

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 66 | Number 3

Article 3

August 1999

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Recommended Citation

Riga, Peter J. (1999) "Suffering," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 66 : No. 3 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol66/iss3/3>

Suffering

by

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Suffering is a reality we all must face. Every single one of us. It can be related to failure, relationships, sickness, death of loved ones, discouragement and depression, end of life futility, mortality, old age, unemployment and uncertain economic future, family failure and difficulty, divorce, failed love affairs, and much more. Suffering has as many faces as we have modes of existence.

Suffering is difficult to understand and it always takes us by surprise even though it is always just around the corner or maybe in our next breath. It comes like a thief in the night or a pain in the belly. It escapes all explanation and demonstration. We all seek consolation from our suffering with a friend, a priest, a psychologist who will listen. But what exactly is suffering? A condition of our human nature? In any case, it is always a disarming reality for which we are neither prepared nor ready.

Can our Christian faith take it up, assume it, explain it? How? Can it give us an explanation starting with what is proper to Christian faith: the revelation of the absolute love of God for man in Christ who is "the light coming into the world which enlightens each man" (John 1:9)?

Alone at night before I fall asleep, I pray for a thousand different men and women throughout the globe: the suffering and dying, the old and abandoned, the homeless and despairing, the sick and the addicted, the wayward and the perverted and, of course, the suicidals. There are all kinds of human failings, weakness, sinfulness and evil, but it's never like it seems. There is the morning star of hope which comes not to take suffering away but to give it new meaning in a spiritual struggle. We ask only for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be one with these suffering members of our unique humanity. We offer our suffering to the Father who alone knows how to draw good from evil. I pray that the God of all consolation will be there for me and for all.

Inexpressible

Suffering escapes definition. We can call it by other names such as fear and trepidation. But suffering is somewhat different in that it is broader, deeper. It even escapes introspection. Just to say that one suffers is to say the unspeakable, the incomprehensible. We experience certain psychological and even physiological causes but they do not explain suffering. If my friend suffers I can console him, understand him. But my suffering is my own interior space into which no one else has access. Each one remains a limited being seeking the absolute, the infinite. Each of us is a body of flesh who is reduced neither to psychological or biological functions or instincts. Submitted to space and time (which we can in part dominate and control) but always suffering as if something in man is more than man. We are restless always because something is always missing. Suffering is inexpressible and proper to each person; but because man is both language and communication, silence and solitude, suffering is inexpressible even while we try to express it. The most terrible thing about suffering is God's silence who does not speak to us in our suffering.

Yet suffering, like every human reality, seeks to express itself. Everyone tries to reach out to another, particularly to those who love us and want to share this suffering. But they cannot. Suffering is beyond all images by which we try to describe it but which must ultimately fail. No image can describe the solitude of suffering, in each of our sufferings. Yet suffering fascinates our intelligence. We are drawn to the nothing of its explanation. We keep trying to understand the un-understandable. It is so frustrating for us. But finally, suffering is mystery.

In our day, the reality of suffering remains but its manifestations are different: loss of our moorings, loss of meaning and significance, uncertain economic future, family fractures, universal relativism, savage technology, loss of sense of the sacred and of God, all kinds of frontiers beyond which we have gone in science and their consequent insecurities on our part, fertility and death control and the strangeness which all this leaves us.

But as Christians we must make a clear distinction between Christian faith and suffering. For this we must continuously return to the foundations of Christian faith, to Christ above all.

God So Loved the World

In its flight from Egypt, wandering in the desert, in hope during the captivity, its restoration, its subjugation by enemies, Israel knew one

central reality; someone loved them and in whose hands they were and who was with them in their trials and tribulations and who cured their wounds. For Israel, faith was acceptance of this manifestation of God's love in history and his realization amidst Israel's joys and agonies.

Christianity is the ultimate manifestation of God who reveals Himself by rendering faith in Him possible in the first place: in the midst of the night, a light shines. At Gethsemani and Golgotha, the Son assumed the suffering of all. Son of God, He experienced man to the bitter end (Mark 14:33). In His suffering, the sins of all fell upon Him. In His passion and crucifixion, evil has its manifestation. *He is present before the silence of the Father by interceding for us, by being with us in our suffering, despair and hope.* The faith which is rendered possible when Jesus manifested Himself as the resurrected one, *is faith in God who can do the impossible.* The absolute barrier between life and death, between the divine holiness and evil – is broken. The wall of separation dividing men (Ephesians 2:14) and the distance between men and God is taken away. Faith in Christ of Gethsemani and Golgotha is given and rendered possible in all, hope in the divine love greater than all is given to all (I John 3:20, 4:18). Henceforth, all power on earth and in the universe (suffering included) is dethroned for him who believes in the victory of the Crucified One through the resurrection.

On Good Friday, the Word of God is humiliated. But it is in exactly that way that God joins and expresses our silent suffering. By assuming our agony which is always upon us and in us, it becomes in Jesus silent and suppliant, absolute suffering expressing and overcoming all our suffering. By placing His life into the hands of the Father, Jesus accomplishes the prophets (Psalms 55:4-5) and He becomes "the one who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection" (Hebrews 12:2).

But above all Jesus revealed what man has never conceived and finds scandalous: the divine suffering.

This expression seems an outrage which traditionally, can only be said analogically of God, in absolute difference between God and man. But in Jesus, God causes us to know and love God because Jesus achieves in His suffering and cross the revelation of God, His Father. It is the suffering of one absolutely pure of all sin. Since sin blinds us, only the infinite purity of love, who is God, can measure the horror of sin. It is also the suffering of Him who alone can submit in our place to the evil and its divine cure and sanctity. It is above all God's suffering as expression of eternal love for what has been lost, that is, we the sheep of His flock.

At the heart of Christian revelation of the absolute love of God is therefore found the divine suffering. It is incomparable to all true human love. We thereby can give ourselves to the other, to give ourselves

completely. Incomparable, without analogy is the revelation in Christ of the divine suffering for the world, for all men and women throughout the ages.

We cannot retire from the world. But we propose to it the revelation of absolute love who once and for all has joined our agony, sorrow and death and offers us victory in Jesus Christ.

The Christian must accept reality to the end. He can live his suffering but by his faith. We know that the nonsense and suffering of all human existence has been assumed by God in Christ. We await the metamorphosis of man and of the universe: the gift of a new earth and a new heaven already in seed in the marked flesh of Jesus, the Resurrected One.

Revelation of the infinite wisdom and compassion of God in Christ of Good Friday and Easter, ecclesial life in which each member is related to all the others by communion in Christ, Christianity assumes and enlightens human suffering and permits us to go beyond it.

Among those who suffer, we choose the ministry of listening, of compassion but also of the announcing the good news of the resurrected Lord. At the core of Christian revelation is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) by going all the way in His compassion for the sick, the possessed, sinners (Matthew 8:16-17) and thereby restores the human race to His grandeur.

Just like sickness and death, suffering is not magically taken away from us in our world. *As long as man remains on earth, suffering remains but no longer as a power but rather as a place of spiritual combat.* Christ did not come to take away suffering or even to have us understand it. He came to share it with us, to sanctify it, to raise it from its own mortality and death. Christianity saves man from inside by transforming his heart and his vision. What is the sign of sadness and of death can become joy in Christ Jesus, the Lord.

The baptized communicate intensely, but really, with the passion of Christ for the salvation of their brothers and sisters. "They fill up those things which are lacking in the passion of Christ." Their agony is then purified in that of the Savior and thus goes to the very logic of their baptism. They show the meaning, the joy of the Christian mission in the midst of all trials: "In the midst of the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be love" (Therese of Lisieux). Joy is the sure sign of Christian presence in the world.

It is by such a vision of faith that we can say that we have despised fear too much. Fear and suffering are also the daughters of God redeemed on Good Friday.

Ironically we accept suffering as grace received from the hand of

our Father. Clearly, suffering makes us afraid and no one can presume the grace of God. In the words of John Howard Yoder, "Those who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe."

But in the Gospel spirit of childhood, the acceptance of suffering with Christ is not a virtue reserved only for some. The grace is offered to all. It is given from above in proportion to our weakness and fear. But it must be asked for each day as a grace. All is grace.

"The Spirit you have received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; It is the Spirit of Sons and it makes us cry out, Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15).
