

The Question of Evil and the Mystery of God in Charles Journet*

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THE QUESTION of evil is present throughout the works of Charles Journet. Journet not only wrote a book on evil,¹ several parts of which appeared as articles in the French journal *Nova et Vetera*,² but he also published various short works,³ as well as numerous studies⁴ touching on

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¹ C. Journet, *The Meaning of Evil*, trans. Michael Barry (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1963); French: *Le mal, Essai théologique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961).

² Journet, “La question du mal,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 32 (1957): 190–201; idem, “Les formes du mal,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 34 (1959): 26–31; idem, “Le mal de la nature,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 34 (1959): 100–117; idem, “Dieu est-il responsable du péché?” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 34 (1959): 206–36; idem, “Le mystère de l’enfer,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 34 (1959): 264–87.

³ Journet, *Le purgatoire* (Liège-Paris: La Pensée Catholique, 1932); *Notre-Dame des sept Douleurs*, “Les cahiers de la Vierge, 2” (Juvisy: Cerf, 1934); *Frère Jérôme Savonare, Dernière méditation sur le Psaume “Miserere” et sur le début du Psaume “In te Domine speravi”* (Fribourg: Librairie de l’Université, 1943 [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947, 1961, 1968]); Journet, *Les sept Paroles du Christ en Croix* (Paris: Seuil, 1952); cf. idem, “La quatrième parole du Christ en Croix,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 27 (1952): 47–69; idem, *La Volonté divine salvifique sur les petits enfants* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1958); idem, *Sur le pardon du péché et la part laissée aux indulgences* (Saint-Maurice: Ed. Saint-Augustin, 1968); C. Journet, J. Maritain, and Philippe de la Trinité, *Le péché de l’ange* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1961).

⁴ C. Journet, “Les maladies des sens internes,” *Revue Thomiste* 29 (1924): 35–50; idem, “La peine temporelle du péché,” *Revue Thomiste* 32 (1927): 20–39 and 89–103; idem, “Le péché comme faute et comme offense,” in *Trouble et Lumière*,

several aspects of evil (suffering, sin) or related questions (“tragedy,” man’s condition before sin, hope, redemption, and so on).⁵ Under Charles Journet’s editorship, the journal *Nova et Vetera* devoted much space to a number of reflections on the question of evil in the events that struck the world in the twentieth century (the events in Poland, in Russia, the occupation and resistance, deportations, anti-Semitism, reprisals, war and peace, atomic weapons, and so on).⁶ Journet also preached spiritual retreats on the mystery of evil.⁷ A brief glance at Charles Journet’s publications shows us right away the exceptional place of evil at the heart of his theological thought from his first writings to the last.

On a great number of essential points, Charles Journet’s doctrine on evil goes back to and develops the “classic” Thomistic doctrine: Evil is defined as “the privation of a good that should be present” (evil is a “negativity of privation”); it is divided into three forms (evil of nature, of fault, and of punishment); in man, after the original fall, it only takes on the form of the evil of punishment and the evil of fault, and so on.⁸ But the thought of

Études Carmélitaines (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949), 21–29; idem, “Pour une théologie du martyre,” in *Limites de l’humain*, Études Carmélitaines (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1953), 215–24; idem, “Dieu et le mal: Aspects métaphysiques du problème,” *Revue Thomiste* 59 (1959): 213–69; idem, “Un affrontement de Hegel et de la sagesse chrétienne,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 38 (1963): 102–28; idem, “La peine du péché actuel,” in *Le Christ devant nous: Études sur l’eschatologie chrétienne* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1968), 71–126.

⁵ Journet, “Notes sur le tragique,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 18 (1943): 185–97; idem, “L’univers de création ou l’univers antérieur à l’Église,” part 1, *Revue Thomiste* 53 (1953): 439–87, and part 2, *Revue Thomiste* 54 (1954): 5–54; idem, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 29 (1954): 208–29; idem, “De l’espérance,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 45 (1970): 161–222; idem, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, *Nova et Vetera* (French) 48 (1973): 46–75, and part 2, *Nova et Vetera* (French) 48 (1973): 81–103.

⁶ See, for example, “Représailles,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 18 (1943): 113–23; “Résistance,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 18 (1943): 209–21; “Au nom du droit chrétien,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 18 (1943): 321–38; and so on. Concerning these contributions, see G. Boissard, *Quelle neutralité face à l’horreur? Le courage de Charles Journet* (Saint-Maurice: Ed. Saint-Augustin, 2000).

⁷ *Le mal*, retreat preached at Ecogia, August 17–30, 1953, typewritten notes. A retreat on God, preached several times with some changes, also testifies to the presence of the question of evil in Charles Journet’s meditation on the mystery of God; the same preoccupation appears again in the retreat on *Les paradoxes des Noms divins* (preached in 1971 at Notre-Dame d’Argentan Abbey). I should mention still other meditations of Journet, notably the last part of his retreat on the Our Father, *Notre Père qui es aux cieux* (Saint-Maurice: Ed. Saint-Augustin, 1997), with the text of a radio address in the appendix.

⁸ See, in particular, Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 27–57.

Journet is not limited to the rehearsal of a common doctrine. It has its own characteristics that express the theologian's fundamental preoccupation: evil in its relation to the mystery of God. For it is this relation, which Journet pondered and delved ever more deeply into in the course of his work, that forms the core of his study of evil. This is what I would like to outline here, without dealing with all the aspects that caught Journet's attention (the redemptive suffering of Christ, the Virgin's compassion, and human suffering), but rather limiting ourselves to some fundamental characteristics dealing with the mystery of God and evil.

I. Evil: A Question Put to Us . . . by God

In all his writings, Charles Journet lays particular stress upon the interdependence of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of evil. "The rule of both fields of knowledge is not to destroy each other but to enrich each other by advancing together": These two fields of knowledge either "extinguish one another" or "deepen one another." Hence, to answer the question of evil means "to clear up a mystery with a mystery."⁹ Journet's thought, insisting on mystery, resolutely parts company with a rationalistic kind of approach that aims at integrating evil into a purely rational grasp of the universe. With just as much vigor, his thought rejects a dialectical approach in which evil and good would be engaged in a process that tends toward unity.¹⁰ Since good and evil cannot be placed on the same level, it is in the mystery of God that light can be brought to bear on the mystery of evil. It is from this height that we must look at the presence of evil in history.¹¹ For this reason Journet's approach is rigorously *theological* because for pure philosophy, evil remains an *enigma*. Faced with the evil undergone by the innocent, faced with the suffering of little children, Journet suggests the state of mind a Christian philosophy must adopt: "At this point, philosophy cannot be integrally constructed without borrowing higher data from theology."¹²

On this high level, according to Journet, evil must be looked at through the "eyes of God," that is, with the vision of God Himself: "[W]e should turn to God to see evil through his eyes, with the penetrating sight that theologians call the vision of wisdom. Then we can get to the

⁹ Ibid., 21–23.

¹⁰ See, in particular, his critique of Leibniz, in Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 119–24; and of Hegel, "Un affrontement de Hegel et de la sagesse chrétienne," 102–28. In this regard we should keep in mind the dedication of his work *The Meaning of Evil*: "To those who know how to hate the absurd and worship mystery."

¹¹ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 21–23 and 275.

¹² Journet, "La quatrième parole du Christ en Croix," 58; idem, *Le mal*, 266.

bottom of things.”¹³ Hence, an authentically Christian look at evil is one of “faith illuminated by the gift of wisdom,” which is “the only light which allows the mind to plumb the depths of evil without foundering.”¹⁴ With St. Thomas, we must understand the “gift of wisdom” as the gift of the Holy Spirit that, linked to charity, enables us to judge things by using the highest cause as our guideline, which is God Himself.¹⁵ Journet gives as examples the Virgin Mary, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Catherine of Sienna, and St. Angela of Foligno.¹⁶

This “point of view” profoundly modifies the question of evil as commonly posed. It reverses it. Journet invites us here to take “question” in its primitive meaning of “torture,” of scandal, and to put it on the high level of God himself. From this perspective, it is not so much man who puts the question of evil to God, like a cry rising to heaven, but rather it is God who “puts before each one of us, in ever more harrowing ways, the question of evil, not in order to shake our faith and trust but to make them truer and more intense.”¹⁷ The question of evil invites us consequently to look closely at the divine design, at God’s permission and knowledge of evil.

II. God’s Permission of Evil

Following Maritain, Journet reproaches Hegelian rationalism for positing evil’s dialectical or metaphysical necessity.¹⁸ A similar criticism is leveled against Leibniz’s theodicy.¹⁹ Their mistake consists in failing to recognize the essential place that belongs to the divine “permission” of evil. “The idea of the permission of evil is misunderstood”;²⁰ this is what can help

¹³ Journet, *Le mal*, retreat, according to typewritten notes unrevised by the author; cf. idem, *Meaning of Evil*, 247–49, which invites us to look at what evil becomes “in the eyes of God.”

¹⁴ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 281.

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 45, a. 1.

¹⁶ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 280–81; idem, *Le mal*, retreat.

¹⁷ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 285; cf. 289: “The question of evil can never be side-stepped, for God sets it before every man from the time he first comes into the world”; idem, *Le mal*, retreat: “The problem of evil, the question of evil—I stress this word, understanding it in its primitive sense of torture: put to the question—the question of evil is addressed by God to each one among us several times in our life. He asks you to answer this direct question that is put to you without losing faith or love, but instead to seize the opportunity of this question, this scandal, to grow in your faith and your love.”

¹⁸ Journet, “Un affrontement de Hegel et de la sagesse chrétienne,” 124–25 (texts of Jacques Maritain).

¹⁹ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 119–24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

us grasp correctly the place of evil in God's design: While God wills the good directly and *per se*, he does not will evil directly but *permits* it *per accidens*. With St. Thomas, Journet explains: "It is not true to say that *God wills evils to be*. . . . Nor is it any more true to say that *God wills evils not to be*. . . . The only thing left to say is that *God wills to permit evil*."²¹ Journet stands here, with St. Thomas, on the dividing line that affirms the universal scope of divine providence as well as the efficacy of the divine will without sacrificing the rights of reason (irrationalism).

On this basis, Journet, again with St. Thomas, carefully distinguishes the three forms of evil. The evil of nature (for example, the suffering of the animal killed by another animal that makes it its meal)²² is willed in the sense that in and of itself it is linked inseparably to a good intended by God: "It is tolerated and accepted by God but not intended . . . , it is willed indirectly and *per accidens*."²³ As for the evil of punishment (the punishment incurred through sin: human illnesses, the infirmities of old age, death), in an analogous way it is *permitted* by God, willed in indirect fashion; in itself it is not intended by God, but "willed" inasmuch as he intends a good to which the evil is connected by virtue of divine justice.²⁴ But the evil of fault (sin) is absolutely not willed by God: There can be no question of God willing it, not even accidentally or indirectly. The evil of sin is "*permitted*, tolerated, and suffered in a completely different sense from the evil of nature; it is permitted as a rebellion, an offense, *which God cannot will in any way*, which he cannot acquiesce in or *consent* to without denying his own being." So, when we say that the evil of sin is permitted, "this cannot be taken to mean that it is accepted, consented to, and tolerated, in other words indirectly willed, as the reverse side of some good looked for by God."²⁵ Among the diverse forms of evil, then, it is the evil of fault that presents the greatest theological difficulty. For if we look at evil from man's point of view, in the light of creatures, the evils of nature and punishment, especially suffering, will seem to be the most "revolting." But if we look at evil in God's light, "from God's point of view," then it is the evil of sin, the refusal of the love offered by God, that stands out as the evil most "unacceptable" to God, as the most radical form of evil.

²¹ Ibid., 82.

²² The evil of nature, insofar as it assails man, is an evil of punishment; every evil of man comes down to the evil of punishment or the evil of fault. On this point, Charles Journet clearly adopts the teaching of St. Thomas.

²³ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 147; cf. idem, "Dieu est-il responsable du péché?" *Nova et Vetera* (French) 34 (1959): 207.

²⁴ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 186; cf. ST I, q. 19, a. 9.

²⁵ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 147; cf. idem, "Dieu est-il responsable du péché?" 207–8; idem, "Dieu et le mal: Aspects métaphysiques du problème," 213–69.

Following St. Thomas Aquinas to the letter, Journet is extremely firm and reminds us constantly of this fundamental truth: In no way (*nullo modo*) does God will the evil of fault.²⁶ When we speak of the allowance of sin, it is more a question of God's respect for the creature, even to the point of the created will's resistance that God may allow "to happen and bear fruit indirectly in other things."²⁷ Up to now, Journet's thought is in full agreement with the common teaching of Thomists,²⁸ but it departs from the common tradition in its explanation of the divine knowledge of sin and the permissive decree. We need to point out that the main difference between Journet and other Thomists is not about the evil of nature or the evil of punishment, but about the evil of fault, as well as the divine decree by which sin is permitted.

III. How Does God Know Sin?

God, who does not possess the idea of evil, knows evil by knowing the good of which the evil is a privation: Evil is known through the good.²⁹ God does not draw this knowledge from creatures, for the divine knowledge cannot be specified immediately by a created object as such; divine knowledge cannot be passive in regard to a creature that would determine it. It is in himself, through his essence, that God knows the good of creatures and hence the evil that is its privation. As regards the evil of nature and of punishment, Journet, with Jacques Maritain, explains that God knows it "by the science of vision, *by a creative knowledge giving form and not receiving it, by seeing it in his essence alone*";³⁰ this is the way God knows everything of which he is the cause.³¹ This thesis fits in with the common teaching of Thomists.

But how does God know sin, the free act of the creature who separates himself from God? Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange may serve as an

²⁶ ST I, q. 19, a. 9: "Malum culpae, quod privat ordinem ad bonum divinum, Deus nullo modo vult."

²⁷ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 147.

²⁸ See, for example, R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *God, His Existence and His Nature: A Thomistic Solution of Certain Agnostic Antinomies*, vol. 2, trans. Bede Rose (London: B. Herder, 1936), 380. With Journet, we must stress the broad and *analogical* use of the term "permission."

²⁹ ST I, q. 14, a. 10; q. 15, a. 3, ad 1.

³⁰ C. Journet, "De la condition initiale privilégiée de l'homme," 217–18; idem, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*, vol. 3 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969), 273–74.

³¹ What we call "science of vision" (*scientia visionis*) is the knowledge of what was, what is, or what will be in reality, that is, knowledge joined to will in the exercise of causality. This "science of vision" is not the same as the "science of simple understanding" (*scientia simplicis intelligentiae*), which has to do with the knowledge of possible things and does not involve any act of the will; cf. ST I, q. 14, a. 9.

example of the teaching of Thomists: God knows when a sin exists in some soul "inasmuch as He permits this moral defect in which He cannot concur, and inasmuch as He concurs as first cause in the physical entity of the sin."³² God knows the sin insofar as he is the first cause of the creature's act (he enables the creature to act); as for the failing, God is not its cause but he knows it insofar as he permits it, although this permission is not the cause of the sin.

This allows Garrigou-Lagrange to maintain a twofold affirmation: the universal scope of divine providence (nothing escapes divine providence, not even sin), and the guiltlessness of God (God is not responsible for sin). "Therefore evil is known by God in his decree permitting through condemning it. He also envisages it in his sublime motives for permitting it."³³ According to this teaching, God knows the creature's free acts "in the divine decree by which they are made present to Him from all eternity."³⁴ By *decree* we mean the act of knowing joined to the will: The "permissive decree" is thus the act whereby God knows sin and allows it.³⁵ This decree is therefore the *medium* by which God knows the wicked human act. If we take into account God's causality as it relates to the human act (the creature could not act, even for evil, without the efficacious concurrence of the first cause that gives the necessary impulse to the act as such), Garrigou-Lagrange's position may be summed up this way: "God knows future sins in a twofold decree, namely, permissive and effective."³⁶ In a similar vein, Jean-Hervé Nicolas specifies: First, God knows the subject of sin; second, God knows the failing in his permissive decree; third, God knows the sinful act in the causal idea of this act (determining decree).³⁷

³² Garrigou-Lagrange, *God, His Existence and His Nature*, 70.

³³ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 73; *idem*, *The One God. A Commentary on the First Part of St. Thomas's Theological Summa*, trans. Bede Rose (London: B. Herder, 1946), 444–46.

³⁵ Garrigou-Lagrange, *God, His Existence and His Nature*, 66–67. The expression, "divine decree," corresponds to what St. Thomas calls "determinatio voluntatis et intellectus Dei" (*idem*, *The One God*, 521). In the case of the permissive decree, the knowledge in question is the "science of vision" (*scientia visionis*), that is, the knowledge of what was, is, or will be in reality, knowledge joined to the will (cf. above).

³⁶ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The One God*, 587: "God knows future sins in a *twofold decree*, namely, *permissive and effective*; for there is a *positive element* in sin, that is, the act or effect, which can be produced only with the concurrence of the First Cause; and there is the *privative element*, and this comes, however, solely from a defectible and deficient cause."

³⁷ Jean-Hervé Nicolas, "La permission du péché," *Revue Thomiste* 60 (1960): 516; there is a priority of the "permissive decree" over the "determining decree," just as in sin there is the natural priority of the failing over the positive determination. In no case does God determine the failing itself (see below).

Journet parts company with this teaching on certain points and qualifies it on others. With Maritain, Journet stresses the *eternity* of divine knowledge: God does not know sin *beforehand*, but knows it in his “eternal now,” wherein all the moments of time are indivisibly present.³⁸ This teaching does not differ from that of Garrigou-Lagrange, except for the stress Journet lays on this point by reprising a famous page from Maritain’s *Existence and the Existent*, repeated several times in the writings of the theologian: “The divine plan is not a scenario prepared in advance.”³⁹ Journet’s position, like Maritain’s, is clear: It is a matter of avoiding all determinism and thus preserving the divine guiltlessness.

As for the divine knowledge of sin by means of the permissive decree, it seems unacceptable to Journet (as well as to Maritain). It is not enough to say that God knows sins in his essence alone, but we must also say that he knows them “in his essence insofar as created existents are seen in it, and in them this privation which their freedom is the first cause of.”⁴⁰ In other words, through his science of vision, God sees the sin in the will of the man who refuses grace, and He sees it *in the instant* when this will refuses the divine impulse of love.⁴¹ Here Journet takes up again and at length Maritain’s position in his *Existence and the Existent* and in *La clé des chants*, explaining that “evil can only be known in the instant when it wounds existence” and that the science of vision attains it eternally, in its presentness, in that very instant when it happens.⁴² God sees sin, of which he is not the cause, in the will of the man who brings to nothing (“nihilates”) the divine motion to the good; he knows sin “in the creature’s freely nihilating will.”⁴³ With Maritain, then, Journet denies the place that Garrigou-Lagrange’s Thomism assigns to the permissive decree as a means of knowing sin: “Unlike several theologians that we usually follow, we do not conceive of this permissive decree as the ‘medium’ by which God knows the deficiency of his creatures.”⁴⁴

³⁸ Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 217–19; idem, *L’Église du Verbe Incarné*, 274.

³⁹ Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 218; idem, *L’Église du Verbe Incarné*, 274; cf. J. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Image Books, 1956), 122.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 216–22; idem, *L’Église du Verbe Incarné*, 273–78; idem, *Meaning of Evil*, 180–82.

⁴² Ibid.; Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 112–22. Idem, “La clé des chants,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5, 1932–1935 (Fribourg-Paris: Ed. Universitaires-Ed. Saint-Paul, 1982), 790–92.

⁴³ Journet, *L’Église du Verbe Incarné*, 278.

⁴⁴ Ibid.; Journet refers to Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 122–25. See also Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 221–22.

What is at stake in this thesis is obvious: Journet will not accept the view that the permissive decree *precedes* man's sin in any way whatever (hence the insistence on the eternal *presentness* of divine knowledge), for man has the entire initiative in sinning (hence the statement that God knows sin *in man's failing will*). With Maritain, he endeavors to exclude every divine initiative in connection with evil, even the permissive decree, and only recognizes the divine initiative in connection with the good. Thus, in the case of sin, every determining knowledge on the part of God must be put aside since God is absolutely not the author of sin. Therefore God only knows sin *in the culpable will* that has refused the divine motion to the good and not in the intervention of a divine decree. In a similar vein, Journet explains that "God knows the creature's refusal—certainly not by causing it, for He does not cause what nihilates—in the positive motion to the good that the creature nihilates."⁴⁵ These explanations rest upon the understanding of sin as a "nihilation" (in French, "néantement") and upon the position of the permissive decree as a consequence (Maritain).⁴⁶

IV. In What Way does God Permit Sin? The Consequent Permissive Decree

According to the usual thesis of Thomists, sin "only takes place following a purely permissive decree of God."⁴⁷ With this statement, the Thomists do not intend to attribute causality to God with respect to the sinful failing: God "only concurs in the physical act of the sin, not in any way in the disorder inherent in it."⁴⁸ As Garrigou-Lagrange explains, the creature's free will needs a divine *motion* to be determined to something. God and man must be considered as two "total causes," one of which (the creature as second cause) is subordinated to the other (God, the first cause). If the human will could be determined by itself alone, our freedom

⁴⁵ Journet, "Dieu est-il responsable du péché?" 232.

⁴⁶ As regards the critique that Journet makes of knowledge by permissive decree, we should point out that Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, while professing the teaching that Charles Journet rejects, nevertheless does not ascribe any causality to the permissive decree as such. Rather, what is proper to Maritain and Journet's position is the exclusion of all divine activity that would precede the wicked human action, in order to exclude any divine intervention in the realm of evil: God has all the initiative in the realm of the good, the creature has all the initiative in the realm of the bad. For a balanced overview of this debate, if yet close to Journet's explanation concerning the knowledge of sin, see G. Bavaud, "Comment Dieu permet-il et connaît-il le péché?" *Revue Thomiste* 61 (1961): 226–40.

⁴⁷ R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Les perfections divines* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1936), 115.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

would have the dignity of God's primary freedom, or resemble it univocally.⁴⁹ Far from suppressing our freedom, the motion by which God moves our will to determine itself is the source of our freedom: In us and with us, the divine will causes the free mode of our act. This does not mean that God is the cause of moral failing: If in the acts that precede the definitive choice, there comes into play a bad movement that inclines us to a sinful choice, God is in no way the cause of this failing, as it belongs entirely to the defectible nature of the creature.⁵⁰ When we say then that God permits sin, we mean that God allows sin to happen. This doctrine tries to account for the guiltlessness of God without lessening his universal causality (God's causality in human action, even wicked, considered as action and as free).

Pushing further the reflection on the relationship between God's permission and man's sin, the usual teaching of Thomists insists that human failing does indeed precede God's refusal of actual grace, but this failing presupposes the divine allowance of sin and would not happen without it.⁵¹ In other words, if sin happens, it is because God permits it, but this permission in no way is the cause of sin. Such, in its broad outlines, is the solution of the "antecedent permissive decree."⁵²

Like all Thomists, Journet agrees that sin must be explained in virtue of a divine permission, but he denies the antecedent permissive decree. Firstly, Journet takes up from Maritain the idea of "nihilation." While every initiative comes from God as it relates to the good, man alone takes the initiative for sin: Sin "is produced *without* God."⁵³ Journet subscribes wholly to Maritain's observations on the dissymmetry between the realm of the good and that of evil.⁵⁴ He reproaches certain Thomists (such as Bañez and the school that follows him) for trying to explain evil in the

⁴⁹ Garrigou-Lagrange, *God, His Existence and His Nature*, 356–57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 380–84; *idem*, *Les perfections divines*, 211–24.

⁵¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, *God, His Existence and His Nature*, 372–73. Here the divine allowance of sin is linked to the absence of "efficacious grace." What we call "efficacious grace" is the grace that effectively moves to action, as distinct from "sufficient grace," which gives the proximate power to act but not the acting itself.

⁵² See J.-H. Nicolas, "La permission du péché," 509–46; and note 37 above.

⁵³ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 178.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 179: "In the line of evil-doing, the creature is first cause. . . . The first initiative towards good acts comes always from God . . . but . . . the first initiative to evil-doing always comes from the creature." Cf. *idem*, "Dieu est-il responsable du péché?" 222, 230–32. On this dissymmetry between the realm of the good and that of evil, Journet follows Jacques Maritain expressly, see Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 94–99. See also Journet, "De la condition initiale privilégiée de l'homme," 217.

same way as we explain good, despite the total dissymmetry between the two realms. By sinning, man on his own initiative, “sprung from his nothingness,” eludes the flow of divine causality. “For a free creature, in so far as it has come out of nothing, has this fearful privilege of being able to nullify within itself the influence of God.”⁵⁵

This nihilation must not be understood as an act of annihilation, like a reduction of a being to nothingness, for that would take us back to the positive line that Journet precisely wants to avoid in explaining sin. Rather, we are dealing with a privation, a negation. More exactly, Journet—like Maritain—calls *nihilation* the non-consideration of the rule, the first principle of sin, the free will’s initiative of nothingness. Thus the first moment of sin, which is a privation, consists in the creature’s “nihilation” of the divine motion to the good. Here Journet is quite close to Maritain’s thinking on the “shatterable motion,” that is, the divine motion to considering the right rule of action, which the creature can put in check. Based on this, Journet takes up one of Maritain’s central theses: The permissive decree is not antecedent but *follows upon* the evil will’s nihilation of the shatterable motion.⁵⁶

According to Charles Journet, as we have already noted, God knows sin by knowing the nihilating initiative in man’s free will. When we say then that God “permits sin,” this means that God “abstains from supplying a remedy to the first failing of man and lets the act, deviated at its source, play itself out according to its own rules. . . . God permits the sin simply by not intervening to prevent it: here we have ‘the permissive decree of sin.’”⁵⁷ For those Thomists whom Journet wishes to part company with, “the permissive divine will precedes the nihilating initiative of the free creature.” Instead, Journet holds that “God forsakes the creature only after having been forsaken by the creature,” in such a way that “the withdrawal of the creature precedes the withdrawal of God.”⁵⁸ Subsequently, as we have seen, the withdrawal of the creature is not known to God by his permissive decree.

More precisely, Journet distinguishes two moments in the resistance to divine motion: A first moment when God may intervene to stave off the

⁵⁵ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 178; idem, *Dieu est-il responsable du péché?* 231–32.

⁵⁶ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 99–112.

⁵⁷ Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 220.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 221 note 2. This affirmation is not lacking in traditional Thomistic teaching (Garrigou-Lagrange, *Les perfections divines*, 233). The debate arises rather from the usage of the sufficient grace/efficacious grace distinction (Garrigou-Lagrange, J.-H. Nicolas), or shatterable motion/unshatterable motion (Maritain, Journet), and therefore from the relationship between the permissive decree and the withdrawal of God, as well as from the notion of “nihilation.”

sin, and a second moment when the sin occurs if God has not come to counter the nihilating will.⁵⁹ No sin occurs, therefore, without a permissive decree of God, but far from coming before the nihilation of the divine will, this decree is by nature subsequent to it. "For us, the permissive decree is God's decision not to use extraordinary means to intervene and prevent the evil act from unfolding."⁶⁰ The permissive decree looks, then, like a divine non-intervention in face of a human initiative (the non-consideration of the rule that the shatterable divine motion would lead us to consider; this is not yet a moral evil, but it gets the creature's process toward it underway). These explanations are based on the distinction between shatterable motion, which the human will can put in check, and unshatterable motion, a divine motion that intervenes in every morally good act by determining it. They can give rise to questions about Maritain's position, questions raised sometime ago by Marie-Joseph Nicolas and Jean-Hervé Nicolas.⁶¹

By and large, these explanations of Journet give Jacques Maritain great credit for untying the knotty problem of the relationship between divine grace and human freedom. Maritain's contribution, underlined and adopted by Journet, consists in the two following affirmations: First, the

⁵⁹ Following Maritain, Journet explains that in the first moment the human will can, "by nihilating it, interrupt the shatterable motion whereby God directs it to consider the rule before acting"; in the second moment, "the will proceeds to the election that will be disordered"; when the shatterable motion is not shattered, it then gives way to an unshatterable motion under which the good act is produced (Journet, "De la condition initiale privilégiée de l'homme," 221, note 1). Thus there are "two divine permissions": in the first instance, there is a conditional permission implied in the possibility of thwarting the motion that directs us to considering the rule of acting; in the second instance, there is the permission, pure and simple, of letting the free action continue with its own dynamism (Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*, 166–67). Journet refers expressly to Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 176–90.

⁶⁰ Journet, "De la condition initiale privilégiée de l'homme," 222.

⁶¹ Marie-Joseph Nicolas, "La liberté humaine et le problème du mal," *Revue Thomiste* 48 (1948): 191–217; J.-H. Nicolas, "La permission du péché," 5–37 and 185–206. The criticism deals not only with Maritain's position as it relates to the universality of providence (God's causality only in the realm of the good), but also with the distinction between shatterable motion and unshatterable motion, as well as the notion of "nihilation," which J.-H. Nicolas deems ambiguous (nihilation, a pure negation that is not yet a fault, would still already be resistance to God). As we shall see further on, it also deals with the motive for permitting evil. Maritain responded to J.-H. Nicolas's criticism: Jacques Maritain, *Dieu et la permission du mal* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963). For a critical appreciation favorable to Maritain's position, see Michel-Louis Guérard des Lauriers, "Le péché et la causalité," *Bulletin Thomiste* 11 (1960–1962): 553–637.

dissymmetry between the order of the good and the order of evil (man has all the initiative in the realm of evil, while God has all the initiative in the realm of the good); second, the denial of a “scenario played out in advance” (eternity of divine knowledge, the creature’s nihilation of the divine motion, denial of the antecedent permissive decree, the divine knowledge of sin in the nihilating human will). According to Journet, it is in this way that Maritain enabled theology to strictly affirm the *guiltlessness of God*, who wills sin neither directly nor indirectly.⁶²

V. Why Does God Permit Sin?

When Journet speculates about the motive for the divine permission of evil, he comes up with a clear and unchanging answer: Evil is permitted *for a greater good*. He grounds this response on his reading of St. Augustine and St. Thomas. He stresses its mysterious character by making clear that this kind of answer does not flow from an a priori metaphysical necessity, but rather from an investigation that takes into account three statements of fact: an infinitely good and powerful God, a world where evil is rife, and the necessary triumph of good over evil (the good’s superabundant compensation for evil).⁶³ The particular characteristic of Journet’s thinking is his insistence on the *analogical value* he sees in this response, as it applies to all forms of evil: the evil of nature, the evil of punishment, “and even the evil of fault.” God permits each form of evil “for some greater good.”⁶⁴ Of these three forms, Journet pays most attention to the evil of fault (sin),⁶⁵ while professing a basic Christocentrism.

What is this “greater good” for the sake of which God permits sin? Journet gives his clear answer in his very first writings, and particularly in his study of the original fall: Adam’s transgression is “preordained to Christ,” not, to be sure, as a means, but insofar as sin, once allowed, will be repaired by Christ. In the unique design of God, “all things are ordered to the glory of Christ the Redeemer.”⁶⁶ For Journet, the glory of Christ is thus God’s *first aim*, the *very reason for the universe* and its *crowning*, the *highest cause* for which everything has been arranged.⁶⁷ Here Journet is expressly following

⁶² Charles Journet, “Jacques Maritain Theologian,” *New Scholasticism* 46.1 (1972): 33–35. For Maritain, the absolute guiltlessness of God is “the fundamental certitude, the rock to which we must cling in this question of moral evil.” Maritain, *Dieu et la permission du mal*, 11.

⁶³ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 85–86.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 85; cf. *idem*, “Dieu et le mal: Aspect métaphysique du problème,” 234–36.

⁶⁵ Concerning the evil of nature and the evil of suffering, Journet’s thinking repeats the common teaching of Thomists.

⁶⁶ Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 213–16.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the Christocentrism of the *Salmaticenses*, for whom all things, including the grace of the angels and the primordial grace of man in the state of innocence, existed for Christ, *propter Christum*. This priority of Christ must be understood in the order of values and of the end “in view of which” (*finis cuius gratia*).⁶⁸ This does not mean that in the order of conditionality Christ was willed independently of certain events (according to the Thomistic thesis, the Incarnation of Christ was decreed as a remedy for sin).⁶⁹ Journet knows that on this point St. Thomas’s interpretation is delicate. All Thomists agree on one affirmation: If Adam had not sinned, the Son of God would not have become flesh. But a difference arises concerning the relationship between the permission of sin and the good willed by God. Certain masters of the Thomistic school (Cajetan, John of St. Thomas) refuse to appeal to Christ immediately in answering the question, “Why did God permit Adam’s sin or original sin?” More precisely, Cajetan explains that God allows sin because he is exercising his providence in respecting the conditions of created beings, that is, by acting in conformity with the nature of creatures. Respecting man’s freedom, God allows sin and then seizes the occasion of the sin to bring about a greater good, the redeeming Incarnation of the Son of God.⁷⁰ Pursuing this line of thought, Jean-Hervé Nicolas, in his debate with Maritain, explains that sin is the occasion of a greater good, with God turning the evil that happens to the best advantage, but evil is not allowed only for the good things that God can draw from it: The permission of evil is not of itself ordered to the obtaining of this good as its *raison d’être*.⁷¹ For his part, Journet prefers the

⁶⁸ The end “cuius gratia” is the reason for which other things are willed, the end for which everything has been arranged; see *L’Église du Verbe Incarné*, vol. 3, 270n2.

⁶⁹ Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 213–16; idem, *L’Église du Verbe Incarné*, 270–72.

⁷⁰ Cajetan, *In Illam*, q. 1, a. 3 (Leonine ed., vol. 11, 16). What is at stake in the debate has to do with the unity of the divine plan and the “contrariness” that sin sets against God’s design. Must we posit one single divine decree whereby Christ is willed as Redeemer (the Carmelites of Salamanca, Journet), or one plan in which Christ would not have been foreseen, then another plan whereby Christ is willed, this last alone being willed with an efficacious will (John of St. Thomas continuing Cajetan)? Cf. M.-J. Nicolas, “La liberté humaine et le problème du mal,” 205 note 1.

⁷¹ J.-H. Nicolas, “La permission du péché,” 538–44; idem, *Synthèse dogmatique, Complément: De l’univers à la Trinité* (Fribourg/Paris: Editions Universitaires/Beauchesne, 1993), 386–90. According to J.-H. Nicolas, we cannot say that sin is permitted for the sake of a greater good, but we have to say: God wills this good because sin has taken place.

solution of the Carmelites of Salamanca who answer that God permitted the sin of Adam *for the sake of the redeeming Incarnation*, in anticipation of the glory of Christ, since God only allows sin for the sake of a greater good.⁷² Such is the “simple and grandiose” solution that Journet rallies to (without giving up the thesis that finds the reason for the permission of sin in the freedom that God has willed for his spiritual creatures).⁷³ All things, including Adam’s grace and the permission of sin, are ordered to the glory of Christ the Redeemer, albeit in different ways: Sin cannot be a means to the glory of Christ, but it is a precondition for its possibility. This thesis can be associated with Journet’s teaching on the grace of the angels: From their first moment, the grace and substantial glory of the angels are ordered to Christ as to their final cause. The primordial grace of the angels, at the dawn of the world, is finalized by the influx of Christ.⁷⁴ In this way, Journet upholds the primacy of Christ even to its utmost consequences: *The glory of Christ the Redeemer is the end that, in and of themselves, all things willed or permitted by God are ordered to.*⁷⁵

A final thesis comes into play to complete these explanations: The world of the redemption, the world of Christ’s grace, is all in all *better* than the world of Adam’s innocence.⁷⁶ Therefore, the “greater good” that the permission of Adam’s sin anticipates is not only Christ himself (the hypostatic union of God and man in Christ),⁷⁷ or his Mother, but the order of Christ’s grace in its full scope. The world of the Redemption, that is, participation in Christ’s grace and glory, involves us in a higher destiny than the one Adam had before his fall. To lay out this Christological thesis, Journet calls upon St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas, the Carmelites of Salamanca, and, in particular, St. Francis de Sales, whom “[t]his view was exceptionally dear to.”⁷⁸

⁷² Journet, “De la condition initiale privilégiée de l’homme,” 215n2; idem, *Meaning of Evil*, 256–59.

⁷³ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 256–57.

⁷⁴ As regards Adam’s state of innocence, Journet states: “If the humanity of the redemption is first in the order of intention, the humanity of innocence is first in the order of execution” Journet, *L’Église du Verbe incarné*, 279.

⁷⁵ Journet, *L’Église du Verbe incarné*, 207–15 and 269–73.

⁷⁶ Journet, “Dieu et le mal: Aspect métaphysique du problème,” 268; idem, *Meaning of Evil*, 86 and 256–59.

⁷⁷ As St. Thomas says, God loves Christ more than the whole human race and more than the whole universe. *ST I*, q. 20, a. 4, ad 1.

⁷⁸ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 258; idem, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 2, 82.

Such is the understanding of the *Exultet's* "Felix Culpa" that Charles Journet presents:⁷⁹ The Church is gathered around the Word made flesh, and a new universe is reshaped bit by bit, the universe of the Redemption, which, all in all, is incomparably better than what went before.⁸⁰ This understanding goes beyond the letter of St. Thomas and looks rather like a *Christocentric interpretation* of St. Thomas Aquinas (insertion of some elements of Duns Scotus's Christocentrism into the heart of a Thomistic theology).⁸¹ As for Journet's thought itself, we can observe the convergence of his doctrine with that of Maritain.⁸²

VI. God Wounded by Sin

Sin does not destroy God's design since in this design sin is ordered to a greater good. Moreover, Journet is very firm on the singleness of the divine plan, as we have just recalled. This does not mean that God is "indifferent" to sin, as if sin did not touch God, did not bring him any vexation, any frustration. Journet does not merely invoke the infinite majesty of God, which sin strikes at by defrauding it of what is justly due to it: "More concretely, it [sin] hurts God *Himself*, admittedly not *in Himself*, but where He is vulnerable, that is to say, in the love by which He strives to save us,"⁸³ for "it was impossible for God to love us *without at the same time needing our love*."⁸⁴

This consideration of God's vulnerability and the wound sin inflicts on him, which Journet reminds us of repeatedly, picks up on Maritain's explanation in his *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*:

⁷⁹ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 86 and 259; idem, "La Rédemption, drame de l'amour de Dieu," part 2, 82. Cf. *ST* III, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3.

⁸⁰ Journet, "La Rédemption, drame de l'amour de Dieu," part 2, 82.

⁸¹ On this question of Scotist Christocentrism and Thomism, see M.-J. Nicolas, "Le Christ et la création d'après saint Thomas d'Aquin," in *Studia mediaevalia et mariologica P. Carolo Balic, OFM septuagesimum expleti annum dicata* (Rome: Ed. Antonianum, 1971), 79–100.

⁸² J. Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*, trans. Joseph Evans (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1966), 62–63. Without going into the Christological question, Jacques Maritain (in answer to the criticism J.-H. Nicolas had leveled against him) maintains here that "God permits evil only *in view* of a greater good, that is to say, by referring or ordaining this evil to a greater good"; God allows sin "because God is certain that He will draw a greater good from the evil which the creature will be able to commit."

⁸³ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 182. Journet repeats and develops the same explanation in the passages indicated in the following notes.

⁸⁴ Journet, "De l'espérance," 211.

Sin *deprives* the divine will of something it really desired. . . . If I sin, something which God desired and loved will not be for all. This is through my first initiative. I am therefore the cause—the nihilating cause—of a privation with respect to God, a privation as to the terminus or desired effect (in no way as to the good of God Himself). . . . Sin deprives God Himself of something which He conditionally but really desired. . . . Moral defect affects the Uncreated, in no way in Himself, since He is absolutely invulnerable, but in the things and the effects He desires and loves. Here, one can say that God is the most vulnerable of beings.⁸⁵

Journet continues: “God indeed is afraid of sin, *He is afraid on my account of the evil I can do to Him.*”⁸⁶

In Journet, as in Maritain, this explanation of God’s vulnerability and the deprivation of love that sin inflicts on God shows a very vivid perception of a real divine wounding, the depth of moral evil in the eyes of God, “this thing, *unacceptable to God*, that sin is”:⁸⁷ sin cannot destroy God in himself, but it is truly *God himself* that sin wounds. In its basic elements, these explanations that distinguish the being of God from his effects, God’s conditional will from his absolute will, or God’s antecedent will from his consequent will, remain right in line with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas.

When St. Thomas analyzes the distress that is tied to mercy, he explains, as a matter of fact, that the merciful person is the one who is affected by the distress of another, who feels sorrow for the misery of another “as if it were his own misery.”⁸⁸ Compassion lies in this: “[H]e who loves looks upon his friend as another self, and counts his friend’s hurt as his own.”⁸⁹ This is why the merciful man acts: He provides a remedy for another’s misery out of love, “as if for his own misery.” As regards God, St. Thomas explains, he does not experience mercy inasmuch as it is a passion tied to the sensible appetite (because of the immateriality and immutability of God): God is not afflicted *in himself*, but he is merciful *in his effects*, in the activity of his love for the creatures he loves.⁹⁰ It is in the effects of God’s love that his compassion, distress, or

⁸⁵ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Cornelia Borgerhoff (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1990), 196–97, quoted in Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 183; idem, “Dieu est-il responsable du péché?” 235–36; idem, “De l’espérance,” 204–5; idem, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, 53–54.

⁸⁶ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 183.

⁸⁷ Journet, “De l’espérance,” 205.

⁸⁸ *ST I*, q. 21, a. 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, II–II, q. 30, a. 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, q. 21, a. 3.

sorrow find their reality: "Mercy is especially (*maxime*) to be attributed to God, as seen in its effect (*secundum effectum*), but not as an affection of passion (*non secundum passionis affectum*)."⁹¹ This is the teaching that Journet repeats while stressing the reality of the love God has for his creatures and which sin wounds. In his last writings, however, Journet goes a step further by posing the question of a real suffering *in God*.

VII. The "Mysterious Suffering" of God

A work by Jacques Maritain gave Charles Journet the opportunity to delve more deeply into his reflection on God's vulnerability. In the course of an article on theological knowledge, which was published in the *Revue Thomiste* in 1969, the philosopher included several pages titled "A Great Problem."⁹² Maritain's reflection starts with the Thomistic teaching on the divine names. Analogy implies that the names we use to speak of God have a twofold aspect: (1) the perfections themselves that the names signify and that exist properly in God, and even more properly in him than in creatures wherein they exist by participation in the divine plenitude; and (2) the manner of signification ("mode of signifying") of these names, a manner by which no name is properly attributed to God since in our language names retain the mode of signifying that befits creatures.

Maritain pushes this doctrine of St. Thomas higher and to its furthest point when reflecting on God's mercy. As we cited above, according to St. Thomas "mercy is especially to be attributed to God, as seen in its effect, but not as an affection of passion." While recognizing the perfect truth of this doctrine, Maritain nonetheless adds, "Yet that leaves the mind unsatisfied": must we not recognize in God's mercy a reality as we concede to his love? "Should we not say of mercy, then, that it exists in God according to what it is, and not only according to what it *does*?"⁹³

In answer, Maritain asserts that mercy exists in God as a perfection of his being, "though in a state of perfection *for which there is no name*: a glory or splendor unnamed, implying no imperfection, unlike what we call suffering or sorrow, and for which we have no idea, no concept, and no name that would be applicable to God."⁹⁴ Here Maritain evokes divine perfections that are "nameless," "unnamable" (*innominabiles*). In this way, the affec-

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Maritain, "Quelques réflexions sur le savoir théologique," *Revue Thomiste* 69 (1969): 5–27; cf. 14–27. This article presents the fruits of a seminar that Maritain held with some superiors of the Little Brothers of Jesus at Kolbsheim in the summer of 1968.

⁹³ Ibid., 16–17.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 17.

tion of passion, the suffering linked to the human experience of mercy, although embedded in our imperfection, would be a participation in this “nameless and unnamable” perfection of God, a perfection that affects neither his plenitude of being, nor his immutability, nor his happiness.

These observations, inspired by Scripture and theology, make an appeal to considerations of an anthropological nature as well. In our human experience, the suffering of love is not a wholly negative reality; it is not merely a deprivation but also carries a positive and noble element, fertile and precious, in short—a perfection. The “mysterious exemplar” of such nobility would be the analogate in God. Such an exemplar of merciful suffering in God, in whom all is perfection, would then be a part of God’s happiness and beyond what is humanly conceivable.⁹⁵ Two references to the thought of Raïssa Maritain suggest her influence on the position worked out by Jacques Maritain, as well as the influence of Léon Bloy.⁹⁶ Journet paid great attention to these pages, and he cites them several times in his last writings.⁹⁷ The French journal *Nova et Vetera* has published extracts from them.⁹⁸

Along with Maritain, Journet gives Marie-Dominique Molinié credit for having stressed the “quasi-suffering” of God, a deep mystery of the unspeakable sorrow that our sin causes God, which, instead of disintegrating the Godhead, “reveals the existence in It of an unsuspected grandeur.” “It is important that we take very seriously the biblical expressions that show God as ‘moved to his depths.’”⁹⁹ If it is indeed with Jacques Maritain that Journet’s speculation delves more deeply into the mystery of God’s suffering, his references to Molinié make clear the biblical and spiritual inspiration of this reflection. Journet shows a great appreciation for Molinié: In the French journal *Nova et Vetera*, he presents his papers under the title “A Theology of Great Style”¹⁰⁰ (there is nothing humdrum about such praise from the pen of Charles Journet).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Quoting Maritain, Journet explicitly repeats the mentioning of Raïssa Maritain and Léon Bloy, Journet, “De l’espérance,” 206. For a short survey of Maritain’s teaching and how it is confronted with that of St. Thomas, see Gilles Emery, “L’immutabilité du Dieu d’amour et les problèmes du discours sur la ‘souffrance de Dieu,’” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 74 (1999): 17–20 and 27–37.

⁹⁷ Journet, “De l’espérance,” 205–6; idem, “Jacques Maritain Theologian,” 35–36; idem, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, 57–60.

⁹⁸ Journet, “La souffrance de la créature,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 44 (1969): 226–28.

⁹⁹ Journet, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, 55–56.

¹⁰⁰ C. Journet, “Une théologie de grand style. Les cahiers de M.-D. Molinié, OP, sur la vie spirituelle,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 48 (1973): 299–310.

Molinié's paper dealing with the *Mystery of the Redemption* (1970) contains an important reflection on the "suffering" of God in a chapter on the divine mercy that arrives at Maritain's conclusions, albeit by a different path.¹⁰¹ Journet retains Molinié's affirmation of God's "quasi-suffering" as it relates to the refusal of the creature to whom he wishes to give himself.¹⁰² As in Maritain, so in Molinié, Journet finds the expression of a sound grasp of the divine immutability, as well as the recognition of the mysterious and exemplary reality of suffering in the Triune God:

In God, impassibility is not an absence of emotion, it is not indifference, it is an *excess* of love and of joy. . . . Hence, we must be careful before we say that God does not suffer . . . , because his love for us is no joke. Those who have not sounded the depths of this mercy unfailingly imagine that God does not suffer by virtue of a kind of indifference . . . , and this mistake is much more catastrophic than the anthropomorphism that pictures God as suffering. . . . The sufferings of Christ merely reflect in a human way the absolutely divine mystery of the Trinitarian love wounded by our refusal.¹⁰³

This being the case, the thought of St. Thomas cited above (God is merciful in respect to the *effectus* of mercy but not in respect to the *passionis affectus*) seems insufficient. We must "go a step further on the road opened by St. Thomas,"¹⁰⁴ for St. Thomas has left this question open: It has remained "incompletely resolved by St. Thomas."¹⁰⁵ There is, to be sure, a certain suffering that is incompatible with God's absolute perfection. But there exists an unutterable compassion affecting God in his relation to our wretchedness (our sin) that does not entail any imperfection. It has to do with a "pure perfection" that we must acknowledge in God, for which we have no concept, and which is the "hurt of God."¹⁰⁶ The created analogue of this perfection is magnanimity, the nobility that sorrow carries with it when it is overcome by greatness of soul. In this manner, Journet, with Maritain, holds that mercy does not merely exist in God with respect to its effects, but *according to what it is*, taken however to a degree of completion

¹⁰¹ Marie-Dominique (André) Molinié, *Le mystère de la Rédemption*, mimeographed paper (1970), 37–45. This paper has recently been published in book form: Marie-Dominique Molinié, *Un feu sur la terre*, vol. 6: *Le mystère de la Rédemption* (Paris: Têqui, 2001), cf. 54–64.

¹⁰² See, for example, Journet, "La Rédemption, drame de l'amour de Dieu," part 1, 56.

¹⁰³ Molinié, *Le mystère de la Rédemption*, 41–42, quoted in Journet, "La Rédemption, drame de l'amour de Dieu," part 1, 55–56.

¹⁰⁴ Journet, "De l'espérance," 206, quoting Maritain.

¹⁰⁵ Journet, "La Rédemption, drame de l'amour de Dieu," part 1, 52 and 57.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

above every name, an “unnamed” perfection, the exemplar of what it is in us when it is lived with nobility and magnanimity.¹⁰⁷

This meditation on “the troubling mystery”¹⁰⁸ of the “mysterious suffering” or “quasi-suffering”¹⁰⁹ of God stays very close to Maritain’s reflections. Journet contents himself with brief comments on these reflections without developing at length their epistemological (divine names) and metaphysical aspects. At the same time, Journet does not give up his conviction that sin reaches unto God himself, though *not in himself* (following the previous explanations of Maritain),¹¹⁰ thereby suggesting the great caution this mystery imposes on our human reflections:

It will be difficult for theology to go further than the great meditation we have just summarized, albeit quite rashly. It remains satisfied in showing that there is no metaphysical impossibility in saying that God, absolutely invulnerable in Himself, is unutterably vulnerable in the love He bears for us and which is the arena of his mercies. It does not betray the truth since it leads us to a divine perfection that for us remains nameless and unnamable.¹¹¹

We can easily recognize an important pastoral motive at the heart of Journet and Maritain’s theological reflection on the mysterious suffering of God. Care for those to whom Christian preaching is directed does not dictate to theology what is true and what is not, but it makes it attentive to the way the faith is expressed. Certainly God is not wounded in himself; he knows no deficiency:

On this we are clear. But if we preach to men that God cannot be hurt by the sight of their disorders and the sufferings that ensue, will they not picture some impassible God, indifferent to pity, too far above them to worry about their lot? Are they not going to turn away from the true God and even end up getting angry at Him? So what will the Christian do?¹¹²

Preaching in univocal fashion on the divine impassibility runs the risk of presenting God as a stranger to man, as man’s *competitor*. Preaching thus on the divine immutability, not well clarified, may then beget indifference or

¹⁰⁷ Journet, “De l’espérance,” 203–8; idem, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, 57–60.

¹⁰⁸ Journet, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, 57.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 55–56.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 53–54.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 58.

¹¹² Journet, “De l’espérance,” 204.

rebellion. With Molinié, Journet agrees that the concept of an immutability of indifference is a graver error than the anthropomorphism that endows God with passions, for *nothing* that concerns creatures can be indifferent to God.¹¹³ Recognition of a nameless perfection, the eternal exemplar in God of what in us is distress with nobility, permits us to “banish from the mind of men the abominable idea of an impassible God who abandons the creature to itself and who takes pleasure at the sight of an unfolding human history where evil abounds.”¹¹⁴

In these reflections, Journet made every effort to avoid a contradiction: If mystery can be adored, contradiction is hateful. The affirmation of God’s “quasi-suffering” must not be understood in dialectical fashion, as though God had within himself an element of negativity and thus underwent a process on account of his differences.¹¹⁵ With the utmost firmness, Journet rejects the idea of a becoming in God in the manner of Böhme’s gnosis, of Hegel’s panlogism, of Berdyaev’s tragic sense, or of the theories of divine kenosis.¹¹⁶ The divine immutability and impassibility remain absolutely inviolate.

Here we touch upon the perception of the *divine paradoxes* that animates Charles Journet’s theology: the paradoxes of a wealthy God who begs, of a good and mighty God who allows evil, of God’s peace that troubles, and of an impassible God who yet conceals within himself the mysterious exemplar of magnanimous suffering. “To respect better the mystery of the Divine Essence,” Journet tells us,

it is good and helpful to designate it by using words together that seem incompatible, that seem contradictory. I do not say: they *are* in fact incompatible and contradictory. That would be to make of God a focal point of inconsistencies, that would be to destroy God in our understanding, that would be to sweep Him forever from our thinking.¹¹⁷

But these seemingly contradictory words “cease to be so if we go beyond, if we strip them of their covering and only keep their clearest, purest, and

¹¹³ Journet, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, 54–56.

¹¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, quoted in Journet, “La souffrance de la créature,” 227.

¹¹⁵ Journet, “Un affrontement de Hegel et de la sagesse chrétienne,” 123–25.

¹¹⁶ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 97–102. Journet refuses to speak of a “kenosis” in God himself; he explains this in the sixth conference of his retreat “The Paradoxes of the Divine Names” (preached in 1971) about the humility of God. Those who say that the Father is humble because He gives his divinity to the Son strip the word “humility” of its meaning. Divinity cannot be lost, but in the human attitude of humility there is something that answers to the divine nature, namely, the magnanimity that exists in the eternal Godhead.

¹¹⁷ Journet, “Dieu. I. Paradoxes divins,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 34 (1959): 134.

most sublime content": "All the names we utter foreshadow the unique *unutterable* Name into which they vanish."¹¹⁸ For Journet, the affirmation, paradoxical but neither absurd nor contradictory, of the mysterious suffering of God remains in the clarity-obscurity of what we know and do not know about God.

VIII. Some Questions

It was my intention to present Charles Journet's thought, not to subject it to a critique. However, we have to recognize that for the Thomist, Journet's doctrine may raise some problems. These difficulties have to do in particular with the evil of fault, that is, sin, in its relation to God. I would like to point out these problems, at least as questions addressed to Journet's doctrine.

1. The main difficulty has to do with the action of God and with his knowledge. We have seen that when Journet says that God "permits" moral evil, he denies the classical Thomistic thesis of the "antecedent permissive decree." According to Journet, this thesis involves God himself too deeply in the scandal of evil. He replaces it therefore with Jacques Maritain's explanation of the "shatterable" and "unshatterable" divine motion while asserting the notion of "nihilation" by the human will. But Maritain's explanation itself raises a problem. The notion of "nihilation" and of "shatterable motion" is problematic, for if nihilation is something "positive," it must be caused by God; but if nihilation is purely negative, this means that God has not given something positive to the human person: In either case, it is not easy to see how the explanation can avoid the intervention of an antecedent decree.¹¹⁹ According to Journet, the denial of the "antecedent permissive decree" and of the "determining decree" does not weaken God's action in the world. But a question remains: Can the theory of the "consequent permissive decree" preserve the universal scope of God's providence and, above all, God's *independence*?¹²⁰

In a famous article published in 1992, Fr. Jean-Hervé Nicolas (whom Maritain strongly opposed on this topic) surrendered to

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ For these criticisms see Stephen A. Long, "Providence, liberté, et loi naturelle," *Revue Thomiste* 102 (2002): 355–406, esp. 376–98.

¹²⁰ Classical Thomism answered the question with the doctrine of "physical pre-motion." For this theory and how it applies to evil moral actions, see Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, "Prémotion physique," in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 13 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1936), col. 31–77, esp. 71–77 ("La causalité divine et l'acte physique du péché").

Maritain's objections and acknowledged that the modern Thomistic doctrine on God's knowledge of sin and on God's permission of sin (antecedent permissive decree) should be abandoned.¹²¹ The main reason given by Fr. Nicolas for rejecting the antecedent permissive decree was God's absolute innocence: God is not responsible for sin.¹²² But although he accepted Maritain's objections, Fr. Nicolas was still not fully satisfied with Maritain's answer to the problem. The doctrine of "nihilation" and of the "consequent permissive decree" may not be the decisive answer for the Thomist.

2. The second difficulty has to do with the motive for which God allows sin. Journet constantly repeats that evil is permitted for the sake of a greater good. No doubt this Augustinian type of response is fundamental, but Journet goes further. On the one hand, Journet makes clear that this "greater good" is the glory of the Incarnate Word. In the final analysis, this means that moral evil (sin) is permitted *propter Christum*. This explanation puts Christ at the heart of God's initial plan, that is, at the starting point of the divine economy. Following the *Salmaticenses*, Journet here professes an absolute Christocentrism that strays from the thought of St. Thomas. On the other hand, Journet considers the state of the redemption "all in all" better than the world of Adam's innocence (the world or the state of man "before" the fault of Adam). This explanation likewise goes beyond the thought of Thomas Aquinas. For St. Thomas, the Incarnation procures this "greater good," which is the union of man with God in the Person of the Incarnate Word; it also allows certain persons (for instance, the Blessed Virgin Mary) to attain a higher grace. But Journet generalizes this affirmation by applying it *universally* to the state of redemption in itself.

To sum up, Journet is not satisfied with saying that God can draw good from a permitted evil, but maintains that God allows the evil *for* the good that he draws from it. He adds that this good is *greater* than the one lost by the original evil, and he puts Christ at the heart of the initial plan of God.¹²³ Paradoxically, this explanation seems to

¹²¹ Jean-Hervé Nicolas, "La volonté salvifique de Dieu contrariée par le péché," *Revue Thomiste* 92 (1992): 177–96.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 185–86: the antecedent permissive decree would imply that the defect of the free will ("la défaillance de la liberté") must follow infallibly from God's permission, to such an extent that it is difficult to avoid making God responsible for evil.

¹²³ For St. Thomas's teaching and the difficulties of Journet's solution, see François Daguet, *Théologie du dessein divin chez Thomas d'Aquin: Finis omnium Ecclesia* (Paris: Vrin, 2003), 252–59.

integrate evil into God's design. Does God permit moral evil (sin) *propter Christum*?

3. The last difficulty concerns the affirmation of the "mysterious suffering of God," which Journet takes over from Maritain. For Journet, this suffering or "quasi-suffering" of God is the perfect exemplar of the wound of love, that is, a pure perfection, a nobility for which we have no human word. As we have seen, we are dealing with a "nameless and unnamable" perfection. On this point too, Journet's reflection (like Maritain's) shows the profound humility the theologian must dwell in when he contemplates the mystery of God. Undeniably, this doctrine is of exceptional profundity. We find in it the penetrating expression of a thought seeking to uncover in God not suffering strictly speaking, but the transcendent exemplar of the suffering of Christ and of the saints.

Still we must ask the following question: The noble element in mercy, the fruitful and precious aspect of the suffering of love, is it not *charity*? Is not the perfection Journet calls "quasi-suffering" instead God's incomprehensible *love* in his fruitful activity, which we signify by the word "mercy"? In other words, if we exclude privation and evil from God, as Journet certainly does, what is the gem that the notion of "mercy" contains, what is the pure perfection that is contained in love suffering to overcome suffering? Here we are faced with a dilemma that Journet solves only by appealing to the obscurity of a "nameless" mystery: (a) either God *suffers* in the strict meaning of the word, and then would know pain in his very being and would be subject to becoming and change; or (b) God in his merciful activity knows neither pain nor suffering—certainly not because of a lack or a defect, but because of his eminent perfection—and then it is his Love that we are naming, Divine Love working to heal men and their misery. Scripture gives us a name, a word to signify this perfection: God is *Agape* (1 Jn 4:8). Is the perfection and the nobility of compassion a *suffering* or a *quasi-suffering*? Is it not rather the *unchanging love of God*?¹²⁴

After reading the pages that Charles Journet devoted to the mystery of evil, we cannot but be struck by the continual progress in his thinking, a non-stop development whereby the theologian deepens his meditation on the path "opened by St. Thomas." This deepening owes much to Jacques Maritain, whose original theses Journet

¹²⁴ For the teaching of St. Thomas and the criticism of it by Maritain and Journet, see Emery, "L'immutabilité du Dieu d'amour," 5–37.

followed from the beginning (God's knowledge of evil, nihilation of the divine motion, rejection of the antecedent divine decree) and whom he followed right up to his final meditations (the mystery of quasi-suffering in God).¹²⁵

Journet's theological meditation sought understanding while avoiding the absurd. Without taking anything away from the worth and necessity of rigorous metaphysical thinking, Journet wanted to shed light on such thinking by a higher outlook, that of an evangelical *vision of wisdom*, like the saints, for

if [the most orthodox doctrine is] repeated without being plunged back into the flame where it was wrought or vivified by some secret power of the Gospel, [it] will mislead and may turn to poison. How then are we to avoid trembling at causing scandal where it was hoped to bring light?¹²⁶

The spiritual and theological journey of Charles Journet shows an ever more vivid awareness of the scandal of evil, an ever-deepening wound, given the *excess of evil* in the world. We are not dealing here merely with what is usually called "post-Auschwitz theology," but with the profound misery that strikes all the world's forsaken people: not only those in Europe who died lingering deaths in the prisons and camps, perishing under torture because they had resolved to resist their conquerors, but also

so many poor souls who had been doing nothing but their normal, humble jobs and upon whom, like a beast, sudden death fell . . . , millions of the poor throughout the centuries, crushed by the huge machine of pride and plunder as old as mankind . . . the slaves of all times . . . , the proletarians of the industrial age, all those that destitution has deprived of their status as men, all the damned of society here below.¹²⁷

Such an awareness of the excess of evil, whereby the question of evil can become a "torture,"¹²⁸ draws its profundity from a lively faith in God. The

¹²⁵ For the early stages of the discussion between Journet and Maritain, see Michael Torre, "Francisco Marín-Sola, OP, and the Origin of Jacques Maritain's Doctrine on God's Permission of Evil," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 4 (2006): 55–94.

¹²⁶ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 20. This is very well illustrated by Journet's theses on God's knowledge and permission of evil, or by his presentation of the divine impassibility.

¹²⁷ Journet, "La Rédemption, drame de l'amour de Dieu," part 1, 74. Here, as is often the case, Journet borrows his words from Maritain.

¹²⁸ Journet, *Meaning of Evil*, 15–16.

most terrible evil, sin that wounds God, cannot be grasped “so long as we have not glimpsed how serious is his love for us.”¹²⁹ It is in the divine gift of redeeming love that the evil of sin is seen as absolutely “unacceptable” to God. Likewise, it is Christ who reveals to us the nobility of suffering undergone with magnanimity and lets us catch sight of the eternal exemplar, in God, of such grief.¹³⁰ Journet has only unfolded here the “point of view” or outlook that he himself had invited us to adopt when faced with the mystery of evil: “We must try to go to God in order to grasp evil from his viewpoint.” N-V

¹²⁹ Journet, “La Rédemption, drame de l’amour de Dieu,” part 1, 54.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.