so many meanings, describes many aspects of life in Christ's Body. It illuminates believers' sufferings.

At the beginning of the Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our tribulation, so that we might comfort others in all tribulation through the comfort with which we are comforted by God. For as Christ's sufferings superabound [*perisseuei*] upon us, so also through Christ our comfort superabounds. If we are troubled, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort active in the bearing of the suffering which we also suffer. And our hope for you is firm, since we know that as you are sharers (*koinōnoi*) in the sufferings, so you are sharers in the comfort. (2 Cor 1:3–7)

Because Christians share Christ's life, His sufferings overflow upon them, remaking them ever more into the image of incarnate Love. Christians are strange in this world. The New Testament repeatedly reports rejoicing in suffering, from the Beatitudes on! For in their suffering they are joined to Christ and His redemptive work. Paul writes: "Now I rejoice

"Faith, Reason, and Freedom," 307–32. Protestant theologians Kitamori, Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Jüngel have sought to reconcile becoming with God's being. For the history see H. Hoping, "*Caritas est passio*: Das Sterben Jesu und die Frage nach dem leidendem Gott," in *Mein Herr und mein Gott: Festschrift W. Kasper*, ed. G. Augustin, K. Krämer, and M. Schulze (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 334–46.

in sufferings for your sake, and I fill up what is lacking to Christ's tribulations in my flesh for the sake of His Body, the Church" (Col 1:24). Not that Christ's redemptive work lacks any perfection. Greek *hysterēmata*, translated "what is lacking," is generally used by St. Paul as the opposite of *perisseuma*, superabundance. Just as God's infinity does not exclude but creates finite men, just as God's omnipotence saves mankind without destroying their response but rather creating it, so there is room for believers to contribute in love to saving all others sharing in Christ's *koinōnia*, his Body.⁴⁹

This mystery of love is full, yet grows. Illustrations abound. With marriage vows husband and wife intended to love each other without conditions, yet over time they can confess that their love has grown. Similarly religious dedicate their whole lives to God without restrictions when they pronounce vows. Their love is full, yet no one kills them immediately after the vow formula. Though full, their love, it is augured, should grow. This paradox is based upon the Christian mystery: in Jesus the kingdom of God was already fully present, yet still to come. Room was left for the superabundant accomplishment of God's will in Jesus's disciples. The indicative of love accomplished in Christ grounds the imperative for their response of love (1 John 4:7–11).⁵⁰ Their free acceptance of sufferings contributes to the salvation of all in the Church and, over the Church, to all whom Christ calls into love's fullness. Thus the leaden dross of suffering is transmuted into love's gold by Christ's Cross, a mystery more transformative than any philosopher's stone and deeper than the wisdom of worldly philosophers.

The Church's Mission

This understanding of suffering also illuminates man's original task in the world. God enjoined on Adam the tilling of the Garden (Gen 2:15). Without a commission to fulfill man would have been reduced to the passivity of a welfare recipient, deprived of meaningful accomplishments. Instead his ingenuity and fortitude were challenged to improve the world and suffuse it with works of love, making it more hospitable to his fellow human beings and reflective of God's generous love. Despite the Fall God's original plan for the world's amelioration remains to be carried out. Though now more burdensome, the task is more imperative. Not

⁴⁹ For further elaboration, see John McDermott, S.J., "The Biblical Doctrine of KOINONIA," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 19 (1975): 64–77, 219–33.

⁵⁰ John McDermott, S.J., "Jesus and the Kingdom of God in the Synoptics, Paul, and John," *Église et Théologie* 19 (1988): 69–91.

only should material creation be enhanced, but men's eternal salvation is at stake. The sacrifices entailed in overcoming sin's disruption should contribute spiritually to their salvation. A world called to greater charity in its spiritual evolution challenges men to grow "to the measure of the stature of Christ's fullness" (Eph 4:13–16).

In Christ's Cross men confront the ultimate choice of faith and meaning. Either they close themselves in upon their sufferings, finding no meaning in them—pain is individual, unintelligible to human reason, and contrary to nature—and so embitter themselves or else they open themselves to love's mystery far surpassing their minds and hearts. Evolution in both physical and spiritual spheres calls for sacrifice. Christian disciples join their sufferings to Christ's for love's increase, mankind's redemption, and eternal sharing in divine life. They know that God can bring good out of evil as He did in His Son's Passion. Sometimes He wishes to open human hearts in order that He might respond to prayers for particular intentions. Then He provides a requested healing or bestows comfort and strength. If some suffer more than others, that is attributable to the humanly incalculable concatenation of physical conditions, the residue of past sins, and human freedom. Furthermore, believers who suffer are invited to conform themselves to His beloved Son, the perfect expression of selfless love. Although God usually treats His weak children more gently than they deserve, sometimes He summons them to heroism. When Paul repeatedly besought God to remove a particular "thorn in the flesh," he received the answer: "My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness." Then Paul proclaimed his faith: "I shall most gladly boast of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore for Christ's sake I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:7–10). Great saints, like Therese of Lisieux and John of the Cross, desired sufferings in order to conform themselves more closely to Christ for the world's salvation.⁵¹ Such heroes by grace overcome the world, leaving mankind models of courage, patience, and fidelity. All others should adopt ascetical discipline willingly in their lives.⁵² God

⁵¹ E.g., Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. J. Clarke (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976), 214–20; John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 2.5–12, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 335–57.

⁵² John McDermott, S.J., "Asceticism: The Language of Love," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 74 (December 1973): 10–18.

alone is the final judge of frail hearts summoned to love in challenging conditions. May He be merciful.

Catholic Christianity preserved this positive evaluation of suffering in its entirety. Before post-Vatican II theologies introduced confusion into Catholic life, the faithful commonly recited daily the Morning Offering, offering prayers, works, joys, and sufferings in reparation for sins. Thereby personal growth in love and holiness ensued. It may be time to renew that practice. Catholics knew that God wanted them to share in His redemptive work, not as independent agents, but entirely animated by His omnipotent love. One merits justification as little as one earns love. Justification results from God's free love implanted in human hearts through Christ.

Christian faith insists that natural powers alone do not suffice for salvation. Sinful creatures are empowered by God to surpass themselves. Ultimately God created them not for happiness or its pursuit, but for divinization, sharing His eternal life of self-giving love. Men are challenged to surpass their nature. Only in dying to themselves do they live to God. God Himself is humble (Matt 11:29). The Lord prefers to serve His creatures (John 13:13–17). Hence His self-humiliation in the form of a crucified slave does not contradict His nature, but truly reveals who He is (Phil 2:7–8). This self-emptying love constitutes the deepest mystery of the Trinity: “For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again” (John 10:17). The divine invitation to enter into the Son's sacrifice of love and participate in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4) provides the answer to suffering in the concrete: when tragedy strikes a loved one, do not enter into a philosophical or theological analysis of suffering, as this essay attempts. Rather place yourselves and your loved ones under the Cross with Mary, God's mother, who accepted the Father's will for her Son and drank the redemptive cup to the dregs. Salvation was won on the Cross, God's definitive revelation in a fallen world; through it the new creation is accomplished in Christ's resurrection, which is offered to all who die to self. Consequently, since “strength is perfected in weakness,” Paul “takes delight in weaknesses, insults, calamities, persecution, and difficulties for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9–10).

The Church's doctrine can illuminate suffering's meaning and instill hope, consolation, and courage to people who must undergo sufferings here below—that is, everyone. Unfortunately not everyone hears the good news about suffering. Catholic Christians should mediate knowledge of it by living their lives joyfully, even when sufferings are inflicted upon them.

Not only are ascetical sufferings required to overcome the concupiscence dwelling deep in human breasts but also sufferings freely accepted increase union with their Savior Jesus Christ. Living this mystery, their zeal should be enflamed to spread it to others who are suffering and seeking meaning. Let Christ's love move them to bring its consolation and strength to others. Whoever is not strengthened to bear sufferings in this life will bear them in the next. A single hope summons all: assume Christ's Cross and encourage others to do likewise. Planted in the Church's midst is the new tree of life, the blessed Eucharist, challenge and consolation, sacrifice and joyous celebration.⁵³ N.V

⁵³ See John McDermott, S.J., "The Centrality of the Eucharist," *Antiphon* 28, no. 2 (2021): 211–44, for the Eucharist's role in revelation and redemption, while resolving ontological problems.