

**EXCERPTS OF THE LECTURE
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"Pain, an enigma or a mystery?"

**THE THINKING AND THEOLOGY OF JOHN PAUL II
*A Christian understanding of pain and suffering***

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I have been asked to expound on John Paul II's incomparable thinking on human pain. I shall first mention briefly several facts about the physiology of human pain. Then, given the Holy Father's openness to all human values, it seems to me that it would be interesting to allude to and discuss certain key thoughts on four solutions from outside the Christian context.

The enigma of suffering

Pope John Paul II does not conceal the fact that suffering is something complex, enigmatic and intangible that must be treated with full respect and compassion and even with awe; but this does not justify the attempt to understand it, since only in this way will it be possible to come to terms with it.

He then briefly outlines the context of suffering, speaking of the vast field of suffering and of the suffering person. He notes from the outset that a misunderstanding of suffering can actually lead to the denial of God.

Pope John Paul II states: "Suffering is something which is still wider than sickness", because there is a "distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering" (*Salvifici Doloris*, n. 5).

In addition to individual suffering, there is collective suffering due to human errors and transgressions, especially war. There are also times when this collective suffering becomes more acute.

Suffering has a subject and it is the individual who experiences it; yet it is not imprisoned within the person but gives rise to solidarity with others who are suffering; for the only one who has a special awareness of this is the person, the whole person. Thus, suffering involves solidarity (cf. *ibid.*, n. 8).

It is far from easy to define the cause of suffering or of the evil connected with it. People put questions to God about its cause and frequently reach the point of denying him when they are unable to discover the reason for it (cf. *ibid.*, n. 9).

One first needs to frame the enigma correctly and begin to seek its cause.

Suffering, the Pope says, consists in feeling cut off from good. Being cut off from good is an evil. Consequently, the cause of suffering is an evil; so, suffering and evil can be identified with each other.

As for evil, it is a deprivation; it has no positive value in itself and therefore cannot be a positive cause or principle, for its origin is a mere privation. There are as many evils as

things that are wanting: an evil, according to its intensity, gives rise to pain, sorrow, depression, disappointment and even desperation; it exists in dispersion but at the same time entails solidarity. Since it originates in privation, the inevitable question is: "Why did this deprivation occur, what is its cause?".

To respond, the Pope leaves the area of enigma and moves on to that of mystery. He does not attempt to do so with the nebulous obscurity of myth but penetrates to the very core of the Christian faith.

Mystery, in the Christian faith, is not darkness but dazzling brightness. The etymological root of the word helps us understand something about it: "mystery" derives from the Greek "Muo" or "Muein", which means closing the eyes, not in the sense of going about blind, but of closing the eyes if they are dazzled, such as occurs, for instance, when we look directly at the sun. It is only the dazzling light, its excessive brightness, that prevents us from seeing anything in front of us, and it is in this that we can make out the mystery of suffering.

Furthermore, the Christian mystery is not only something contemplated but also experienced. Only by experiencing the mystery can we penetrate it with our minds. Only by living the mystery of Christian suffering can we get an idea of what suffering means and, as the Pope said previously, transcend it and overcome it. Let us now try to describe suffering.

The mystery of suffering

Three topics, among others, that the Pope addresses in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* with regard to suffering as a mystery are: "evil and suffering", "Christ takes on suffering", and "the value of human suffering". To enter into the mystery, let us be guided by God himself. The Pope enables us to penetrate into Revelation in order to move on to ascension in the mystery.

The Holy Father tells us that in Old Testament biblical language, suffering and evil are at first identified with each other. Thanks to the Greek language, however, a distinction is made particularly in the New Testament between suffering and evil. Suffering is a passive or active attitude to evil, or rather, to the lack of a good that it would be desirable to possess (cf. *ibid.*, n. 7).

In fact, in the Book of Job and in some other Books of the Old Testament, the answer is that the cause of evil is the transgression of the natural order created by God. Suffering and transgression were held to be the same, or at least it was believed that suffering was caused by transgression. This is the opinion of Job's friends (cf. *ibid.*, n. 10).

However, although God rejects this theory and approves Job's innocence, his suffering remains a mystery: not all suffering is consequential to transgression, which is proof of Job's righteousness. It prefigures the Lord's passion (cf. *ibid.*, n. 11). It further affirms that suffering is a punishment inflicted for self-correction, since good follows evil, leading to conversion and to rebuilding goodness (cf. *ibid.*, n. 12).

The Pope now goes a step further and reaches the heart of the mystery: in his mortal life, Christ put an end to pain by his miracles. He took upon himself the suffering of all and bore it with full consciousness on the Cross (cf. *ibid.*, n. 16).

The only answer [to the "why" of suffering] can come from the love of God in the Cross (cf. *ibid.*, n. 13). It is God the Father who provides the answer to the problem of suffering: it consists in the fact that he "gives" his Son to the world. Evil is sin and suffering, death. With the Cross, he overcomes sin, and with his Resurrection, death (Jn 3: 16; cf. *ibid.*, n. 14).

In the Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant in the Book of Isaiah, the meaning of Christ's suffering in the passion is portrayed even more vividly than it is in the Gospels. His suffering is redemptive; its depth can be measured by the depth of the evil in the history of the world, especially since the person who suffers it is God (cf. *ibid.*, n. 17).

Christ provides an answer to the problem of suffering by offering his unreserved availability and compassion; his presence is effective: he gives help and gives himself (cf. *ibid.*, n. 28).

Through suffering, human beings are incorporated into the pain of Christ. Suffering gives rise to love for those who suffer, a disinterested love to help them by relieving it. This is now official and organized through health-care institutions and the professionals who work in them, and also through volunteers. It is a matter of a real vocation, especially when one is united to the Church with a Christian profession.

The assistance that families give their sick relatives is important in this area. Moreover, those who not only act to help the sick but also to drive away a whole series of evils, those who fight hatred, violence, cruelty and every type of physical and spiritual suffering, belong to the same category as the Good Samaritan.

Every man and every woman should feel personally called to bear witness to love in suffering and must not leave those who are suffering to be cared for solely by official institutions (*ibid.*, n. 29). The Parable of the Good Samaritan corroborates what Christ said about the Last Judgment: "I was sick and you visited me". Christ himself is the One who was cared for, and the one who fell into the hands of bandits is cared for and helped. The meaning of suffering is to do good by one's suffering and to do good to those who suffer (cf. *ibid.*, n. 30).

The Pope ends by saying that the mystery of man is revealed in Christ, and the mystery of man is very specially connected to suffering. In Christ the enigma of pain and death is revealed. Only in love is it possible to find the saving response to pain. May the suffering of Mary and the saints help us discover this response. May pain and suffering be transformed into a source of strength for all humanity.

The comment

I think that the development of the Pope's thought climbs six steps towards the fullness of the mystery of suffering and pain; we can sum them up as follows:

Suffering is not in itself evil but is the effect of a negative cause. Evil is not a positive entity but a privation. Deprivation does not demand a positive cause but the search for its origin.

The origin of the privation is sin. The sin committed by a person spreads by joint human liability. Sin can be eliminated through suffering itself in a very special context of solidarity.

Only God can bestow this solidarity upon us. This gift of solidarity is the meaning of the Incarnation and the meaning of Jesus Christ. For this solidarity, Christ brought the elimination of sin to completion through his suffering in his life, passion, death and Resurrection.

This divine action is an act of the Most Holy Trinity since the Eternal Father gave his Son to humanity so that he might redeem it through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Love of the Father and of the Son, and it is only through the Love of the Spirit that we can glimpse this mysterious, redeeming solidarity.

Through Christ's solidarity with all humanity the human pain of all times was suffered by Christ in his passion and his redeeming death. Thus, human pain and suffering are transformed from something negative into something positive, into a source of life, as it were, because they become redemptive.

Each person in his or her suffering is united with the suffering of Christ, and thus this suffering mysteriously becomes a source of life and resurrection. Pain and suffering are the door to the encounter with Christ and in him to the experience of his presence as life and resurrection, through the work of the Spirit of Love, who is the Holy Spirit. This is what Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, was the first to do, and with her, all the saints.

This definitive destruction of suffering through suffering leads us to destroy our actual suffering with the whole panoply of means at our disposal, as in the case of the Good Samaritan.

The Pope thus situates us in the heart of the mystery whose light dazzles us. For we find ourselves in intimacy with the Blessed Trinity, in the loving reality of the unity of the Triune God and in the depths of this mystery. This is the central mystery of the entire Christian religion, not in the abstract nor in an immensely remote way, but in a closeness present in human history into whose temporal dimensions eternity bursts, through the historical Incarnation of the Word with his birth, life, passion, death and Resurrection.

This is a Trinitarian and Christological solidarity in which the absolute fullness of life is attained through death. It is called "cross" and "resurrection". We find ourselves at the heart of the Christian mystery, inaccessible except through an experience of it: no one who does not know it can prove its efficacy or find its solution.

The solution to the mystery of evil is not only discovered through theological exposition but also by experiencing that something which, if steadily gazed at, darkens because of its excessive brightness yet is very real - we can say the most real reality -, for it is the only way to happiness.

In this way we are within the nucleus of salvation. This is the heart of Christianity. Tertullian said: "*Credo quia ineptum*". By experiencing relief from evil through suffering, and through that cruellest form of suffering which sums up all imaginable forms of suffering, the Cross, this "*ineptum*", becomes "*aptum*", the most just and rational that we can imagine, for it is the only way to experience happiness.

This is why the mystery of pain shifts from pain in itself to the mystery of solidarity. Solidarity, as the foundation of the whole of existence, is not only sympathy with all, a way of being socially committed and aware that we all belong to the same race, culture, nationality, etc., but is also the experiencing of a bond with all other human beings so deeply within ourselves that it is not a qualification that comes to us as soon as we exist but constitutes our existence itself.

Solidarity belongs to divinized human life as a gift received which takes part in the mystery itself of God's very life. The life of God is infinitely perfect in each one of the divine Persons through the internal solidarity between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This infinite solidarity is infinite Love, which is the Holy Spirit who has been poured out into our hearts, an infinite Love that is God himself. The mystery of suffering is contained in the mystery of Love, in the mystery of the Spirit.

In this way, the mystery of suffering-love enters into the very constitution of God incarnate, the Son made flesh through the work of the Holy Spirit. Since Christ is the most intimate

model for every person, the Holy Spirit, the Love of God and redemptive suffering enter into the actual objective, and we might say ontological, constitution of humanity.

In contrast to cold objectivity, however, it is something that indeed belongs to the objectivity of our being, but with the maximum loving subjectivity, since it is and depends upon our free will in such a way that we can accept or reject it. In accepting it we become totally human through suffering-love; in rejecting it, on the contrary, we destroy ourselves as human beings through suffering and hatred.

The Pope is aware of the difficulty of reasoning in this way and therefore tells us that the reality of suffering in solidarity should only be understood through the Resurrection. From our solidarity with the essence of life which is the Risen Christ, we can understand our loving solidarity with Christ suffering on the Cross; just as the Risen Christ includes in his Resurrection the resurrection of humanity, of each and every one of us, so too the suffering of Christ contains the suffering and pain of each and every one of us. There is no separation between the Resurrection and the Cross but convergence, both in Christ and in us; the Pope says, therefore, that Christ contains the signs of his wounds in his glorified Body.

One can thus realize and understand what would otherwise be an untenable paradox, scandal and folly: the Cross is glorious; having been the evil most feared as total death, it becomes the glorious beginning of the whole of the second creation. The nothing from which this new world of happiness or the definitive Paradise flows is not an innocent nothingness but a guilty nothingness that is the greatest evil - sin - which leads definitively to the Cross. And from the Cross, not by virtue of the Cross but by virtue of the Father's omnipotence and the Spirit's solidarity and Love, the Incarnate Word recreates within us the authentic Adam, the man of truth, the model planned by God from all eternity so that we might be authentically human.

Conclusion

Love is the only key to deciphering the enigma of pain and suffering: love that can transform nothingness into full reality. The lack of meaning, the lack of direction, the radical anticulture, contradiction, death: in a fullness of meaning, of orientation, in an ascendant culture, in joyous affirmation, in life; folly and stupidity, in what is wisest and most sensible. It is the intimate solidarity of love triumphant that raises, in loving solidarity with the most atrocious suffering that kills. It is victory over death.

Thus, John Paul II leads us to scrutinize the meaning of human suffering in a mysterious and dazzling way, and which is also the only valid perspective; at last, the enigma becomes mystery. It is a joyful, shining mystery and full of happiness. It is the paradox that returns to being logical through the Omnipotent Love of God the Father who is his Spirit, and whose effectiveness is to be found in the culmination of human history when he grants to us the close solidarity of all peoples in the Pasch of the Incarnate Word.