

Human Suffering and John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*

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The root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. (Gaudium et Spes, no. 19)

THE ROOT of our dignity as human beings lies in our destiny. As beings created in God's image and likeness, we are destined and called to share the good of eternal friendship in communion with him, the vicissitudes of this "vale of tears" notwithstanding. Thanks to our medicine and advanced technologies, however, we can prevent or alleviate these vicissitudes. A Bengali typhoon kills thousands, but thanks to good roads, advanced building codes, and efficient communications, Hurricane Isabel killed fewer than a score in the U.S.A. in 2003. Trauma centers and hospitals can restore accident victims and military casualties "as good as new," and if eighteenth century surgery required a shot of whisky and a bullet clenched in the teeth, contemporary anesthetics make the cutting and much of recovery relatively pain-free. As a result, we tend to regard sufferings and misfortune as anomalous evils that can, in principle, be avoided completely. It is not at all surprising that as the promise of scientific technology was on the verge of its realization, J. S. Mill held the maximization of pleasure to be the touchstone of the good life, that intelligent public administration combined with industrial technology could make possible lives of prosperity, comfort, and minimal suffering, at least for most.¹ We now expect the pleasures of bed and banquet without their

¹ See J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*.

usual but unwanted consequences, and we look for a healthy old age ending in a comfortable, sanitary death. In many ways we have created an analgesic society in which suffering and humiliation constitute the only intolerable evils. And yet suffering exists, not just bodily pain, but psychological anguish and—for us all—death. In encyclicals, letters, and addresses Pope John Paul II has repeatedly addressed the questions of pleasure and pain. The key to understanding both is the human person's destiny to love: "The meaning of life is found in giving and receiving love, and in this light human sexuality and procreation reach their true and full significance. Love also gives meaning to suffering and death."²

I. Suffering Characterized

What is suffering? John Paul II defines it as the experience of an evil,³ and in doing so he holds that it is not suffering that is, in the first instance, an evil. John Paul II accepts the classical analysis that evil has no reality of its own, but is parasitic upon good.⁴ Since evil is a loss of or disorder with respect to the appropriate good, we find the significance of suffering in relation to the good. Indeed, we know that the pain associated with trauma is often a good,⁵ and this reveals something essential about suffering. Why does a blister affect the mechanics of one's tennis serve? Despite its exposed nerve, a decayed tooth can still bite an apple. Grieving her husband's sudden death, the scholar can make no sense of the differential equations she had handled facily the day before. In each of these cases—and in almost any other one may think of—suffering hinders the ability to act. The sufferer cannot easily get on with life as normal. Popular wisdom has it that pain is nature's warning against danger. But this can be only one function of pain and not the most important one at that. The warning is always too late. Those who suffer really serious injury—catastrophic burns are a good example—or the gravest losses do not experience the pain until the event is over. The essential message of suffering is "Take care of this evil." The suffering person needs the lost good restored.

We may contrast this position with phenomenalist philosophy, which defines pain as a kind of perception or sensation that is disliked and

² John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (EV), no. 81.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris* (SD), no. 7.

⁴ St. Augustine, *City of God*, XI, ch. 9; St. Thomas Aquinas, *De malo*, q. 1, aa. 1–3.

⁵ The starkest illustration of this is congenital insensitivity to pain. Children afflicted with this condition have normal tactile sensitivity but feel no pain, so that a needle is felt simply to be small. Such patients are especially susceptible to severe injury and illness because their bodies do not alert them when something is wrong.

shunned for its own sake.⁶ This position makes pain—and suffering in general—into a kind of positive reality, an experiential surd that is evil in itself. Under such a conception, pain is reduced to subjective experience that may (or may not) be related to any thing or event in reality. However, no one who has suffered grievously will recognize such a definition as adequate. More than anything else, suffering gives the lie to the philosophical distinction between facts and values. An unrelenting toothache is more than just another fact about the world and one's perception of it. Pain, by its very nature, demands a response.

Suffering tends to be holistic. The greater the suffering, the more completely does it engulf one's whole person. The pain in one part of the body tends to form one's entire consciousness, so that it is the person and not just the arm or the tooth that is in pain. Were pain only a kind of perception or sensation, this phenomenon would be difficult to understand. The malfunction of an automobile's turn signal lever does not affect the steering, but the pain from an ear infection can hinder virtually all one's activities. If we understand pain (or suffering) to be the experience of an evil, this phenomenon makes sense, for the evil is not localized sensation with localized effects but rather an evil from without that one can deal with as a person, that is, with rational understanding and appropriate action. It is for this reason that we often feel insulted or offended by suffering, even when we recognize that its origin is random or irrational.

II. Kinds of Suffering

We may describe a threefold *phenomenology of suffering*, according as one's sufferings are in the feelings and perceptions, in the engagement of the will within the world, and in the meaningfulness of one's life. Pain, properly speaking, is the sensation that accompanies damage to the body. Break a bone or scratch the skin and it hurts. The failure of one's efforts to attain an important goal is experienced as frustration. This is not only the athlete's "agony of defeat," but also the embarrassment of failure and the bitterness of being passed over. The loss of meaning, of significance is experienced as despair. In despair, the sense of the effort is lost. There is no point in pursuing further, for the goal will never be reached. Having tried and tried again to pass the bar, the law graduate abandons his goal. He despairs of ever becoming a lawyer. Despair is the loss of the good that had shaped one's life. Pain, frustration, and despair correspond to the

⁶ "Pain," in Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

forms of evil that afflict our bodies, our intentions, and our spirits. These three forms of suffering fall into a kind of hierarchy, an order of acceptability. An athlete, for example, will endure pain for the sake of victory; the battered champion, his bruised face grinning in triumph, is practically a cultural icon. More seriously, a birthing mother's "labor pains" are powerful muscle contractions, which she works with to bring the child to the light. And just as success trumps pain, comfort does not assuage failure. The worst, most destructive form of suffering, however, is despair, the suffering of the spirit. Victory and defeat find their respective values within a context. The local champion eventually tires of defeating his weaker rivals and needs to prove himself against regional or national competitors. An important measure of maturity is whether one can pick himself up after failure and continue to meet his responsibilities.

As the loss of meaning to one's life and experiences, despair is relatively unrelated to pain and frustration. To be sure, someone suffering incurable, unremitting pain may foresee nothing but misery and thus despair of life, but others in such straits do continue to find meaning in their lives. On Black Tuesday, 1929, several Wall Street traders, having lost the wealth for which they had invested their lives, jumped from windows to their deaths on the street below. It is well-known that many wealthy celebrities live lives of comfort in their personal hells, seeking refuge from the emptiness of meaning in drink, drugs, and sensual pleasures. While pain debilitates and defeat stings, despair is deadly, for having lost meaning one becomes destructive of his own life.

III. Engagement with Evil

Considered from a different perspective, the human person's engagement with evil is twofold. First, evil *happens to a human being*. It befalls him as the body suffers trauma, as important projects are frustrated, and as loss casts doubt on the sense he has made of things. Second, evil is also something that the *person does*.⁷ Further, the evil a person performs is that in which he is most implicated, to the point that by acting evilly he becomes evil.⁸ In his ethical studies, Karol Wojtyla insists strongly on this, and it is worth reflecting upon. We may pose the problem more precisely

⁷ The distinction between "what happens to a human being" and "a human being acts" is central to Karol Wojtyla's (John Paul II's) analysis of human personhood. See *the Acting Person* (Dordrecht, Boston, & London: D. Reidel, 1979), 38, 48, 60–65; *Person and Community; Selected Essays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 182, 189, 224.

⁸ "Self-determination, therefore, and not just the efficacy of the personal self, explains the reality of moral values; it explains the reality that by my actions I become 'good' or 'bad' . . ." (*Person and Community*, 91).

like this: How can an act one performs render him evil or bad? Is it even reasonable to maintain that the defects of an event in the physical order can communicate moral evil to the inner core of personal subjectivity? Many contemporary ethicists and moral theologians deny that it can. One act, they argue, cannot reveal the fundamental orientation of one's entire being.⁹

Wojtyla argues that it does and he takes precisely the physical act as his starting point. The reason that the act makes the person evil is that the act flows from the will, which is precisely what is innermost in the person. Wojtyla maintains that "the essence of the will does not lie in (the contents of practical reason) but in the specific dynamism contained in the efficacy of the rational person."¹⁰ The point is not that the physical act, considered simply as a spatio-temporal interaction among physical bodies, is tainted with an evil that somehow transmits itself to the moral order, but that the act itself finds its origin within the personal subjectivity that caused it. That subjectivity is capable of choosing to act well or evilly. The person as a free and responsible agent chooses to bring about good or evil, and in virtue of this freely chosen action becomes personally good or evil.

Ironically, although we suffer when evil beyond our control afflicts us, the evil we do may well cause no direct discomfort beyond some pangs of conscience. To be sure, this evil eventually exacts its toll. Plato illustrates dramatically (and probably from his own observation) the persistent paranoia and the anxious loneliness of the tyrannical soul, the one who gives himself over entirely to injustice.¹¹ We now know too well the serious effects that abortion has on the mother—the anniversary grief, the burden of guilt and unworthiness, the profound and unrelenting sense of loss. What is most common in human experience, however, is that one seldom recognizes the disintegrating effects of one's own wrongdoing on one's own life. As a result, we fail to connect the resultant suffering with the evil we have embraced. Further, compared to excruciating bodily pain, crushing defeat, and humiliating despair, the sense of guilt for having done wrong is often modest suffering indeed. Precisely this is one of the classical problems of good and evil: The evil prosper while the good endure misfortune. Robert Bolt's Thomas More, stripped of office, honor, and freedom goes to the executioner, while the perjurer Richard Rich

⁹ See Charles Curran, *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 107–8.

¹⁰ "The Will in the Analysis of the Ethical Act" in *Person and Community*, 4.

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, Books VIII and IX. For a time Plato lived in the home of Dionysius II, who was himself a tyrant.

"became a Knight and Solicitor-General, a Baron and Lord Chancellor, and died in his bed."¹² It seems, then, that the sufferings that are most external to the self, to the will and its responsible exercise of freedom, are the most patent. The pains that afflict one's physical organism and the misfortunes that befall every wayfarer in this world shout, while the evils one embraces within his heart whisper. Since these are the evils most properly called "human" and "personal," we must address this paradox.

IV. Evil and the Loss of Good

When the body is injured, the sufferer seeks relief from the pain, approaching medical professionals with the expertise to fix the damage.¹³ But as much as the patient wants the pain to go away, she will endure further pain for the sake of overcoming the evil. Here one thinks of the discomforts of chemotherapy and physical rehabilitation.¹⁴ But repairs are not enough. Suffering has a deeper aspect, touching the core of one's personhood.

In suffering, the person experiences solitude and this in rough proportion to the degree of the suffering. She asks, "Why?" This "why" is of cosmic import, for—as we so often see—no theoretical or philosophical answer suffices. The Pope writes: "Why does evil exist? Why is there evil in the world? . . . Both questions are difficult, when an individual puts them to another individual, when people put them to other people, as also when *man puts them to God*."¹⁵ Christ himself cried out in his pain, "My God, why have you abandoned me!" (Mk. 15:34). In his solitude, the sufferer needs a helper, someone to share his burden. If in our academic seminars we discuss the *significance of suffering*, an important philosophical and theological problem, the sufferer faces it as an immediate, profoundly personal issue. If my suffering is meaningless, then evil triumphs—not simply in the abstract, but *in my life*. Meaningless suffering is, in a very real sense, the ultimate insult, for it constitutes a negation of one's life value. *My* meaningless suffering makes *my life* less. To the extent I am defeated by the evil I am irrelevant to reality and to its author—defeated.

Further, suffering threatens to shut one off from the good that all others share. To the sufferer it seems that no one can share his pain. Whatever another says is inadequate. Unless one has suffered something similar—and this is the value of support groups—he really does not understand. In

¹² Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 127.

¹³ *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 5.

¹⁴ We must also note that once the body's affliction has been identified or when the affliction is beyond treatment, palliative care is certainly in order.

¹⁵ *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 9.

suffering, especially in great suffering, one feels alone before the evil. Suffering calls for a Someone who can make sense of it and overcome one's lonely helplessness before the evil—indeed, Someone who can restore the good completely. Here we may note the serious problem that phenomenalist accounts pose. If indeed suffering is essentially subjective, a “kind of sensation disliked for its own sake,” then the sufferer is irredeemably alone. The reality of her sufferings lies in her feelings and only there. And thus there can in principle be no answer to suffering, no adequate response, save to prevent its continuation or reoccurrence.

Also integral to suffering is shame. To be sure, Henry Fleming¹⁶ may console himself with his war wound, his “red badge of courage.” But in the first instance, we are ashamed to suffer. Even as one asks God why this has happened, he asks himself what he did wrong. Right or wrong, he senses that evil has gotten the better of him, that he cannot control the evil that afflicts him. In suffering, one is not the subject acting on his initiative, but the *object* of something alien. Ironically, it is often when the ills afflicting our bodies are most effectively being treated—namely, in the hospital—that we feel most like objects, poked and prodded, cut into and sewn up again. This is one of the painful insults of aging, that one may be incontinent and diapered, talked down to by caregivers, reduced to an object of care but not an agent. In this context let me also mention the retarded and the mentally disabled. Those with psychosis or autism, traumatic brain injury, developmental disability, and the like, typically experience a world in which they are treated as objects. Knowing that they are different and somehow “less,” they find themselves in settings where they, their lives, and their behavior are discussed in detail, where plans are made for them—all with their having no chance to express their own wishes, to be agents in their own lives. Less able than others, they become the objects of others' plans, missing out at humanity's table where the rest of us dine on freedom. Shame arises from the passivity of suffering. To suffer is to become a *patient*, afflicted from without and by this deprived of the agent's dominion over his life and acts. To suffer is to experience a loss of dignity.

The shame of suffering is rooted in one's own guilt as a sinner. Although the Galileans Pilate butchered were not worse sinners than others because they had suffered thus, Christ goes on to warn his listeners: “But unless you all repent you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13:1–3). The father blames himself for the child's injuries: “I should have reminded him. . . . If only I had been a stronger disciplinarian. . . . If only I had not been so harsh. . . .” And his family, his friends rightly console

¹⁶ In Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*.

him with the truth that the child's injuries were not his fault. But what he knows—and what each of us knows deep in his heart—is that even if he is innocent of causing specifically this evil, he is deeply implicated in evil, that were an accurate tally reckoned, a much greater burden of suffering would be levied. Another, inverse, sign of this is the survivor's guilt of one who has escaped a calamity that has arbitrarily fallen upon another. Therefore we may say that beyond the shame of being an object in the eyes of others, there is the deeper shame of being revealed as an evildoer, as the author of wrongs that lead to suffering. Having eaten of the forbidden tree, the first couple hid themselves from God. Adam said to him, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked" (Gn. 3:10). Thus it is that evildoing demands a satisfaction, a setting things right. As Dostoevsky shows so clearly in *Crime and Punishment*, the wrongdoer *needs* his punishment, to experience in his own self the evil he has wrought. He needs his punishment as part of his return to the good he abandoned by embracing evil in his acts.

V. Theology of the Body

A fundamental principle of John Paul II's theology of the body is that the body itself signifies the person's vocation to love. It is in the context of explaining this "nuptial meaning" that the Holy Father brings forward the importance of *solitude* and *shame*, those two experiences that lie in the heart of suffering. In the naming of the animals (Gn 2:19–20), Adam experienced his difference from other living beings as solitude within his own subjectivity. John Paul II writes: "Solitude, in fact, also signifies man's subjectivity, which is constituted through self-knowledge. Man is alone because he is 'different. . . .'"¹⁷ In virtue of this subjectivity, the human being is a person.¹⁸ But solitude had also another aspect; the man had no one like himself to share his life with. In this respect "it was not good for the man to be alone" (Gn 2:18). And so the Lord God fashioned a helper for him. Adam's exclamation, "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (Gn. 2: 23), amounts to a recognition that the woman is another self, one like him, a *person*. Only in communion with another person could he overcome the loneliness of his solitude and break out of the isolation of his own subjectivity. Man and woman realize this communion as they give freely of themselves, each to the other in love.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 37.

¹⁸ On subjectivity, personhood, and the image of God, see the audiences of April 9 and 16, 1986. Accessed at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/index_it.html, 9/3/03.

This love is a mutual giving, which fulfills the meaning of the body—male and female—and reveals its destiny for love, its “nuptial significance.” Underlying John Paul II’s thought here is an important text from the Second Vatican Council: “[M]an, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24).¹⁹

Shame, the second element found in suffering, appears in Genesis 2:25: “They were naked but they were not ashamed.” Why did they feel no shame? It was not that they were ignorant, too childlike to realize that they were naked. The meaning of their sexual characteristics, that they could unite bodily in intercourse as “one flesh,” was clear to them. Through this union they could give of themselves freely and generously in love; intercourse was for the original pair an expression—indeed, an act—of mutual gift of self. The issue, according to John Paul II’s analysis, is not so much why before the Fall *they* lacked shame as why *we* experience it. Shame, he writes, is a “boundary experience”²⁰ between the original state and our sinful state. In rupturing their relationship with God, the original sin also wounded their relationship with each other. No longer could the man and the woman—nor we, their sons and daughters—appear naked before each other without shame. John Paul II writes: “In the experience of shame, the human being experiences fear with regard to his ‘second self’ . . . and this is substantially fear for his own ‘self.’ With shame, the human being manifests almost ‘instinctively’ the need of affirmation and acceptance of this ‘self,’ according to its rightful value.”²¹ In our post-lapsarian experience, to be naked is to be vulnerable. Shame arises from nakedness because others can regard the body as an *object for use*, for their own enjoyment.²²

Shame has also a cosmic sense.²³ The body, the instrument of sin, has become another thing in the universe, an object no longer entirely

¹⁹ It would be impossible to overstate the importance of this text in John Paul II’s thought. See, for example, Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, 193, 267, 316–18, 323, 350; *Sign of Contradiction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 132; John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 63–66, 71, 127, 284, 286, 357; *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 201; Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 13; Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 62; Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, nos. 11, 41; Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, nos. 13, 86; Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, nos. 25, 49, 96; Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 28; Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 8; and Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 22.

²⁰ *Theology of the Body*, 53.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

²² We note further that the truly malicious—I am thinking of dictators and criminals—often use nakedness to humiliate their victims.

²³ *Theology of the Body*, 114 ff.

subject to one's will. My body no longer transparently manifests my self. John Paul II writes: "Through these words [of Genesis 3:10] there is revealed a certain constitutive break within the human person, almost a rupture of man's original spiritual and somatic unity. He realizes for the first time that his body has ceased drawing upon the power of the spirit, which raised him up to the level of the image of God."²⁴ As St. Paul complains, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rm 8:15). The body is almost the instrument of judgment, its concupiscence inspiring our sin, and so in the body we are ashamed. We dissemble to hide our inner selves where the guilt is hidden.

Precisely here can we find the connection between suffering and the nuptial meaning of the body: its significance as a gift of love. Paradoxically, it is precisely through this body that one is able to give oneself in love to transcend suffering's shame and solitude. John Paul II writes: "Love is also the richest source of the meaning of suffering."²⁵ This is to say that the answer to suffering is the gift of self, that free gift by which one finds himself (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24). Here we recall the fundamental principle of theology of the body: that the body is intended for love, to be given in love. The young and fertile body is given in love to a spouse, and the fruit of this gift is often the creation of new life. How, then, is the weakened, suffering, even dying body given in love? And to whom is it given? Here John Paul II cites Christ's words at John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believed in him might be saved," and continues: "Salvation means liberation from evil, and for this reason it is closely bound up with the problem of suffering. According to the words spoken to Nicodemus, God gives his Son to 'the world' to free man from evil, which bears within itself the definitive and absolute perspective on suffering."²⁶ This salvation was won precisely by the Son's gift of himself in the body. "In this way Jesus proclaims that *life finds its center, its meaning, and its fulfillment when it is given up*."²⁷

We may indeed take this a step further. To suffer is to be ashamed and alone, and yet the suffering Christ is exalted and surrounded by others. In his fourth Servant Song, which the Gospel of John applies explicitly to Jesus (Jn 12:38), Isaiah writes: "See, my servant will prosper, he shall be lifted up, exalted, rise to great heights. As the crowds were appalled on seeing him—so disfigured did he look that he seemed no longer

²⁴ Ibid., 115

²⁵ *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 13.

²⁶ Ibid., no. 14.

²⁷ *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 51.

human—so will the crowds be astonished at him, and kings stand speechless before him” (Is 52:13–14). Jesus was lifted up in shame and disgrace (crucifixion was intended to humiliate) and died abandoned by those he had gathered and taught. And the crowds gathered to watch. Indeed, that was precisely the point: “And when I am lifted up from the earth,” Jesus said, “I shall draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:32). As he preached and healed he drew many to himself, but it was precisely in shame and solitude that he gathered all. On the cross, the suffering Christ made of his own body a gift²⁸ and thereby transcended the shame and solitude of his suffering, reconstituting it as his exaltation.

VI. The Joys of the Wicked, the Suffering of the Good

In the light of this vocation, we may turn again to the paradox of sin and suffering—that the evil held most closely is that which hurts the least. Earlier we distinguished three general forms of suffering—pain, frustration, and despair—and as we consider them in terms of immediate discomfort, we notice a kind of inverse ratio. The more deeply the evil touched the person, the less immediate the pain. Minding her own business and doing no harm, Sally is seriously injured by a drunk driver, laid up for weeks in the hospital, and then consigned to months of difficult physical therapy. She did not deserve this pain. The evil came upon her immediately and insistently to overtake her. The good to be restored is the physical integrity of her body, and the restoration is tedious and grueling. Sam trains long and hard for competition, but in the tournament he slips slightly. He continues to compete, but his mistake dooms him to bitter defeat. All he can recall of the match was “what could have been,” the lost opportunity for a victory so urgently desired. There is no going back, of course, but there is next year.²⁹ Every competitor, every planner and builder, every general and leader, has heard and is called to make her own the exhortations: “try, try again” . . . “never give up” . . . “winners never quit.” Today’s pain of defeat is overcome in future triumph.

The deepest and most personal evil—and with it the most insidious suffering—comes from within. This third form of suffering is despair, the loss of hope. To be sure, pain and frustration bring with them a loss of hope—“This pain will never end,” “I can never win”—but this loss can be restored or transcended from within. One can learn to live fruitfully

²⁸ With respect to this we might note a common reaction to the recent film *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson. Although the film’s brutality is stark and painful to watch, many viewers have commented that through seeing it they came to realize for the first time how much Jesus gave of himself for them.

²⁹ This essay is written within one hundred miles of Wrigley Field.

with pain. One can set new goals. True despair, however, is the despair of meaning. If, as *Gaudium et Spes* states, the human being indeed “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self,” then it is implied that one can fail to fully “find himself.” He can lose his own self, and this not by losing his life or what he has, but by losing the capability to order himself to the good, to embrace the good, and therefore to *be* good. To despair is to lose the point of reference for his life as a whole. The singer whose voice has begun to fail or the arthritic pianist can take up the baton or (more typically) teach her art to the young. Music continues to order her life, and therefore, in the context of her vocation, she may hope even without the chance to perform. The person whose life is in despair has no such principle, but he pursues apparent goods to satisfy his longing for the true good that escapes him. Because he cannot recognize it, he is unable to orient himself to this good.

This is the significance of John Paul II’s analysis of the Gospel story of the rich young man in the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*. “The question which the rich young man puts to Jesus of Nazareth is one which rises from the depths of his heart. It is *an essential and unavoidable question for the life of every man*, for it is about the moral good which must be done, and about eternal life. The young man senses that there is a connection between moral good and the fulfilment of his own destiny.”³⁰ The moral life is ultimately an exercise not simply of finding the right thing and doing it while avoiding the wrong thing, but of pursuing the perfect and all-fulfilling good that is the destiny of every person. This means to turn to God, “who alone is good” (Lk 18:19).³¹ Conversely, to embrace evil by one’s actions is to turn away from God the good and by that to turn away from one’s own destiny. Here we can begin to glimpse the nature and depths of the suffering consequent upon moral evil. This evil, which is not experienced directly as a pain, takes the form of a sickness, in Kierkegaard’s analysis, a “sickness unto death.” This is a sickness, however, not of the mortal body, the physical organism, but of the self that is no longer related to that in virtue of which it is a self.³² This despair takes the form of an ultimately purposeless search for things and pleasure, which are incapable of filling up the desire for meaning. Having turned from the One who created it for himself, the evildoer’s heart comes inexorably to despair of finding rest. Indeed, John Paul II echoes the Second Vatican Council by pointing to the emptiness of human development based on “having” and

³⁰ *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, no. 9.

³² Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), especially 13 ff. on despair as a sickness of the self understood as relation.

not on “being.”³³ Such despair is dramatically illustrated by the stories of wealthy celebrities who turn to alcohol, drugs, and promiscuous sex to find happiness. They have everything, but nothing satisfies. Less noticed, but equally real are the “lives of quiet desperation” of many ordinary people who have embraced unremarkable evils. Leading lives with little pain and perhaps even great success, they experience no joy.

Here we may recall Dostoevsky’s theme from *Crime and Punishment*. The wrongdoer needs punishment, even if, unlike Raskolnikov, he fails to recognize this need, because the experience of moral evil—the suffering of despair—is not direct. It manifests itself in a loss of direction, a spiraling out of control amenable to no technique or investigation. The wrongdoer, having turned away from good and embraced evil, is no longer able to recognize the true good, because she has forfeited, as it were, the inner criteria by which that good may be sought and recognized. The burn victim can look at the cause of his pain and seek the help of the professional healer. The sinner looks everywhere for consolation of the inner loss but cannot find it, because what was lost is within.

VII. Redemption and Suffering

The answer to suffering is not simply that it must end, but that evil must be overcome and good restored. The true good, however, that good in virtue of which our lives have value—the good to which we are destined—is not a good to be found in this world, but rather in relationship with the Author and Creator of it. Speaking of consumerism, in which “having” is valued more than “being,” John Paul II writes: “In such a context suffering, an inescapable burden of human existence but also a factor of possible personal growth, is ‘censored,’ rejected as useless, indeed opposed as an evil, always and in every way to be avoided. When it cannot be avoided and the prospect of even some future well-being vanishes, then life appears to have lost all meaning and the temptation grows in man to claim the right to suppress it.”³⁴ Suffering forces us to reflect, to enter our own solitude and in that to turn to the only one whose good transcends the evil that afflicts us. Revealing the transitory, fragile character of the goods of this body and this world, suffering is an invitation to give our bodies, ambitions, and the very sense of self to the One who has destined us to himself.

Suffering, then, turns out not to be the evil we are to avoid. The goods lost in the sufferings of this life are not the goods for which we

³³ Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 28; cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 35.

³⁴ *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 23.

are ultimately destined. St. Paul wrote, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rm 8:18). This is not to say that the experience of temporal evils is not real suffering. Such a position is callous. It is to say that the patient enduring of sufferings in this life has a twofold value. First is that of witness. If all we have to hope for are the pleasures and triumphs of this life, then even moderate suffering may be intolerable. However, for her who hopes in the promise of eternal communion with God, even severe suffering does not represent the triumph of evil, nor does it deprive her of the expectation of perfect fulfillment. In this respect, every Christian can be a martyr, for the patient endurance of suffering—of pain and illness, of frustration and defeat, of humiliation and disgrace—in itself bears witness to the One who went before us in suffering and who opens the way to the true good that transcends every evil. The second value of suffering is the redemptive. St. Paul wrote: “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24).

Within this lies an important truth from the theology of the body. Love is not in the accomplishment but in the gift. Christ effected our salvation not by smashing Satan with a mighty spiritual sword but by offering his body to the Father on the cross out of love for sinners.

By offering the gift of one’s own bodily self in patient acceptance of suffering, the sufferer participates in that sacrifice. In his Apostolic Letter for the third millennium, John Paul II points to the “lived theology” of the saints³⁵ and quotes St. Catherine of Siena: “Thus the soul is blissful and afflicted: afflicted on account of the sins of its neighbor, blissful on account of the union and the affection of charity which it has inwardly received. These souls imitate the spotless Lamb, my Only-begotten Son, who on the Cross was both blissful and afflicted.”³⁶ Precisely here is the mysticism that lies at the heart of the faith we all share. The patient and redemptive acceptance of even ordinary sufferings is a participation in the love of the Father and the Son within the Trinity. It is a distinctive and privileged way to know Christ because it is an imitation and sharing of his sacrifice of love.

Adam and Eve’s original solitude was overcome in their mutual communion, a communion so profound that it shares in God’s creative work. Protected by shame from our lusts, we their children can share this communion and so experience something of their original joy, the joy of

³⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 27.

³⁶ St. Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue of Divine Providence*, cited in John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 27.

being husband and wife. But this is not the greatest joy, nor is it the perfectly beatifying communion. If the couple in each other's arms share in the work of God the Creator, the sufferer can share in the work of Christ the Redeemer. The sinner, by sharing in Christ's gift of his body in suffering and death, enters into communion with the heavenly Father. In this communion, the good lost not only in suffering, but through Adam's sin itself is restored.

