

The Apostolate of Suffering

The Mystery of Suffering

Suffering is a universal reality. It is present in the lives of human beings, whether they acknowledge it or not. However, far from accepting it as a matter of course, human beings rebel against it and, in addition to dealing with it as a distressing problem, try to explain it and overcome it in some way.

Different cultures have dealt with it in their own ways – from Buddhism, which seeks to give an inner answer that allows one to be beyond suffering, to the Judeo-Christian West, which seeks not to avoid suffering, but to interpret it. Insufficient answers may lead to deism or atheism.

Often the concepts of pain and suffering are understood to be synonymous; however, they are far from identical; in fact, there can be pain without suffering and suffering without pain. So much of our suffering has nothing to do with pain.

One of the first questions that arise in this context is: where does pain come from? What causes it? Why do we suffer?

In some cultures, suffering is explained as the result of conflict between the gods: there would be, two superhuman forces (one good and one evil) fighting with each other. Suffering would be the product of the triumph of the evil force. In the modern world, suffering is not very often accepted, quietly and submissively, as God's will. However, modern man resists openly human suffering, especially that of the innocent, raises his accusing finger towards God.

Suffering in the Bible

The experience of suffering accompanies the whole of biblical history to the point of producing even a literary genre: lamentation. Not as a simple outburst, as happens in so many cultures and human experiences but the cries of the suffering person rise up to God and solicit an intervention or a response.

"Sacred Scripture is a great book about suffering," said St John Paul II (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 6). The book of Genesis attributes the origin of suffering to sin: "[God] said to the woman: I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain, you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." And to the man, he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life'" (Gen 3:16-17). This idea had been taken to the extreme of believing that any suffering was the result of sin. Jesus would decisively refute this concept several times, for example, in the episode of the man born blind (cf. Jn 9:2-3).

A certain number of the Psalms (6, 38, 41, 88) testify to non-resignation in the face of suffering, which becomes a plea to God for healing.

The time of salvation was imagined as a time of the abolition of all suffering: "No inhabitant of the city," says Isaiah, "shall say any more, 'I feel sick'" (Is 33:24). "He will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces" (Is 25:8).

But while waiting for that 'then', suffering remains and one cannot avoid having to come to terms with it. Of course, Bible believers could not accept the explanations of other peoples: their God was unique, they had experienced him as friend and saviour. Unlike modern man, the biblical believer knows that he is a 'creature', and therefore limited, liable, subject to weakness and pain.

In the Bible, there are many protagonists who, in different ways, have to face the reality of pain. Job is the prototype of the believing man besieged and upset by suffering. Faced with external misfortunes, Job's reaction is full of serenity; but when he is struck in his flesh, he begins to curse his existence and to ask himself: "why?". This attitude will be incarnated by Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". Another face of Job is also revealed: the rebel who rejects all religious justification and questions and accuses God himself. Then he dialogues with his friends, who try to convince him that if he were innocent, God would not have reduced him like this. Finally, God intervenes with his questions.

A conclusion is an act of reliance on God. Job comes to the maturation of faith. He has not received any explanation: he has only guessed that it is foolish to contest with God about his own suffering. Pain is an instrument of maturation, of purification, when it is experienced in faith.

Throughout the centuries, and still today, a certain conviction has taken root - perhaps also present in preaching - that somehow God, his will, is behind evil.

The fact is that Jesus never placed a positive value on pain. In the face of human suffering, he has always shown compassion - even to the point of tears - and great commitment in wanting to overcome it, through signs of healing: "He healed many who were sick of various diseases and cast out many demons" (Mk 1:34): Jesus came to free man from the ills, both physical and inner, that make him suffer. This behaviour of Jesus in front of the suffering can correct many misinterpretations.

On the evening of Gethsemane, Jesus prays: "Father, not my will, but your will be done!". Here is the prayer that has always been the strong point of Christian sorrow: "it was the will of the Father that Jesus should end up on the cross!". But no, God's will is "that all men be saved", that no one be lost and that Jesus his Son may give life to all those who approach him..., that His Kingdom come and that pain, death and sorrow disappear for good. The meaning of that prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane is this: "Father, my flesh, my human sensibility, rebels and leads me to flee from this hour, from this trial...; nevertheless, I want your plan of salvation to be fulfilled, that it is your Kingdom that triumphs and not the empire of darkness... This I want, even if it now costs me the sweat of blood". "The words of Christ's prayer at Gethsemane prove the truth of love through the truth of suffering" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 18).

The Bible, therefore, does not offer us explanations about pain. We are offered the possibility to illuminate the experience of pain from within, but not to explain it.

Suffering experienced with Jesus is the narrow door that leads to life, and the joyful message is precisely that suffering is not an end in itself, but that it is for our salvation that Jesus

experienced it for us, that he did not leave us alone to suffer. “Jesus represents “suffering overcome by love” (*Salvifici doloris*, no. 14). “And if we are children, we are also heirs: heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ, if we truly share in his sufferings in order to share also in his glory” (Rom 8:17).

“The Apostolate of Suffering”

In addition to the sensitivity he took on in the seminary, Fr Alberione also had a reference in this theme: “The Apostolate of Suffering”, an association aimed at carrying out a twofold apostolate: helping the suffering to accept and even love their physical and moral suffering as a gift of God’s predilection, and cooperating with the suffering to rebuild Christian families, through the formation of individual members in the school of the Gospel, with a devoted and filial attachment to the Pope.

Founded by the Venerable Giacomo Gaglione on 21 March 1948, it was approved as a sodality by the Bishop of Caserta, Bartolomeo Mangino, who had encouraged the Venerable Servant of God to set up the brotherhood of the sick returning from Lourdes. In fact, the inspirational idea of the Apostolate of Suffering was born during James’ first trip to Lourdes, seventeen years after the beginning of his infirmity. The Lord made James understand the mission to which he had destined him: to be an apostle among the suffering, a mission which became even clearer after he met with Saint Pio of Pietrelcina.

The main commitment of the members is the daily spiritual offering. In addition to this, there is personal contact with the suffering, even by letter when personal contact is not possible, in addition to the usual pious practices and financial contributions for membership, and the spreading of the Apostolate of Suffering (cf. www.giacomogaglione.it.)

Fr Alberione’s Proposal

Frequent in the preaching of Blessed James Alberione are references to the apostolate of suffering since it is “the crown and fulfilment of the apostolates of the saint’s desires of prayer and good example,” he says.

Speaking to the Daughters of Saint Paul (cf. *To the Daughters of Saint Paul* 1947, pp 400-416 and 1956, pp 489-495), the Founder offers a synthesis of his thinking about suffering and the apostolate of suffering. Obviously, his doctrine is affected by the spirituality of the time, but it has some beautiful insights that he wanted to pass on to his sons and daughters.

He begins with the theological foundation: “For the redemption and salvation of souls, the sufferings of Jesus were sufficient, complete, superabundant; but only in the Head. The sufferings of Jesus Christ were still lacking in his mystical members, that is, in us... And here is how St Paul speaks about this: ‘I complete in my flesh what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings for the sake of his body, which is the Church’ (Col 1:4). Every apostle can say: this body is me because I am a member of Christ. And what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings I must complete in myself, for the sake of his body, which is the Church”.

The Founder then speaks of the origin of sufferings: many arise from ourselves: sins, limitations, powerlessness...; others originate outside of ourselves: people, news, situations... "These are sufferings that we all encounter, more or less".

He explains that the apostolate of suffering "consists in using suffering for the purposes of the apostolate: the glory of God and the peace of souls. And he affirms the greatness of the apostolate of suffering, "supremely useful". "Just as Jesus truly saved us with his passion, so we must save ourselves with our passion. And just as Jesus exercised his greatest apostolate with his passion, so the greatest and most useful apostolate is that of suffering. Those who suffer are sometimes unable to work; but let us remember that it is not enough to sow, the soil must be prepared and fertilised: suffering makes it fertile".

With great realism, Father Alberione advised: "You should not aspire to this apostolate, but accept well the sufferings that are inherent in your apostolate...". And he concludes: "Let us accept well our crosses, those that come to us from the apostolate, from spiritual work, from the office, etc.". Then there are the voluntary crosses: closing one's eyes to vanities, closing one's heart to human affections, hurrying one's steps in order to arrive quickly, mortifying the faculties of the soul, etc..

And he encourages people to choose well these voluntary penances, which must be related to the apostolate: "Meanwhile, do the penances that are common in your apostolate, or required by daily life. Could one perhaps heed all the advice and exhortations scattered in little books full of theoretical, vain, or sentimental things? One is not a saint because one is a victim! One is a saint if one loves the Lord with all one's heart, all one's mind, all one's strength, above everything, always... Work intensely in your apostolate, asking the Lord for health... Devote yourselves to your apostolate with all your energies. Your offering of victims should be made in this sense.

An aspect that adds value to this apostolate: "The apostolate of suffering carried out in silence is the stamp, the thermometer to distinguish whether the other apostolates are exercised with an upright spirit, truly for the love of God".

And he explains: "In the apostolate of the interior life, of prayer, there can be some personal satisfaction. In the apostolate of example and action, there can be some self-love. But when a soul is capable of suffering in concealment and perhaps knows how to smile even though the heart is bleeding and the soul is in anguish, then there is no doubt, it is the true love of God... When one knows how to add to the apostolate of editions the apostolate of suffering, then the redemption is complete: 'I fulfil in myself the passion of Christ' for the Church".

Fr Alberione makes some very concrete proposals for "exercising this apostolate. In the first place, always accept all crosses... Let us not look for our own crosses... Secondly, accept them with humility. In view of our sins: we have committed so many! ... Thirdly, to accept them as penance for the sins of others, sins committed by bad press, immoral films, obscene radio stations... And: "Finally," concludes the Founder, "accept them with gratitude; put your whole heart into them".

Finally, the Founder enumerates the merits of the apostolate of suffering: "It is an apostolate that is possible for everyone, by divine grace. It is often making a virtue of necessity since everyone has something to suffer. It is a most effective apostolate because it is an

association with the Divine Patient, Jesus Christ. It is the apostolate that distinguishes the true apostle from the apostle in the name”.

It is not difficult to see here the immediate connection of the apostolate of suffering from another way of the apostolate very often proposed by the Founder to all Paulines men and women, especially to the Disciples of the Divine Master, and later to the members of Pauline Institutes of consecrated secular life: reparation.

Conclusion

If the man of 50 years ago could resign himself to the idea of a God who sends diseases, the man of today resolutely rejects such a view and has every reason to reject it. And so one might think that in today's society the apostolate of suffering is outdated, that it has lost its meaning... On the contrary! But we must focus on its meaning.

A spirituality of suffering that had decayed into painfulness, that attributed to suffering a value in itself, means having forgotten the Bible, in which there is Job who reasons in a very different way, and Jesus, the Son of God, who always healed the sick who approached him and is never said to have made anyone sick by God's will... God is on the side of those who suffer, never against them to make them suffer.

Today, a certain way of seeing things needs to pass, and we need to return to the vision of the face of God that the Gospel reveals to us. We need to promote the image of a Jesus who is moved by all human suffering, revealing the face of God who is for us, not against us. A Jesus who frees others from suffering, but who does not flee in the face of his own, not out of masochism, but in order to remain consistent with what he has done and taught: fidelity to the Father's will.

In the New Testament, it is never said that Christ offered his sufferings to the Father; instead, it is expressly said that Christ did not offer something of himself (suffering or otherwise) but “offered himself without blemish to God” (Heb 9:14). Jesus did not save us because of the cross, but because of his love for us, which led him to the point of dying on the cross. Therefore Christian spirituality - whether for those who are well and working or for those who are suffering and cannot do anything else - is to offer oneself to God in the situation in which one finds oneself.

Offering one's work may ease one's conscience: one feels OK because it has been offered to God, even if it is done with nervousness, negligence, anger and so on... The same thing for a sick person: it makes no sense for him to offer his suffering only to be complaining and grumpy with everyone.

Offering oneself to God is quite different; it is much more involving because it provokes us to be consistent with the offering made; otherwise it would not be an offering of “sweet odour” as St Paul says. He himself confirms this: “I urge you, therefore, brothers, by the mercy of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; as your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). So not work, suffering or anything else... but your bodies, the whole person, in whatever situation he or she is in. Far from a superficial prayer: “Lord, I offer you this..., I offer you that...”. Here it is real life that is involved in its entirety. This applies to everyone, and obviously also to the suffering.

So would the offering always have the same value? That the offering of the sufferer is more valuable in God's eyes - or even redemptive - is not because pain is worth more than work or any other human experience, but because the sufferer pays a higher price to remain faithful to the Lord and benevolent to all.

It is love, in short, that makes the offering of oneself to God more or less precious. It is here that the meaning and great value of the apostolate of suffering takes root, which, if lived in communion with the sufferings of Christ, makes us an acceptable offering to God for the salvation of humanity. "Then the man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy" (*Salvifici doloris*, n. 26).

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