

EUTHANASIA AND PAIN: THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF SUFFERING

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Note: *The paper talks in the present tense about people who have since died.*

Importance of the topic

I had originally intended to entitle this talk: "If pain persists: the Christian meaning of suffering". I did so with some measure of malice aforethought. We are all familiar with the advice on packets of certain medicines, especially pain relievers: "If pain persists, see your doctor".

No one wants to be in pain, and it is part of good morals and good medicine, particularly palliative care, to do everything possible to relieve pain and suffering of all kinds. But sometimes, in spite of the best efforts of doctors and nurses, pain persists. This presents a problem. Pain persists, and the patient has already seen his doctor. What does he do now, especially when the pain is considerable?

The answer of some people is euthanasia. They think man was not meant to suffer, and they seek a painless exit from life. Others, however, find meaning and value even in suffering, and the thought of euthanasia does not even enter their minds. Thus the question of the search for meaning in suffering is important. It is important always, since suffering is part of life, and it is especially important today in the context of the euthanasia debate.

I have set myself the task of attempting to elucidate the meaning of suffering from the perspective of Christian revelation. Some of you may not be Christians, and I hope you will bear with me as I speak of matters with which you are not familiar. But the Christian faith has so much to offer in giving an understanding of suffering, that I hope you may gain something from it. And for those of you who are Christians, perhaps a little of what I have to say may be distinctively Catholic. I make no apology for that. I can only speak as the Catholic priest that I am.

I must warn all of you from the outset that some of what I have to say may sound like blasphemy. Blasphemy, that is, not in the eyes of God, but in the eyes of this hedonistic society we live in, which looks on pain and suffering as an unmitigated evil, to be avoided at all costs. Such a society looks on any attempt to find meaning in suffering as utter blasphemy. Indeed, when the pursuit of pleasure becomes the purpose of life, any effort to understand and accept suffering must be folly. But then, there is nothing new in this. St Paul, after all, wrote to the Corinthians 2000 years ago: "Here are the Jews asking for signs and wonders, here are the Greeks intent on their philosophy; but what we preach is Christ crucified; to the Jews, a discouragement, to the Gentiles, mere folly; but to us who have been called, Jew and Gentile alike, Christ the power of God, Christ the wisdom of God."¹1\$

The nature of suffering

At the outset, we ought to clarify what we mean by suffering.

¹ *I Cor* 1:22-24.

Etymologically, the English word *suffer* comes from the Latin verb *suffero*, meaning “to take up, to submit to, to undergo, to bear, to endure, to suffer”. Its primary meaning, of undergoing or bearing in general, is thus broader than our presentday understanding of suffering, which refers specifically to the bearing of something painful or unpleasant. Closely related to the word *suffero* is the Latin verb *patior*, which has the same meaning: “to bear, to support, to undergo, to suffer, to endure”. From *patior* come our English words *passion* , or suffering, and *patient* , literally one who suffers.

The Greek verb is similar: *pasko*, meaning “to be affected by, to experience a feeling, to suffer”.

The word thus has a predominantly **passive**, rather than active, character. To use another expression, it is not an action but a passion. Suffering is not so much something one *does*, as something one *feels* or *experiences*.

In its presentday English usage, suffering is understood as the experience of pain, grief or some other unpleasant phenomenon. In general it can be summed up as the *experience of evil*. As Pope John Paul II says in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, on the Christian meaning of human suffering, “man suffers whenever he experiences any kind of evil”.²\$

Now, we might ask, what is evil? The Christian understanding of evil is different from that of certain other cultural and religious traditions which hold that existence itself, or life itself, is an evil from which one needs to be liberated. Christianity, on the contrary, proclaims the essential goodness of existence, of life, of creation. Evil, in the Christian sense, is a deprivation, limitation or distortion of a good, so that one suffers when he is deprived of a good in which he ought to share.³\$

But let us be careful about the use of the word *ought*. There are some goods which are due to us in strict justice, so that we truly ought to have them. For example, wages are due to a worker and food and clothing are due to one’s children. If these are not forthcoming, the person who has to go without them would have a legitimate reason to suffer.

But most other goods are not due to the person in strict justice. For example, is not life itself a gift to which no one can be entitled? And if life itself is a gift, good health, or even normal bodily functions such as seeing or hearing or the ability to walk can also be seen as gifts. Can anyone, for example, say he has a right to be healthy, or able to see? And if he is deprived of health or eyesight, can he say he is lacking something due him? A person will suffer more or less when deprived of good health or eyesight depending on whether he considers these as gifts or as something to which he is by right entitled.

This brings us to a very important distinction between the **objective** and the **subjective** element in suffering. While based on an objective deprivation of a good, suffering nonetheless has a strong subjective element. As a result, the same objective situation may cause very different subjective reactions in different people, depending on how they view their situation.

For example, one person rendered paraplegic by an accident may grieve over the loss of the use of his legs and spend the rest of his life feeling sorry for himself, while another may

² John Paul II, Apost. Letter *Salvifici doloris*, No. 7.

³ Cf. *ibid.*

see the situation as a challenge for further growth and set out to achieve his former goals within the limitations of his disability. I recently saw an interview with a Catholic priest in his 30s who has been left quadriplegic as a result of an automobile accident. In spite of having lost all movement from his neck down, after several years of rehabilitation he has now returned to giving ethics classes in a university. Asked how he viewed his situation, he replied: "I feel like a millionaire who has lost a thousand dollars."

Similarly, one couple having a Downs Syndrome baby may grieve over the fact that their child was not born normal, while another may rejoice that they have a baby at all. If one feels he has a right to a healthy child he will suffer if his child is born abnormal, whereas if he regards any child as a gift from God he will be happy with whatever gift God sends.

The classic example of this latter attitude is Job, that quintessential paradigm of the sufferer. After Job has lost everything - his possessions, his servants and even his children - he can still say: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."⁴

One final point in these preliminary remarks on the nature of suffering: the distinction between **physical suffering** and **moral** or **mental suffering**. In simple terms, one could say that physical suffering is experienced primarily in the body, while moral suffering is experienced primarily in the soul or spirit. Examples of physical suffering are sickness, pain, hunger and thirst. Examples of moral suffering are grief following the death of a loved one, sadness due to a broken relationship, disappointment over the loss of a job, anxiety about the future, etc.

While one can make a theoretical distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering, in practice they are often very interrelated. For example, sickness in the body can often result in anxiety, sadness or even depression in the soul. Conversely, sadness over a broken relationship can often have a psychosomatic effect, resulting in sickness of the body.

The Christian meaning of life

An understanding of the Christian meaning of suffering necessarily implies an understanding of the Christian meaning of life. A few words, then, about that.

In God's original plan for mankind, there would not have been any suffering. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, and their descendants were to live a life of work, but work free from suffering, until such time as they had sufficiently proven their love for God. In the words of Genesis: "So the Lord God took the man and put him in his garden of delight, to cultivate and tend it."⁵ If in the way they lived their lives they were found worthy, they would be taken to enjoy eternal happiness with God in Heaven. Alternatively, if they rejected God, after their life on earth they would be banished from God forever to the eternal suffering of Hell.

Adam was told he could eat the fruit of all the trees in the garden, except of "the tree which brings knowledge of good and evil"⁶, and if he ate from that tree he would be punished by death. We know the rest of the story. Tempted by the devil under the form of a serpent, Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree and suffering entered the life of man. What

⁴ *Job* 1:21.

⁵ *Gen* 2:15.

⁶ *Gen* 2:17.

sort of suffering? Eve was told that henceforth childbearing was to involve pain, and Adam was told that the very ground would be under a curse so that it would yield thorns and thistles, and only by the sweat of his brow would he be able to earn his bread. Moreover, as he had been made from dust, he would return to dust; that is, he would die.⁷⁷ Thus, we can say that suffering and death entered human existence as a consequence of original sin.

From that moment on, suffering has been part and parcel of the life of man on earth. Of *all* men and *all* women. All human beings experience suffering in some form or other in the course of their lives. We cannot escape it. As we said before, suffering takes many forms: sickness, aches and pains, hunger, grief over the death of a loved one, the suffering of another who is close to us, the presence of danger, family divisions, childlessness, loneliness, remorse over one's misdeeds, the ingratitude of others The list goes on.

If we take into account that God is a just judge, who rewards good and punishes evil, we can accept that man should have to suffer for his sins. This conviction finds expression in many texts of Scripture, among them this one from the book of Daniel: "For thou art just in all that thou hast done to us, and all thy works are true and thy ways right. . . for in truth and justice thou hast brought all this upon us because of our sins."⁸⁸ To be sure, the whole Old Testament is the history of the Israelites being rewarded for their good deeds and punished for their sins.

Does this mean that every form of suffering on earth can be seen as punishment for some particular individual sin? Certainly not. Babies suffer and even die, and they committed no sin. Job suffered grievously and his suffering was not the result of his sins. And Mary, the mother of Jesus, suffered unspeakably while watching her Son die on the Cross, and she had not sinned.

It is in cases such as these, when an obviously innocent person suffers, that the great **mystery of suffering** is seen in all its stark reality. But the answer to the mystery of the suffering of the innocent is given by the most innocent person ever to live on earth, who at the same time experienced the greatest suffering: Jesus Christ.

The suffering of Jesus Christ and Redemption

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."⁹⁹ It was the love of God for man that moved him to send his only-begotten Son to earth to redeem man from original sin, and thus to overcome suffering and death by opening up the way to eternal life where there would be no more suffering.

Jesus understood human suffering. He lived on earth as man for thirty-three years and, so to speak, entered into the world of suffering, taking suffering upon his very self, as the Pope says in *Salvifici doloris*.¹⁰¹⁰ He experienced tiredness, hunger, thirst, misunderstanding, the betrayal of Judas and the defection of the other Apostles, the injustice of his condemnation, and especially the agony of his passion and death on the Cross. He truly knew suffering in his own flesh.

⁷ Cf. *Gen* 3:19.

⁸ *Dan* 3:27-28;

⁹ *John* 3:16.

¹⁰ Cf. John Paul II, Apost. Lett. *Salvifici doloris*, No. 16.

He had compassion on those who suffered and helped many of them. He healed the sick, consoled the afflicted, fed the hungry, freed people from deafness, from blindness, from leprosy, from the devil and he even restored the dead to life.

Yet it must be said that he did not come to free the world from suffering in its temporal dimension. Rather he came, as he said to Nicodemus, so that man should not perish but have eternal life. Man perishes, not when he suffers on earth in his body, but when he suffers eternally in Hell and loses eternal life. Jesus came, then, not to free mankind from suffering on earth, but to free him from eternal suffering in Hell. Even Job, in the midst of his sufferings, alludes to this definitive liberation from suffering when he says: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last . . . I shall see God. . ." ¹¹11\$

Jesus accomplished this definitive liberation of mankind from suffering, as we know, by undergoing intense, indescribable suffering himself on the Cross. With his death, Jesus attacked the cause of suffering, original sin, in its root, atoning as the God-man, and thus opening up for mankind the possibility of a life free from suffering in Heaven.

The **key to understanding the great mystery of Christ's suffering** for the salvation of mankind, and of man's suffering, is **love**. In the words we quoted before, "So much did God love the world that he sent his only-begotten Son." Christ suffered out of love for mankind. In the words of St John, having loved his own who were in the world, "he would give them the uttermost proof of his love." ¹²12\$ Or those other familiar words, "No greater love does a man have than that he lay down his life for his friends." ¹³13\$

In other words, it is love that gives suffering meaning. God revealed his love for man by suffering for us. And man's own suffering has meaning when united by love with the Cross of Christ. In the words of Pope John Paul II in *Salvifici doloris* :

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 Redemption of the world was drawn from the Cross of Christ, and from that Cross constantly takes its beginning. ¹⁴14\$

Does not popular wisdom give us the well-known adage: "Sacrifice is the touchstone of love"? That is, love is seen to be genuine when it is manifested in sacrifice. God shows the depth of his love for man by the sacrifice of the Cross. And man can show the depth of his love for God and for his fellow man by sacrifice and suffering borne with love.

One final and very important point in our consideration of the meaning of suffering within the context of the Christian meaning of life: Christ's suffering and death were followed by the Resurrection. While all human beings experience suffering on earth, this suffering will come to an end with death, after which there is the possibility of eternal life free from all suffering in Heaven.

¹¹ Job 19:25-26.

¹² John 13:1.

¹³ John 5:13.

¹⁴ John Paul II, Apost. Lett. *Salvifici doloris*, No. 18.

Earthly suffering lasts only for a time and is not the worst form of evil. What is more, man's suffering on earth is little compared with the happiness which follows in Heaven. In the words of the Book of Wisdom, which are very relevant today: "The world sees nothing but the pains they endure; they themselves have eyes only for what is immortal; so light their suffering, so great the gain they win!"¹⁵ Or those other words from St Paul's letter to the Romans: "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."¹⁶

Of course, if after death the soul goes to Hell, it enters a state of suffering which is not only far more intense than any suffering on earth, but also everlasting. The suffering of Hell is truly an unmitigated evil.

Suffering is a blessing

Not only is suffering on earth, then, not an unmitigated evil, it can be a source of great good, indeed even a blessing. Jesus himself tells us so when he pronounces those enigmatic words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted. . . . Blessed are those who suffer persecution in the cause of right; the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Blessed are you, when men revile you, and persecute you, and speak all manner of evil against you falsely, because of me. Be glad and light-hearted, for a rich reward awaits you in heaven."¹⁷

In what ways can suffering be not only not an evil but a great good, so that the Son of God can say "Blessed are those who suffer"? Let us consider seven of these ways, beginning with those that are more human and ending with the more supernatural.

1. Suffering strengthens character

I think we all know people who have been through more than their "fair share" of suffering, and have emerged greatly strengthened in character by it: migrants who have left advantaged positions in their home country to flee persecution and who have had to start from scratch to rebuild their lives in a new country where they did not even know the language when they arrived; business people who have lost everything and have had to start over from nothing, sometimes several times in the course of their career, finally ending up with very successful businesses; people who have overcome severe handicaps to lead lives of great happiness and usefulness to others. . . . The world is full of such people, some well known and most known only to their family and friends, whose lives are a real inspiration to others. Their character, tempered in the forge of suffering, helped them go on to achieve great things. Without their suffering, they would not be the persons they came to be.

Allow me to quote excerpts from a letter to *The Australian* which appeared on June 2nd of this year, which eloquently illustrates this point:

In 1959, as a three-year old I became a grand mal epileptic, having between 20-30 seizures per day. The diagnosis my parents received was that I would become more

¹⁵ *Wis* 3:4-5.

¹⁶ *Rom* 8:17-18.

¹⁷ *Matt* 5:5, 10-12.

and more brain damaged and eventually die. . . . Today, some would see such a heart-wrenching set of circumstances as justification for euthanasia. . .

The epilepsy was eventually controlled with heavy doses of powerful medication. I did receive considerable brain damage and it took the best part of seven years before a semblance of normal functioning was reached. . . I have often seen my life as worthless and wished to die. Yet, on mature reflection, as I approach 40, I am glad that euthanasia did not exist. There is a certain dignity in struggling against obstacles and slowly but certainly overcoming them.

My objection to euthanasia is precisely because it takes away the pain and struggle. It is a quick fix. I have a soul and that soul is not strengthened by instant gratification and the avoidance of pain. It is made worthy by suffering borne well and by living a difficult life with some dignity. My objection to euthanasia is that it substitutes dignity of circumstances for dignity of character. Dignity of character shines out of pain well endured - not out of pain sanitised, avoided and dismissed.

While we must do everything possible to reduce suffering on earth, we can never forget that suffering well borne can be a very powerful influence in the development of character and an expression of true human dignity. When suffering cannot be eliminated, man shows his character and dignity more by accepting the suffering and bearing it than by fleeing from it through an easy death by euthanasia.

2. Suffering helps one to be more sympathetic towards others who are suffering.

People react to the suffering of others in different ways. Some turn their heads and quickly leave the scene, incapable of relating to the person who is suffering while others immediately enter into a close relationship. There can be no question but that a person who has been through suffering himself finds it much easier to relate to the suffering of others.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why there is such a strong push for euthanasia in the affluent western world today. We are not used to suffering on the scale experienced in many parts of the less affluent world, where hunger, poor standards of health, natural disasters, war, etc., have made people used to considerable levels of suffering. When others around them suffer they do not find it difficult to relate to them.

In our own society, where in general there is comparatively little suffering - and don't misunderstand me: this is a good thing - we are not used to suffering and we find it difficult to relate to the suffering of others.

An acquaintance of mine in Melbourne whose husband recently died of a brain tumour after four months in a hospice, told me that no fewer than three of her friends had asked her if she was going to have her husband *put away*. "Hasn't he suffered enough already?" they asked. The truth of the matter is that the man was not suffering at all. Nor was his wife, who was happy to be able to visit him everyday. The three friends, she said, were all young, in their 30s, and all wealthy. "They are just selfish", she said. Perhaps she was right. They don't know what it means to suffer and they flee from it, hiding their own fear of suffering under the cloak of a seemingly altruistic desire to prevent someone else's suffering.

When we have suffered ourselves, we find it much easier to feel true compassion for others who are suffering. Compassion, after all, etymologically, means "to suffer with". We

can then “suffer with the suffering”, in the words of a first-century Christian document, the *Didache*. This compassion will give those who are suffering more strength and support than the detached “pity” which only knows how to look on suffering from a distance, much as one looks on a suffering animal with pity. What people who are suffering need is compassion, not mere pity, and those who have suffered themselves are better able to show it to them.

3. Suffering helps to make up for sins

As we said at the beginning, suffering entered into the life of mankind as a punishment for the original sin of our first parents. Thereafter, as is clear from Scripture, man must be punished by God for his personal sins as well. At the dawn of civilisation, when Cain killed his brother Abel, he was punished by God who told him that the ground he tilled would no longer yield fruit and that he would be a fugitive and wanderer on earth.¹⁸ The need for punishment for wrongdoing is understood by everyone. It is a matter of natural justice, and it forms part of the legal system of every human society. It is thus not surprising that it should also form part of man’s relationship with God. By the infinite mercy of God and the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross, the punishment meted out by God is much less than our sins deserve, but nonetheless some punishment must still be undergone.

The punishment that the sinner must undergo on earth is traditionally called *temporal punishment* to distinguish it from the *eternal punishment* to be suffered in Hell if the sinner dies unrepentant. All sins have as one of their consequences the incurring of a certain amount of temporal punishment which must be undergone before the sinner is able to enter Heaven. If the sinner dies reconciled with God but with some temporal punishment still remaining for his sins, this must be made up after death in what Christian tradition has called Purgatory.

Belief in the possibility of purification of the soul after death, or Purgatory, is so ancient that one of the Fathers of the Church, St Isidore of Seville writes: “To offer the sacrifice for the repose of the faithful departed . . . is a custom observed throughout the world. For this reason we believe it is a custom taught by the Apostles themselves.”¹⁹

This temporal punishment can be undergone or made up in many ways. The Old Testament, for example, is full of references to people fasting in sackcloth and ashes as penance for their sins in order to avoid worse punishments. All good deeds, such as acts of charity, work, prayer, and especially acts which traditionally go by the name of penance, such as fasting and abstaining from certain foods, can help to repay the debt man has acquired before God and the Church on account of his sins. The Church can also remit some or all of the temporal punishment through what are known as indulgences.

Another way, and an important one, to make up for one’s sins is the loving acceptance of suffering. Just as Christ atoned for the sins of mankind by voluntarily undergoing suffering on the Cross, so man can atone for his own sins by bearing willingly whatever suffering life brings him. In this way, suffering can be a true blessing, in that it purifies the soul and prepares it for Heaven.

This too has its bearing on the question of euthanasia. God, who is always a loving Father, allows man to suffer on earth as a way of purifying the soul for eternal life. In his infinite wisdom and providence, God knows how much suffering each of us requires to make

¹⁸ Cf. *Gen* 4:12.

¹⁹ St Isidore of Seville, *On ecclesiastical offices*, 1.

adequate satisfaction for our sins. He also knows, as Christian doctrine has taught, that the slightest pains of Purgatory are greater than the greatest pains man can suffer on earth, and so he allows man to suffer lesser pains on earth in order to be spared the greater ones of Purgatory.

But if man presumes to play God, and judges that his pains are intolerable and seeks to end his life through euthanasia, it could very well be that he thereby plunges himself into the far more intense pains of Purgatory. To put it another way, in an effort to end his suffering on earth, he only sends himself into greater suffering in Purgatory. Had he trusted God and accepted the pain, he may very well have found that God had wanted him to suffer only a little longer and then go straight to Heaven.

4. Suffering unites the sufferer with Jesus Christ

We have already said that Jesus, by taking human nature and living on earth for 33 years, and especially by his own suffering, entered into the world of suffering. While God is close to all human beings, in a real sense he is especially close to the suffering.

Indeed Jesus invited us to come close to him through the cross: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”²⁰ And he assures us that if we do this, the cross will not be heavy: “Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened; I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon yourselves, and learn from me; I am gentle and humble of heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”²¹

St Paul gives us the witness of his own identification with Christ through the cross: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”²² By taking up his cross, that is, by willingly accepting suffering of whatever kind, the sufferer has the consolation of knowing that he is especially close to Jesus Christ.

Perhaps it takes a certain level of faith to appreciate this reality, but once grasped it is a source of great strength for the sufferer. Listen to some words written by a Canberra mother several years ago in her diary when she was in the final stages of terminal cancer:

The pain in my chest is crushing me. As the pain crushed You as You struggled to breathe while you hung on the Cross. You are in my pain. I am in Yours. We are one - my God and I! What else can I ever ask for? In this You have given me proof of your love.”²³

Can suffering be an unmitigated evil when it unites the sufferer with Jesus Christ like that?

Let me give you another example of someone who found union with Christ through suffering, this time a Guatemalan Indian, who describes in a letter what happened to him in the earthquake of 1976 which killed thousands of people in his country:

²⁰ *Matt* 16:24.

²¹ *Matt* 11:28-30

²² *Gal* 2:20.

²³ Maureen Cronin died on 3 December 1987.

On the night of the earthquake Our Lord God visited us, because it is the word of God that when one is close to the cross, to suffering, to pain he is close to Jesus. After the great earthquake I spent the whole night searching through the ruins of my house. I found my two sons and my two daughters. The sons were alive; the daughters were dead. Then I got down on my knees in the midst of the rubble and prayed the prayer of holy Job: ‘Lord, you gave me my two daughters as the fruit of a holy marriage. I give back to you their souls, because I know that what you want is always for the best.’”

5. Suffering is a manifestation of God’s love

The previous two examples of loving acceptance of suffering have already suggested a further way in which suffering is a blessing: it is a manifestation of God’s love. Perhaps the statement can appear somewhat startling. Suffering, a manifestation of God’s love? Could God make those he loves suffer?

He himself says so, in the *Letter to the Hebrews*: “For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”²⁴24\$ The letter explains the reason for the discipline: “God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?”²⁵25\$ Just as earthly fathers discipline their children, making them suffer in some way in order to correct them and teach them virtue, so God treats his children on earth in the same way. Moreover, as the Letter goes on to say, our earthly fathers “disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.”²⁶26\$ Whatever allows us to share in God’s holiness must surely be a blessing, even if it is painful at the time.

That God shows his love by sharing his cross with those he loves is seen throughout human history in the lives of the saints. One can begin with Jesus himself, the beloved Son of the Father, and Mary his mother, both of whom were loved with predilection by the Father and both of whom had to bear great sufferings.

Many of the saints were told by God that they would have much to suffer on his account and, from the early martyrs to the present day, many have borne great suffering. Indeed, St John Vianney, the 19th Century French priest known more commonly as the Cure of Ars, says that the greatest saints were those who suffered the most. He himself would have to be numbered among them. In another place he says: “You wonder why God, who is goodness itself, allows us to suffer. . . But what would you think of a doctor who lost his patient because he was afraid to give him the necessary but unpleasant treatment?”

And St John Chrysostom, an early Father of the Church, writes: “He knows all that you are suffering and can prevent it, and if he does not prevent it, it is clearly because of the providence and care he has for you.”

Man does not always understand God’s ways but with faith we trust that he knows what he is doing and that, as St Paul says, “everything helps to secure the good of those who love God.”²⁷27\$

²⁴ *Heb* 12:6; the words are quoted from *Proverbs* 3:11-12.

²⁵ *Heb* 12:7.

²⁶ *Heb* 12:10.

²⁷ *Rom* 8:28.

Someone recently sent me a little poem which expresses this idea beautifully, even if it is a little trite. I do not know who wrote it. It is called “The Weaver”.

My life is but a weaving
Between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colours;
He worketh steadily.

Oftimes He weaveth sorrow,
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper,
And I the underside.

Not ‘til the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver’s skilful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

6. Suffering can be offered up for others

Just as the suffering of Jesus on the Cross was offered to the Father as atonement for the sins of mankind, so our own sufferings can be offered to God for the needs of others. St Paul, for example, writes to the Colossians that in his sufferings he completes “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.”²⁸ That is, his own sufferings, like those of Christ, are offered for the benefit of the Church.

Every person of faith understands the value of praying for others. Perhaps fewer understand that they can also offer their work, their relaxation, and especially their suffering as a most powerful prayer for others. When a person is suffering very much, the awareness that the suffering is benefitting someone else can be very consoling. It makes me very happy to say that a Hobart woman, who is presently undergoing considerable suffering with cancer, has been offering her suffering in part for the success of this seminar.

I was told some time ago about a retired university professor living out his last years in a Sydney nursing home, who felt very sorry for himself and saw no purpose in his continuing existence. But then he was visited by some boys from a nearby boys’ club who asked him if he would offer his suffering for their work in leading their friends closer to God. The professor brightened up and thereafter looked forward to the boys’ visits, asking them how their work was going. He was happy to know that somehow his sufferings were helping them. His life, which had become purposeless, had taken on a new meaning.

7. Suffering benefits those who care for the sufferers

²⁸ Col 1:24.

As we have seen, suffering brings numerous benefits to the sufferers. It also benefits those who look after them, from both the human and the spiritual points of view.

Those of you -- and there are many -- who spend your lives caring for the sick, the elderly and the dying will agree that you have grown humanly in many ways through your work. Really, practically everyone is called upon to look after a suffering person from time to time, be it only to attend to a sick person at home. One virtue which can be sorely tested and thereby grow through such work is that of patience. I dare say you are all more patient now than you were when you began that work. Compassion is another quality that health workers generally have to a great degree and which grows through their work. And what can one not say about industriousness, resourcefulness, cheerfulness, kindness. . . ?

Health workers also improve their skills in caring for the suffering as they are forced to confront ever new situations and conditions. Through their dedication, the suffering are much better looked after today than they were years ago. It is frightening to think what the state of health care would be today if suffering people were simply eliminated rather than efforts being made to improve the way of caring for them.

Turning to the spiritual aspects of care for the suffering, perhaps one of the chief benefits comes in the fact that those who care for the sick have an opportunity to deal with Jesus Christ himself. It was he, after all, who said: "I was sick. . . and you cared for me. . . . Believe me, when you did it to one of the least of my brethren here, you did it to me."²⁹ As Jesus goes on to say in this passage, not only does the carer have the opportunity to do something for Jesus himself in the person of the sick person, he also thereby becomes deserving of eternal life: "Come, you that have received a blessing from my Father, take possession of the kingdom which has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food, . . . sick and you cared for me. . . ."³⁰ It is truly a blessing to be dealing with Jesus himself and meriting heaven through one's care for the suffering.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a great believer in this reality. Listen to some words of hers which exemplify not only this truth but several others we have mentioned today:

One day they brought a man from the streets and half of his body was all eaten up; worms were crawling all over his body, and nobody could stand near him, the odour was so great. So I went to clean him and he looked at me, and then he asked: 'Why do you do this? Everybody has given me away. Why do you do this? Why do you come near me?' 'I love you', I said. 'I love you. You are Jesus in a distressing disguise. Jesus is sharing his passion with you.' And he looked up at me and said, 'And you -- you too, by doing what you are doing, are sharing.' I said, 'No, I am sharing the joy of loving with you. I love the Jesus in you.' And this Hindu gentleman, so full of suffering, what did he say? 'Glory be to Jesus Christ.' There was no complaint of those big worms eating into his body. There was no crying, no calling. He realised that he was somebody, that he was loved.'³¹

²⁹ *Matt 25:36, 40.*

³⁰ *Matt 25:34, 36.*

³¹ Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Address to retreat for priests, Rome, 5-9 October 1984.

Conclusion

I must conclude. From what we have considered, I hope you have come to realise that, from the perspective of Christian faith, suffering can be a very great blessing. While in its very nature, as the experience of an evil, it necessarily has some aspect of pain, nonetheless it can be a source of much good, both to those who suffer and to those who look after them.

In this light, it is possible to understand how St Paul and many others down the ages have been able not only to tolerate suffering but to rejoice in it. Remember St Paul's words to the Colossians: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake."³²\$

Instead of something to be complained about with the familiar question, "Why me?", the sufferer can accept his condition joyfully with the obvious answer, "Because God loves me and is sharing his cross with me." Or, in more words from the Cure of Ars: "We complain when we suffer. We have much more reason to complain when we do not suffer, since nothing so likens us to Our Lord as the bearing of his Cross."

The ultimate expression of appreciating the value of suffering is actually loving it. When it is loved, suffering ceases to be suffering. Allow me to conclude with some words from a modern-day man of God who knew great suffering practically all his life. Blessed Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, wrote these words when he was 30 years of age, in a notebook of spiritual considerations:

Jesus, I feel such desires for making reparation. My role is to love and suffer. But love makes me rejoice in suffering, to such an extent that it now seems impossible for me ever to suffer. I told you before that no one could make me upset. And I would even add that no one can make me suffer, because suffering brings me joy and peace.³³\$

Returning to the question we posed at the outset, does suffering have meaning from the Christian point of view? I think so.

¹ *I Cor* 1:22-24.

¹ John Paul II, Apost. Letter *Salvifici doloris*, No. 7.

¹ Cf. *ibid*.

¹ *Job* 1:21.

¹ *Gen* 2:15.

¹ *Gen* 2:17.

¹ Cf. *Gen* 3:19.

¹ *Dan* 3:27-28;

¹ *John* 3:16.

¹ Cf. John Paul II, Apost. Lett. *Salvifici doloris*, No. 16.

¹ *Job* 19:25-26.

¹ *John* 13:1.

¹ *John* 5:13.

¹ John Paul II, Apost. Lett. *Salvifici doloris*, No. 18.

¹ *Wis* 3:4-5.

¹ *Rom* 8:17-18.

³² *Col* 1:24.

³³ Blessed Josemaria Escriva, words written on 24 January 1932, *Intimate notes*, 582.

- ¹ *Matt* 5:5, 10-12.
- ¹ Cf. *Gen* 4:12.
- ¹ St Isidore of Seville, *On ecclesiastical offices*, 1.
- ¹ *Matt* 16:24.
- ¹ *Matt* 11:28-30
- ¹ *Gal* 2:20.
- ¹ Maureen Cronin died on 3 December 1987.
- ¹ *Heb* 12:6; the words are quoted from *Proverbs* 3:11-12.
- ¹ *Heb* 12:7.
- ¹ *Heb* 12:10.
- ¹ *Rom* 8:28.
- ¹ *Col* 1:24.
- ¹ *Matt* 25:36, 40.
- ¹ *Matt* 25:34, 36.
- ¹ Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Address to retreat for priests, Rome, 5-9 October 1984.
- ¹ *Col* 1:24.
- ¹ Blessed Josemaria Escriva, words written on 24 January 1932, *Intimate notes*, 582.