

A GOD WHO LETS THINGS HAPPEN?

THE MYSTERY OF EVIL AND SUFFERING

One of the most frequent reasons for people abandoning the faith is the existence of evil in the world, especially in its most acute and hard to understand forms. When things happen that seem clearly unjust and meaningless; when we face tragic situations where we feel powerless, the question naturally arises: how can God permit this? Why should the good and all-powerful God allow such evils to occur? Why should humble people who are already burdened by life be forced to face an unexpected tragedy such as a natural disaster? Why doesn't God intervene? We address these questions not to public opinion or to those around us, but to God Himself, because we acknowledge Him as Creator and Lord of the world.¹

To a certain extent these questions fall outside the confines of Revelation and enter into the mystery of God himself, since in the end nothing in creation falls outside God's wisdom and will. Just as we cannot fully grasp God's infinite goodness, neither can we fathom his plans completely. Hence when we face evil and suffering the best attitude is trusting abandonment in God, who always "knows best" and can "bring about what is best."

Yet it is only natural that we should try to shed light on the obscure mystery of evil, so that our faith is not extinguished by the hard realities we encounter in life, but continues to be a clear *light to my path* (Ps 119:105).

Evil stems from created freedom

God did not create a closed world that He alone can alter, nor did He create a perfect world. Rather He created a world open to many possibilities and to becoming more perfect over time. And He created men and women to inhabit it and bring it to fulfilment through their personal initiative. He has created us intelligent and free, and gives us the means to develop our talents. In bringing us into existence God "puts us to the test," entrusting us with the task of doing all the good we can. And this is often a demanding task. *Trade until I come* (Lk 19:13), Jesus says in a well-known parable, making clear that our talents are not meant to be buried or hidden. Each of us is called to bear fruit by developing the talents we have received. But often enough we don't do so, or even do the opposite: we freely choose to do what is wrong, and are often guilty of what is evil.

Humanity has done so right from the beginning, ever since that decision of our first parents, which became the fountain head for all other evils. Everything evil in the world stems from a misguided use of freedom, from our capacity to destroy God's works in ourselves, in others and in nature. By doing so we deprive ourselves of God and our heart becomes clouded. We can even

¹ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* (*On the Christian Meaning of Suffering*), no. 9.

turn our own life or that of others into a living “hell.” Sin is the true evil we must fear. All the other evils in the world, in one way or another, stem from there.

Suffering as a trial or purification

But is evil always the direct result of human guilt? First, we need to clarify the notion of evil. In itself evil is merely the “reverse side” of the good, the side that the world shows when good is not present. When the good that should be present is lacking, evil appears. Evil is really a privation, and possesses no positive entity. “Evil is not something with its own nature, its own being, but is simply negation. And when I take a step into evil, I leave the realm of the positive development of being in favor of the status of a parasite, of the corrosion of being and the negation of being.”² We suffer when we experience any absence of the good. Certainly, any guilty deed (whether ours or that of others) always causes harm. Nevertheless, whenever we suffer harm it is not necessarily because we ourselves are guilty.

In Sacred Scripture the Book of Job addresses this problem in depth. Job’s friends want to convince him that the misfortunes the Lord has sent him are the result of his sins, of his injustice. Although often this may be the case, since misdeeds merit punishment (both on the human and divine level), Job’s case shows us that the just and innocent suffer too. Referring to this sacred book, Pope Saint John Paul II wrote: *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.*³ Job’s suffering represents a trial to test his faith, which he emerges from greatly strengthened. Sometimes God tests us, but He always gives us his grace to win out and find a way to grow in love, which is the ultimate meaning of good.

At other times suffering takes on meaning as purification. As happened with Israel in Moses’ time, when the people were fickle and capricious. God purified them through a long desert journey that lasted many years, guiding and teaching them until they were ready to enter the Promised Land and acknowledge God’s fidelity to his word. By divine Providence suffering often acquires a purifying value like this. Many people caught up in life’s hustle and bustle can fail to face the all-important questions in life until an illness or a financial or family setback leads them to a deeper soul-searching. And this can often lead to a change, a conversion, accompanied by an opening to others’ needs. Then suffering also becomes part of God’s “pedagogy.” He doesn’t want us to get lost on the way, wasting our time pursuing transient delights and worldly aims. Although everyone’s life includes a measure of evil, if we trust in God, his divine Providence can turn this evil into a means to attain our true good.

Suffering inscribed in nature

² Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World, Believing and Living in Our Era*, Barcelona, 2005, p. 128.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, no. 11.

This also sheds light on the meaning of what we could call “natural suffering” – the suffering that seems to be “inscribed” in the world around us. For example, the fatigue that accompanies our growth as we strive to know the world better and make progress; the fleeting nature of all creatures, who age and die; the lack of harmony in nature, seen in earthquakes and tsunamis that tear apart the very order of creation. These are sufferings that we cannot avoid or control; they are, as it were, inscribed in nature.

Sometimes these evils are necessary for other goods to come about. Saint Thomas Aquinas gives the example of the lion that in order to obtain food gives chase to a stag or some other animal.⁴ But often the good that results from natural disasters is hidden from us. It is not easy to grasp why God permits disasters, or why He has created a universe where destruction is given free reign, and which sometimes doesn’t seem to be ruled by Goodness and Love.

One possible explanation is that, in God’s creative plan, the destruction involved in natural evils and disasters bears some relationship to our free will and our capacity to reject God, if only as an image of the harm that results when we separate ourselves from Him.

The material world in which we live and which so often moves us by its beauty, can also become a terrifying and destructive place, just as our heart, made to love God and hold a heaven inside it, can become a sad and dark place – if we stop struggling and give free reign to the seeds sown by the devil. So when we contemplate a nature that rebels and causes widespread and indiscriminate destruction, with no regard for justice, we can see there an image of a world that refuses to let God reign and a heart that rejects God’s love and justice. The intimate tie between the created world and man, who was placed over it to care for it (cf. *Gen 2:15*), can also be seen reflected in this disorder.

With mankind, *the whole creation has been groaning in travail (Rom 8:22)*, because creation too shares in God’s creative and redemptive plan. Creation too *cherishes the hope of being freed from corruption and enabled to participate in the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21)*.

Redemptive suffering

Certainly, the meaning of evil is fully illumined only by the Cross of Christ. And together with the Cross, the Resurrection. Christ’s Cross shows us that suffering can be the sign and proof of love. Moreover, it can be the path to destroy sin. For it was on Jesus’ Cross that God’s love washed away the sins of the world. Sin has no resistance against the love that lowers itself and humiliates itself for the good of the sinner. As a character in a Dostoevsky novel exclaimed: “a loving humility is an incredible force, the strongest of all; nothing else is like it.”⁵

⁴ Cf. *S. Th.*, I, q 19 a. 9 c.

⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*.

On the Cross, Jesus' suffering is redemptive because his love for the Father and mankind does not recoil before human rejection and injustice. With his complete self-giving, He gave his life for sinners. Thus his Cross became the source of life for them.

Our sufferings too can be redemptive, when they stem from love and are transformed by love. Then they are part of Christ's Cross. As Saint Josemaria taught, suffering is a source of life: of interior life and grace for oneself and for others.⁶ It is not suffering in itself that redeems, but the love that imbues it.

Already on the human level love has the capacity to transform life: a mother who spares no effort for her children's happiness; a brother who sacrifices himself for his needy brother; a soldier who risks his life for those in his platoon. When such love is motivated by and grounded on faith, then besides being something beautiful, it is also divine. It shares in the Cross and is a channel of the grace Christ won for us. There evil is transformed into good through the action of the Holy Spirit, the Gift stemming from the Cross of Jesus.

The trump card

Besides everything said up to now in trying to clarify, to the extent possible, the meaning of evil, we can add here a decisive consideration. Although evil is an evident reality in our life here on earth, God holds the "trump card;" his is the final move in all that refers to each person's life. It is his all-powerful Love that is the world's true hope—a Love made manifest also in Christ's Resurrection.

No matter how great and incomprehensible life's tragedies may be, the creative and re-creative power of God is much greater. Life is a time of testing; when it is over, what is definitive begins. This world is transient. It is somewhat like rehearsing for a concert. Perhaps someone forgets their instrument, another has not learned their part and a third is out of tune. But that is why rehearsals are needed. It is a time for adjustments, for fine-tuning instruments, for learning to follow the conductor. Then at last comes the big day when everything is finally ready. The concert takes place in a magnificent hall amid strains of joy and emotion.

Christ's life shows us not only God's love but also his power: his power to pay us back manyfold for any injustice received, for when it seemed God was absent, for when He allowed evil to triumph and suffering to reach beyond what we could see any meaning for. Jesus too experienced this abandonment (cf. *Mk* 15:34). But his loving suffering on the Cross was followed by eternal glory. The Apocalypse, the last book in Sacred Scripture, speaks of a God who will *wipe away every tear* (*Rev* 21:4). For He will make all things new (cf. *Rev* 21:5), with a superabundant happiness.

⁶ Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Station XII.

How can we help those who are suffering?

Oftentimes we feel powerless when faced with the suffering of others and can only try to do what the good Samaritan did (cf. *Lk* 10:25-37). We can offer our affection, listen sympathetically, accompany; that is, we can refuse to “pass by on the other side” without showing any concern. Some famous paintings represent the good Samaritan and the man who was assaulted with the same face. We can see here Christ, who both heals and is healed. Each of us is or can be the good Samaritan who cures the wounds of others; at that moment we are Christ for the other person. But sometimes we too need to be healed because something has wounded us: we have put on a sour face, answered someone abruptly, been deserted by a friend.... And we need to be healed by a good Samaritan, who might be Christ himself when we seek Him in prayer, or someone beside us who becomes Christ when that person listens to us. And we can be Christ for others, since each of us is created in the image and likeness of God.

Suffering always remains a mystery, but a mystery that through Our Lord’s saving action opens us to the needs of others: “Everywhere there are abandoned children, either because they were abandoned at birth or because life abandoned them... their family, their parents, and thus they receive no affection from their family. How can they escape from such a negative experience of abandonment, so far from love? There is only one remedy to these experiences: give what you did not receive. If you did not receive understanding, be understanding with others. If you did not receive love, love others. If you felt the pain of solitude, draw near to those who are alone. Flesh and blood is cured by flesh and blood, and God became flesh in order to cure us. Let us do the same for others.”⁷

Many people have felt God’s caress precisely in their most difficult moments. Lepers received caresses from Saint Teresa of Calcutta; people suffering from tuberculosis were materially and spiritually comforted by Saint Josemaria; those about to die were treated with love and respect by Saint Camillus de Lellis. Such examples also tell us something about the mystery of suffering within human existence. These are opportunities for love to expand forcefully if God’s grace is embraced, which restores dignity to even the most extreme situations.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Address at Kerasani Stadium, Nairobi, 27 November 2015.*