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Commentary on the Apostolic Exhortation on Human Suffering

Msgr. Dino Lorenzetti

Monsignor Lorenzetti, spiritual advisor of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, gave this address at the group's annual convention, held in Philadelphia in October, 1984.

Man suffers in ways not always considered by medicine. The suffering is wider and more complex than sickness and, at the same time, is deeply rooted in humanity itself.

While an individual's pain is contained within himself, suffering, which evokes compassion, has a ripple effect which brings that person to a deeper bond with his neighbor. For example, we can view on television the starvation of children in South America, or witness people who have been bombed in the Middle East and we immediately share in the plight of these victims.

In the Old Testament, suffering and evil are identified with each other. Yet the Christian sees suffering as an experience of evil with a firm basis toward goodness when suffering is united with the passion and death of Christ to bring about salvation.

In the early pages of Scripture, after man had committed sin, the words of the Creator were pronounced: "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Since that day in history, the mystery of human suffering and death is somehow involved with the consequences of sin.

While man endures suffering, it seems to be particularly essential to his nature that he go beyond himself, to transcend his suffering in following Christ, the Redeemer Who gained salvation for all mankind through His suffering and cross.

Our beloved Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, at St. Peter's in Rome on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, Feb. 11, 1984, spoke on the Christian meaning of human suffering as a theme for the Holy Year. It therefore seems most fitting that at this national gathering of Catholic physicians we consider a summary and commentary of this apostolic exhortation on human suffering as being of special importance for the guests and participants at this convention.

The Book of Job presents the question, "Why does suffering exist?" Job accepts the mystery of suffering as one who is innocent and is rewarded. Suffering is looked upon as having the nature of a test, and that God, just judge that He is, rewards good and punishes evil.

In Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, He introduced us to the very heart of God's salvific work. Jesus revealed to humankind the "why" of redemption when He said, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, and whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Yes, God gave His Son to the world to free man from evil which bears within itself the definitive and absolute perspective on suffering. This liberation can and must be achieved by the suffering of His only begotten Son.

Christ drew very near to the world of suffering as "He went about doing good." He healed the sick, consoled the afflicted, fed the hungry, cared for the unwanted, and assured those who gave a cup of water in His name that they were giving it to Him.

Compassion for Suffering

Jesus demonstrated His great compassion toward those suffering from various physical illnesses as He went among the lepers, curing them, and healing those possessed by the devil. On three different occasions, Jesus exercised His greatness by restoring the dead to life.

In teaching the beatitudes, Jesus called "blessed" those who accepted the sufferings inflicted upon them during their temporal life, as they would be assured of the kingdom of heaven.

To clarify His teaching regarding "Who is your neighbor?" Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan who, on a journey, encountered a suffering victim abandoned on the road. The Samaritan not only stopped to care for the immediate needs of this ailing human being, but went beyond common courtesies to show his love for his neighbor. He gave money to the innkeeper to provide for the future needs of this stranger and promised that, on his return home, he would reimburse him for any additional costs. This generous, unselfish and compassionate Samaritan displayed a genuine sensitivity toward the man who was found suffering. This Samaritan, whom Jesus called "good," exemplified the perfection of what is expected in the fulfillment of the law to "love thy neighbor."

The prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messiah as "the man of sorrows" — a person despised, rejected, acquainted with grief, wounded for our transgressions, spat upon and crowned with thorns. John the Baptist called Jesus "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world." It was by His acceptance of the passion and His suffering as the only begotten Son, out of love for the Father, that Jesus annihilated the evil in the relationship between God and humanity and thus restored mankind to holiness.

Human suffering had reached its culmination when Christ pleaded with the Father, "If possible, let this cup pass from Me, yet not as I will, but as Thou willest."

At Golgotha, the evil of suffering experienced by Jesus was expressed in His words, "My God, my God, why have You abandoned Me?" In an indescribable way, Jesus underwent this suffering which is separation, estrangement from God. Yet it was precisely through this suffering that He accomplished the redemption and could say, as He breathed His last, "It is finished."

Christ's suffering, linked to love, challenges all who suffer to manifest moral greatness in their spiritual maturity and to bring, above all, good from the depths of their suffering.

Since Jesus suffered in place of man, and for man, and raised human suffering to the level of redemption, each suffering person is called to become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.

The scriptures quote Sts. Peter and Paul who outline on different occasions the merits of accepting the mystery of suffering in the name of the Lord.

St. Peter says that "You know that you were ransomed, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ." Again, he says, "Rejoice, insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed."

This was not always Peter's understanding of suffering. On a previous occasion, he wanted Jesus to abandon His suffering and death on the cross. It was then that Jesus reprimanded him, for he was judging by man's ways instead of God's ways.

St. John reports that, in the passion of Jesus, Simon Peter tried to defend the Lord with a sword, but was told by the Master, "Put your sword back into its place. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" It was in fulfillment of the scriptures that Jesus obediently accepted the will of the Father.

St. Paul to the Colossians

When addressing the Colossians, St. Paul said, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is the Church."

In the strange paradox, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake," the springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human weakness. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle in the infinite treasure of the world's redemption and can share this treasure with others. The more one is threatened by sin, the greater is the eloquence which human suffering possesses in itself.

When speaking to the Galatians, Paul stated, "I have been crucified with Christ" and "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world."

The salvific value of suffering is repeated by Paul over and over again. When talking to the Romans, he proceeded to say, "We are fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us."

God has confirmed His desire to be united with and act through suffering, which is man's weakness and emptying of himself. He permits the weakness which comes about through human suffering to be infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's cross, thus allowing man to become a sharer in the redemptive sufferings of His Son.

Christ did not conceal from His listeners the need of suffering. He said very clearly, "If any man would come after Me, let him take up his cross daily and follow Me."

In suffering, there is hidden a particular power which draws a person interiorly close to Christ. It is a special grace. Christ, through His own salvific suffering, is very much present in every suffering person and acts from within that suffering person by His spirit.

He wishes to penetrate every sufferer through the heart of His holy mother, for it was on Calvary that Mary's suffering, beside that of her Son, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from the human point of view, but which was mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world.

The answer to suffering comes through one's sharing of the interior encounter with the Lord. It is in itself something more than a mere abstract answer to the question about the meaning of suffering, for it is above all a call. It is a vocation. Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else, He says, "Follow Me — come! Take part through your suffering in the work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through suffering, through My cross." Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed to him. It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy.

Suffering is truly supernatural because it is rooted in the divine mystery and is deeply human because in it, a person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission.