

THE GOSPEL OF SUFFERING IN THE LIFE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

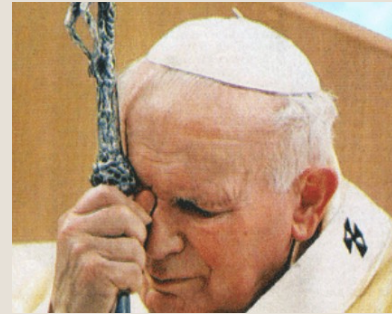
Mother Adela, SCTJM

Foundress

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With all my gratitude to Our Lord Jesus, for His Passion of love, and to the Holy Father John Paul II, who loved as Christ loved us, on the twentieth anniversary of the Apostolic Letter Salvifici Doloris.

During Lent and especially at the beginning of Holy Week, we are called to contemplate the mystery of the Redemption, and how our redemption has been fulfilled by means of the Cross of Christ, that is to say, by means of His suffering. Particularly in this liturgical time, we should approach the theme of the value of human suffering. I would like us to approach this subject by entering into the vision that the Holy Father John Paul II has wanted to present to the Church and the world throughout his pontificate.



On February 11, 1984, upon completing the Year of Our Redemption, the Holy Father John Paul II issued an Apostolic Letter Salvifici Dolores in which he called us to discover the salvific value of suffering - a meaning to which he has witnessed, not only in his words and through his Magisterium, but also through his own life, by becoming into a living witness of the redemptive Gospel of Suffering.

The Pope has reminded us so many times that the redemption fulfilled in Christ, at the cost of His Passion and death on the cross, is a decisive and determinate event in the history of humanity, not only because it fulfills the divine designs of justice and mercy in which He takes on our sins and pays for them and thus attains for us our salvation, but also because the suffering of God-made-man reveals to man a new meaning of suffering. This is a meaning that the human heart has incessantly sought to understand - why has suffering accompanied man for so long and so extensively throughout all history and in all places? Suffering, in its double dimension, physical and moral, is almost inseparable to man's earthly existence. As a result, it is necessary to reflect on its meaning and mystery (cf. Salvifici Dolores, hereafter SD, 2-3).

THE TRUE MEANING OF SUFFERING

Sacred Scripture tells us clearly that suffering is the consequence of the sin committed by our first parents. Before it, Adam and Eve lived in an earthly paradise without suffering, struggle or illness. Because of sin, suffering was introduced into human history, and we see how man has tried in many ways to evade suffering and escape from it.

In the Old Testament suffering was considered a punishment or grief inflicted by God because of man's sinfulness. Suffering and evil were identified one with the other.

Nevertheless, the book of Job, without distorting the foundation of this moral order founded in justice (culpa-pena), demonstrates with clarity that the principles of this order should not be applied in an exclusive manner and superficially. "While it is true that suffering has a meaning as punishment, when it is connected with a fault, it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment" (SD, 11).

In the figure of the just Job, we see how suffering also has the characteristic of a trial. Just as the sufferings endured by the people of God are an invitation to conversion - that is to say, they have an educational purpose - these are also acts of God's mercy that seek the education and conversion of his people: "these chastisements were meant not for the ruin but for the correction of our nation" (2 Mac 6:12). That is to say, suffering has the purpose of building up the goodness of the person who suffers, allowing him to overcome the evil that, in various ways, is latent in the hearts of men and manifests itself in their relationships with God and with others.

The life of Job, in a certain way, prefigures Christ, serving as an announcement of His passion. That the Messiah would suffer was very clear in the messianic witnesses of the Old Testament. An example is in the fourth poem of the Suffering Servant in the book of the Prophet Isaiah 53:2-6: "There was in him no stately bearing or appearance...a man of suffering accustomed to infirmities...yet it was our infirmities that he bore...our sufferings that he endured...pierced for our iniquities...crushed for our sins...upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole...by his stripes we were healed."

In this scripture we are invited to contemplate suffering as a means of revelation of divine love - love that is salvific: "he bore our sins...endured our sufferings...was pierced for our iniquities." It reveals a divine love that always saves, always frees and always redeems. It is the love that gives to the extreme "without sparing anything" (words of the Heart of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary).

Love is, therefore, the richest fountain through which to understand the meaning of suffering, which is always a mystery. To discover this mystery to the greatest possible extent, we need to contemplate the Cross of Christ: the salvific love of Christ Who, through His wounds, has healed us. "The cross of Christ - the Passion - sheds a totally new light over this mystery, giving another meaning to human suffering in general" (cf. John

Paul II, General Audience, Nov. 9, 1988). That is to say, in order to try to read the mystery of suffering, we should, from the Cross of Christ, read it through the language of love.

SUFFERING IS CONQUERED BY LOVE

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that all who believe in Him might not perish but have eternal life." These words of Christ in His conversation with Nicodemus introduce us to the same heart of the salvific action of God. Salvation is freedom from evil - but not only from temporal evil, but from all definitive evil: the loss of eternal life, of eternal happiness. The first-born Son has been given to humanity to free it, first of all, from this definitive evil and suffering. The Redeemer conquers evil with good; He conquers sin by His obedience unto death - death on the cross. He conquers death, resurrecting, coming back to life. He conquers by giving His life for humanity, so it can have eternal life. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13).

In Christ's messianic mission, he came incessantly near to the world of human suffering as we hear in Acts 10:38: "He went about doing good" - to the sick, the poor, the afflicted, the hungry, those oppressed by the devil, the blind, the paralyzed, and even the dead. Jesus was sensitive to all human suffering. At the same time, He instructed, placing in the center of His teaching the eight Beatitudes, which are directed towards men tried by various sufferings in their temporal life: the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the pure, the hungry and thirsty, the persecuted, those insulted, etc. He invited them to conquer these adversities with good.

He drew near to suffering not only to touch it and heal it, but He also took it upon himself: fatigue, exile, lack of a place to rest, being misunderstood, betrayal, hostility, poverty, abandonment, defamation, calumnies, enemies, beatings, humiliation, scourging, insults, disdain, even crucifixion. And He made of it a means for salvation.

The Son of God, moved by salvific love, consented to live and assume suffering fully and in the most decisive and determined way. Not deserving it, He accepted it voluntarily and freely (John 10:17: "I lay down my life...no one takes it from me...I lay it down on my own") because, these are the characteristics of authentic love. Christ drew near and embraced the world of human suffering; assuming it, He redeemed it, elevated it, and made it the means of salvation and freedom.

Definitively, suffering is a mystery that very few are able to discover...Only the saints, who having profoundly contemplated the Cross of Christ and the suffering face of the Savior, are able to understand its power and efficacy. To his spiritual children Padre Pio said, "Do not waste any sufferings; use them to bring about good." So we do not waste so many personal, family, social, world-wide sufferings, but instead convert them into fountains of salvation in union with Christ - this is the reason the Holy Father so often calls us to contemplate the Gospel of suffering and its salvific power...and in order for us to have a living witness of the power of this Gospel, the Lord has given us a pontificate like that of John Paul II.

With His Cross, Christ radically changes the meaning of suffering. It no longer is seen as a punishment or is limited to only a trial or correction; it is now necessary to discover the redemptive and salvific power of love. The evil of suffering, in the mystery of the Redemption of Christ, is raised and in all ways transformed: suffering is converted into a force for freedom from evil, for the victory of good. A few days ago, I read testimonies of priest and religious who ministered to the families of those who died in the terrorist attacks in Madrid. Many truly edified me, but one in particular moved me: a young husband, married for two years, lost his wife and the baby she was carrying in her womb. This young man said, "I do not understand this, but I offer it to Christ so that love can triumph over hate." Suffering received with love is victory over evil.

STRENGTH FOR LIBERATION FROM EVIL, FOR THE VICTORY OF GOOD.

"Pain," the Holy Father told us on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, on the day of the Annual World Day of the Sick, "is converted to a font of life for all humanity, when it is lived united to Christ." During his visit to the Czech Republic in 1997, the Pope addressed all those who suffer saying, "You are a hidden force contributing powerfully to the life of the Church: by your sufferings you have a share in the redemption of the world. You too...have been placed by God as a pillar in the temple of the Church so as to become one of its most powerful supports" (April 26).

Was this not what St. Paul the Apostle referred to in Colossians 1:24: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of his body, that is the Church"?

These words of St. Paul are an invitation to offer our sufferings generously to Christ and with Christ for the good of all the Church. It is not that the sacrifice of Christ was left incomplete, but that within history and throughout the generations, His sacrifice is made present with the loving cooperation of the members of His Mystical Body. That cooperation, comprised of suffering embraced with love, is a call to "love heroically, as he loved us" (cf. Jn 13:34). "The Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all love expressed in human suffering. In this dimension—the dimension of love—the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished" (SD 24). What the Holy Father is telling us with these words is that through the sacrifice of Christ and His acceptance of suffering for love of man, suffering has now been converted into a victorious expression of love. Because of the Passion of Christ, suffering is now an excellent way to grow in love and express love. "He loved us to the end" (cf. Jn 13:1). Now He makes us participants of this "love to the end," a love capable of giving one's life for others and achieving the good of others, despite oneself.

Did not the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima invite the young shepherds to understand the depth of this redemptive dimension of human suffering embraced and offered for love? This was Her invitation: "Would you like to accept and offer to God all the suffering that He desires to send you, as reparation for the sins by which He is being offended and for the conversion of sinners?"

In the conclusion his Apostolic Letter the Holy Father says, "We ask all you who suffer to support us. We ask precisely you who are weak to become a source of strength for the Church and humanity. In the terrible battle between the forces of good and evil, revealed to our eyes by our modern world, may your suffering in union with the Cross of Christ be victorious!" (no. 31).

This has been precisely the great message that John Paul II has wanted to give the world and the Church. In a time where human beings are constantly seeking to avoid suffering, but are nevertheless more immersed in it, the Holy Father has wanted us to discover the value and meaning of human suffering. Nevertheless, the gospel of suffering in the teachings of John Paul II has not been simply an apostolic letter, a chapter in an official document, or the theme of a papal audience. It has been much more: it is a living magisterium (teaching). In his concern, he has been continuously announcing this gospel to the world - a world tormented by wars, threatened with nuclear bombs and violence of all types; a world that disregards the person and human life; a world that suffers due to hunger, sickness, and all types of injustices. In His Holiness, the gospel of suffering has been integrated with his mission to live his own humanity; from the time of his childhood, which was lived in the midst of a great human crisis, he has been formed in sorrow; but he has allowed this great sorrow to bear much fruit in him and for the good of the Church.

The gospel of suffering for John Paul II is not just a lesson taught, but rather totally lived. I would like to direct our gaze to the person of John Paul II so we can discover, not only in his words, but in his life, the salvific value of suffering.

DISTINCTIVE MARK OF JOHN PAUL II: SUFFERING

Suffering is essential in understanding His Holiness John Paul II - on a personal level as well as on an ethnic, historical and theological one. In his own life, from early on, he has been a witness of tremendous personal suffering, which he felt for the first time in an intense way with the premature death of his mother. While still young, he later lived the death of his brother, the person closest to him. A short time later, his father, who had been crucial in his religious formation, passed away. Beyond his personal losses, he lived through the Second World War and poverty, as well as the difficulties caused by the communism that dominated Poland. Karol Wojtyla was formed in the school that the Blessed Virgin uses to form souls particularly chosen to become visible icons of Christ crucified. This is the "school of sacrifice and of sorrow" (expression of Padre Pio). This school formed him to be an austere man, sensitive to sorrow, and from an early age, deprived him of all supports and human attachments in order for him to grow in total trust of God and Holy Mary. All this, furthermore, was increased by the great sufferings of the Polish nation, which was, for 200 years, a nation victimized by some occupation, oppression, war, abandonment, or lack of total freedom, including religious.

How many times was he a witness to violence and its heart-rending consequences? An example can be found in the case of a fellow worker at the time of his hidden seminarian life (that was how the seminary was in Poland then). He writes, "In order to avoid deportation to do forced labor in Germany, I began in the autumn of 1940 to work as a laborer in a stone quarry attached to the Solvay chemical plant...I was present when, during the detonation of a dynamite charge, some rocks struck a worker and killed him. The experience left a profound impression on me: They took his body, and walked in a silent line. Toil still lingered about him, a sense of wrong" (Gift & Mystery, p.9-10).

For the Holy Father, all the sufferings of his childhood and youth were not only profound experiences, but they also revealed the salvific power of suffering to generate life. "If a grain of wheat dies, it will bear much fruit" (cf. Jn 12:24). It was precisely on the subject of his priestly vocation that he expressed, "My priesthood, even at its beginning, was in some way marked by the great sacrifice of countless men and women of my generation. Providence spared me the most difficult experiences; and so my sense of indebtedness is all the greater, both to people whom I knew and to many more whom I did not know; all of them, regardless of nationality or language, by their sacrifice on the great altar of history, helped to make my priestly vocation a reality. In a way these people guided me to this path; by their sacrifice they showed me the most profound and essential truth about the priesthood of Christ" (Gift and Mystery, p.39).

The awareness that his vocation is the fruit of the suffering of many is seen in his homily on February 11, 2000, on the Jubilee of the Sick: "Dear suffering brothers and sisters, we are indebted to you. The Church is indebted to you, as is the Pope!" With this he wants to stress a message very close to his heart, a message that through his pontificate, he has constantly directed to all humanity: suffering, along with prayers, are a powerful force of grace and salvation for the universal Church. In his homily on May 13th, 2000 in Fatima during the beatification of the shepherd children, he referred to them with tears in his eyes and with deep gratitude, stating, "And once again I would like to celebrate the Lord's goodness to me when I was saved from death after being gravely wounded on May 13, 1981. I also express my gratitude to Bl. Jacinta for the sacrifices and prayers offered for the Holy Father, whom she saw suffering greatly" (no.4).

I SHOULD LEAD THE CHURCH WITH SUFFERING

During the Angelus on May 29, 1994, upon his return to the Vatican after having been hospitalized some weeks in Gemelli de Roma Hospital, the Holy Father made an important reference to suffering, recalling the painful moments and dismay that accompanied him with the attempt on his life on May 13th, 1981: "Through Mary I

would like to express today my gratitude for this gift of suffering, associated once again with this Marian month of May. I want to appreciate this gift. I understand that it is a necessary gift. The Pope should be in the hospital Gemelli; he should be absent from this window for four weeks; in the same way he suffered thirteen years ago, he should suffer again this year." (Three times he said, "The Pope should.") He continued, "I have meditated, I have reflected over all of this during my hospitalization. And I have found again at my side the great figure of Cardinal Wyszynski...At the start of my Pontificate he told me, 'If the Lord has called you, you should take the Church of Christ to the Third Millennium'...And I have understood that I should lead the Church of Christ to this Third Millennium with prayer, with various initiatives, but I have seen that this is not enough: I needed to lead it with suffering - with the attempt on my life thirteen years ago and with this new suffering. Why now? Why this year? Why in this year of the Family? Precisely now, because the family is being threatened, because it is being attacked. The Pope should be attacked, the Pope should suffer, so that all the families and the whole world can see that there is a gospel - I could say, a superior gospel - the gospel of suffering, with which we are to prepare the future, the Third Millennium of families, of all families and of each family. I wanted to add these reflections in my first encounter with you...at the end of this Marian month, because I owe this gift of suffering to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and I thank her. I understand it was important to have this debate before the powerful of the world. I need to meet again with the powerful of the world, and I have to speak up. With what arguments? I am left with this argument of suffering. And I would like to tell them: understand, understand why the Pope has returned to the hospital, why has he suffered again; understand it, reflect on this one more time" (cf. no.4).

Is it not moving that the Pope - so fruitful in his teachings, in his writings, and in his words - tells us that he no longer has any argument to combat the "powerful of the world" except the argument of suffering? As he well told us, "understand why the Pope must suffer."

SUFFERING: A MARIAN GIFT FOR THE POPE

"I owe this gift of suffering to the Blessed Virgin Mary." That is how the Pope sees all his sufferings. Since childhood, with his deep devotion to the Virgin Mary, he has lived in the Marian school of love and of sorrow. For the Pope, to see the maternal hand of Mary in the midst of sorrow is a reality throughout all his existence. Could he possibly forget that when he was 22 years old he was struck by a German military truck and his body, apparently lifeless, ended up in a pit where a woman picked him up, found an ambulance, and took him to a hospital? But no one was ever able to identify her, and this unknown woman disappeared forever. He is convinced that woman was the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The assassination attempt, of which he was a victim in St. Peter's Square, happened on May 13, 1981, at the same hour in which the apparitions of Fatima had taken place. From this experience, of which he could not help but note the Marian sign, as well as Her maternal protection, he began his deep analysis of the message of Fatima, until he discovered in the third part of the secret that he was the Pope revealed in these apparitions. He is the Pope "that was to suffer for the good of the Church." For this reason, before all the sufferings he has endured throughout his life and his Pontificate, all he can say is "I am grateful to Blessed Virgin Mary for this new gift of suffering." He knows its salvific value; he understands that St. Paul, and all who suffer, "for love complete in their flesh what is lacking for the good of the Church" (cf. Col 1:24). It was for them that only four days after his attempted assassination, from his bedside in Gemelli Hospital, he said, "Priest and victim, I offer my suffering for all the Church and world."

WHY A MARIAN GIFT? (according to Salvici doloris, 25)

Before all, the Gospel of suffering was written with Christ's own suffering assumed out of love for us. This suffering has been converted into a rich springtime for those who, with Christ, have participated and participate in it. The Blessed Virgin Mary, together with Christ, has been the first to live out, in a rare and unique way, the Gospel of suffering. She is always together with Him. And the Virgin Mary is the model witness of this gospel. She participated and lived fully in the sufferings of Christ: "your son will be a sign of contradiction...and you yourself a sword will pierce" (Luke 2:34-35). She will live the same destiny of Her Son, the Redeemer. The sufferings of Christ are totally Hers...and they are lived in perfect union with Him.

The Magisterium of the Church teaches us that the sufferings of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in being fully united to Christ's sufferings, were a real contribution to the redemption of all. In the event of Calvary, the suffering of Mary, united with Christ's, reached a difficult climax - unimaginably deep from a human perspective - but most certainly mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the final end of human salvation.

Her being at the foot of the cross was a participation in the redemptive death of Christ. She, together with Jesus, is a living witness of the Gospel of redemptive suffering. She, with St. John who was also at the foot of the cross, shows how suffering with Christ is a participation in the redemptive fruits of the cross.

His Holiness John Paul II, who always has had a particular spiritual sensitivity to the gift of Marian co-redemption - of Her presence and singular cooperation of the event of the cross - has also understood the necessity of embracing Her maternity in order to be formed into a beloved disciple. The Pope has understood that the first characteristic of that apostle called to testify to the world about the redeeming love of the pierced Heart of Christ needed to be with Mary at the foot of the cross in order to be a witness. He who had to bring to awareness Christ's extreme love for humanity, he who had to reveal to the world how much it is loved and the high price of salvation, needed to have been with Mary at the foot of the cross; he needed to be formed in the Marian school of love and sorrow.

As a result, this real witness of God's redeeming love for humanity, this voice that cries out, "Open the doors

of your hearts to the redeemer," also needed, like St. John, to be in the Marian school of love and sorrow.

THE POWERFUL EVANGELIZER OF SUFFERING: "I AM LEFT WITH THIS ARGUMENT OF SUFFERING"

This period in the life of John Paul II is perhaps the most fruitful and splendid of his pontificate. Yes, because His Holiness John Paul II, with an enlightened mind and such particular wisdom, shows us a limited body, marked by pain; however, he carries on the normal life of his pontificate, even with all his limited capacities. He carries on all his pastoral labor with the weight of the cross on his shoulders. All he achieves is accompanied by suffering - that is to say, by the power of a suffering love that gives fruit to all labor. This is the power of the gospel of suffering that can be converted into the most powerful argument and the strongest evangelizer. "When I am lifted up (on the cross) I will attract all to Me" (cf. Jn 12:32).

In the person of the Vicar of Christ, we can see gathered the sufferings of the Mystical Body, the Church; he carries in his suffering face the painful stains and wrinkles with which his members disfigure the face of the Church; the limitation of his legs reveal the blocks which the Church faces in advancing the kingdom and reveal her incapacity to move freely in so many nations of the world; he endures the limitation of his voice like the many places the Church is not allowed to openly proclaim the Gospel; he carries, in his weak physical state, the battles of the Mystical Body; due to the weight of the cross, he carries on his fallen shoulders so many men and women who have been martyred for their faith or who suffer in prisons. The increasing pain and anguish of all the men and women of our generation, the sufferings of all the people, especially the poorest and weakest, those most wounded by violence - all are reflected in the visible head of the Church. The pains of the Church accumulate in him; but he is also a witness to the power of the Holy Spirit that sustains and fortifies.

In reality, contemplating the selfless and generous surrender of the Holy Father should cause profound admiration and gratitude in us. He does not hide his physical weakness, but rather makes it his most powerful argument before the illusions of this world; he knows how to show the power of weakness before a world obsessed by power, before a culture generalized by death, superficiality, vanity, pleasure, and falsehood. This challenge to desire to seek the most worthy and most suitable dignity of each human person has always been a clear characteristic of his human profile.

The Pope presents himself today before people and cities with suffering, considering it to be a strong and edifying recourse of evangelization. That is how John Paul II conducts the Church and humanity in this third millennium: carrying the Cross of Jesus.

In this way he resembles his Lord, the Suffering Servant more and more; in this way he presents His same physique. He is a Pope who, like Christ the Suffering Servant, is not afraid to show suffering embraced by love; he is not afraid to show a face not beautiful, a body not robust, a physique not strong...He is a Pope who wants to demonstrate to us the redeeming face of suffering embraced by love for the good of the Church. He wants to demonstrate to us what true love is, what true freedom is...what the true face of man is: we are capable of God and to love as He loves us.

Before this disoriented world, the Pope is a living, prophetic icon of Christ crucified; and because of this, his pontificate, marked by suffering in all its facets, ends up being one of the greatest evangelizers. This is the great treasure that the Church today has in its universal pastor - just like it had in its Supreme Pastor.

For the Holy Father, in imitation of Christ, to freely choose does not mean opting out of difficulties - but rather it is opting for the most difficult. That is true freedom, for it is the freedom of true love. That is why he has said so many times, to those who insidiously invite him to abandon his mission of Pastor, "If Christ did not come down from his cross, neither will I."

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