

Redeemable Suffering? St. Thomas Aquinas on the Meaning of Human Suffering and the Passion of Christ

THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, O.P.
Dominican House of Studies
Washington, DC

NEAR the end of his famous work the *Summa theologiae* (ST III, q. 69, a. 3), St. Thomas Aquinas asks an interesting question in his treatise on baptism: Why is it that the baptized are subject to death?¹ Why is it that people who are baptized still suffer and die? The question could sound like a skeptical cajole. Do you mean to tell me that people who are Christian die? Employed this way, the question would be a rhetorical taunt, not meant to seek an answer, but to end a conversation. Christianity should not be considered as a serious possibility because the problem of evil it diagnoses, it seems itself unable to remedy.

But Aquinas in fact means business in asking this question, and he is thinking on a deeper and more challenging level. He is letting the question lead him not only into a consideration of the mystery of redemption in Christ, and the character of human suffering, but also into a consideration of the very structure of things. To what does God give priority in the way he governs the world? How does suffering fit into the order of things? Aquinas is asking the question of what suffering ultimately means. For that is in fact what is at stake in speaking about “redeemable suffering”: does suffering mean anything, or could it? Can it be meaningful to suffer, or perhaps we should say, can there be ultimate meaning in life, despite suffering?

¹ This essay originally was presented as a talk in the Merton Lecture Series of the Catholic Chaplaincy at Columbia University, February 16, 2011.

He gives three answers to the question, which I will briefly paraphrase, in the inverse order in which he himself presents them: First, it is suitable that the baptized die, despite baptism into the life of Christ, for were this not the case “human beings might seek to be baptized for the sake of freedom from suffering in the present life, and not for the sake of the glory of eternal life. Wherefore the Apostle Paul says in I Cor. 15:19: ‘If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most miserable.’” Aquinas here is employing an argument from Augustine in the *City of God*: baptism is not about the stakes of remedying our life in this world only, and if it were then the whole of the Christian religion would be misconceived and delusional. Rather, the claim that baptism is about freedom from suffering and death is precisely a claim about what is ultimate and what is not, and whether we live for this life only, or whether we do not. The claim that through baptism we can attain to eternal life, then, provides the ultimate interpretive light on our understanding of suffering and death, and not the inverse, as if we were to say: “because we do die, Christianity must not be true.” In fact, the skeptic refuses the claim that baptism saves, not because of the reality human suffering, but because he or she judges the stakes of human existence in terms that are too restricted. In short, her or his view of salvation is materialistic. It pertains to this world only, and thus is too limited.

Second, Aquinas claims that the fact that we are subject even to suffering in baptism is fitting for our spiritual training. “Namely, in order that by fighting against the vices of our fallen nature and other defects to which humanity is subject, such as passibility, the human person may receive the crown of victory.” Temptation and suffering can lead the human spirit to fall into nihilism, or despair, but they are also the opportunity for growth and inner development of virtue. We have in and through the mystery of suffering the possibility to come to a deeper realization of what is more ultimately real, and to gain purchase on those virtues that last, in the face of a world where evil certainly does exist but may not yield the ultimate verdict on the meaning of life. In short, suffering invites us to choose sides in a world torn dramatically between the struggles of moral good and evil, and it can be in some cases the invitation to move toward our best selves and our highest destinations. Evidently if we were to absolutize this point of view in a simplistic manner we’d end up instrumentalizing suffering artificially: suffering is beneficial because it gives us the opportunity to become good people. Suffice it to say, Aquinas does not advocate such an un-nuanced view.

Last, he claims that baptism works in us by conforming us through the course of our lives to the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Just as Christ

suffered and died, and rose physically from the dead, so too the grace of God conforms us to Christ, inwardly. We are given the graces of baptism to unite our minds and hearts to Christ in this life, by spiritual habits of faith, hope, and charity, so that we might live through suffering and death in union with Christ and with God, so as to attain to eternal life (which consists in the beatification of the soul) and eventually to the resurrection from the dead. “Wherefore a Christian receives grace in Baptism, as to his soul, but he retains a passible body, so that he may suffer for Christ therein: yet at length he will be raised up to a life of impassibility. . . . So the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:17: ‘We are heirs indeed of God, and joint heirs with Christ; yet so, if we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified with Him.’ ”

In short, Aquinas has given us three themes to consider: free will and its importance in understanding the meaning of suffering; the place of the development of character and the discernment of ultimate values in the face of suffering; and the mystery of conformity to Christ—who himself suffered as God made man—so that united to him we might be delivered from the power of moral evil and death. Three points of inquiry, to which we return below. But let’s take a detour and look for a moment at the other option, the more contemporary point of view: the idea that suffering is meaningless.

II

Albert Camus was born in 1913 in Algeria, the son of a French working-class couple in the Northern African colony. Educated at the University of Algiers, Albert moved to France only after he turned 27 in 1940 amidst the onset of the Second World War. Despite his colonial origins and the fact that he never held an academic university post, Camus is in some ways the archetypical modern French intellectual. In Paris, he joined the resistance movement against German National Socialism, and was an active communist, who wrote regularly in the liberal free press under Nietzschean-inspired pseudonyms (*Caligula*, *Caesar Borgia*). After the war, he and Jean-Paul Sartre would come to symbolize in different ways the advocacy of secular socialist European humanism in the 1950s (Camus, though, was always ambivalent about the theoretical aspirations of humanism or what it might genuinely represent). Camus’s first wife was a morphine addict, and he passed through a series of affairs, for decades, amidst serial marriages. Sexuality seemed to amount to a kind of psychological anesthetic to his existentialist qualms. (The exploration of sensualism in the face of the threat of nihilism is a well-known theme in his famous 1944 play *Caligula*.) He wrote essays of political and philosophical tonality, but also plays and

novels, from around the time he was thirty, through the course of his life; for these latter he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. He is said to have claimed that the most absurd way in which one might die would be in an auto accident, and fittingly enough, he perished in a car driven by a friend, in 1960, at the age of 47. It does not seem that his death was a suicide.

I am referring to Camus in this context not because of the peculiarly French melodrama that characterized his life, but rather because of a theme in his writing that characterizes well a dilemma of modern secular human beings: the theme of the absurdity of suffering. Who says "absurd" in fact designates that which lacks any true purpose, or that which is purposeless. In other words, that which has no final cause, no teleology. In his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus takes as his image for the absurdity of human existence the condition of a character from an ancient Greek legend. Sisyphus, a mere mortal man, tried to overcome the power of death and in doing so strove against the gods. As a punishment, they condemned him to perpetually push a heavy boulder up a hill, only to see the boulder each time returned by gravity to the place from which he had originally moved it. The cycle permits no improvement and yet it must continually be taken up anew. The struggle of Sisyphus, then, is simultaneously pointless and painful. Like life, no discernable meaning can be found in this activity, and it is accompanied by existential disincentives. The image is like Nietzsche's eternal return, but instead of being filled with the existential triumph of the superman, or the wisdom of Zarathustra, Camus's conundrum lacks the vigor of confidence. How should we live with the absurd, or should we? Thus the claim of this particular book is famous: Camus says that the only real philosophical question is whether one should kill oneself or not. A terrible question and perhaps quite an immature and adolescent one in some ways, but of course the deeper revolt or issue that is at stake concerns the reason to live. Not for a salvation that transcends this world, and not because there is a deeper discernable meaning inscribed in things, but only for the modest joys of being in a world marked by suffering, despite that suffering. And in view of a hope that is not salvific, but only for the modest changes that a humanistic political ethic can afford.

Perhaps this seems a world away from the reflections of Aquinas we considered a few minutes ago. However, it is not entirely so, for surprising reasons. In fact, at age twenty-three, in 1936, a few years before he came to Paris, Camus wrote his master's thesis in Algiers, "Neo-Platonism and Christian Thought," a study of the human condition according to Plotinus and Augustine of Hippo. Camus was particularly marked by Augus-

tine's conception of the fallen human being, and Augustine's account of the effects of original sin, which include the tendency toward selfishness, the tenacity of lust, and the inevitability of mortality. While he could not see clear to the redemptive side of Augustine's anthropology—his study of grace and the mysteries of salvation (which nonetheless continually haunted Camus)—the Frenchman was sensitive to the darker side of this vision of the human plight. We find undergirding some of his restless existentialist reflections a frustrated desire for salvation, for the infinite, for the heroic—a desire knowingly refused and purposely suppressed, and then intentionally re-channeled into political activism. But the vision of the human person characterized by the inevitability of finitude and weaknesses of moral compromise has been retained: the human being naturally desires liberation from suffering and a higher purpose or horizon, but none can be found. And given that we cannot attain to God, no transcendent purpose is available, and thus an absurdity results.

This is not the moral optimism of Rousseau or the political optimism of Hegel. Camus wants to find purposefulness in the midst of a universe of the absurd, and to elevate the human spirit and the human community above the fray of mere interests of survival in view of a life of humane politics, arts, and philosophy: a kind of secular ecclesiality, where the primacy of the human thrives in a world that is not evidently friendly to the human, and where the human being has evolved arbitrarily and for no real reason. Meaning is sought, in other words, despite the absurd conditions in which human consciousness and freedom have arisen.

It would be a short trip from this vision of man to the vision we encounter today in English-speaking secularism. We would need to add the study of the modern sciences to the equation. In a post-religious world, we are in the slightly absurd situation of having to make meaning freely out of the gratuitous evolution of a consciousness capable of self-awareness and analysis. Through the modern sciences and technology we can pursue a humanism that would seek to liberate us progressively from the conditions of pain that characterize suffering humanity. This suffering is in itself purposeless, or meaningless, but with the advent of a human drive to lessen the powers of such an evil, humankind can push forward in the humanization of the physical universe by technology, making it more successfully habitable and less painful. Liberalism seeks to expand this modest goal by political models of inclusivity. Death is inevitable, and does not entail any meaning as such. It is for this life alone that we can live, by moments of joy and human achievement, despite the fact that there is no transcendental value to ascribe to this life. Like Sisyphus, we find our meaning “merely in the present moment of being,” as

we push against the weight of a purposeless cosmos. Against the backdrop of a sometimes hostile universe, the acceptance of our unique humanity in its fragile, momentary goodness and finite glory is our highest value, an acceptance without any recourse to salvific agency, or any life of grace, that would save us in the midst of our plight of suffering.

III

Let us pass from Camus and our contemporaries to a different consideration: the ontology of love. Catholic Christianity affirms a different metaphysics, of course, from that of the absurdists. It holds that the core meaning of human existence stems from love: not romantic or emotional love, though not excluding these, but a deeper spiritual and personal love. Behind being, and within being, is the mystery of love. By which we mean what? Well, love is analogous, and has multiple realizations, which are like and unlike one another, in different degrees and running through all things, but in different ways.

According to the first letter of John, God is love. Consequently, love is first and foremost something utterly transcendent of the world, and incomprehensible, coextensive with the being of God itself. We know this transcendent love as we know of God, that is to say: not in itself but only by its effects. There is a relative intelligibility, beauty, and goodness inscribed in the existent world that we inhabit. However, what we perceive to be good in itself—the world around us, ourselves—is also being in flux, dependent, and derivative, and so it leaves an inevitable trace of a hidden origin from a transcendent source. We are invited then to think transcendently or metaphysically, in view of the uncreated, underived love that created the world. However emotionally or existentially trying it is to think this, yet it is a firm truth of reason: There is a hidden goodness from before the foundations of the world who is uncreated love, who has given us existence gratuitously, in the munificence of his bounty.

Analogically speaking, love also characterizes creatures, even those which are inanimate or irrational. Things are characterized by intrinsic qualities, by which they tend toward purposes: from the brilliance of light to the solubility of water, to the sprouting form of plants, to the reproduction of animals, the physical world is characterized by the goodness and beauty of things as they tend toward perfections inherent in them. Analogically speaking, they “love,” so to speak, in their very beings, by way of these innate inclinations to natural perfection that characterize them from within. Modern sciences depend implicitly upon concepts of teleology for the study of the “laws” of nature. We presuppose these truths when we study the formal characteristics of material realities and their patterns

of behavior, or when we delight in them or take interest in their intelligibility and orderliness.

But more properly speaking, love especially characterizes rational creatures, or persons. Persons have spiritual souls, which make them capable, unlike other animals, of rational and conceptual knowledge and spiritual, voluntary love. To love freely and intelligently is human, to be human is to love in such a way. For the human being is before all things marked by an insatiable spiritual desire for love at the core of the soul, and this desire craves satisfaction by the unique fulfillment of happiness. We desire to love and to be loved and to find happiness thus, and this appetite inevitably and necessarily works itself out in all the pathways trod by human freedom, which is this restless seeking of happiness. The desire for happiness is a tortuous desire that we cannot escape, but which we can shape from within by reason and habitual choice, seeking freely to love more or less well, more or less nobly and realistically, or in base and delusional ways, in accord with reason or with irrationality, and in accord with falsehood or the truth.

Love in fact also characterizes the life of reason itself: there is a spiritual inclination in us that desires the truth, such that we can learn to love the truth. The pursuit of the truth consequently can also and perhaps especially make us happy and free us: We can be freed by the love of the truth. To become happy, then, is to love well and to be loved, but it is also to find the truth concerning that which is ultimate and affords perspective, to see all things in the light of this truth, wherein the mind alone can rest. To seek the truth, and to discover stable and noble forms of love that abide: this is the purpose-filled vocation of the human being who is bound to love.

If this is our starting point, then the problem of suffering is immediately more complicated, for we are obliged from the beginning to make a crucial distinction between moral suffering—which stems from the inner conundrums of our spiritual life, in its implacable desires for love and for the truth—and physical or emotional suffering, which is rooted in the body and its material and emotional pathos. There is a hierarchy of suffering, then, not because we need to say that mental anguish or spiritual heartbreak is worse than physical suffering, or vice versa, but because there is a distinction of kinds, a duality, by which we are characterized. Suffering from a sense of meaninglessness is different from suffering from cancer. The two can overlap or interpenetrate (and often do), but they still are utterly distinguishable, and Christianity takes them both utterly seriously, because it takes seriously the suffering of the whole person.

Let's return now to Aquinas's first reason for the suffering and mortality of baptized Christians: the argument from free will. Baptism is not

chosen freely in order to take away mere physical pains or to reach a material accommodation with the cosmos. What, after all, would unending life in this world as we know it be like spiritually? Would we want it? Why is it that most people would answer “no” to this latter question, even while they simultaneously feel a deep instinctual (truly natural) wish not to die? Analogously, then, baptism is most fundamentally motivated not by a desire for perpetual life in this world, but by a spiritual desire for a higher, eternal life, by an inclination to be united to God by love and to love the truth concerning God in a way that transcends the sorrows of this world.

One of the places we suffer most is inwardly in our capacity to love, and so our happiness depends above all on our gaining perspective and wisdom and fortitude in our very capacity to love rightly. Baptism is a remedy to suffering, then, above all because it invites us to choose in grace, by virtue of the charity that is poured into our hearts by Christ, to love the triune God above all things, in and through everything, and to acknowledge ourselves loved in Christ. The deepest fortitude of the soul in the face of sufferings comes from loving and being loved—in the truth—and this is possible in a most ultimate way only by grace, a grace that alleviates our deepest spiritual suffering.

But what about the physical suffering, and the psychological and mental agony it can engender, that so characterize our existence? We could give a thousand vivid and diverse examples, a hypnotizing tableau both fascinating and terrible. Recall that St. Thomas appealed in his second argument to the possibility of growth in virtue even in this life, in the midst of our suffering, by way of the moral virtues and the theological virtues, of faith, hope, and love. Is this just Pollyanna? Is Christianity motivated by the misguided pursuit of wish fulfillment in the midst of unavoidable moral tragedy? Given the witness of saints, it is not clear that it is. Suffering *can* and does become the occasion for human beings to grow inwardly—morally, spiritually—and to be more generous toward others, sometimes in astonishing ways. We think of the life of Teresa of Calcutta, who made a thousand acts of beauty and spiritual love blossom amidst a desert of suffering in the ghettos of Calcutta, or of Thérèse of Lisieux, the Carmelite saint, whose excruciating battle with tuberculosis was the occasion for a heroic but also utterly beautiful act of offering of her life to God in excruciating pain, an act she made in faith and wished to make on behalf of those who do not believe in God. Or of Maximillian Kolbe, the Polish Franciscan, who died in Auschwitz giving thanks to God—even at the moment of his execution by lethal injection—that he had been permitted to give witness to his faith. Maybe it is not fanaticism. Maybe it is the triumph of love.

And yet we are not all saints, you might say. Yes, but the passivity of suffering works also in the ordinary person, and even the weak person, to push him or her toward the consciousness of the absolute, and a more deliberate choice of the good, and sometimes a reluctant martyrdom. There is no one on a cancer ward who is not in some way seeking the truth. The work of living with our mortality and with the mystery of evil is also the work of discerning the deeper meaning of things. And this is something St. Augustine spells out as well. He says in the *City of God* that God permitted the first death, mortality, so as possibly to spare us the second death, eternal separation from God. We are brought by mercy around to the consideration of the last things, and of the journey back to God as our ultimate resting place. Even in suffering, and in a certain sense, especially in it, we can find the peace that God alone can give and that the world cannot procure. In short, suffering can lead to purification, by which we attain to our deeper selves and to a new-found hope in God alone. Suffering can purify us of the spiritual dilettante in us, and it may push us toward more ultimate forms of inward resolution and truthfulness. This is a form of wisdom procured through the crucible, but it is wisdom the world requires—and, in truth, a wisdom we require, if we are to rejoin the wisdom of God.

IV

Let us speak finally then about the suffering of God in the passion of Christ. This was the third of Aquinas's "reasons" regarding baptism and mortality. In fact it is, of course, fundamental. The Catholic faith teaches that in Christ, God became human and lived an ordinary and extraordinary human life among us, to eventually bear witness to his own identity through his death, by way of crucifixion. And this same person, the Son of God made man, also rose physically from the dead in his human nature, in a transformed, or glorified, state of body and soul. This state of Christ's resurrected humanity is itself a new creation, a new beginning or recreation of humanity, that foreshadows the end times, the life of the world to come. Thus Christian baptism is an invitation to union with Christ, not only in this world, through love and fidelity to God even through suffering, but also through death unto the beatification of the soul in glory and the eventual resurrection of the body from the dead.

Is the effectuation of bodily resurrection impossible for God? Well, it is as easy or as difficult to raise the dead to eternal corporeal life as it is to create the world from nothing in the first place. That is to say, it is absolutely impossible for whoever is not God, but it is in truth mere child's play for God. If God exists, then God can raise the dead. And God does exist and he has raised the dead, in Jesus Christ.

The claim that God suffered in Christ then is mysterious. God did not assuredly have to become incarnate and human to save us, nor did he have to suffer to do so. But, as Aquinas notes, by his incarnation and his paschal mystery God makes love the victorious inward form of our human life in this world, even after we have fallen into sin and the power of death. He does not restore us back to a state in which we are free from the power of evil (simply hitting the reset button of human creation, as it were), but rather, in the midst of the fallen state that currently characterizes humanity, in which the power of evil has some real reign over us and within us, God has come among us as a liberator, to whom we can be joined, a power of love to transform and heal, to whom we can be united by grace. The passion of Christ then does work by love, but it is a love that renders humanity righteous, from within so to speak: Christ is now our righteousness, through his own human charity and justice, his moral purity and his grace, against the backdrop of a human race that is compromised or marred by evil, or just banality and indifference. And it is his righteousness that he in turn offers to us, his members, by a participation in his grace. He takes on the form of suffering Adam in love, so that we the children of Adam who suffer might become united to the love of Christ that can conquer sin and death.

On this account of things, our suffering now in this world, despite its potential absurdity or its horror or its sheer existential trial, is not meaningless, but meaningful, because we can take up the life of Christ into ourselves, his life of grace. Our intellects and wills—which innately desire to love and to find the truth—can now be strengthened from within to live by Christ in the truth about God, and to love, even in the midst of suffering, in union with God and for the good of others. The Catholic theological tradition here speaks of meriting in Christ, of suffering with him and in him, not only for our own purification of sins, but even for the redemption of others, for their good, so that God might in turn offer grace and consolation to others, as a result of our union with Christ. The mystical body of the Church in this world is seen as the Church suffering, or the community of human beings who live by the grace that draws us in by love toward God, but also toward the radical offering of our lives on behalf of the neighbor, and even the enemy. On this view, the burden we shoulder in daily life is not the absurd stone of Sisyphus, but the Cross of Jesus: if we take up our cross daily in him, we grow in life, and we are able to communicate that life to others, in a hidden but real way. That is the victory of the truth and of love that can be inscribed on our souls, even sometimes with radiant beauty, often in hidden ways known only to God. But it is a victory which can bear us through trial and pain, and even seemingly inexplicable suffering, into the life of God.

Let us conclude by asking: Is this reasonable to believe? We should respond by saying: It is a gift to believe. Only by faith is it possible to believe in the ultimate salutary purposes of suffering, by faith which is itself a grace given by God. This grace, however, is offered to all, if we wish to accept it, to seek it, and to cooperate with it.

Note that we are left with this great difficulty: how to deal with the irreducible duality of man. We are body and spirit, and we suffer in both, for different reasons. A culture that absolutizes the body makes the spirit suffer from the suppression of its desire for transcendence and encases it in meaningless commercialistic and sensual banter. The greatness of the self is suppressed and the absolutization of the body is preferred. A culture that glorifies the spiritual, however, has to contend with the frailty of our corporeality and its transience. The temptation in that case is the inverse: to deny the inherent goodness of this material world, or its meaningfulness, and to absolutize spirit to the denigration of flesh. Everything around us is ashes, illusion, samsara, and the only thing that transcends all is sensibly unknown. The spiritual life is attained by the ascetic denial of the corporeal.

Camus wanted to find a way out of this dilemma through a purely intra-worldly humanism, which accepts that the infinite desires of our spiritual life cannot be met, but which wishes nonetheless for some kind of political and artistic nobility that will exist in the moment, hovering over the abyss, without purchase in the very fabric of things, a fleeting if absurd meaning. Christianity, however, posits that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God took upon himself the form of a servant and became obedient, even unto death on the Cross, so that the human world, and even the physical world, might be illumined by a higher spiritual meaning, and by the giving of divine life. The crucifixion illuminates the world: It is the presence of the absolute Logos, or transcendent reason of God, present in the sensible, the bodily, present even in suffering and death. The Cross is the reconciliation of the spiritual and the corporeal, the victory of love in the midst of suffering, and the claim of ultimate and perennial meaning, even in a world of alteration and change. This mystery of wholistic unification, of God and man, and body and soul, and suffering and death with resurrection and eternal life—it terminates in the glory of the resurrected life of Christ, where God has delivered us definitively from the power of evil and the power of death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, then, is the hope of all humanity, the implicit unique hope of every human person, whether recognized or not. In the resurrected Lord we can perceive the term of our personal pilgrimage and that of the collective history of suffering humanity. How can we set out in that direction? In faith. It is not an impossible

pathway to walk, for it begins in prayer, and if we ask God, He will help us to pray, and to believe in the resurrected life of Jesus. He will open the eyes of our heart to perceive this mystery. He will illuminate our minds to follow after the Risen Lord. **N·V**