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THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFERING

The principle of Christian suffering is an open secret. It is there, written out for us, in the twenty-fourth chapter of St. Luke's gospel. "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and so to enter into his glory?"(Lk 24:26). If it was right for Christ to go by the way of suffering to the final possession of his glory, it is right also for us. We are members of his body. The limbs must go the way of the head; the parts may not choose one way of going to the Father while the whole chooses another. What Christ endures, we endure; what Christ enjoys, we enjoy. There is only this difference: he does it in his degree, we in ours.

Admittedly this difference is a very considerable one and will show itself in each separate person's experience, but it does not alter the principle, which our Lord himself lays down in the words quoted above. He had laid down the principle earlier, when he preached the

cross to his disciples, but he needed to reaffirm it afterward, with the full weight of the Resurrection to back up the doctrine, before the disciples could really grasp the significance. It was as a suffering Messias that he was to be remembered; it was as a suffering Messias that he had been foretold; it was as a suffering Messias that he was to be followed.

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross. . . . and I, if I be lifted up, crucified, will draw all things to myself . . . whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me" (Mt 16:24, Jn 12:32, Mt 10:38, NABRE). Not only was cross-bearing to be the condition of Christian discipleship, it was to be also the theme of Christian preaching. St. Paul's "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23) can be extended to the whole Christian apostolate. Certainly wherever Christ has been preached apart from his crucifixion, the preaching has come to nothing. In the same way, wherever Christians have thought to live the Christian life without reference to suffering, they have failed as Christians.

This is not to say that the whole of Christ's teaching is contained in the single subject of the cross. Nor is it to say that the Christian's whole obligation is summed up in suffering. It is to say that just as Christ was obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross, so we have to follow his example: fidelity and submission to be judged in terms of willing sacrifice. The terms *submission*, *sacrifice*, *suffering*, do not mean the same thing. But they can come

to express the same thing. They can arise out of love and be employed in the service of love. So it would not be far out to say that love is the principle of Christian suffering.

There then is the statement of the issue. What follows in these pages will merely present various aspects of the material which anyone can find for himself if he reads through the gospels looking for it. Nothing that is said in this book has not been either said or implied in the gospels. One or two things have to be assumed, however, if what is written does not give rise to misconception. An opening chapter can be used to make the position clear.

First to be borne in mind is the doctrine of divine providence. It would be the greatest mistake, for instance, to imagine that God wants us to lie down under every suffering that comes—judging it to be an infidelity if we made the least effort to ease our situation. It is true that in answer to a particular call of grace a soul *may* feel drawn to such an act of heroic surrender. But in the ordinary way it would be wrong to equate the Christian ideal of sacrifice with supine acceptance. Neither stoicism (the bite-the-bullet-and-don't-cry-out approach) nor fatalism (the no-use-doing-anything-about-it-because-God-has-decreed-it approach) are Christian perfection. The Christian ideal is shown to us in the garden of Gethsemane: our Lord asking that the suffering might pass from him, while at the same time being ready to bear it if this is the Father's will.

Suffering and the providence of God have to be understood in faith. Even with faith—which anyway

is an active, positive, constructive virtue—it is difficult not to conclude that God both *likes* to see his creatures suffer and takes very good care to provide inescapable sufferings for them. But divine providence does not mean this at all. If it did, we would not only find it hard to believe that he was a loving father but also would be led to argue that we pleased him only by being miserable. Both these propositions are wildly unchristian. Providence in relation to our sufferings means simply this: that when we have to suffer, we can safely assume that God has allowed this particular trial for our sanctification. The word *providence* is from the Latin and means "seeing beforehand." He sees beforehand what is best for us, and we accept what he sends. Divine providence extends equally to things pleasant. God "provides": he gives the grace to enjoy, he gives the grace to endure. Now one grace, now another: it depends on which grace he sees we need more of at this particular moment.

So avoiding all idea of a vindictive God, inflicting pain because he has every excuse for doing so, we have to remember that he is love itself, wisdom itself, power itself. We have to believe that we are all the time objects of his love, that his wisdom is being brought to bear upon our affairs, and that his power is there to help us. We have to understand why he sent his Son into this world to suffer, and how, by suffering willingly ourselves, we can share in the work of the Passion. We have to accept it as true that the more we pray and try to see Christ in others we shall come to appreciate the connection

between these things: between God's love and our pain, between the Father's will and the Son's mission, between the Son's Passion and our own trials, between feeling sorrowful and possessing peace, between the horrors in the world about us and the essential harmony of God's design. Without prayer and the desire to develop charity, we shall see none of this.

What as followers of Christ we have to recognize throughout the study of this subject is that our purpose is a quite different one from that of the materialist, the hedonist, the worldling. Our aim is not to get through this life with the maximum of pleasure and the minimum of suffering. Our aim is to handle everything in this life, whether pleasurable or painful, in such a way that it becomes matter for the love of God. Pleasure accepted with thanksgiving, pain accepted with thanksgiving—it does not very much matter which. The important thing is to receive whichever it is with love. "Always and everywhere to give thanks"—we have it in the Preface at Mass. Gratitude supposes a certain degree of love, even if the gratitude is expressed only at intervals. When the gratitude has become habitual, always and everywhere covering pleasure and pain, it supposes the abiding love, which grace builds up in the responsive soul.

Some people imagine that in order to be holy you have to cultivate the sad side of life, choosing the darker prospect wherever the alternative comes up. Surely what holy people choose is the will of God, whether it happens to be dark or light. Holy people know—and know it

better than others—that suffering must anyway occupy a fair slice of life. They accept this as normal, meeting their sorrows as calmly and cheerfully as they can. They do not focus their whole attention on the necessity of suffering; they focus their whole attention on the necessity of loving. It is just that they see the necessary place of suffering in the overall activity of love.

The saints flinch as instinctively as others when the cross comes along, but they do not allow their flinching to upset their perspectives. As soon as it becomes clear to them that this particular suffering is what God evidently wants suffered, they stop flinching. Their habitual state of surrender to God's will has a steadying effect: they do not get stampeded into panic or despair or rebellion or defeat. After a while—sometimes only after a very long while—they find that the grace of suffering produces the opposite effect: instead of fear there is trust, instead of hopelessness there is hope, instead of revolt there is peace, instead of defeat there is the sense of the triumph of grace.

The saints realize, and without a trace of morbid interest or cynicism, that frustration pays off in the end. Without sorrow of some sort, whether it is disappointment or loss or loneliness, the soul is likely to grow soft. Suffering comes in to prevent corrosion. Nor has suffering a negative value only: it comes to play a positive part—to bring the best out of what is already there. Many souls drift through life making themselves as snug as they can, never becoming either very happy or very holy.

If they were to forget about being comfortable, and concentrate on being generous, they would have far more to enjoy and far more to offer. To a man who is as smooth and soft as a grape, the bloom rubs off all too easily. A coconut or a pineapple may not look so elegant, but at least it keeps and provides more for your money. Pineapples and coconuts are tougher because they have not been raised in a hothouse. The Christian who runs away from the first suggestion of discomfort will back away from the challenge of sacrifice. And the challenge to sacrifice himself on one or other altar of life—whether in marriage, in a religious vocation, in supplying the needs of others, in the demands of a job, a political principle, or simply as a witness to truth—is inevitably bound to present itself. How not—if a Christian is to reproduce Christ?

So in one form or another, suffering is the law of life. Remember how, in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, the temple of love and wisdom is reached only by those searchers who are first ill-treated by brutal sentries and who then have to cross water and fire. Remember how the spear of Achilles healed where it wounded. Remember that it is the grain of sand setting up a friction within the oyster that produces the pearl. And there is, I believe, a certain lily in South America which has a nasty smell until its *calix* (appropriately enough) is pierced: no sooner is it lanced than it begins to smell deliciously.

Why is a swim more satisfying than a bath? Surely because it involves so many discomforts. Why are dogs healthier when they have something to scratch? Perhaps

because if nothing itched, they would sit about having nothing to do. Why do sensible men want to get to the top of Mount Everest? Surely it is not because they cannot wait until an air service offers to take them there. Why do people hike, camp, go out to sea on a raft? Would it be because instinctively they know that hardship has an antiseptic, indeed a curative, quality? From this we should learn that doing difficult things not only adds to life but, when seen in its Christian context, unifies life in Christ. The Christian puts up with suffering in the certain knowledge that he is entering into the mystery of Christ's Passion. This is union. This is identification with the Father's will. What greater satisfaction can there be than this?

The principle of Christian suffering, then, is Christ's Passion. Ours is not the endurance of the Spartan nor the exploratory ambition of the spaceman. For us it is simply a matter of synthesis—seeing to it that our human ills are molten in Christ. The old tag about the crucible, about the dross being burned away and only the gold remaining. But always in the furnace it is the image of Christ which gives the whole thing meaning. We do not submit to the flames for the sake of the flames. "Greater love has no one than this," said our Lord (Jn 15:13: NASB), but he did not stop short at the words: "than that he should lay down his life." There was more to it than merely laying down life. Any fool can commit suicide. There had to be a purpose about laying down life. If voluntary death

were to be counted for the greatest of all acts of charity, it would have to be offered in the name of charity.

Seen apart from charity, apart from Christ, suffering is a waste. Indeed it is an evil. There is nothing in itself good about suffering; its good lies in what it is associated with. God created a world in which there was no suffering. He pronounced it good—good the way it was in the first place. Then came sin, bringing with it a new dispensation in which suffering occupied an essential part. It was bad that man and animals had to suffer, but there it was. Man had to shoulder the bad and make the best of it.

But man found that he could not make the best of it. It was always defeating him: suffering was "getting him down." Sin was getting him down still more. Then came Christ and the scene changed once again. Christ took sin upon himself and atoned for it. He also took suffering upon himself and sanctified it. He changed it from an evil to a good. He took death upon himself and removed the sting from it. Here was a quite new dispensation. Suffering and death still occupied an essential place in the general scheme of things, but they were not to be dreaded in the way that they were dreaded before. The Father could now look down from heaven upon his creation and see suffering transformed by his Son from an evil to a good. Creation, in spite of sin and suffering, could still be pronounced "good"—in some ways, because of the Incarnation, better than before.

Nor is it as if by magic that what was hitherto to be dreaded and avoided—the Jews of the Old Testament looked upon all affliction as a sign of God's disfavor—is now to be prized. It is not as though Christ so imputed his Passion to the affairs of man as automatically to put a halo round human suffering. Yes, we are made free of the merits of his Passion—"Your wounds are my merits," said St. Gabriel of the Seven Sorrows quite correctly in his prayer—but this very freedom assumes the need to choose. The halo which surrounds Christ's sufferings will surround ours only when we unite our own with his. There is no guarantee that the hideous amount of pain, which is everywhere in the world, is counted for penance, is swept up into the volume of charity directed by man toward God. By the mercy of God it *may* work out this way—undirected suffering finding its way by the magnetic power of Christ's Passion to its appropriate destination in love—but if so, it will be because God chooses to substitute one thing for another. From our point of view, the safer course is to rely upon direct application: we relate our sufferings to Christ's; he sanctifies our sufferings with his. No magic, just the normal operation of grace. Too often we Catholics tend to treat grace as though it were a trick. A faulty understanding of the doctrine which teaches that certain sacraments confer grace *ex opere operato* can lead to a confidence which borders on superstition.

The sacraments of the Church are one thing, the sufferings of human beings are another. Since there is