



APOSTOLIC LETTER  
***SALVIFICI DOLORIS***  
OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF  
JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS, TO THE PRIESTS,  
TO THE RELIGIOUS FAMILIES  
AND TO THE FAITHFUL  
OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
ON THE CHRISTIAN MEANING  
OF HUMAN SUFFERING

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and dear brothers and sisters in Christ,*

**I**

**INTRODUCTION**

1. Declaring the power of salvific suffering, the Apostle Paul says: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church"(1).

These words seem to be found at the end of the long road that winds through the suffering which forms part of the history of man and which is illuminated by the Word of God. These words have as it were the value of a final discovery, which is accompanied by joy. For this reason Saint Paul writes: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake"(2). The joy comes from the discovery of the meaning of suffering, and this discovery, even if it is most personally shared in by Paul of Tarsus who wrote these words, is at the same time valid for others. The Apostle shares his own discovery and rejoices in it because of all those whom it can help—just as it helped him—to understand *the salvific meaning of suffering*.

2. The theme of suffering—precisely under the aspect of this salvific meaning—seems to fit profoundly into the context of the Holy Year of the Redemption as an extraordinary Jubilee of the Church. And this circumstance too clearly favours the attention it deserves during this period. Independently of this fact, it is a universal theme that accompanies man at every point on earth: in a certain sense it co-exists with him in the world, and thus demands to be constantly reconsidered. Even though Paul, in the Letter to the Romans, wrote that "the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now"(3), even though man knows and is close to the sufferings of the animal world, nevertheless what we express by the word "suffering" seems to be particularly *essential to the nature of man*. It is as deep as man himself, precisely because it manifests in its own way that depth which is proper to man, and in its own way surpasses it. Suffering seems to belong to man's transcendence: it is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense "destined" to go beyond himself, and he is

called to this in a mysterious way.

3. The theme of suffering in a special way demands to be faced in the context of the Holy Year of the Redemption, and this is so, in the first place, because the *Redemption* was accomplished *through the Cross of Christ*, that is, *through his suffering*. And at the same time, during the Holy Year of the Redemption we recall the truth expressed in the Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*: in Christ "every man becomes the way for the Church"(4). It can be said that man in a special fashion becomes the way for the Church when suffering enters his life. This happens, as we know, at different moments in life, it takes place in different ways, it assumes different dimensions; nevertheless, in whatever form, suffering seems to be, and is, almost *inseparable from man's earthly existence*.

Assuming then that throughout his earthly life man walks in one manner or another on the long path of suffering, it is precisely on this path that the Church at all times-and perhaps especially during the Holy Year of the Redemption-should meet man. Born of the mystery of Redemption in the Cross of Christ, the Church has *to try to meet* man in a special way on the path of his suffering. In this meeting man "becomes the way for the Church", and this way is one of the most important ones.

4. This is the origin also of the present reflection, precisely in the Year of the Redemption: a meditation on suffering. Human suffering evokes *compassion*; it also evokes *respect*, and in its own way *it intimidates*. For in suffering is contained the greatness of a specific mystery. This special respect for every form of human suffering must be set at the beginning of what will be expressed here later by the deepest *need of the heart*, and also by the deep *imperative of faith*. About the theme of suffering these two reasons seem to draw particularly close to each other and to become one: the need of the heart commands us to overcome fear, and the imperative of faith—formulated, for example, in the words of Saint Paul quoted at the beginning—provides the content, in the name of which and by virtue of which we dare to touch what appears in every man so intangible: for man, in his suffering, remains an intangible mystery.

## II

### THE WORLD OF HUMAN SUFFERING

5. Even though in its subjective dimension, as a personal fact contained within man's concrete and unrepeatable interior, suffering seems almost inexpressible and not transferable, perhaps at the same time nothing else requires as much as does suffering, in *its "objective reality"*, to be dealt with, meditated upon, and conceived as an explicit problem; and that therefore basic questions be asked about it and the answers sought. It is evident that it is not a question here merely of giving a description of suffering. There are other criteria which go beyond the sphere of description, and which we must introduce when we wish to penetrate the world of human suffering.

*Medicine*, as the science and also the art of healing, discovers in the vast field of human sufferings *the best known area*, the one identified with greater precision and relatively more counterbalanced by the methods of "reaction" (that is, the methods of therapy). Nonetheless, this is only one area. The field of human suffering is much wider, more varied, and multi-

dimensional. Man suffers in different ways, ways not always considered by medicine, not even in *its* most advanced specializations. Suffering is something which is *still wider* than sickness, more complex and at the same time still more deeply rooted in humanity itself. A certain idea of this problem comes to us from the distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering. This distinction is based upon the double dimension of the human being and indicates the bodily and spiritual element as the immediate or direct subject of suffering. Insofar as the words "suffering" and "pain", can, up to a certain degree, be used as synonyms, *physical suffering* is present when "the body is hurting" in some way, whereas *moral suffering* is "pain of the soul". In fact, it is **a question of pain** of a spiritual nature, and not only of the "psychological" dimension of pain which accompanies both moral and physical suffering. The vastness and the many forms of moral suffering are certainly no less in number than the forms of physical suffering. But at the same time, moral suffering seems as it were less identified and less reachable by therapy.

6. Sacred Scripture is a *great book about suffering*. Let us quote from the books of the Old Testament a few examples of situations which bear the signs of suffering, and above all moral suffering: the danger of death(5), the death of one's own children(6) and, especially, the death of the firstborn and only son(7); and then too: the lack of offspring(8), nostalgia for the homeland(9), persecution and hostility of the environment(10), mockery and scorn of the one who suffers(11), loneliness and abandonment(12); and again: the remorse of conscience(13), the difficulty of understanding why the wicked prosper and the just suffer(14), the unfaithfulness and ingratitude of friends and neighbours(15); and finally: the misfortunes of one's own nation(16).

In treating the human person as a *psychological and physical "whole"*, the Old Testament often links "moral" sufferings with the pain of specific parts of the body: the bones(17), kidneys(18), liver(19), viscera(20), heart(21). In fact one cannot deny that moral sufferings have a "physical" or somatic element, and that they are often reflected in the state of the entire organism.

7. As we see from the examples quoted, we find in Sacred Scripture an extensive list of variously painful situations for man. This varied list certainly does not exhaust all that has been said and constantly repeated on the theme of suffering by *the book of the history of man* (this is rather an "unwritten book"), and even more by the book of the history of humanity, read through the history of every human individual.

It can be said that man suffers whenever *he experiences any kind of evil*. In **the vocabulary** of the Old Testament, suffering and evil are identified with each other. In fact, that vocabulary did not have a specific word to indicate "suffering". Thus it defined as "evil" everything that was suffering(22). Only the Greek language, and together with it the New Testament (and the Greek translations of the Old Testament), use the verb \* = "I am affected by .... I experience a feeling, I suffer"; and, thanks to this verb, suffering is no longer directly identifiable with (objective) evil, but expresses a situation in which man experiences evil and in doing so becomes the subject of suffering. Suffering has indeed both *a subjective and a passive character* (from "patior"). Even when man brings suffering on himself, when he is its cause, this suffering remains something passive in its metaphysical essence.

This does not however mean that suffering in the psychological sense is not marked by a

*specific "activity"*. This is in fact that multiple and subjectively differentiated "activity" of pain, sadness, disappointment, discouragement or even despair, according to the intensity of the suffering subject and his or her specific sensitivity. In the midst of what constitutes the psychological form of suffering there is always *an experience of evil*, which causes the individual to suffer.

Thus the reality of suffering prompts the question about the essence of evil: what is evil?

This questions seems, in a certain sense, inseparable from the theme of suffering. The Christian response to it is different, for example, from the one given by certain cultural and religious traditions which hold that existence is an evil from which one needs to be liberated. Christianity proclaims the essential *good of existence* and the good of that which exists, acknowledges the goodness of the Creator and proclaims the good of creatures. Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good. We could say that man suffers *because of a good* in which he does not share, from which in a certain sense he is cut off, or of which he has deprived himself. He particularly suffers when he "ought"—in the normal order of things—to have a share in this good and does not have it.

Thus, in the Christian view, the reality of suffering is explained through evil, which always, in some way, refers to a good.

8. In itself human suffering constitutes as it were a specific "*world*" which exists together with man, which appears in him and passes, and sometimes does not pass, but which consolidates itself and becomes deeply rooted in him. This world of suffering, divided into many, very many subjects, exists *as it were "in dispersion"*. Every individual, through personal suffering, constitutes not only a small part of that a world", but at the same time "that world" is present in him as a finite and unrepeatable entity. Parallel with this, however, is the interhuman and social dimension. The world of suffering possesses as it were its *own solidarity*. People who suffer become similar to one another through the analogy of their situation, the trial of their destiny, or through their need for understanding and care, and perhaps above all through the persistent question of the meaning of suffering. Thus, although the world of suffering exists "in dispersion", at the same time it contains within itself a singular challenge *to communion and solidarity*. We shall also try to follow this appeal in the present reflection.

Considering the world of suffering in its personal and at the same time collective meaning, one cannot fail to notice the fact that this world, at some periods of time and in some eras of human existence, *as it were becomes particularly concentrated*. This happens, for example, in cases of natural disasters, epidemics, catastrophes, upheavals and various social scourges: one thinks, for example, of a bad harvest and connected with it—or with various other causes—the scourge of famine.

One thinks, finally, of war. I speak of this in a particular way. I speak of the last two World Wars, the second of which brought with it a much greater harvest of death and a much heavier burden of human sufferings. The second half of our century, in *its* turn, brings with it —*as though in proportion to the mistakes and transgressions* of our contemporary civilization —such a horrible threat of nuclear war that we cannot think of this period except in terms of *an incomparable accumulation of sufferings*, even to the possible self-destruction of

humanity. In this way, that world of suffering which in brief has its subject in each human being, seems in our age to be transformed—perhaps more than at any other moment—into a special "world": the world which as never before has been transformed by progress through man's work and, at the same time, is as never before in danger because of man's mistakes and offences.

### III

#### THE QUEST FOR AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF THE MEANING OF SUFFERING

9. Within each form of suffering endured by man, and at the same time at the basis of the whole world of suffering, there inevitably arises *the question: why?* It is a question about the cause, the reason, and equally, about the purpose of suffering, and, in brief, a question about its meaning. Not only does it accompany human suffering, but it seems even to determine its human content, what makes suffering precisely human suffering.

It is obvious that pain, especially physical pain, is widespread in the animal world. But only the suffering human being knows that he is suffering and wonders why; and he suffers in a humanly speaking still deeper way if he does not find a satisfactory answer. This is a *difficult question*, just as is a question closely akin to it, the question of evil. Why does evil exist? Why is there evil in the world? When we put the question in this way, we are always, at least to a certain extent, asking a question about suffering too.

Both questions are difficult, when an individual puts them to another individual, when people put them to other people, as also when man *puts them to God*. For man does not put this question to the world, even though it is from the world that suffering often comes to him, but he puts it to God as the Creator and Lord of the world. And it is well known that concerning this question there not only arise many frustrations and conflicts in the relations of man with God, but it also happens that people reach the point of actually *denying God*. For, whereas the existence of the world opens as it were the eyes of the human soul to the existence of God, to his wisdom, power and greatness, evil and suffering seem to obscure this image, sometimes in a radical way, especially in the daily drama of so many cases of undeserved suffering and of so many faults without proper punishment. So this circumstance shows—perhaps more than any other—the importance of *the question of the meaning of suffering*; it also shows how much care must be taken both in dealing with the question itself and with all possible answers to it.

10. Man can put this question to God with all the emotion of his heart and with his mind full of dismay and anxiety; and God expects the question and listens to it, as we see in the Revelation of the Old Testament. In the Book of Job the question has found its most vivid expression.

The story of this just man, who without any fault of his own is tried by innumerable sufferings, is well known. He loses his possessions, his sons and daughters, and finally he himself is afflicted by a grave sickness. In this horrible situation three old acquaintances come to his house, and each one in his own way tries to convince him that since he has been struck

down by such varied and terrible sufferings, *he must have done something seriously wrong*. For suffering—they say—always strikes a man as punishment for a crime; it is sent by the absolutely just God and finds its reason in the order of justice. It can be said that Job's old friends wish not only to *convince him* of the moral justice of the evil, but in a certain sense they attempt to *justify* to themselves the moral meaning of suffering. In their eyes suffering can have a meaning only as a punishment for sin, therefore only on the level of God's justice, who repays good with good and evil with evil.

The point of reference in this case is the doctrine expressed in other Old Testament writings which show us suffering as punishment inflicted by God for human sins. The God of Revelation is the *Lawgiver and Judge* to a degree that no temporal authority can see. For the God of Revelation is first of all the Creator, from whom comes, together with existence, the essential good of creation. Therefore, the conscious and free violation of this good by man is not only a transgression of the law but at the same time an offence against the Creator, who is the first Lawgiver. Such a transgression has the character of sin, according to the exact meaning of this word, namely the biblical and theological one. *Corresponding to the moral evil of sin is punishment*, which guarantees the moral order in the same transcendent sense in which this order is laid down by the will of the Creator and Supreme Lawgiver. From this there also derives one of the fundamental truths of religious faith, equally based upon Revelation, namely that God is a just judge, who rewards good and punishes evil: "For thou **art just in all that thou hast** done to us, and all thy works are true and thy ways right, and all thy judgments are truth. Thou hast executed true judgments in all that thou hast brought upon us... for in truth and justice thou hast brought all this upon us because of our sins"(23).

The opinion expressed by Job's friends manifests a conviction also found in the moral conscience of humanity: the objective moral order demands punishment for transgression, sin and crime. From this point of view, suffering appears as a "justified evil". The conviction of those who explain suffering as a punishment for sin finds support in the order of justice, and this corresponds to the conviction expressed by one of Job's friends: "As I have seen, those who plough iniquity and sow trouble reap the same"(24).

11. Job however challenges the truth of the principle that identifies suffering with punishment for sin. And he does this on the basis of his own opinion. For he is aware that he has not deserved such punishment, and in fact he speaks of the good that he has done during his life. In the end, God himself reproves Job's friends for their accusations and recognizes that Job is not guilty. His suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent and it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate completely by his own intelligence.

The Book of Job does not violate the foundations of the transcendent moral order, based upon justice, as they are set forth by the whole of Revelation, in both the Old and the New Covenants. At the same time, however, this Book shows with all firmness that the principles of this order cannot be applied in an exclusive and superficial way. 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*. The figure of the just man Job is a special proof of this in the Old Testament. Revelation, which is the word of God himself, with complete frankness presents the problem of the suffering of an innocent man: suffering without guilt. Job has not been punished, there was no reason for inflicting a punishment on him, even if he has been subjected to a grievous trial. From the introduction

of the Book it is apparent that God permitted this testing as a result of Satan's provocation. For Satan had challenged before the Lord the righteousness of Job: "Does Job fear God for nought? ... Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face"(25). And if the Lord consents to test Job with suffering, he does it *to demonstrate the latter's righteousness*. The suffering has the nature of a test.

The Book of Job is not the last word on this subject in Revelation. In a certain way it is a foretelling of the Passion of Christ. But already in itself it is *sufficient argument* why the answer to the question about the meaning of suffering is not to be unreservedly linked to the moral order, based on justice alone. While such an answer has a fundamental and transcendent reason and validity, at the same time it is seen to be not only unsatisfactory in cases similar to the suffering of the just man Job, but it even seems to trivialize and impoverish *the concept of justice* which we encounter in Revelation.

12. The Book of Job poses in an extremely acute way the question of the "why" of suffering; it also shows that suffering strikes the innocent, but it does not yet give the solution to the problem.

Already in the Old Testament we note an orientation that begins to go beyond the concept according to which suffering has a meaning only as a punishment for sin, insofar as it emphasizes at the same time the educational value of suffering as a punishment. Thus in the sufferings inflicted by God upon the Chosen People there is included an invitation of his mercy, which corrects in order to lead to conversion: "... these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people"(26).

Thus the personal dimension of punishment is affirmed. According to this dimension, punishment has a meaning not only because it serves *to* repay the objective evil of the transgression with another evil, but first and foremost because it creates the possibility of rebuilding goodness in the subject who suffers.

This is an extremely important aspect of suffering. It is profoundly rooted in the entire Revelation of the Old and above all the New Covenant. Suffering must serve *for conversion*, that is, *for the rebuilding of goodness* in the subject, who can recognize the divine mercy in this call to repentance. The purpose of penance is to overcome evil, which under different forms lies dormant in man. Its purpose is also to strengthen goodness both in man himself and in his relationships with others and especially with God.

13. But in order to perceive the true answer to the "why" of suffering, we must look to the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists. Love is also the richest source of the meaning of suffering, which always remains a mystery: we are conscious of the insufficiency and inadequacy of our explanations. Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the "why" of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love.

In order to discover the profound meaning of suffering, following the revealed word of God, we must open ourselves wide to the human subject in his manifold potentiality. We must above all accept the light of Revelation not only insofar as it expresses the transcendent order

of justice but also insofar as it illuminates this order with Love, as the definitive source of everything that exists. Love is: also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

#### IV

### JESUS CHRIST SUFFERING CONQUERED BY LOVE

14. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"(27). These words, spoken by Christ in his conversation with Nicodemus, introduce us into the very heart of *God's salvific work*. They also express the very essence of Christian soteriology, that is, of the theology of salvation. Salvation means liberation from evil, and for this reason it is closely bound up with the problem of suffering. According to the words spoken to Nicodemus, God gives his Son to "the world" to free man from evil, which bears within itself the definitive and absolute perspective on suffering. At the same time, the very word "gives" ("gave") indicates that this liberation must be achieved by the only-begotten Son through his own suffering. And in this, love is manifested, the infinite love both of that only-begotten Son and of the Father who for this reason "gives" his Son. This is love for man, love for the "world": it is salvific love.

We here find ourselves—and we must clearly realize this in our shared reflection on this problem—faced with a completely new dimension of our theme. It is a different dimension from the one which was determined and, in a certain sense, concluded the search for the meaning of suffering within the limits of justice. This *is the dimension of Redemption*, to which in the Old Testament, at least in the Vulgate text, the words of the just man Job already seem to refer: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last... I shall see God..."(28). Whereas our consideration has so far concentrated primarily and in a certain sense exclusively on suffering in its multiple temporal dimension (as also the sufferings of the just man Job), the words quoted above from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus refer to *suffering in its fundamental and definitive meaning*. God gives his only-begotten Son so that man "should not perish" and the meaning of these words "should not perish" is precisely specified by the words that follow: "but have eternal life".

Man "perishes" when he loses "eternal life". The opposite of salvation is not, therefore, only temporal suffering, any kind of suffering, but the definitive suffering: the loss of eternal life, being rejected by God, damnation. The only-begotten Son was given to humanity primarily to protect man against this definitive evil and against *definitive suffering*. In his salvific mission, the Son must therefore strike evil right at its transcendental roots from which it develops in human history. These transcendental roots of evil are grounded in sin and death: for they are at the basis of the loss of eternal life. The mission of the only-begotten Son consists in *conquering sin and death*. He conquers sin by his obedience unto death, and he overcomes death by his Resurrection.

15. When one says that Christ by his mission strikes at evil at its very roots, we have in mind not only evil and definitive, eschatological suffering (so that man "should not perish, but have

eternal life"), but also—at least indirectly *toil and suffering* in their *temporal and historical dimension*. For evil remains bound to sin and death. And even if we must use great caution in judging man's suffering as a consequence of concrete sins (this is shown precisely by the example of the just man Job), nevertheless suffering cannot be divorced from the sin of the beginnings, from what Saint John calls "the sin of the world"(29), *from the sinful background* of the personal actions and social processes in human history. Though it is not licit to apply here the narrow criterion of direct dependance (as Job's three friends did), it is equally true that one cannot reject the criterion that, at the basis of human suffering, there is a complex involvement with sin.

It is the same when we deal with *death*. It is often awaited even as a liberation from the suffering of this life. At the same time, it is not possible to ignore the fact that it constitutes as it were a definitive summing-up of the destructive work both in the bodily organism and in the psyche. But death primarily involves *the dissolution* of the entire psychophysical personality of man. The soul survives and subsists separated from the body, while the body is subjected to gradual decomposition according to the words of the Lord God, pronounced after the sin committed by man at the beginning of his earthly history: "You are dust and to dust you shall return"(30). Therefore, even if death is not a form of suffering in the temporal sense of the word, even if in *a certain way* it is *beyond all forms of suffering*, at the same time the evil which the human being experiences in death has a definitive and total character. By his salvific work, the only-begotten Son liberates man from sin and death. First of all he *blots out* from human history *the dominion of sin*, which took root under the influence of the evil Spirit, beginning with Original Sin, and then he gives man the possibility of living in Sanctifying Grace. In the wake of his victory over sin, he also takes away the dominion of *death*, by his Resurrection beginning the process of the future resurrection of the body. Both are essential conditions of "eternal life", that is of man's definitive happiness in union with God; this means, for the saved, that in the eschatological perspective suffering is totally blotted out.

As a result of Christ's salvific work, man exists on earth *with the hope* of eternal life and holiness. And even though the victory over sin and death achieved by Christ in his Cross and Resurrection does not abolish temporal suffering from human life, nor free from suffering the whole historical dimension of human existence, it nevertheless *throws a new light* upon this dimension and upon every suffering: the light of salvation. This is the light of the Gospel, that is, of the Good News. At the heart of this light is the truth expounded in the conversation with Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son"(31). This truth radically changes the picture of man's history and his earthly situation: in spite of the sin that took root in this history both as an original inheritance and as the "sin of the world" and as the sum of personal sins, God the Father has loved the only-begotten Son, that is, he loves him in a lasting way; and then in time, precisely through this allsurpassing love, he "gives" this Son, that he may strike at the very roots of human evil and thus draw close in a salvific way to the whole world of suffering in which man shares.

16. In his messianic activity in the midst of Israel, Christ drew increasingly closer *to the world of human suffering*. "He went about doing good"(32), and his actions concerned primarily those who were suffering and seeking help. He healed the sick, consoled the afflicted, fed the hungry, freed people from deafness, from blindness, from leprosy, from the

devil and from various physical disabilities, three times he restored the dead to life. He was sensitive to every human suffering, whether of the body or of the soul. And at the same time he taught, and at the heart of his teaching there are *the eight beatitudes*, which are addressed to people tried by various sufferings in their temporal life. These are "the poor in spirit" and "the afflicted" and "those who hunger and thirst for justice" and those who are "persecuted for justice sake", when they insult them, persecute them and speak falsely every kind of evil against them for the sake of Christ...(33). Thus according to Matthew; Luke mentions explicitly those "who hunger now"(34).

At any rate, Christ drew close above all to the world of human suffering through the fact of having taken *this suffering upon his very self*. During his public activity, he experienced not only fatigue, homelessness, misunderstanding even on the part of those closest to him, but, more than anything, he became progressively more and more isolated and encircled by hostility and the preparations for putting him to death. Christ is aware of this, and often speaks to his disciples of the sufferings and death that await him: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man *will be delivered* to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise"(35). Christ goes towards his Passion and death with full awareness of the mission that he has to fulfil precisely in this way. Precisely *by means of this suffering* he must bring it about "that man should not perish, but have eternal life". Precisely by means of his Cross he must strike at the roots of evil, planted in the history of man and in human souls. Precisely by means of his Cross he must accomplish *the work of salvation*. This work, in the plan of eternal Love, has a redemptive character.

And therefore Christ severely reproveth Peter when the latter wants to make him abandon the thoughts of suffering and of death on the Cross(36). And when, during his arrest in Gethsemane, the same Peter tries to defend him with the sword, Christ says, "Put your sword back into its place... But how then *should the scriptures be fulfilled*, that it must be so?(37)". And he also says, "Shall I not drink the *cup which the Father has given me?*"(38). This response, like others that reappear in different points of the Gospel, shows how profoundly Christ was imbued by the thought that he had already expressed in the conversation with Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"(39). Christ goes toward his own suffering, aware of its saving power; he goes forward in obedience to the Father, but primarily he is *united to the Father in this love* with which he has loved the world and man in the world. And for this reason Saint Paul will write of Christ: "He loved me and gave himself for me"(40).

17. The Scriptures had to be fulfilled. There were many messianic texts in the Old Testament which foreshadowed the sufferings of the future Anointed One of God. Among all these, particularly touching is the one which is commonly called the *Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant*, in the Book of Isaiah. The Prophet, who has rightly been called "the Fifth Evangelist", presents in this Song an image of the sufferings of the Servant with a realism as acute as if he were seeing them with his own eyes: the eyes of the body and of the spirit. In the light of the verses of Isaiah, the Passion of Christ becomes almost more expressive and touching than in the descriptions of the Evangelists themselves. Behold, the true Man of Sorrows presents himself before us:

"He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; *a man of sorrows*, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray we have turned every one to his own way; and *the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*"(41).

The Song of the Suffering Servant contains a description in which it is possible, in a certain sense, to identify the stages of Christ's Passion in their various details: the arrest, the humiliation, the blows, the spitting, the contempt for the prisoner, the unjust sentence, and then the scourging, the crowning with thorns and the mocking, the carrying of the Cross, the crucifixion and the agony.

Even more than this description of the Passion, what strikes us in the words of the Prophet *is the depth of Christ's sacrifice*. Behold, He, though innocent, takes upon himself the sufferings of all people, because he takes upon himself the sins of all. "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all": *all* human sin in its breadth and depth becomes the true cause of the Redeemer's suffering. If the suffering "is measured" by the evil suffered, then the words of the Prophet enable us to understand *the extent of this evil* and suffering with which Christ burdened himself. It can be said that this is "substitutive" suffering; but above all it is "redemptive". The Man of Sorrows of that prophecy is truly that "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"(42). In his suffering, sins are cancelled out precisely because he alone as the only-begotten Son could take them upon himself, accept them *with that love for the Father which overcomes* the evil of every sin; in a certain sense he annihilates this evil in the spiritual space of the relationship between God and humanity, and fills this space with good.

Here we touch upon the duality of nature of a single personal subject of redemptive suffering.

He who by his Passion and death on the Cross brings about the Redemption is the only-begotten Son whom God "gave". And at the same time this *Son who is consubstantial with the Father suffers as a man*. His suffering has human dimensions; it also has unique in the history of humanity—a depth and intensity which, while being human, can also be an incomparable depth and intensity of suffering, insofar as the man who suffers is in person the only-begotten Son himself: "God from God". Therefore, only he—the only-begotten Son—is capable of embracing the measure of evil contained in the sin of man: in every sin and in "total" sin, according to the dimensions of the historical existence of humanity on earth.

18. It can be said that the above considerations now brings us directly to Gethsemane and

Golgotha, where the Song of the Suffering Servant, contained in the Book of Isaiah, was fulfilled. But before going there, let us read the next verses of the Song, which give a prophetic anticipation of the Passion at Gethsemane and Golgotha. The Suffering Servant—and this in its turn is essential for an analysis of Christ's Passion—*takes on himself* those sufferings which were spoken of, *in a totally voluntary way*:

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,  
so he opened not his mouth.  
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;  
and as for his generation, who considered that  
he was cut off out of the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people?  
And they made his grave with the wicked  
and with a rich man in his death,  
although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth"(43).

*Christ suffers voluntarily and suffers innocently.* With his suffering he accepts that question which—posed by people many times—has been expressed, in a certain sense, in a radical way by the Book of Job. Christ, however, not only carries with himself the same question (and this in an even more radical way, for he is not only a man like Job but the only-begotten Son of God), but he also carries *the greatest possible answer to this question*. One can say that this answer emerges from the very matter of which the question is made up. Christ gives the answer to the question about suffering and the meaning of suffering not only by his teaching, that is by the Good News, but most of all by his own suffering, which is integrated with this teaching of the Good News in an organic and indissoluble way. And this is *the final*, definitive word of this *teaching*: "the word of the Cross", as Saint Paul one day will say(44).

This "word of the Cross" completes with a definitive reality the image of the ancient prophecy. Many episodes, many discourses during Christ's public teaching bear witness to the way in which from the beginning he accepts this suffering which is the will of the Father for the salvation of the world. However, *the prayer in Gethsemane* becomes a definitive point here. The words: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt"(45), and later: "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done"(46), have a manifold eloquence. They prove the truth of that love which the only-begotten Son gives to the Father in his obedience. At the same time, they attest to the truth of his suffering. The words of that prayer of Christ in Gethsemane prove *the truth of love through the truth of suffering*. Christ's words confirm with all simplicity this human truth of suffering, to its very depths: suffering is the undergoing of evil before which man shudders. He says: let it pass from me", just as Christ says in Gethsemane.

His words also attest to this unique and incomparable depth and intensity of suffering which only the man who is the only-begotten Son could experience; they attest to *that depth and intensity* which the prophetic words quoted above in their own way help us to understand.

Not of course completely (for this we would have to penetrate the divine-human mystery of the subject), but at least they help us to understand that difference (and at the same time the similarity) which exists between every possible form of human suffering and the suffering of the Godman. Gethsemane is the place where precisely this suffering, in all the truth expressed by the Prophet concerning the evil experienced in it, *is revealed as it were definitively before the eyes of Christ's soul*.

After the words in Gethsemane come the words uttered on Golgotha, words which bear witness to this depth—unique in the history of the world—of the evil of the suffering experienced. When Christ says: "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?", his words are not only an expression of that abandonment which many times found expression in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and in particular in that Psalm 22 [21] from which come the words quoted(47). One can say that these words on abandonment are born at the level of that inseparable union of the Son with the Father, and are born because the Father "laid on him the iniquity of us all"(48). They also foreshadow the words of Saint Paul: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin"(49). Together with this horrible weight, *encompassing the "entire" evil of the turning away from God* which is contained in sin, Christ, through the divine depth of his filial union with the Father, perceives in a humanly inexpressible way *this suffering which is the separation, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God*. But precisely through this suffering he accomplishes the Redemption, and can say as he breathes his last: "It is finished"(50).

One can also say that the Scripture has been fulfilled, that these words of the Song of the Suffering Servant have been definitively accomplished: "it was the will of the Lord to bruise him"(51). Human suffering has reached its culmination in the Passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: *it has been linked to love*, to that love of which Christ spoke to Nicodemus, to that love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering, just as the supreme good of the Redemption of the world was drawn from the Cross of Christ, and from that Cross constantly takes its beginning. The Cross of Christ has become a source from which flow rivers of living water(52). In it we must also pose anew the question about the meaning of suffering, and read in it, to its very depths, the answer to this question.

## V

### SHARERS IN THE SUFFERING OF CHRIST

19. The same Song of the Suffering Servant in the Book of Isaiah leads us, through the following verses, precisely in the direction of this question and answer:

"When he makes himself an offering for sin,  
 he shall see his offspring,  
 he shall prolong his days;  
 the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand;  
*he shall see the fruit of the travail* of his soul  
 and be satisfied;  
 by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant.  
*make many to be accounted righteous;*

and he shall bear their iniquities.  
 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great,  
 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;  
 because he poured out his soul to death,  
 and was numbered with the transgressors;  
 yet he bore the sin of many,  
 and made intercession for the transgressors".

One can say that with the Passion of Christ all human suffering has found itself in a new situation. And it is as though Job has foreseen this when he said: "I know that my Redeemer lives ...", and as though he had directed towards it his own suffering, which without the Redemption could not have revealed to him the fullness of its meaning.

In the Cross of Christ not only is the Redemption accomplished through suffering, but *also human suffering itself has been redeemed*. Christ, - without any fault of his own - took on himself "the total evil of sin". The experience of this evil determined the incomparable extent of Christ's suffering, which became *the price of the Redemption*. The Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah speaks of this. In later times, the witnesses of the New Covenant, sealed in the Blood of Christ, will speak of this.

These are the words of the Apostle Peter in his First Letter: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with the perishable things such as silver or gold, but *with the precious blood of Christ*, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot".

And the Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Galatians will say: "He gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age"(56), and in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body "(57).

With these and similar words the witnesses of the New Covenant speak of the greatness of the Redemption, accomplished through the suffering of Christ. The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has *his own share in the Redemption*. Each one is also *called to share in that suffering* through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ *has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption*. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.

20. The texts of the New Testament express this concept in many places. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle writes: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always *carrying in the body the death of Jesus*, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for **Jesus'** sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh .... knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus"(58).

Saint Paul speaks of various sufferings and, in particular, of those in which the first Christians became sharers "for the sake of Christ ". These sufferings enable the recipients of

that Letter to share in the work of the Redemption, accomplished through the suffering and death of the Redeemer. *The eloquence of the Cross and death* is, however, completed by *the eloquence of the Resurrection*. Man finds in the Resurrection a completely new light, which helps him to go forward through the thick darkness of humiliations, doubts, hopelessness and persecution. Therefore the Apostle will also write in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "For *as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too*"(59). Elsewhere he addresses to his recipients words of encouragement: "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ"(60). And in the Letter to the Romans **he writes**: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, *to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*"(61).

The very participation in Christ's suffering finds, in these apostolic expressions, as it were a twofold dimension. If one becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ, this happens because *Christ has opened his suffering to man*, because he himself in his redemptive suffering has become, in a certain sense, a sharer in all human sufferings. Man, discovering through faith the redemptive suffering of Christ, also discovers in it his own sufferings; he *rediscovers them, through faith*, enriched with a new content and new meaning.

This discovery caused Saint Paul to write particularly strong words in the Letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me: and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"(62). Faith enables the author of these words to know that love which led Christ to the Cross. And if he loved us in this way, suffering and dying, then with this suffering and death of his he *lives in the one whom he loved in this way*; he lives in the man: in Paul. And living in him-to the degree that Paul, conscious of this through faith, responds to his love with love-Christ also becomes in a particular way *united to the man*, to Paul, *through the Cross*. This union caused Paul to write, in the same Letter to the Galatians, other words as well, no less strong: "But far be it from me to *glory* except in the *Cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world"(63).

21. The Cross of Christ throws salvific light, in a most penetrating way, on man's life and in particular on his suffering. For through faith the Cross reaches man *together with the Resurrection*: the mystery of the Passion is contained in the Paschal Mystery. The witnesses of Christ's Passion are at the same time witnesses of his Resurrection. Paul writes: "That I may know him (Christ) and the power of his Resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead"(64). Truly, the Apostle first experienced the "power of the Resurrection" of Christ, on the road to Damascus, and only later, in this paschal light, reached that "sharing in his sufferings" of which he speaks, for example, in the Letter to the Galatians. **The path of Paul** is clearly paschal: *sharing in the Cross* of Christ comes about *through the experience of the Risen One*, therefore through a special sharing in the Resurrection. Thus, even in the Apostle's expressions on the subject of suffering there so often appears the motif of glory, which finds its beginning in Christ's Cross.

The witnesses of the Cross and Resurrection were convinced that "through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God"(65). And Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, says this: "We ourselves boast of you... for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in

the afflictions which you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be made *worthy of the Kingdom of God*, for which you are suffering"(66). Thus to share in the sufferings of Christ is, at the same time, to suffer for the Kingdom of God. In the eyes of the just God, before his judgment, those who share in the suffering of Christ become worthy of this Kingdom. Through their sufferings, in a certain sense they repay the infinite price of the Passion and death of Christ, which became the price of our Redemption: at this price the Kingdom of God has been consolidated anew in human history, becoming the definitive prospect of man's earthly existence. Christ has led us into this Kingdom through his suffering. And also through suffering those surrounded by the mystery of Christ's Redemption *become mature* enough to enter this Kingdom.

22. To the prospect of the Kingdom of God is linked hope in that glory which has its beginning in the Cross of Christ. The Resurrection revealed this glory—eschatological glory—which, in the Cross of Christ, was completely obscured by the immensity of suffering. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ are also called, through their own sufferings, to share in *glory*. Paul expresses this in various places. To the Romans he writes: " We are ... fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us"(67). In the Second Letter to the Corinthians we read: "For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to things that are unseen"(68). The Apostle Peter will express this truth in the following words of his First Letter: "But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed "(69).

The motif of *suffering and glory* has a strictly evangelica! characteristic, which becomes clear by reference to the Cross and the Resurrection. The Resurrection became, first of all, the manifestation of glory, which corresponds to Christ's being lifted up through the Cross. If, in fact, the Cross was to human eyes Christ's *emptying of himself*, at the same time it was in the eyes of God *his being lifted up*. On the Cross, Christ attained and fully accomplished his mission: by fulfilling the will of the Father, he at the same time fully realized himself. In weakness he manifested his *power*, and in humiliation he manifested all *his messianic greatness*. Are not all the words he uttered during his agony on Golgotha a proof of this greatness, and especially his words concerning the perpetrators of his crucifixion: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"(70)? To those who share in Christ's sufferings these words present themselves with the power of a supreme example. Suffering is also an invitation to manifest the moral greatness of man, his *spiritual maturity*. Proof of this has been given, down through the generations, by the martyrs and confessors of Christ, faithful to the words: "And do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul .

Christ's Resurrection has revealed "the glory of the future age" and, at the same time, has confirmed "the boast of the Cross": the *glory that is hidden in the very suffering of Christ* and which has been and is often mirrored in human suffering, as an expression of man's spiritual greatness. This glory must be acknowledged not only in the martyrs for the faith but in many others also who, at times, even without belief in Christ, suffer and give their lives for the truth and for a just cause. In the sufferings of all of these people the great dignity of man is strikingly confirmed.

23. Suffering, in fact, is always *a trial*— at times a very hard one—to which humanity is subjected. The gospel *paradox of weakness and strength* often speaks to us from the pages of the Letters of Saint Paul, a paradox particularly experienced by the Apostle himself and together with him experienced by all who share Christ's sufferings. Paul writes in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"(72). In the Second Letter to Timothy we read: "And therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed"(73). And in the Letter to the Philippians he will even say: "*I can do all things in him* who strengthens me"(74).

Those who share in Christ's sufferings have before their eyes the Paschal Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection, in which Christ descends, in a first phase, to the ultimate limits of human weakness and impotence: indeed, he dies nailed to the Cross. But if at the same time in this *weakness* there is accomplished his *lifting up*, confirmed by the power of the Resurrection, then this means that the weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ's Cross. In such a concept, *to suffer* means to become particularly *susceptible*, particularly *open to the working of the salvific powers of God*, offered to humanity in Christ. In him God has confirmed his desire to act especially through suffering, which is man's weakness and emptying of self, and he wishes to make his power known precisely in this weakness and emptying of self. This also explains the exhortation in the First Letter of Peter: "Yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God"(75).

In the Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul deals still more fully with the theme of this "birth of power in weakness", this *spiritual tempering* of man in the midst of trials and tribulations, which is the particular vocation of those who share in Christ's sufferings. "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us"(76). Suffering as it were contains a special *call to the virtue* which man must exercise on his own part. And this is the virtue of perseverance in bearing whatever disturbs and causes harm. **In doing** this, the individual unleashes hope, which maintains in him the conviction that suffering will not get the better of him, that it will not deprive him of his dignity as a human being, a dignity linked to awareness of the meaning of life. And indeed this meaning makes itself known together with *the working of God's love*, which is the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit. The more he shares in this love, man rediscovers himself more and more fully in suffering: he rediscovers the "soul" which he thought he had "lost"(77) because of suffering.

24. Nevertheless, the Apostle's experiences as a sharer in the sufferings of Christ go **even further**. In the Letter to the Colossians we read the words which constitute as it were the final stage of the spiritual journey in relation to suffering: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I *complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions* for the sake of his body, that is, the Church"(78). And in another Letter he asks his readers: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?"(79).

In the Paschal Mystery Christ began *the union with man in the community of the Church*. The mystery of the Church is expressed in this: that already in the act of Baptism, which brings

about a configuration with Christ, and then through his Sacrifice—sacramentally through the Eucharist—the Church is continually being built up spiritually as the Body of Christ. In this Body, Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way he is united with those who suffer. The words quoted above from the Letter to the Colossians bear witness to the exceptional nature of this union. For, *whoever suffers in union with Christ*— just as the Apostle Paul bears his "tribulations" in union with Christ— not only receives from Christ that strength already referred to but also "completes" by his suffering "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions". This evangelical outlook especially highlights the truth *concerning the creative character of suffering*. The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world's redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings—in any part of the world and at any time in history—to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world.

Does this mean that the Redemption achieved by Christ is not complete? No. **It only means** that 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. Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limits but at the same time he did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part of *the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering* that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed.

Thus, with this openness to every human suffering, Christ has accomplished the world's Redemption through his own suffering. For, at the same time, this Redemption, even though it was completely achieved by Christ's suffering, lives on and in its own special way develops in the history of man. It lives and develops as the body of Christ, the Church, and in this dimension every human suffering, by reason of the loving union with Christ, completes the suffering of Christ. It completes that suffering *just as the Church completes the redemptive work of Christ*. The mystery of the Church—that body which completes in itself also Christ's crucified and risen body—indicates at the same time the space or context in which human sufferings complete the sufferings of Christ. Only within this radius and dimension of the Church as the Body of Christ, which continually develops in space and time, can one think and speak of "what is lacking" in the sufferings of Christ. The Apostle, in fact, makes this clear when he writes of "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church".

It is precisely *the Church*, which ceaselessly draws on the infinite resources of the Redemption, introducing it into the life of humanity, *which is the dimension* in which the redemptive suffering of Christ can be constantly completed by the suffering of man. This also highlights the divine and human nature of the Church. Suffering seems in some way to share in the characteristics of this nature. And for this reason suffering also has a special value in the eyes of the Church. It is something good, before which the Church bows down in reverence with all the depth of her faith in the Redemption. She likewise bows down with all the depth of that faith with which she embraces within herself the inexpressible mystery of

the Body of Christ.

## VI

### THE GOSPEL OF SUFFERING

25. The witnesses of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ have handed on to the Church and to mankind a specific Gospel of suffering. The Redeemer himself wrote this Gospel, above all by his own suffering accepted in love, so that man "should not perish but have eternal life"(80). This suffering, together with the living word of his teaching, became a rich source for all those who shared in Jesus' sufferings among the first generation of his disciples and confessors and among those who have come after them down the centuries.

It is especially consoling to note—and also accurate in accordance with the Gospel and history—that at the side of Christ, in the first and most exalted place, there is always his Mother through the exemplary testimony that she bears *by her whole life* to this particular Gospel of suffering. In her, the many and intense sufferings were amassed in such an interconnected way that they were not only a proof of her unshakeable faith but also a contribution to the redemption of all. In reality, from the time of her secret conversation with the angel, she began to see in her mission as a mother her "destiny" to share, in a singular and unrepeatably way, in the very mission of her Son. And she very soon received a confirmation of this in the events that accompanied the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and in the solemn words of the aged Simeon, when he spoke of a sharp sword that would pierce her heart. Yet a further confirmation was in the anxieties and privations of the hurried flight into Egypt, caused by the cruel decision of Herod.

And again, after the events of her Son's hidden and public life, events which she must have shared with acute sensitivity, it was on Calvary that Mary's suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view but which was mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world. Her ascent of Calvary and her standing at the foot of the Cross together with the Beloved Disciple were a special sort of sharing in the redeeming death of her Son. And the words which she heard from his lips were a kind of solemn handing-over of this Gospel of suffering so that it could be proclaimed to the whole community of believers.

As a witness *to* her Son's Passion by her *presence*, and as a sharer in it by her *compassion*, Mary offered a unique contribution to the Gospel of suffering, by embodying in anticipation the expression of Saint Paul which was quoted at the beginning. She truly has a special title to be able to claim that she "completes in her flesh"—as already in her heart—"what is lacking in Christ's afflictions".

In the light of the unmatched example of Christ, reflected with singular clarity in the life of his Mother, the Gospel of suffering, through the experience and words of the Apostles, becomes *an inexhaustible source for the ever new generations* that succeed one another in the history of the Church. The Gospel of suffering signifies not only the presence of suffering in the Gospel, as one of the themes of the Good News, but also the revelation *of the salvific power and salvific significance* of suffering in Christ's messianic mission and, subsequently, in the mission and vocation of the Church.

Christ *did not conceal* from his listeners *the need for suffering*. He said very clearly: "If any man would come after me... let him take up his cross daily "(81), and before his disciples he placed demands of a moral nature that can only be fulfilled on condition that they should "deny themselves"(82). The way that leads to the Kingdom of heaven is "hard and narrow", and Christ contrasts it to the "wide and easy" way that "leads to destruction"(83). On various occasions Christ also said that his disciples and confessors would *meet with much persecution*, something which—as we know—happened not only in the first centuries of the Church's life under the Roman Empire, but also came true in various historical periods and in other parts of the world, and still does even in our own time.

Here are some of Christ's statements on this subject: "They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be a time for you *to bear testimony*. Settle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you they will put to death; you will be hated by all *for my name's sake*. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives"(84).

The Gospel of suffering speaks first in various places of suffering "for Christ", "for the sake of Christ", and it does so with the words of Jesus himself or the words of his Apostles. The Master does not conceal the prospect of suffering from his disciples and followers. On the contrary, he reveals it with all frankness, indicating at the same time the supernatural assistance that will accompany them in the midst of persecutions and tribulations " for his name's sake". These persecutions and tribulations will also be, as it were, a *particular proof* of likeness to Christ and union with him. "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you...; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you... A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me they will persecute you... But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me"(85). "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"(86).

This first chapter of the Gospel of suffering, which speaks of persecutions, namely of tribulations experienced because of Christ, contains in itself *a special call to courage and fortitude*, sustained by the eloquence of the Resurrection. Christ has overcome the world definitively by his Resurrection. Yet, because of the relationship between the Resurrection and his Passion and death, he has at the same time overcome the world by his suffering. Yes, suffering has been singularly present in that victory over the world which was manifested in the Resurrection. Christ retains in his risen body the marks of the wounds of the Cross in his hands, feet and side. Through the Resurrection, he manifests *the victorious power of suffering*, and he wishes to imbue with the conviction of this power the hearts of those whom he chose as Apostles and those whom he continually chooses and sends forth. The Apostle Paul will say: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"(87).

26. While the first great chapter of the Gospel of suffering is written down, as the generations pass, by those who suffer persecutions for Christ's sake, simultaneously another great chapter of this Gospel unfolds through the course of history. This chapter is written by all those *who*

*suffer together with Christ*, uniting their human sufferings to his salvific suffering. In these people there is fulfilled what the first witnesses of the Passion and Resurrection said and wrote about sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Therefore in those people there is fulfilled the Gospel of suffering, and, at the same time, each of them continues in a certain sense to write it: they write it and proclaim it to the world, they announce it to the world in which they live and to the people of their time.

Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that *in suffering there is concealed* a particular *power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ*, a special grace. To this grace many saints, such as Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Ignatius of Loyola and others, owe their profound conversion. A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of *his entire life and vocation*. This discovery is a particular confirmation of the spiritual greatness which in man surpasses the body in a way that is completely beyond compare. When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior *maturity and spiritual greatness* become evident, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal.

This interior maturity and spiritual greatness in suffering are certainly the *result* of a particular *conversion* and cooperation with the grace of the Crucified Redeemer. It is he himself who acts at the heart of human sufferings through his Spirit of truth, through the consoling Spirit. It is he who transforms, in a certain sense, the very substance of the spiritual life, indicating for the person who suffers a place close to himself. *It is he*— as the interior Master and Guide— *who reveals* to the suffering brother and sister this *wonderful interchange*, situated at the very heart of the mystery of the Redemption. Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation. By his suffering on the Cross, Christ reached the very roots of evil, of sin and death. He conquered the author of evil, Satan, and his permanent rebellion against the Creator. To the suffering brother or sister Christ *discloses* and gradually reveals *the horizons of the Kingdom of God*: the horizons of a world converted to the Creator, of a world free from sin, a world being built on the saving power of love. And slowly but effectively, Christ leads into this world, into this Kingdom of the Father, suffering man, in a certain sense through the very heart of his suffering. For suffering cannot be *transformed* and changed by a grace from outside, but *from within*. And Christ through his own salvific suffering is very much present in every human suffering, and can act from within that suffering by the powers of his Spirit of truth, his consoling Spirit.

This is not all: the Divine Redeemer wishes to penetrate the soul of every sufferer through the heart of his holy Mother, the first and the most exalted of all the redeemed. As though by a continuation of that motherhood which by the power of the Holy Spirit had given him life, the dying Christ conferred upon the ever Virgin Mary a *new kind of motherhood*— spiritual and universal— towards all human beings, so that every individual, during the pilgrimage of faith, might remain, together with her, closely united to him unto the Cross, and so that every form of suffering, given fresh life by the power of this Cross, should become no longer the weakness of man but the power of God.

However, this interior process does not always follow the same pattern. It often begins and is

set in motion with great difficulty. Even the very point of departure differs: people react to suffering in different ways. But in general it can be said that almost always the individual enters suffering with a *typically human protest* and *with the question "why"*. He asks the meaning of his suffering and seeks an answer to this question on the human level. Certainly he often puts this question to God, and to Christ. Furthermore, he cannot help noticing that the one to whom he puts the question is himself suffering and wishes *to answer him* from the Cross, *from the heart of his own suffering*. Nevertheless, it often takes time, even a long time, for this answer to begin to be interiorly perceived. For Christ does not answer directly and he does not answer in the abstract this human questioning about the meaning of suffering. Man hears Christ's saving answer as he himself gradually becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ.

The answer which comes through this sharing, by way of the interior encounter with the Master, is in itself *something more than the mere abstract answer* to the question about the meaning of suffering. For it is above all a call. It is a vocation. Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: "Follow me!". Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! Through my Cross. Gradually, *as the individual takes up his cross*, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him. He does not discover this meaning at his own human level, but at the level of the suffering of Christ. At the same time, however, from this level of Christ the salvific meaning of suffering *descends to man's level* and becomes, in a sense, the individual's personal response. It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy.

27. Saint Paul speaks of such joy in the Letter to the Colossians: "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake"(88). A source of joy is found in the *overcoming of the sense of the uselessness of suffering*, a feeling that is sometimes very strongly rooted in human suffering. This feeling not only consumes the person interiorly, but seems to make him a burden to others. The person feels condemned to receive help and assistance from others, and at the same time seems useless to himself. The discovery of the salvific meaning of suffering in union with Christ *transforms* this depressing *feeling*. Faith in sharing in the suffering of Christ brings with it the interior certainty that the suffering person "completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions"; the certainty that in the spiritual dimension of the work of Redemption *he is serving*, like Christ, *the salvation of his brothers and sisters*. Therefore he is carrying out an irreplaceable service. In the Body of Christ, which is ceaselessly born of the Cross of the Redeemer, it is precisely suffering permeated by the spirit of Christ's sacrifice that *is the irreplaceable mediator and author of the good things* which are indispensable for the world's salvation. It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls. Suffering, more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity the powers of the Redemption. In that "cosmic" struggle between the spiritual powers of good and evil, spoken of in the Letter to the Ephesians(89), human sufferings, united to the redemptive suffering of Christ, *constitute a special support for the powers of good*, and open the way to the victory of these salvific powers.

And so the Church sees in all Christ's suffering brothers and sisters as it were a *multiple subject of his supernatural power*. How often is it precisely to them that the pastors of the Church appeal, and precisely from them that they seek help and support! The Gospel of

suffering is being written unceasingly, and it speaks unceasingly with the words of this strange paradox: the springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human weakness. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special *particle of the infinite treasure* of the world's Redemption, and can share this treasure with others. The more a person is threatened by sin, the heavier the structures of sin which today's world brings with it, the greater is the eloquence which human suffering possesses in itself. And the more the Church feels the need to have recourse to the value of human sufferings for the salvation of the world.

## VII

### THE GOOD SAMARITAN

28. To the Gospel of suffering there also belongs—and in an organic way—the parable of the Good Samaritan. Through this parable Christ wished to give an answer to the question: "Who is my neighbour?"(90) For of the three travellers along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, on which there lay half-dead a man who had been stripped and beaten by robbers, it was precisely the Samaritan who showed himself to be *the real "neighbour"* of the victim: "neighbour" means also the person who carried out the commandment of love of neighbour. Two other men were passing along the same road; one was a priest and the other a Levite, but each of them "saw him and passed by on the other side". The Samaritan, on the other hand, "saw him and had compassion on him. He went to him, ... and bound up his wounds", then "brought him to an inn, and took care of him"(91). And when he left, he solicitously entrusted the suffering man to the care of the innkeeper, promising to meet any expenses.

The parable of the Good Samaritan belongs to the Gospel of suffering. For it indicates what the relationship of each of us must be towards our suffering neighbour. We are not allowed to "pass by on the other side" indifferently; we must "stop" beside him. *Everyone who stops beside the suffering of another person*, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan. This stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, which also has an emotional expression of its own. The name "Good Samaritan" fits *every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others*, who "is moved" by the misfortune of another. If Christ, who knows the interior of man, emphasizes this compassion, this means that it is important for our whole attitude to others' suffering. Therefore one must cultivate this sensitivity of heart, which bears witness to *compassion* towards a suffering person. Some times this compassion remains the only or principal expression of our love for and solidarity with the sufferer.

Nevertheless, the Good Samaritan of Christ's parable does not stop at sympathy and compassion alone. They become for him an incentive to actions aimed at bringing help to the injured man. In a word, then, a Good Samaritan is *one who brings help in suffering*, whatever its nature may be. Help which is, as far as possible, effective. He puts his whole heart into it, nor does he spare material means. We can say that he gives himself, his very "I", opening this "I" to the other person. Here we touch upon one of the key-points of all Christian anthropology. Man cannot "fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself"(92). A Good Samaritan *is the person capable of exactly such a gift of self*.

29. Following the parable of the Gospel, we could say that suffering, which is present under

so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order *to unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one's "I" on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for, so to speak, another world: the world of human love; and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions. The person who is a "neighbour" cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another: this in the name of fundamental human solidarity, still more in the name of love of neighbour. He must "stop", "sympathize", just like the Samaritan of the Gospel parable. The parable in itself expresses *a deeply Christian truth*, but one that at the same time is very universally human. It is not without reason that, also in ordinary speech, any activity on behalf of the suffering and needy is called "Good Samaritan" work.

In the course of the centuries, this *activity* assumes organized *institutional forms* and constitutes a field of work in the respective *professions*. How much there is of "the Good Samaritan" in the profession of the doctor, or the nurse, or others similar! Considering its "evangelical" content, we are inclined to think here of a vocation rather than simply a profession. And the institutions which from generation to generation have performed "Good Samaritan" service have developed and specialized even further in our times. This undoubtedly proves that people today pay ever greater and closer attention to the sufferings of their neighbour, seek to understand those sufferings and deal with them with ever greater skill. They also have an ever greater capacity and specialization in this area. In view of all this, we can say that the parable of the Samaritan of the Gospel has become *one of the essential elements of moral culture and universally human civilization*. And thinking of all those who by their knowledge and ability provide many kinds of service to their suffering neighbour, we cannot but offer them words of thanks and gratitude.

These words are directed to all those who exercise their own service to their suffering neighbour in an unselfish way, *freely undertaking to provide "Good Samaritan" help*, and devoting to this cause all the time and energy at their disposal outside their professional work. This kind of voluntary "Good Samaritan" or charitable activity can be called social work; it can also be called an *apostolate*, when it is undertaken for clearly evangelical motives, especially if this is in connection with the Church or another Christian Communion. Voluntary "Good Samaritan" work is carried out in appropriate *milieux* or through *organizations* created for this purpose. Working in this way has a great importance, especially if it involves undertaking larger tasks which require cooperation and the use of technical means. No less valuable is individual activity, especially by people who are better prepared for it in regard to the various kinds of human suffering which can only be alleviated in an individual or personal way. Finally, *family help* means both acts of love of neighbour done to members of the same family, and mutual help between families.

It is difficult to list here all the types and different circumstances of "Good Samaritan" work which exist in the Church and society. It must be recognized that they are very numerous, and one must express satisfaction at the fact that, thanks to them, the *fundamental moral values*, such as the value of human solidarity, the value of Christian love of neighbour, form the framework of social life and interhuman relationships and combat on this front the various forms of hatred, violence, cruelty, contempt for others, or simple "insensitivity", in other words, indifference towards one's neighbour and his sufferings.

Here we come to the enormous *importance of having the right attitudes in education*. The

family, the school and other education institutions must, if only for humanitarian reasons, work perseveringly for the reawakening and refining of that sensitivity towards one's neighbour and his suffering of which the figure of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel has become a symbol. Obviously the Church must do the same. She must even more profoundly make her own—as far as possible—the motivations which Christ placed in his parable and in the whole Gospel. The eloquence of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and of the whole Gospel, is especially this: every individual must feel as if *called personally* to bear witness to love in suffering. The institutions are very important and indispensable; nevertheless, no institution can by itself replace the human heart, human compassion, human love or human initiative, when it is a question of dealing with the sufferings of another. This refers to physical sufferings, but it is even more true when it is a question of the many kinds of moral suffering, and when it is primarily the soul that is suffering.

30. The parable of the Good Samaritan, which —as we have said—belongs to the Gospel of suffering, goes hand in hand with this Gospel through the history of the Church and Christianity, through the history of man and humanity. This parable witnesses to the fact that Christ's revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering *is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity*. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering. Christ himself is especially active in this field. In this way he accomplishes the messianic programme of his mission, according to the words of the prophet: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"(93). In a superabundant way Christ carries out this *messianic programme* of his mission: he goes about "doing good"(94). and the good of his works became especially evident in the face of human suffering. The parable of the Good Samaritan is in profound harmony with the conduct of Christ himself.

Finally, this parable, through its essential content, will enter into those disturbing words of the Final Judgment, noted by Matthew in his Gospel: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was in prison and you came to me"(95). To the just, who ask when they did all this to him, the Son of Man will respond: "Truly, I say to you, *as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren*, you did it to me"(96). The opposite sentence will be imposed on those who have behaved differently: "As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me".

One could certainly extend the list of the forms of suffering that have encountered human sensitivity, compassion and help, or that have failed to do so. The first and second parts of Christ's words about the Final Judgment unambiguously show how essential it is, for the eternal life of every individual, to "stop", as the Good Samaritan did, at the suffering of one's neighbour, to have "compassion" for that suffering, and to give some help. In the messianic programme of Christ, which is at the same time the programme *of the Kingdom of God*, suffering is present in the world in order to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbour, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a "civilization of love". In this love the salvific meaning of suffering is completely accomplished and reaches its definitive dimension. Christ's words about the Final Judgment

enable us to understand this in all the simplicity and clarity of the Gospel.

These words about love, about actions of love, acts linked with human suffering, enable us once more to discover, at the basis of all *human sufferings, the same redemptive suffering of Christ*. Christ said: "You did it to me". He himself is the one who in each individual experiences love; he himself is the one who receives help, when this is given to every suffering person without exception. He himself is present in this suffering person, since his salvific suffering has been opened once and for all to every human suffering. And all those who suffer have been called once and for all to become sharers "in Christ's sufferings"(98), just as all have been called to "complete" with their own suffering "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions"(99). At one and the same time Christ has taught man *to do good by his suffering* and *to do good to those who suffer*. In this double aspect he has completely revealed the meaning of suffering.

## VIII

### CONCLUSION

31. This is the meaning of suffering, which is truly supernatural and at the same time human. It is *supernatural* because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply *human*, because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission.

Suffering is certainly part of the mystery of man. Perhaps suffering is not wrapped up as much as man is by this mystery, which is an especially impenetrable one. The Second Vatican Council expressed this truth that "...only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. In fact..., Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and makes his supreme calling clear"(100). If these words refer to everything that concerns the mystery of man, then they certainly refer in a very special way *to human suffering*. Precisely at this point the "revealing of man to himself and making his supreme vocation clear" is particularly *indispensable*. It also happens as experience proves—that this can be particularly *dramatic*. But when it is completely accomplished and becomes the light of human life, it is particularly *blessed*. "Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful"(101).

I now end the present considerations on suffering in the year in which the Church is living the extraordinary Jubilee linked to the anniversary of the Redemption.

The mystery of the Redemption of the world is in an amazing way *rooted in suffering*, and this suffering in turn finds in the mystery of the Redemption its supreme and surest point of reference.

We wish to live this Year of the Redemption in special union with all those who suffer. And so there should come together in spirit beneath the Cross on Calvary all suffering people who believe in Christ, and particularly those who suffer because of their faith in him who is the Crucified and Risen One, so that the offering of their sufferings may hasten the fulfilment of the prayer of the Saviour himself that all may be one(102). Let there also gather beneath the

Cross all people of good will, for on this Cross is the "Redeemer of man", the Man of Sorrows, who has taken upon himself the physical and moral sufferings of the people of all times, so that *in love* they may find the salvific meaning of their sorrow and valid answers to all of their questions.

*Together with Mary, Mother of Christ, who stood beneath the Cross(103), we pause beside all the crosses of contemporary man.*

We invoke all *the Saints*, who down the centuries in a special way shared in the suffering of Christ. We ask them to support us.

And 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!

To all of you, dearest brothers and sisters, I send my Apostolic Blessing.

*Given at Rome, at Saint Peter's, on the liturgical Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes, 11 February 1984, in the sixth year of my Pontificate.*

