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The Grace Concealed in Suffering: Developing Virtue and Beatitude

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The Grace Concealed in Suffering: Developing Virtue and Beatitude

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Suffering, despite being a fundamental and universally experienced human phenomenon, is an enigma to most people. When they experience it, many ask, “Why me?” Some will turn to God for help when trouble arises while others will blame Him for perceived injustices. A few will even lose faith in God altogether. Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, a rich tradition of Christian thought recognizes that suffering can be morally redeeming but these insights are not brought together and clearly articulated with other aspects of moral theology in comprehensive theological works like St. Thomas’s *Summa theologiae* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This failure to provide a concentrated and comprehensive discussion of the meaning of suffering makes Catholic moral teaching less accessible to many within and external to the tradition, fails to give solace to many who suffer, and causes many to deny God’s existence.

This dissertation develops a theology of suffering based on Sacred Scripture, the thought of St. Thomas, and appropriate magisterial documents including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter on suffering, *Salvifici doloris*, along with more recent work in medicine, philosophy and theology. This theology, consistent with Catholic doctrine, views suffering as the God-given ability to sense evil, or more accurately stated, the absence of goods significant enough to threaten our existence physically, psychologically, socially or

spiritually. It identifies four tasks of suffering that lead humans to the eternal bliss of the beatific vision: to build virtue, to reorient the soul to God, to unleash our love toward those who suffer, and to redeem the person who suffers for the benefit of others. It then describes how God withholds goods, which humans perceive as evil, to provide us with opportunities to build the virtues which allow us to share in the divine nature, man's true end, using suffering to motivate us to avoid vice and pursue the goods that have been withheld. Finally, the dissertation explains that suffering is actually a religious calling and describes how one can answer that call in a way that leads to eternal joy.

This dissertation by Paul N. Chaloux, Jr. fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Moral Theology and Ethics approved by Paul A. Scherz, PhD, as Director, and by David Cloutier, PhD and David Elliot, PhD as Readers.

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Dissertation Introduction

Suffering, despite being a fundamental and universal human experience, is an enigma to most people. When they experience it, many ask, “Why me?” Some will turn to God for help when trouble arises, while others will blame Him for what they perceive to be injustices. A few will even lose faith in God altogether. But there is grace concealed within suffering: it highlights our shortcomings and imperfections, and, because of its intensity, it motivates us to pursue the goods we are lacking. It is God’s answer to original sin, the fruit of the proverbial tree of the knowledge of good and evil, driving a recalcitrant humanity ever toward the good, developing within it the virtues that prepare it to accept his grace, and ultimately allowing it to share in the divine nature.

Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, a rich tradition of Christian thought recognizes that suffering can be morally redeeming, but these insights are not brought together and clearly articulated with other aspects of moral theology in comprehensive theological works like St. Thomas’s *Summa theologiae* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.¹ This failure to provide a concentrated and comprehensive discussion of the meaning of suffering makes Catholic moral teaching less accessible to many within and external to the tradition, fails to give

¹ In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas’ greatest and most comprehensive work on theology, not one of the 512 questions is devoted to suffering. In fact, suffering is not even a specific topic of any of the articles that make up these questions. This is not to say that St. Thomas fails to discuss suffering at all. He does, but his insight is dispersed throughout the document and is not readily accessible without a strong commitment to studying large parts of the document. Similarly, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, first published by the Vatican in 1994 under the direction of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, has just three references to suffering in its index, although upon detailed review, it has another 36 paragraphs that at least tangentially involve the problem of suffering.

solace to many who suffer, and causes many to doubt and even deny God's existence. Further, over the last 50 years, some feminist and womanist theologians, including Joanne Carlson Brown and Delores Williams, have even called into question the Christian concept of redemptive suffering, blaming it for the exploitation of various disadvantaged groups. Similarly, some liberation theologians like Mary Vandenberg have also criticized the concept of redemptive suffering, declaring it a distraction from Christ's true mission, which she says is to end all suffering.

These are significant concerns that justify the development of a theology of suffering that will make Catholic teaching more accessible to those inside and outside of the tradition, provide understanding and solace to those who suffer, and answer the concerns of those who question the existence of God or the propriety of the concept of redemptive suffering. Such a theology must be consistent with Church teaching about the nature of God and man and their on-going relationship. This suggests that suffering must have a beneficial role in God's providential plan for man that can logically fit with what has already been revealed.

Everyone on earth suffers and most people consider it a curse. This is understandable because suffering is uncomfortable and often uncontrollable, and, since the beginning, man has sought comfort and to control his own destiny.² Many people have questioned why a benevolent God would allow suffering to occur and concluded that suffering and God are incompatible. In fact, the common understanding of suffering as an evil brought upon humanity as punishment for

² Genesis 3:6. Eve committed the first sin because she saw the forbidden fruit as "good for food, pleasing to the eyes and desirable for gaining wisdom."

its disobedience and ingratitude to its Creator undermines the Christian understanding of the nature of God as a loving father, perhaps best exemplified in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.³

In this rendering, Jesus portrays the father as remarkably patient with his son, who wasted half his father's property on prostitutes and a life of dissipation. His son, suffering now from a lack of resources, comes to realize that he was better off as a slave in his father's house than as a freeman on his own. He returns to his father, content to do so as a slave, but the Father will have none of it. He loves his son so dearly and is so excited to have him back that he rushes to him and takes him back with a great celebration and complete forgiveness, not concerned in the least about what his son had done or had failed to do. Any true theology of suffering must be consistent with this understanding of the Father's love for his creation. Suffering cannot be merely a punitive tool. It must be an instrument for calling back his wayward progeny and, indeed, in the parable, it is suffering in the form of hunger that brings the young man to his senses and facilitates a return to his father.⁴

It may be argued that in the parable, the father is not responsible for his son's suffering, which is different from the situation in the "real world." However, if suffering is understood as a warning of the threat of evil, then it is consistent with the loving Father of the Prodigal Son. A central argument of this dissertation is that suffering is the ability to sense evil but is not evil itself. Examples of this abound in everyday life. Hunger is a sensation when we lack food. Loneliness is a sensation that we get when we lack companionship. Pain is the feeling we get

³ Luke 15:11-32 NABRE

⁴ Luke 15: 14-19.

when we are physically hurt. In each of these cases, any of which if serious enough to threaten our existence could be called suffering, the sensation is a good because it warns us of something of which we are being deprived, which is the true evil.

A second challenge to our view of God as the loving Father of the Prodigal Son might be that such a father would not allow there to be evil in the first place. This, however, is a misunderstanding of evil. It is not an entity in its own right, it is the privation of good, much like silence is the absence of sound or darkness is the absence of light. One might then ask, why would God withhold anything good from a son he loves? After all, the Father of the Prodigal Son did not hold back his inheritance when he asked for it in the parable.⁵ But it can also be argued that God, like the best of human fathers, gives us what we need, when we need it. In the parable, the Prodigal Son had to lose everything and hit rock bottom before he would be ready to repent. While this is certainly the case for many people, it is also true that no person could absorb all the good that God could bestow and so God must withhold goods from everyone. In fact, the Prodigal Son did not get every good. He received his inheritance but not his brother's share. God is good and gives us what we need, when we need it, just as the Father of the Prodigal Son did in the parable.

This theology of suffering is inspired by the insights of Saint John Paul II from his 1984 Apostolic letter, *Salvifici doloris*, the first such work devoted to the problem of human suffering. The Pope's letter is brief, only thirty-one paragraphs in length, and despite the depth of its insight, it is not a comprehensive theology that addresses all of the concerns raised in the

⁵ Luke 15:12

opening paragraphs. Three other late twentieth century sources provided the most significant insights in the development of this theology. The first is the influential essay *The Love of God and Affliction* written by the French philosopher Simone Weil at the onset of World War II.⁶ The second is *Suffering*, the 1975 classic from Dorothee Soelle, a German liberation theologian. The third primary source is the 1991 book by American physician Eric Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*. Each of these commentators, working in different fields in different places in the last century, added significant insight into the problem of suffering that made it possible to develop what many might consider a counter-intuitive, even paradoxical understanding that *suffering is the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually*. Yet, such a thesis, at once profound, provocative, and perhaps awkwardly precise, is consistent with what one would expect of a God who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”⁷ After all, suffering is clearly the chosen vehicle used by Christ for our redemption.

Another way to understand the nature of suffering is to contemplate the story of the Fall of Man as described in Genesis 1-3. In this reflection, suffering is the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that attracted the first humans to sin, despite the warning that it was attached to death, as indeed it is. Consider that the first people lived in the comfort of a garden

⁶ Affliction is the translation of the French word “malheur” chosen by the translator with the note that there is no direct correlation in English. It is an interesting choice because the etymology would suggest mal=bad + heure=time→ bad times. The standard translations for malheur include misfortune, woe, grief, adversity, bad luck, trouble, and curse. In the context of her writing, Weil herself refers to it as a kind of extreme suffering which incorporates physical, emotional and social components.

⁷ John 3:16 NABRE

paradise. They had power and purpose, having been given dominion over the whole of creation.⁸ They also had each other for love and companionship. But yet, none of this satisfied them. They were willing to give it all up to be like God, having the knowledge of good and evil. This is not surprising given human experience; most children want to be like their parents, who they love and admire.

Whether one believes that the events of the first chapters of Scripture are literally true or not, the wisdom that temporal, material goods would fail to satisfy man is still a profound truth, proven over and over again across time and space.⁹ Likewise, the fact that man desires the truth above all, and in particular, the knowledge of good and evil, is consistent with what St. Thomas calls “Man’s Last End,” the “Beatific Vision.”¹⁰ It seems clear that God intended the tree to be both a test and a learning experience. In fact, the *Catechism* explains that many of the Doctors of the Church believe that God permitted this original sin to bring out even greater good for mankind.¹¹ It should not be surprising that a loving God would want his children to be happy and to share in his divine nature since human parents, who cannot love as perfectly as God, also want their children to be happy and to have what they have.

⁸ Genesis 1:28.

⁹ Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000, 390. The *Catechism* teaches that “the account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man.” Note, subsequent references from the *Catechism* will be in the form: CCC, 390.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920. New York: Benziger Bros, 1948 I-II Q1-5. Note subsequent references from the *Summa* will be in the form: ST I-II Q1-5.

¹¹ CCC, 412

Suffering is the ability to sense evil or, to state it more appropriately, the absence of goods significant enough to threaten one's existence, and thus provides the knowledge of evil. This puts suffering in opposition to true evil because it warns people of the threat that it presents. It is necessarily an unpleasant experience, so that it naturally works to drive people away from evil and toward the good that they need. As such, it serves as a warning to those who separate themselves from God's will of the eternal ramifications of their actions. It is persistent because God desires to save us from ourselves and to teach us the way to beatitude. This consistent pressure to avoid doing evil is designed to make good actions become habitual, pushing people from vice to virtue. It is also notable that the knowledges of good and evil are inseparable because evil only exists as the absence of good.

By pushing people ever toward the good in this way, suffering also provides both the knowledge of good and the desire to attain it. As will be explained in detail in chapter one, suffering has four tasks in God's providential plan for humanity. First, it drives the development of the natural virtues that clear the way for God's grace. This can also be thought of as instilling proper self-love in the sufferer. Second, it re-orientes the soul to God, instilling a love of God. Third, it releases love, providing opportunities for people to demonstrate true charity toward their neighbor by relieving their suffering. The fourth task is to redeem the sufferer, leading him or her to share in the suffering of Christ and thereby, to partake in the divine nature.

Continuing this reflection, God warned Adam and Eve that gaining the knowledge of good and evil is coupled with death. This was not necessarily a threat, but it is an important truth. There is irritation but no suffering without death to threaten one's existence. This uncertainty is

largely what makes suffering effective; the choice to do evil would be more attractive in many cases if the ramifications were not so severe. Death is threatening to those who do evil, because suffering is a warning and a preview of what awaits those who separate themselves from the ultimate source of goodness. For those aligned with God and sharing in his divine nature, however, death provides the gateway to a glorious rebirth in the presence of God, the ultimate end for man.

To insure consistency with Church teaching and the revealed truth about God, this theology is kept in constant conversation with Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (referred to hereafter as the *Catechism* in the text and *CCC* in the notes) and Saint Thomas Aquinas' most comprehensive and respected work on theology, the *Summa Theologiae* (referred to hereafter as the *Summa* in the text and *ST* in the notes).¹² Other works of the Church Fathers and the Magisterium are also used as appropriate to demonstrate that the theology developed here is consistent with divine revelation and magisterial interpretation.

¹² These three sources were chosen as a basis for assuring that the developed theology is consistent with the Catholic faith because they have been acknowledged by the Magisterium as authoritative representatives of true Catholic teaching. Sacred Scripture is divine revelation. The *Catechism* was declared by John Paul II to be a "sure norm for teaching the faith" when it was published on October 11, 1992 (John Paul II, *Fidei depositum*, 3). The *Summa* was chosen because it is the most respected and comprehensive theological work of Thomas Aquinas, who is recognized by the Church's Magisterium as a Doctor of the Church and "an apostle of the truth" and was singled out by John Paul II himself for the enduring originality of his thought. In fact, the Pope states that "the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology." (John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 43-44) Pope Leo XIII, was even more effusive in his praise of Thomas, telling the bishops in his 1879 encyclical *Aeterni patris*, "We exhort you, venerable brethren, in all earnestness to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas, and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society, and for the advantage of all the sciences." (Leo XIII, *Aeterni patris*, 31)

This dissertation is written in four chapters. The function of the first chapter is to re-orient the reader's expectations about suffering, setting the stage for the more complete exposition of the theology of suffering in chapter two. To do so, the first chapter defines the nature of suffering as the ability to sense evil, the good one lacks, and motivate one to attain that good. This chapter ends with an explanation of the four tasks of suffering that bring mankind to true happiness in the presence of God. In other words, it shows how suffering provides mankind with the knowledge of good and evil and how it motivates each person to fulfill his or her purpose, defined as sharing in the divine nature in union with God.

The second chapter extends the concepts introduced in the first and puts them in the context of what has been revealed to the Church concerning God's providence, his plan for the salvation of humanity.¹³ Whereas the initial chapter is focused on defining the nature and role of suffering in relation to evil, the good one lacks, this chapter explores the nature of evil itself and how God makes use of it to lead individual people to salvation. In doing this, it demonstrates that God is active in this world and that his providence is particular to individuals and not just a general providence as proposed by the Deists. The result is a theology of suffering, consistent with established Catholic doctrines and its understanding of moral theology and providence, that can make them more accessible to those both inside and outside the tradition.

The second half of the dissertation is focused on applying the theology developed in the first half in a way that will make the concepts more accessible to everyone while showing them

¹³ The sources used will be primarily Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism*, the *Summa*, and *Salvifici doloris* while the key existential questions to be addressed will be man's last end (the meaning of life), death, judgment, heaven and hell, in addition to the meaning of suffering, the existence of evil and the nature of God.

how they can be applied in living out their daily lives. The third chapter answers critical questions that have been asked throughout the ages on issues that impact this theology of suffering by those engaged in debates about whether the existence of God is consistent with the existence of evil and suffering in the world or those who challenge the propriety of the concept of redemptive suffering in a world where the powerful exploit their weaker brothers and sisters. It also engages with various well-known theodicies to highlight common themes and to demonstrate how this theology of suffering addresses shortcomings identified in those works. This serves two purposes: to make the key concepts of this theology clearer by looking at them in different contexts and to demonstrate its credibility.

The final chapter of this dissertation recognizes that suffering is a religious calling and describes how we should answer that call in a way that will lead us to the joy of the beatific vision. This chapter begins by elaborating on the role of the Church in God's call to us, explaining how suffering leads us to God through his Church and why the Church is so instrumental in God's plan for salvation as it facilitates the first and second tasks of suffering. This will be followed by discussions of the call to share the messages from our suffering with those around us and our call to take action to help our neighbors to respond to their own suffering. Together, these two discussions address the third task of suffering: to unleash our love of neighbor. The fourth task is discussed with a focus on dying a good death and the role of suffering in our redemption. This leads to the final topic of the chapter which will complete the journey to joy, summarizing how suffering ultimately leads us to share in God's nature and his life, basking in the pure joy of union with Him.

Understanding suffering as God's divine beacon of joy, highlighting stridently, persistently, and unambiguously when we deviate from the path that leads to our ultimate happiness and fulfillment, gives our trials on earth meaning that can make them bearable and even joyous, when we contemplate the promises of Christ. We who suffer can see ourselves not as being punished or cursed, but as being privileged messengers of God's divine mercy and love, bearing our short-term discomfort for the spiritual benefit of others, sharing in the Christ's suffering but also in his ultimate glory. Above all, we can be thankful that God loves us so much that he would expend this much effort to give us a way back when we turned from him like the prodigal son in the parable.

Chapter I: Understanding Suffering

The Nature of Suffering

The core principle that defines the nature of suffering in this theological proposal is that *suffering is the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually.* It was developed based on insights from Pope St. John Paul II's 1984 apostolic letter, *Salvifici doloris*, the most profound work on suffering in the last century, in conversation with the work of Eric Casell, Simone Weil, and Dorothee Soelle, among others. As will be discussed in great detail in the second chapter, suffering is God's answer to original sin, driving a recalcitrant humanity ever toward the good, developing within it the virtues that prepare it to accept his grace, and ultimately allowing it to share in the divine nature, which is "man's last end." It provides man with the knowledge of both good and evil.

It is altogether appropriate that such a theology is anchored in the thoughts of Pope Saint John Paul II, who, as his biographer George Weigel notes, has an intimate familiarity with suffering that uniquely prepared him for this work.¹ His mother died when he was nine, followed in relatively short order by his brother and then his father, leaving him an orphan in an occupied country. He suffered loss and hardship under repressive Nazi and Communist regimes, once being run over by a German army truck and left unconscious in a ditch. In 1981, he survived an assassination attempt and after emergency surgery, was almost killed by a tainted

¹ Weigel, George. *The Truth of Catholicism: Inside the Essential Teaching and Controversies of the Church Today*. New York: Harper, 2002. 215-216

blood transfusion. These experiences provide the kind of perspective that allowed him to write *Salvifici doloris* barely six weeks after meeting his would-be assassin in a Roman jail. As Peter Vaghi put it, “John Paul II understood and shared the ‘treasure’ of his own suffering. For that gift, our world, and each of us, has been deeply enriched.”²

The core principle is actually an amalgam of four main ideas. The true center of the theology is that *suffering is the ability of humans to sense evil*. In *Salvifici doloris*, John Paul II describes suffering as an experience of evil, noting that it has both a subjective and a passive character.³ Indeed, he notes that even when man brings suffering on himself, the suffering remains something passive in its metaphysical essence. By this, he means that suffering for the subject is an output of the senses, whether it is experienced as pain, sorrow, disappointment, discouragement or even, despair. Suffering is a feeling, not an action and thus, can be understood as a divinely-inspired warning system that alerts us to the presence of evil.

Writing about forty years before John Paul II, Simone Weil also had the insight that God uses suffering as a type of divine messaging system. For Weil, “only affliction and beauty are piercing enough to penetrate the human soul and allow it to hear the word of God.”⁴ Indeed, she describes affliction as “a marvel of divine technique that introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal and cold,” by which God reveals Himself to those who are oriented to Him in love.⁵ She further describes affliction “as causing God to be absent

² Vaghi, Peter. “Faith in Focus: Challenge and Opportunity,” *America* (October 31, 2005).

³ John Paul II. *Apostolic Letter: Salvifici doloris*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, AAS 76 (1984): 7

⁴ Weil, Simone. “The Love of God and Affliction” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, Edited by George A Panichas. New York: McKay, 1977. 467

⁵ Weil, “The Love of God,” 452

for a while, a darkness in which there is nothing to love and yet if the soul goes on wanting to love, God will come to show himself to this soul and reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job.”⁶

The core principle of this theology, *suffering is the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually*, requires the underlined clause for the sake of clarity and precision. Returning to John Paul II’s assertion that suffering is an experience of evil, it must be said that although most people would agree with that definition, it means very different things depending on how one defines evil. If one understands evil as a discrete entity, then suffering as an experience of evil means meeting up with this evil entity, an encounter that one would want to avoid. Christianity has an altogether different response because as John Paul II explains, “it 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.”⁷ Therefore, John Paul II reframes suffering in terms of a good in which “a person does not share, from which he is cut off, or of which he deprives himself.”⁸ As will become obvious, this clarification is absolutely critical in understanding suffering. If one understands evil as the absence of good as in the Christian tradition, then suffering becomes both a warning that some good is missing from one’s life and a motivator to pursue that good. Therefore, suffering can be perceived as either a help or a hindrance, a curse or a blessing, depending on one’s understanding of evil and how it is experienced.

⁶ Weil, “The Love of God,” 442.

⁷ John Paul II. *Salvifici Doloris*, 7.

⁸ John Paul II. *Salvifici Doloris*, 7.

The final thought of the defining principle, *suffering is the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually*, insists that suffering must involve evils or more accurately stated, the privation of good(s), significant enough to threaten one's existence, is perhaps intuitive because in general usage, suffering is reserved for significant problems and not mere irritants. This clarification, which will be shown to have important implications for the resolution of suffering, is not discussed at all by John Paul II but is highlighted by Eric Cassell from his medical work and is consistent with the insights of Weil.

Cassell, writing from a medical perspective in 1991, recognizes that while physical pain is the primary image formed by people when they think of suffering, it is only one of many sources of human suffering.⁹ Simply put, suffering is the sense of loss people feel when they are deprived of goods such as health, friends, family, possessions, and ultimately, union with God and it can be felt as pain, sorrow, loneliness, isolation and /or a yearning for God. In fact, whatever the initial source of suffering, whether it be from a physical, psychological or social loss, there is a growing consensus that suffering must consist of more than just physical pain but must also cause psychological distress and social isolation. Accordingly, Cassell rejects the historical dualism of mind and body in favor of a construct of an integrated whole that includes a person's view of his or herself as both an individual and as part of the community as well as attributes such as his or her experiences, relationships, memories and inherent personality. He

⁹ Cassell, Eric J, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*. 2nd edition. New York: Oxford, 2004, 31-40.

asserts that only by considering the effect of suffering on the whole person can there be true healing. Cassell's concept of an integrated whole can also be extended to explain why people who have clinical depression can also exhibit physical symptoms like digestive and sleeping disorders and why on occasion, physical disorders can be manifestations of psychological, social or spiritual disorders.

Cassell also argues convincingly that physical pain is not synonymous with suffering. He notes that while it is commonly believed that the greater the pain, the greater the suffering, this is often not the case.¹⁰ He uses childbirth as an example of extreme pain that can be perceived by the mother as uplifting. In his experience, patients can writhe in pain from kidney stones but not experience it as suffering (by their own statements) because "they know what it is." His best example of this phenomena is that when a person through great pain or deprivation is brought closer to a cherished goal, he or she may experience a feeling of enormous triumph rather than suffering.

The fact that people experience suffering physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually is a clear indication that our existence is threatened by needs beyond the material ones that result in physical pain. All of this can be experienced and discerned by those who suffer. People know when they need food because they feel hungry, when they suffer physical injury because they feel pain, when they are isolated from society because they feel lonely and when they lack unity with God because they have a longing in the soul that for many is hard to discern but ultimately is the only need that lasts beyond the material world. When any of these losses

¹⁰Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 34-35.

becomes so great that they threaten the person's existence, suffering will commence because the subject feels anxiety and sometimes depression if the person feels that hope is lost.

As Cassell notes and the Catholic Church teaches, man is a composite being and all of these needs are interconnected.¹¹ For instance, if a person does not live in society, he may have difficulty meeting his material needs of food and warmth, threatening his existence and perhaps his faith in God. Such a person is afflicted with suffering and will likely experience all the sensations of suffering simultaneously: physical pain, loneliness, anxiety, and longing of the soul.

These observations led Cassell to realize that suffering only occurs when people perceive an injury or illness as a threat to their existence, not merely to their lives, but to their integrity as persons.¹² This is a tremendously important insight because it also means that suffering ends when the person's existence is no longer in question or the existential threat ceases, although the pain may remain. From a strictly medical perspective, suffering can be meliorated by giving the patient a clear understanding of what is causing their pain and a clear view of future expectations. For instance, simply knowing the reason for the pain, even if it is the result of a terminal illness, can ease the suffering. Likewise, if the pain is due to a condition that causes a person to lose some ability by which he defines himself, providing an alternative can give that person a new view of himself that ends the experience of suffering. This also explains why

¹¹ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 42. and CCC, 327.

¹² Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering* 42-44

treating a person's pain without finding the source or reason for it is insufficient to ease the suffering if the person still feels threatened.

The most profound implication of Cassell's epiphany on suffering involves what John Paul II calls moral suffering.¹³ As Cassell notes, when a person can find meaning in their suffering, they can ignore the pain and may even feel exhilaration, thus resolving the suffering. This is especially true if the meaning for their suffering is transcendent. Cassell points out that pain or loss offers the Christian the chance, through suffering, to identify with the suffering of Christ. He says that such Christian suffering can be uplifting because of the occasion for transcendence it offers. He also notes that there are even secular examples of this, offering Nathan Hale's patriotic last words, "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country" as evidence that personal agony can be overcome when it allows the person to retain and honor their sense of self.¹⁴

Cassell concludes that the key to understanding suffering is the realization that it takes place when the person is diminished by the experience.¹⁵ On the other hand, if the experience is enlarging, the suffering is resolved, even if the pain remains. In his words, "suffering is good only to the extent that it provides an engine that drives toward enrichment – toward fulfillment in dimensions of the human condition other than those closed by the illness or toward attainment of

¹³ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 43-44; John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 6.

¹⁴ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 44.

¹⁵ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 54.

some transcendental goal.”¹⁶ Cassell points out that the saints would truly have suffered if after they experienced great privation and pain, they lost their faith in Christ.

This is a point that requires emphasis. Suffering is good but only to the extent that it improves the human condition. What, then, would make suffering pointless or worse yet, a negative to the person? Primarily the person’s reaction to it. Suffering is an internal warning to the person that requires a response to resolve. If the person fails to heed the warning and take action, then the suffering will have been in vain. As will be discussed extensively in the following chapters, the first action required of the sufferer is to articulate what he or she is feeling so that others can respond to it, either to aid the sufferer or to correct the underlying reason for the suffering. Every sufferer has the opportunity to advance goodness in some way, but this starts with passing on the message he or she receives that some good is missing.

In “The Love of God and Affliction,” written with the backdrop of World War II in Europe, Weil defined “*malheur*” (severe suffering or affliction) as “an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain.”¹⁷ This single line identifies suffering as a sensation made present to the soul and insists that it cannot be trivial but must threaten one’s existence in a way equivalent to death, both concepts that were integrated into the core principle of this theology of suffering. To make the points even more strongly, Weil insists that such affliction must involve all three human dimensions: physical, psychological and social. She explains that

¹⁶ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 54

¹⁷ Weil, Simone. “The Love of God and Affliction” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, Edited by George A Panichas. New York: McKay, 1977. 440.

“a pain which is only physical is of very little account and leaves no mark on the soul,” using the example of a toothache that is soon forgotten when a bad tooth is removed.¹⁸ Likewise, she says that suffering without physical pain is artificial and can be eliminated by a “suitable adjustment of the mind.” While the prevalence of psychological suffering cannot be denied, many forms, like clinical depression, also have a physical component consistent with Weil’s description of affliction. Finally, she maintains that pain must involve social degradation or at least the fear of it to rise to the level of affliction. As Weil put it, only suffering, along with beauty, is intense and pervasive enough that it cannot be mistaken as anything else other than a message from God.¹⁹

If suffering is understood as a message from God, then the person who suffers can be understood as God’s messenger. It is important to note that the message provided by suffering is not always directed at the person who actually suffers but can be for the benefit of others. For instance, if the suffering is caused by some physical or natural danger, the message to be conveyed is in the form of a warning to others to avoid the situation. If the suffering is caused by the sin of another, the message will be an appeal to the consciences of the oppressor and the on-lookers to put an end to the hurtful activity. If the suffering is in the form of a punishment for one’s own sins, then the message is a deterrent to future sin. In all cases, the sufferer’s message is a cry for help, whether it be silent or loud, and an opportunity for others to practice charity by coming to the sufferer’s aid. Further, when the person willingly suffers for the potential benefit of others, as will be discussed below, because it is in keeping with God’s will, the person is

¹⁸ Weil, “The Love of God,” 439-441.

¹⁹ Weil, “The Love of God,” 467.

sharing in the nature of Christ, which has undeniable spiritual benefit. The kind of opportunity to share in the mission of Christ and be part of his kingdom should give solace to many who suffer. It is more than just an opportunity, though, it is a responsibility to help our neighbors on the path to beatitude because we are all called to love.

Although it is clear that suffering is a means of learning God's will, it is also quite clear that learning through suffering is a slow and painful process of trial and error. It is obviously more efficient and less painful to heed other forms of divine revelation that are part of the deposit of faith held by the Church, including Sacred Scripture and traditional sources like the *Summa* and the *Catechism* whenever possible. Nevertheless, suffering is often very effectively used in conjunction with other sources of revelation. It can provide impetus to seek out these sources when we suffer and do not understand the reason. It can also validate other sources of revelation when they are followed and suffering is alleviated or avoided. Conversely, false teachings or interpretations of those teachings are highlighted when they result in more suffering.

Dorothee Soelle, writing a generation later at the end of the Vietnam War, adopted Weil's definition of affliction for her 1975 book, *Suffering*. In it, she offers the insight that "true suffering goes beyond the scientific diagnosis of pain, expressing not only an extended duration and intensity but a multi-dimensionality that roots the suffering in the physical, psychological, and social spheres."²⁰ Echoing Weil, she makes the point that pain that strikes only one of these dimensions is not only easier to overcome but is easier to forget, using the same example of a tooth ache to illustrate the point. Similarly, she agrees with Weil that purely psychological pain

²⁰ Soelle, Dorothee. *Suffering*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, 13-16.

that is spared physical pain is artificial and imaginary and that true suffering or affliction requires some social degradation or at least the fear of it. Citing the genre of psalms of lament, Soelle says that “suffering threatens every dimension of life, encompassing physical and psychological pain as well as social isolation, loneliness and ostracism.”²¹

Suffering, then, can be described as *the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually*. The person experiences this privation as physical pain, but also has psychological distress because of the uncertainty of his or her continued existence, and because these are not appealing traits, others avoid the person, causing social isolation. Because of the intensity of the experience, the sufferer is highly motivated to pursue the good he or she lacks. While it is undoubtedly a bad thing when a person is lacking something so fundamental that it threatens his or her existence, it is an undeniable good that the person is warned about this threat in a way that cannot be easily ignored and that demands action be taken. Because it relentlessly drives people to attain the good(s) they are lacking, while also driving onlookers to see the benefits of leading a moral life, suffering should be seen as ultimately beneficial for both the individual sufferer and for society as a whole. It should also be recognized, as will be discussed in detail in chapter two, that when God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden, warning our parents that such knowledge was attached to death, it also allowed a recovery path to men to find their way back to God since it also gave the knowledge of good, and not just evil.

²¹ Soelle. *Suffering*. 13-16. In this section, she cites Psalms 16, 22, 73, 88 and 116 as examples of individual psalms of lament

It must be noted that it is not always possible to attain the temporal goods that the person lacks. However, because of the incredible wisdom in the divine design of suffering, if one can establish meaning for the suffering, it mitigates the uncertainty that drives the psychological trauma, providing a level of spiritual and mental relief, even if the physical pain continues. This allows people who endure pain for a greater good to feel exhilaration instead of suffering because they are attaining spiritual goods. It also prevents those who have strong faith in the afterlife from suffering even in the face of certain death since they know that even death will not threaten their existence. Those who are not attaining spiritual goods will get no such relief, however, unless or until they turn toward God as will be discussed in the following chapters.

The Four Tasks: How Suffering Generates Love and Forms Virtue

As just discussed, suffering is the ability to sense the existence of evil, or said more accurately, the goods one lacks that threatens one's existence. Suffering has four tasks in God's providential plan that are designed to motivate four types of responses that will ultimately lead to human beatitude based on the grace of God and a person's spiritual maturity. In other words, these tasks provide the knowledge of good and the motivation to pursue and attain it. These tasks, which are hierarchical and sequential in most cases, are inspired by the insights of John Paul II in *Salvifici doloris*. It must be noted that these insights require some discernment from the reader because John Paul II neither numbers them or puts them in a given sequence in his Apostolic Letter or elsewhere. He does, however, provide examples from which this can be extrapolated.

The first task of suffering is to drive the development of virtue that will clear the way for God's grace to be accepted by the sufferer. The initial response to suffering is almost inevitably self-centered, with the sufferer seeking to avoid or alleviate suffering in any way possible. Because suffering is a response to the privation of a good, it will drive a person to attain the good as an act of self-love. Furthermore, once the good is attained, the person will naturally try to retain it through habituation, which results in the development of natural human virtues. This is beneficial to the person because it results in temporal happiness and because it promotes the common good, it is also good for society. As will be discussed later in this chapter, living a virtuous life prepares a person to respond positively to God when he offers the person his grace.

The second task of suffering is to re-orient one's will to God. As will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, God reaches different people in different ways. Some people, like St. Augustine can be converted through appeals to the intellect without the need to use suffering to alert them to their needs while others, like St. Paul, need to be thrown from their horses before they see the light. For most people, being thrown off their horse actually means they are presented with suffering that cannot be resolved through natural means, causing a person to turn to God for help as a "last resort." For others, it is somewhere in between, with conversion happening incrementally, beginning with the development of virtue through suffering which can make the person open to accepting the grace of faith when it is presented to him or her.

The third task of suffering, discussed in detail in the following segment, is to provide an opportunity to show compassion for our suffering neighbors. While men after the Fall are typically isolated from the community when they suffer, people with grace react in a more

positive way toward their suffering neighbors, causing John Paul II to describe suffering in this scenario as “unleashing love.”²² However, for this to have salvific value, it must be done for spiritual purposes (out of love for God) and hence, it must follow the previous step, which enabled the re-orientation toward God and the infusion of the applicable theological virtue of charity.

The fourth task of suffering is to redeem the sufferer, as described in the final segment of this chapter. It results in the most spiritually advanced response to suffering, which is to willingly suffer for the benefit of others out of love for them and for God. To do so is to share in the divine nature, emulating the redemptive suffering of Christ, and leads to beatitude, salvation and joy. As the greatest demonstration of love, it requires self-love, the love of God, and the love of neighbor developed through the previous three tasks.²³ It is to fully give of oneself as Jesus did on the Cross as he declared to God with his dying breath: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”²⁴

The First Task: Developing Virtue which Clears the Way for Grace

Not surprisingly, the first way that God uses suffering to redirect us to goodness and beatitude is by teaching us proper self-love while attending to our own material needs. This does not require faith or even an acknowledgment of God, it merely requires people to react to suffering naturally, which is to avoid or alleviate it as soon as possible since it is an unpleasant

²² John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 29.

²³ John 15:13 “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

²⁴ Luke 23:46 NABRE

experience by design. Because suffering highlights evil to humans, and as discussed above, evil is the lack of some good that threatens our existence, it motivates all humans to seek out the good that they are missing. Furthermore, once they learn to attain the needed goods, the lack of which caused their suffering, people are highly motivated to repeat the process until it becomes ingrained as a habit.

The concept of habits is a very important part of human anthropology to understand in any theology of suffering. Simply put, human beings need habits because many, if not most decisions people make do not have enough lead time for structured reasoning. Nor is it a good use of time and intellectual resources to constantly re-evaluate decisions that are repeated regularly, like how best to go home from work. For people to do these things automatically requires them to become a second nature of the person, which must be difficult to change in order to be effective. Habits make people efficient, but they also define a person because a person will reliably and repeatedly carry out habitual actions. Conversion can therefore be thought of as creating or changing a habit.

As Thomas explains in his *Treatise of Habits* in the *Summa*, for a habit to be formed, reason must completely overcome the appetitive power (sensual desires) and generally requires the instigation by some extrinsic principle.²⁵ Because the appetitive power is inclined to multiple things and in various ways, it takes multiple acts of reason to perfect a habit.²⁶ Habits grow

²⁵ The *Treatise on Habits* includes questions 49-54 of the first part of the second part of the *Summa*. Note, *habitus* is a derivative of the Latin root *habere* (to have). As such, the implication is that a habit is something one has gained rather than the modern sense of the word, which is something one does regularly. This nuance is important because it reflects the effort required to form a habit

²⁶ *ST* I-II Q51.3.

through repetition and intensity, becoming increasingly reliable and repeatable.²⁷ Nevertheless, habits are acts of the will and so can be controlled and overridden if desired.²⁸ Thus, habits can be corrupted by a judgment of reason, whether through ignorance, passion or deliberate choice.²⁹ Habits can also be diminished if they are not practiced or if the intensity of the action is itself diminished.³⁰ Not all habits are acquired by repetition, however. Some habits are infused by God into man to suit God's purposes, including those that are supernatural, beyond the natural capability of men.³¹

Habits are normally distinguished in respect to their active principles, in respect to their objects, or in respect to nature.³² Habits that are suitable to a person's nature are virtues while those evil habits that are contrary to nature are vices. At the same time, habits that dispose one to an act befitting human nature are human virtues while habits that dispose a person to an act befitting some higher nature are called divine or supernatural virtues.

The *Treatise on Habits* is generic in a sense, since it applies to all habits, whether they are oriented toward God (perfect virtue) or toward some earthly end (imperfect virtue or vice).³³

²⁷ ST I-II Q52.3.

²⁸ ST I-II Q50.5.

²⁹ ST I-II Q53.1.

³⁰ ST I-II Q53.2

³¹ ST I-II Q51.4.

³² ST I-II Q54.

³³ After first categorizing natural moral virtues as those that can be acquired by human effort and supernatural virtues as those that must be infused into the soul by God, Thomas has a second set of categorizations, aimed primarily at differentiating the acquired virtues. A perfect virtue is one that leads to beatitude, which includes only the infused virtues. In the *Prima Secundae*, Thomas identifies two types of imperfect moral (cardinal) virtues: ones that are not connected to the other moral virtues or those that are "only an inclination in us to do some kind of good deed, whether such inclination be in us by nature or by habituation." (ST I-II Q65.1) However, in the *Secunda Secundae*, he introduces two more ways a moral virtue may be classified as imperfect: they are ineffective, or they are ordered to a proximate good but not to God (ST II-II Q23.7; ST II-II Q47.13). In addition, he also adds a third distinction; that of a true versus a false virtue. Any virtue ordered to a true good, is a true virtue, whether it be to a

This allows it to be used as a bridge from the ancient philosophers to current theological thought while also providing a basis for understanding why human habits are worthwhile, even those that do not lead one directly to heaven. Indeed, although he does not explicitly say so, Thomas is recognizing that there are a whole range of habits that humans acquire in day-to-day life that are necessary for efficient living that do not have significant salvific ramifications. Said another way, some habits are formed strictly for temporal reasons, while others lead to eternal life.

There are two ways that Thomas' *Treatise on Habits* is important to the understanding of suffering. The first is its explanation of why habits are important to human functioning and are therefore, difficult to break. This concept is critical because it explains why the sensation of suffering must be vigorous, persistent, and unappealing if it is to effectively highlight goods that are lacking and motivate the individual to make the changes that would allow them to be attained. Thomas also provides the insight that to break a habit requires reason to overcome the will, but he offers little in the way of how this is accomplished. It is here that John Paul II would claim that "it is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls."³⁴ With that in mind, it can now be seen that, in the terminology of St. Thomas, suffering can be the extrinsic principle that moves the passive agent away from a bad habit and toward a good one.³⁵ In other words, suffering provides the motivation to change from a vice to a virtue by making vice uncomfortable. Suffering is therefore an important asset to be

proximate good (a true but imperfect virtue) or to the ultimate good (a true and perfect virtue). A false virtue is ordered to an apparent good that is actually evil: for example, a miser's thrift.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, #27

³⁵ ST I-II Q51.3

used in God's providential plan to drive people from sin and vice to virtue and beatitude because it is severe enough to motivate a change and overcome ingrained habits.

Pierre Bourdieu, the 20th century French philosopher and sociologist, has a theory about how this works. His basic premise is that most of people's actions rely not on rational conscious decisions, as economists may suggest, but on *habitus*, internal habits based on a person's experience and perceptions.³⁶ Bourdieu explains that the reason that a person's actions are not completely predictable is that the *habitus* interacts with the environment (called fields by Bourdieu) and a person's capital (the resources and skills that he or she can bring to bear gained through his or her life history) to generate an action. It is important to note that Bourdieu does leave some room for free will to be exercised but asserts that it is very limited in practice.³⁷ For instance, if something causes a person to suffer, the person will likely take the time to freely figure out a response that will alleviate the suffering and then, if the solution is successful, the person will simply repeat it until it becomes an ingrained habit.

As Sam Binkley describes Bourdieu's system, "successful moves succeed because they result from a natural alignment of the *habitus* with the logic of a given field, experienced by the actor and others as unselfconscious and easy."³⁸ This is why habits are so hard to break. To break a habit requires a significant change in the field (environment) in which the *habitus* interacts. However, many forms of suffering can provide this type of environmental change,

³⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loic Wacquant. *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1992, 18-19.

³⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loic Wacquant. *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 177.

³⁸ Binkley, Sam. *Happiness as Enterprise: An Essay on Neoliberal Life*. New York: SUNY Press, 2014, 82.

from illness to natural disaster. This in turn, changes the way the person acts, creating new habits. Whether a person changes in a lasting way is dependent on the person's experience and perceptions that have been built up by practices they are exposed to, which could go back generations, as well as the persistence of the environmental change. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that suffering would lead to conversion in some and not in others.

The second reason that the *Treatise of Habits* is important to understanding suffering is because it provides the basis for the *Treatise on Virtue*, which follows it in the *Summa* and more fully explains the path to human beatitude. Thomas builds his virtue theory on the four classical cardinal virtues: temperance, justice, prudence, and fortitude, using Ambrose as his authoritative source, although he could have used Cicero or other classical philosophers as well.³⁹ Thomas, citing Chrysostom for the classical definition of man as a social animal, recognizes these as social virtues “since it is by reason of them that a person behaves well in the conduct of human affairs.”⁴⁰ Thomas asserts that some elements of the virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance are part of human nature. When they are defined according to human reason and are directed to natural (temporal) happiness, these virtues can be “acquired” and perfected through habituation.⁴¹ Often, as shown above, natural virtues are acquired and perfected in order to avoid suffering.

³⁹ ST I-II Q61.1

⁴⁰ ST I-II Q61.4.

⁴¹ ST I-II Q63.1.

The perseverance in good works that St. Paul tells the Romans is required for eternal life also implies the need to develop human virtue.⁴² The *Catechism* defines virtue as an “habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself.”⁴³ It adds that “the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.”⁴⁴ This is what is required to unite with God, who brings eternal happiness and it begins in most cases with the development of the human virtue.

Human virtue is acquired through education and practice, enabling us to be efficient by replicating acts already established as good without replicating the original reasoning process. Suffering itself brings out the need for fortitude, which is not required if there are no challenges. When we are able to meet these challenges and grow in capability and confidence, suffering is mitigated, and our fortitude is validated. Suffering also provides both the impetus and validation for the development of the other human virtues. It supplies the impetus for developing the virtues by highlighting the goods that are needed. For instance, when one suffers from having eaten too much or too little, the need for temperance is highlighted. The value of temperance is validated if the person, now eating in moderation, no longer suffers. Developing the virtue of temperance is highly important because it drives people to take better care of themselves, which is a fundamental element of proper self-love.

⁴² Romans 2: 5-10.

⁴³ CCC, 1803.

⁴⁴ CCC, 1803, quoting St. Gregory of Nyssa from *De beatitudinibus*, 1: PG44, 1200D.

Thomas, referencing works of Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory and Cicero, teaches that there is a sort of hierarchy in the development of virtue.⁴⁵ Indeed, he declares that moral virtues not connected by prudence are nothing more than imperfect inclinations to do some good deed. This would be the situation in the case describe above where suffering from overeating makes one more inclined to eat moderately. To do a good deed well and consistently, the definition of virtue, requires all the moral virtues to work in unison, governed by prudence. For instance, an action is not prudent, if it is unjust or intemperate and if it not carried out with fortitude. Similarly, one cannot act justly without a prudent decision, one needs prudence to act with temperance and to separate fortitude from foolhardiness.

Prudence governs reason and the ability to make the right decisions. When people make wrong decisions, it causes suffering while making prudent decisions relieves suffering, providing both the impetus for prudent decisions and the validation of whether decisions were indeed, prudent. With practice, prudence becomes habitual and controls the other moral virtues.

Justice governs our interactions with others. When we fail to give others what is due them, it causes them to suffer. When we are confronted with their suffering, it provides the impetus for us to act justly. When suffering ceases, our actions are validated as just. Justice is the cornerstone of all relationships and allows us to operate efficiently and effectively with others with a minimum of conflict by balancing the interests of each party through prudence.

⁴⁵ ST, I-II, Q65.1

This balancing through prudence and justice led to the establishment of the common good of society.

Having learned the value of the human virtues in everyday life, the person is open to accepting the grace of faith. Jennifer Herdt explains that “To the extent that (human) pagan virtue does allow both for proper self-love and love of the common good, it is beginning to change us into the sort of persons we must be in order to be brought into the divine community.”⁴⁶ She interprets Thomas as teaching that through growth in natural virtue, pagans begin to order their will to the good, although without grace they cannot complete the ordering task. This is undoubtedly true, but at the same time, it prepares the way for the acceptance of grace and as such is itself a form of grace as attested by both the Magisterium through the *Catechism* and St. Thomas in the *Summa*.⁴⁷ Because these virtues are often acquired through suffering, John Paul II is justified in asserting that it is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls.⁴⁸

To be clear, natural virtue does not obligate God to provide grace, nor does it insure that if he does provide grace, the virtuous will accept it. What is proposed here is that a person who practices natural prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance will be more likely to accept the grace that leads to the infused virtues than a person who is not prudent, just, or temperate. It would seem to be obvious and intuitive that those who are focused on the good are more likely to be open to grace and belief in God than those who are not and indeed, this sentiment is an

⁴⁶ Herdt. *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 76.

⁴⁷ CCC, 2001 and ST I-II Q109.6

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, #27

important teaching in the Old Testament tradition, with proverbial statements like “The Lord is a stronghold to those who walk honestly, downfall for evildoers.”⁴⁹

The Second Task: Re-orienting the Soul to God

The second task that God uses suffering for is to move us from love of self to love of Him, a re-orienting of the soul that results from the infusion of the theological virtues.⁵⁰ God accomplishes this in different ways with different people. Some, like Augustine, are converted through appeals to the intellect, without much recourse to suffering. Others, like Saint Paul, who was thrown from his horse and blinded on the road to Damascus, are converted through overwhelming force because nothing else would suffice. Many, however, require something in between, an incremental process that raises a person first from vice to natural virtue, which in turn prepares them to accept the grace that leads to conversion. Some, of course, do not convert at all, never having been exposed to the type of suffering that would have driven their conversions. Ironically, these people may have seen their lack of suffering as a blessing, yet it was to their eternal detriment.

Suffering is often a catalyst for conversion, particularly when a person is unable to resolve his or her material suffering through human means, as is the case with chronic and terminal illnesses. As the *Catechism* describes:

Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Proverbs 10, 29

⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 27.

⁵¹ CCC, 1501.

This more direct path to conversion, where the person has no other option to resolve his or her suffering but to turn to God, is explained by perhaps the least expected and at the same time, most powerful insight by John Paul II in *Salvifici doloris*: "... 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."⁵² While to many people, this would seem to be an unintelligible paradox, it is in fact the key to properly understanding the role of suffering in God's providential plan of salvation. Suffering is an experience of evil, which rightly understood, is not something to be feared but is highlighting a good to be gained, recovered, or improved and the pain or sorrow that one experiences because of the privation of the good, while harsh, alerts the person of the need to change. For many, the change required is a re-orientation toward God, reversing the evil of original sin that is the reason for all suffering.

As hard as societal sin is to break, it is still a habit that remains within man's natural power to correct. This is not the case for original sin, which Thomas describes as "the corrupt disposition to remove the subjection of the human mind from God, causing the privation of original justice."⁵³ According to Thomas, the habit of original sin is neither infused or acquired, but inborn.⁵⁴ The result of this habit is that "human action is no longer oriented toward God's

⁵² John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 27. The official Latin text of the first part of this quote is: (*Constat per saecula et generationes*) *in dolore singularem abscondi virtutem, quae intime coniungat hominem cum Christo, quod peculiaris est gratia*. This provides a few nuances that the official English translation quoted in the text above does not convey. It might have been better translated as "... Hidden within suffering is a singular virtue that joins man intimately with Christ, which is a special grace." This translation better links the concepts of virtue (*virtutem*) and grace (*gratia*) that are there in the Latin text and also better conveys the concept that suffering positively disposes one to join with Christ than does the official translation.

⁵³ ST I-II Q82.2

⁵⁴ ST I-II Q 82.1 resp to Obj 3

will but toward the desire for mutable goods,” the disorder of the will designated as *concupiscence* in Thomistic language.⁵⁵ Thomas states that “in the state of perfect nature (before the Fall of Man), man loved God more than himself and above all things, but in the state of corrupt nature associated with the habit of original sin, man’s will follows its private good.”⁵⁶ Because this necessarily leads to disordered choices, humans in the corrupted state cannot achieve the happiness for which they were made. To heal man’s wounded nature and re-orient his will toward God requires God to provide the gift of justifying grace and also to move man’s free will to accept it.⁵⁷

In the previous stage that dealt with self-love, the focus was necessarily on the natural moral virtues since that is what is within the capability of human nature. Since the Fall of Man, however, orienting one’s self to the will of God has been beyond the capability of corrupted human nature and so God’s grace is needed to allow humans to take the steps of knowing and loving God that make that possible.⁵⁸ Thomas teaches that the type of virtue which directs a person to good as defined by the Divine Law goes beyond humanity’s ability to obtain by natural principles and therefore, cannot be caused by human acts but must be produced in us by the Divine Operation alone.⁵⁹ Hence it is necessary for humans to receive from God some additional principles to direct us to supernatural happiness. These additional principles are called

⁵⁵ ST I-II Q82.3

⁵⁶ ST I-II Q 109.3

⁵⁷ ST I-II Q 113.3

⁵⁸ ST I-II Q109.1

⁵⁹ ST I-II Q63.2

“theological virtues” because “their object is God, they are infused in us by God, and they were made known to us by God through Divine revelation.”⁶⁰

The three theological virtues are faith, hope and charity. “Faith allows a person to perceive the supernatural principles that directs him or her to a supernatural end. The will is directed toward that end by hope. The movement toward that end belongs to charity.”⁶¹ Thomas concludes that the perfect moral virtues must be infused by God because they correspond to the theological virtues that extend beyond the capacity of nature.⁶² Thomas insists that the infused moral virtues are not mere perfections of the acquired moral virtues but are of an entirely different species since they differ not only in relation to the ultimate end but also in relation to their proper objects. In his example, Thomas notes that in the consumption of food, acquired temperance would dictate that food should not harm the body while infused temperance would suggest that it behoves a person to chastise the body and bring it into subjection by fasting.⁶³

According to Thomas, faith precedes all the other infused virtues because the object of the theological virtues is the last end and the last end must be present to the intellect before it is presented to the will as hope and before the will can move the person to charitable action. There is an “accidental exception” however, in that Thomas also recognizes that imperfect virtues can precede faith by removing obstacles to belief as described below.

⁶⁰ ST I-II Q62.1

⁶¹ ST I-II Q62.3

⁶² ST I-II Q63.3

⁶³ ST I-II Q63.4

The infusion of faith itself has two pre-requisites in the Thomistic tradition.⁶⁴ The first is that the things to be believed must be proposed to a person, and the second is the assent of the believer to the things that are proposed. Because the things which are of faith surpass human reason, they must be revealed by God. This is either done directly, as in the case of the prophets and apostles, or indirectly, through their witness to others and passed down through the centuries by the Church through Sacred Scripture and Tradition.

The re-orienting of people towards God often requires more than re-direction from vice to virtue, it may also require refining a person's understanding of the nature of God which is obviously required if one is to partake in it. False images of God and his nature are very hard to break and so suffering has a prominent role in doing so. An example of this is described in the classic biblical text on suffering, *The Book of Job*, in which the righteous Job is systematically deprived of his property, his family and his health. As John Paul II points out, the suffering that Job undergoes in the Old Testament account has the nature of a test to demonstrate his righteousness.⁶⁵ Job does not understand this and demands a hearing before God to defend his innocence, only to recognize when confronted by God that he is in no position to judge God. Most commentaries explain that the separation of suffering from punishment is the point of the story, but it does more than that. It also teaches the righteous Job about the nature of God, of whom Job admits, "By hearsay I had heard of you but now my eye has seen you. Therefore, I disown what I have said and repent in dust and ashes."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ ST II-II Q6.1

⁶⁵ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 11.

⁶⁶ Job 42:5-6.

Job's encounter with God was undoubtedly a moment of grace for him, but it also was one for others. Not only did the suffering of Job open him up to a new, more appropriate understanding of the nature of God, it also did the same for his friends and even today's readers of the text. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar spend most of the Book of Job convinced that Job's suffering was the penalty for some unstated or unknown sin against God or man. God uses Job's suffering as an opportunity to correct that misconception for the three men (and the multitude of people who have heard the story since then), bringing them closer to God.

The problem of an improper image of God still exists today. Consistent with Freud, Paul Ricoeur recognizes that many people have an immature image of God, which is virtually identical to the oedipal father.⁶⁷ He describes this as a religious faith of the first naivete, the type of faith that can be made untenable when suffering occurs and God does not protect them. The result is often a painful transition to a more robust, mature image of God, what Ricoeur calls a faith of the second naivete. Because the transition can involve a significant feeling of loss, perhaps like that of Elie Wiesel, some people lose all faith in God.⁶⁸ Kirk Bingaman points out that counselors can help those in a difficult faith transition recognize that the transition from the first to the second naivete is not a conversion to another God but involves a better understanding of the true God.⁶⁹ As in the case of Job and his friends, God uses suffering to drive people to understand the divine nature so they can partake in it.

⁶⁷ Bingaman, Kirk A. *Freud and Faith: Living in the Tension*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003, 60-61.

⁶⁸ Wiesel Elie, *Night*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1958, 34. Elie Wiesel, describes how on his first night in the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, seeing the smoke and flames rising from the Crematoria, he felt his faith was consumed and that God and his soul had been murdered.

⁶⁹ Bingaman, *Freud and Faith*, 61-62

Suffering is not the only way to understand the divine nature. As discussed above, the Church also reveals that Christ, because he is truly God, can make us sharers in his divinity, and because he is truly man, can be our model of holiness.⁷⁰ Said simply, to know Jesus is to know God because as Jesus stated, “The Father and I are one.”⁷¹

Once the truths of faith have been revealed to a person, there is still the matter of the person’s assent. Thomas recognizes that there may be a two-fold cause of this assent: one external and the other internal. External inducements include things like witnessing a miracle or being persuaded by someone to embrace the faith.⁷² Augustine found that even the threat of punishment at the hands of the state could be an effective tool for bringing people to true conversion.⁷³ Thomas argues that such external causes are not in themselves sufficient to bring about true faith because some people are converted while others are not when witnessing the same miracle or hearing the same sermon. He asserts that there must be another internal cause which moves people to assent in matters of faith. Thomas notes that the Pelagians held that this internal cause was nothing other than people exercising their free will but he denies this, arguing that this would raise people above their nature. He therefore concludes that the assent of faith is from God moving man inwardly by grace.⁷⁴

This does not mean, however, that people have no agency at all. In fact, Thomas states that “infused virtue is caused in us by God without any action on our part, but not without our

⁷⁰ CCC 459-460.

⁷¹ John 10:30.

⁷² ST II-II Q6.1

⁷³ Augustine, *Epistle* 93, #10-11

⁷⁴ ST II-II Q6.1

consent.”⁷⁵ His position against the Pelagians is that before a person can exercise his or her free will to assent to or reject faith and ultimately the other infused virtues that follow, “the person’s will needs to be prepared by God with grace, in order that he or she may be raised to things which are above human nature.”⁷⁶ Thomas does not say how that grace is manifested but John Paul II’s startling observation that within suffering is a special grace that draws a person interiorly close to Christ helps to explain it.

The Pope uses Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Ignatius of Loyola as examples of people who owe their profound conversion to the special grace concealed within suffering, so it is useful to review their stories to understand his insight. Bonaventure, in his original biography of Francis writes that

Francis as yet knew not, neither understood, the great purposes of God towards him; for being by the will of his father engrossed by external affairs, and also by reason of the original corruption of our nature drawn down and depressed by earthly things, he had not learned to contemplate heavenly mysteries, neither did he yet know the sweetness of divine consolation. And forasmuch as the Lord is wont, by afflictions and tribulations, to open the ears of the spirit, so, by the right hand of the Most High, he was suddenly changed, his body being afflicted with long and severe sufferings, that his soul might be prepared to receive the unction of the Holy Ghost. Now, when he had recovered his bodily health, going forth one day, as was his wont, in apparel suited to his state, he met a certain soldier of honor and courage, but poor and vilely clad; of whose poverty, feeling a tender and sorrowful compassion, he took off his new clothes and gave them to the poor man-at-arms, thus at once fulfilling two offices of piety, by covering the shame of a noble cavalier and relieving a poor man’s penury.⁷⁷

In Bonaventure’s account, it is clear that Francis was so engrossed in worldly affairs that God needed to use severe physical pain to get his attention and prepare him to receive the graces

⁷⁵ ST I-II Q55.4 reply to obj 6

⁷⁶ ST II-II Q6.1 reply to obj 3

⁷⁷ Bonaventure. *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, edited by Cardinal Manning. Rockford, Ill: Tan Books and Publishers, 1988, 13.

of the Holy Spirit. While the account says that it was Francis's body that was changed, the more important change was his perspective. Faced with his own mortality by his suffering and given time during his convalescence to ponder what is important in life, Francis completely re-oriented his life toward emulating Christ.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola has a similar story which he recounts in *Reminiscences*, his life story that he dictated to Goncalus da Camara from 1553-1555.⁷⁸ He too was a baptized Christian who was distracted from God by the pleasures of life. After living an early life of self-described dissipation and laxity, he was severely injured in battle and suffered much during a long convalescence.⁷⁹ During this time, the only thing available for him to read to pass away the time was *The Lives of Christ and the Saints*, which led to his profound conversion and the founding of the Jesuit order.

In each of these cases, it was suffering that caused the conversion by forcing a change in their *habitus* from battlefield to bed. But it was more than just a change in the environment, it was a realization that what they had been doing was lacking something critical: communion with God. Undoubtedly, they could appreciate Simone Weil's description of affliction as "a marvel of divine technique that introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal and cold," by which God reveals Himself to those who are oriented to Him in love.⁸⁰ John Paul II says that "such a conversion involves not only the discovery of the salvific meaning of

⁷⁸ Ignatius. *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*. Translated with introductions and Notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean. New York: Penguin, 1996, 7

⁷⁹ Ignatius *Personal Writings*. 13,14.

⁸⁰ Weil, "The Love of God," 452

suffering by the individual but a complete change in the person in which he or she discovers a new dimension of his or her entire life and vocation.”⁸¹

The ability of illness or injury to redirect people’s lives to be in line with God’s plan is not unique to the Church’s most famous saints, it is lived daily by countless people. At the same time, it does not always have the same result. As discussed above, the Church’s own experience as shared in the *Catechism* admits that “for some, illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God while for others it will lead to spiritual maturity and provoke a search for God and a return to him.”⁸²

Nor is illness or injury the only means of suffering God uses to re-direct people from the various forms of idolatry that keep their focus away from God. If monetary greed is the impediment to holiness, the means to conversion might be through utter financial ruin. If the problem is vanity, the means to conversion could be an accident or simply old age that reduces one’s attractiveness. If it is fame, there could be a shameful situation that re-establishes the correct end. These forms of suffering are also gifts of grace because they highlight what needs to be changed and motivates us to take the right actions. As the Book of Wisdom relates, “Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed, because God tried them and found them worthy of himself. As gold in the furnace, he proved them.”⁸³ .

Furthermore, many people occupy a sort of middle ground, where their conversion is accomplished incrementally through the use of many small, redirecting setbacks rather than

⁸¹ John Paul II, *Salvific doloris*, #26

⁸² CCC #1501

⁸³ Wisdom 3: 5-6.

through a single conversion experience so debilitating that the person has no where else to turn but God. In these more incremental cases, the person first is lead by suffering from vice to moral virtue as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, which is the preparation that precedes the acceptance of grace. In this scenario, the first two tasks of suffering are in a sense, hierarchical, with suffering leading a person to proper self-love which prepares one to accept the grace of faith that re-orientes the person toward God. For instance, Thomas notes that fortitude removes the inordinate fear that hinders faith and humility removes pride that keeps a man from submitting himself to the truth of faith. In this way, even the acquired virtues discussed in the previous section can lead to beatitude, albeit indirectly.⁸⁴

While everyone suffers to some degree, it is not always suffering that drives conversion. Some people, like St. Augustine, by the grace of God are spurred on through the preaching and example of others (in Augustine's case, by Ambrose). For some, this is a fast process but for many, it can be exceedingly slow. Many, who think they have been blessed with a happy life with minimal suffering, have been in fact cursed with a lack of divine correction. Like spoiled children, they think themselves privileged, only to find they are ill-prepared for the life that awaits them.

When John Paul II states that within suffering is concealed a special grace which produces profound conversions of heart, many are undoubtedly skeptical. Yet, when viewed from the proper perspective, it makes perfect sense. After all, Simone Weil, Dorothee Soelle, and Eric Cassell, each from different times, places and specialties, recognize that suffering drives

⁸⁴ ST II-II Q4.7

people to change. This is easily explained. Because suffering is uncomfortable, people will change their habits to avoid it. If one also understands that suffering is an experience of evil and that evil is the absence of good, then suffering is identifying when some good is missing. This means that people are motivated to find the good they are missing, which is God. This in turn, makes them receptive to grace, which brings forth faith and then the rest of the infused virtues which allows the people to align their wills with God.

This is in effect, the personal repudiation of original sin, choosing to unite our wills to the will of God, thus reducing the separation that previously existed. In this way, we emulate Christ who prayed to God in Gethsemane, “not as I will, but as you will.”⁸⁵ Like Christ, we need to put our love of God into action through our love of neighbor and as in the life of Christ, suffering will provide the opportunity and context for this to occur. It begins with the unleashing of our love toward our suffering neighbors, as we provide aid and comfort. It culminates in our own redemption when we realize our own suffering provides an opportunity for the redemption of others and we embrace it out of love for them, thus uniting ourselves with Jesus, who suffered on the cross for the love and benefit of humanity.

The Third Task: Unleashing Love

The development of human virtue is the culmination of natural human capability, which, since the Fall of Man, is based on a philosophy of self-interest. To rise above self-interest and practice true charity, which is self-giving love, is above the natural capability of man and

⁸⁵ Mt 26:39 NABRE

requires grace. Having first prepared the way for the grace that transforms human souls and then provided the grace that orients a person to God, the third task of suffering provides the opportunity and motivation for humans to demonstrate love to each other. Whereas the first response was primarily driven by self-love without the benefit of grace and the second response focused on love of God as grace was offered and accepted, allowing our will to be ordered to His, this third response is about love of neighbor as the infused virtues are put into effect and we begin to act in accord with the Divine nature to address the suffering of others. Appropriate for this task, John Paul II says that suffering is “present in order to unleash love in the human person, that unselfish gift of ones ‘I’ on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer.”⁸⁶

John Paul II uses the famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37) as the basis for his discussion on how suffering leads to human love.⁸⁷ In this parable, three travelers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho encounter a man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead by robbers. Two of them, a priest and a Levite, pass him by without helping but the third, a Samaritan, shows compassion on him, dressing his wounds and bringing him to an inn, where he arranges for his care. Like the Good Samaritan, we are called to stop and show loving compassion to our suffering neighbors; to be “one who brings help in suffering.”

Suffering unleashes human love by appealing to a person’s conscience and eliciting compassion when the person comes into contact with one who suffers. Suffering therefore provides both the opportunity and the motivation for people to love others. This parable is particularly interesting because even the imperfect virtue of justice should have been sufficient to

⁸⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 29.

⁸⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 28.

motivate the priest and Levite to care for their fellow Jew. As leaders of the community, they would have been expected to help their injured countryman as a social duty. The Samaritan, however, had no such expectations, since he was from a country that was in conflict with the Jews. His actions were truly charitable in that they demonstrated by the desire to unite in love for the injured man and to serve him with no self-interest in mind. John Paul II describes this as giving oneself to the other.⁸⁸

In a very real way, in this third task, we are called to emulate Jesus, whose entire earthly mission, both his words and actions, demonstrate the unconditional giving of oneself. He makes it very clear that his kingdom is based on love, defining the greatest commandment as “You should love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind and you should love your neighbor as yourself.”⁸⁹ In fact, he concludes that “the whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”⁹⁰

Thomas recognizes that to love as radically and completely as Jesus did surpasses the natural power of the will, so he surmises that the infusion of charity (theological love) must involve some form superadded to the natural power of the will to enable it to perform acts of charity with ease and pleasure. He denies that this infusion is based on any natural capacity of a person, reasoning that since charity is beyond the natural capability of a human, it can only be received based on the will of the Holy Spirit.⁹¹ As such, charity can increase in the subject in both magnitude and intensity indefinitely since it is a participation of the infinite charity of the

⁸⁸ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 28.

⁸⁹ Matthew 22:37-39.

⁹⁰ Matthew 22:40.

⁹¹ ST II-II Q24.3

Holy Spirit.⁹² Thomas divides charity into three stages based on different pursuits people have as they progress.⁹³ In the beginning stage, people concern themselves with avoiding sin and resisting temptations. In the middle stage, people work to progress in the good by increasing their charity. In the final stage, people pursue union with and the enjoyment of God, having perfected their use of charity.

Using Ambrose as his authority, Thomas asserts that charity is the form of the virtues since it directs the acts of all the other virtues to man's last end, communion with God.⁹⁴ Further, because the kind of virtue that results in beatitude must be ordered to God, Thomas agrees with Augustine that no true virtue is possible without charity.⁹⁵ In fact, he argues that having charity is required to have any of the infused moral or theological virtues and that they are all infused together. The logical explanation Thomas uses for this is that God operates no less perfectly in works of grace than in works of nature. Because in nature, things always are granted whatever is necessary for the execution of their roles, it is logical that all the moral virtues must be infused together with charity, since it is through them that man performs each different kind of good work.

Therefore, the infused cardinal virtues would also progress in the same way as charity. When the virtues are first infused, the activity is focused on eliminating the vices associated with each virtue. As discussed above, suffering can provide the motivation to eliminate the vices that

⁹² ST II-II Q24.4-7

⁹³ ST II-II Q24.9

⁹⁴ ST II-II Q23.8

⁹⁵ ST I-II Q65.3.

oppose the infused virtues by making them continuously uncomfortable until they are replaced with virtue.

Like faith, charity must be freely exercised as Thomas pointed out in his debate with Lombard.⁹⁶ From a practical perspective, this means that when the Holy Spirit infuses grace into our souls to make us charitable, we still must consent to act in love and we must also have the opportunity to do so. John Paul II points out that it is suffering that provides both the opportunity and the challenge to love when he says that “suffering is present in order to unleash love in the human person.”⁹⁷ He expands on this, asserting that the world of human suffering unceasingly calls for the world of human love and that “in a certain sense, man owes to the suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and in his actions.”

John Paul II describes some of the many ways that people can follow the example of Christ and the Good Samaritan by showing their love to those who suffer, starting with those that make it their professions. These include medical professionals such as doctors and nurses, whose professions he thinks should actually be considered vocations. He also acknowledges that many show their love for the suffering through volunteer work, both through various social organizations and as individuals and encourages everyone to do the same.⁹⁸

John Paul II notes that at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount there are the eight beatitudes, which are addressed to people tried by various sufferings in their temporal life.⁹⁹ The *Catechism* adds that these same beatitudes “depict the countenance of Jesus and portray his

⁹⁶ ST II-II Q23.2

⁹⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 29.

⁹⁸ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 29.

⁹⁹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 16

charity.”¹⁰⁰ This is because the characteristics described : being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, hungering for righteousness and being willing to be persecuted for its sake, being merciful, pure of heart, and peacemakers are all a part of the divine nature that we need to emulate. Said another way, they define ways for us to utilize the infused virtues to love the suffering. “The Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus’s preaching.”¹⁰¹ They depict his nature and in doing so, provide us with a “blue print” of how to orient ourselves to God, who alone can satisfy our desires for happiness.¹⁰² Through the *Catechism*, the Church affirms that “God put us in the world to know, to love, and to serve him and so to come to paradise.”¹⁰³ To be sharers in the divine nature, the very definition of beatitude, we must understand, accept and practice the beatitudes through the infused virtues.

When we are poor in spirit, we are called to help others, regardless of the cost to us or the wealth of the sufferer. The Good Samaritan paid the innkeeper to care for the injured man he found beaten and naked by the roadside out of his own funds without expecting anything in return.¹⁰⁴ We should be prepared to do the same.

When we encounter someone who is suffering, it is our duty to mourn with them. As Dorothee Soelle describes, suffering always involves a sense of isolation so the first step to aid the sufferer is to let them mourn with you, thus allowing them to normalize their suffering and

¹⁰⁰ CCC, 1717.

¹⁰¹ CCC, 1716.

¹⁰² CCC, 1718.

¹⁰³ CCC, 1721.

¹⁰⁴ Luke 11:35

return to the community. To their credit, the three friends of Job sat silently with him for seven days, mourning his misfortune, which allowed him to speak and ultimately be healed.¹⁰⁵

The meek put others' needs before their own. Certainly, the Good Samaritan had other plans the day he encountered the injured man, yet he put them aside and tended to him, while the priest and Levite passed him by. These incidents should be seen as opportunities for beatitude worthy of being thankful for, not inconveniences.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to work to remove injustices that cause people to suffer. This is a call to action to treat others as you would want to be treated, applying equally to individual cases where people are denied what they are due as to cases of societal sin where whole classes of people are exploited.

We are to be merciful to the suffering, offering both compassion and forgiveness, especially to those suffering punishments for their own sins and offenses. An example of this is to visit the imprisoned, who suffer from both isolation and from guilt.

The clean of heart are in tune with God's will, both in regard to themselves and to those who suffer. They recognize that everyone is a child of God and are willing to both help and be helped by them, thus providing solace for the temporal needs of the other while also being sensitive to their eternal need to provide charity themselves.

Many suffer because of strife and conflict so we are called to be peacemakers to help resolve their suffering. This can apply to disagreements between individuals as well as wars

¹⁰⁵ Job 2:13

between nations. If we are part of the conflict, we need to put ourselves in the other's shoes and understand their needs so we can help meet those needs, even at a loss to ourselves.

Emulating Jesus, we must be willing to endure persecution for the sake of righteousness. This will be the topic of the next discussion on the fourth task because giving yourself up for the good of others is essentially martyrdom, which the Church has always recognized as a sign of beatitude.

Looking at the Beatitudes from a different vantage point, Servais Pinckaers notes that Saint Thomas, in his *Commentary on Saint Matthew*, observed that the Beatitudes provide evaluations of the worthiness of various goods for beatitude.¹⁰⁶ For instance, wealth is discredited by the first Beatitude which declares "Blessed be the Poor in Spirit." Pleasure is discredited because it is those who mourn that will be comforted. The desire for vengeance is rejected when the meek are blessed. Those who value their own will over others are countered with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and those who seek to dominate others are told that blessed are the merciful. The value of the natural virtues are supported by the sixth and seventh beatitudes, which reference the clean of heart and the peacemakers, although Pinckaers notes that this only applies to the afterlife. Finally, the eighth beatitude recognizes the value of martyrdom. Together, these views direct us in how to share in the divine nature.

Jesus taught about the importance of giving aid to those who suffer not only through his words but through his actions. Indeed, in Matthew's gospel alone, there are seventeen separate

¹⁰⁶ Pinckaers, Servais, "Aquinas's Pursuit of Beatitude" in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, edited by John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus. Washington: Catholic University Press, 2005. 104-106.

accounts of Jesus healing, six of which depict mass healings and eleven which document specific incidents involving the healing of lepers, paralytics, the mute, the possessed and the blind. Jesus even calls attention to what he was doing in his answer to the messengers from John the Baptist, who asked whether he was the Messiah, telling them to observe that “the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.”¹⁰⁷ While many are accustomed to think of these miraculous healings as strictly signs of his messianic role and of the coming Kingdom, they actually serve to provide credibility to the teaching on suffering in a number of ways. First, and most obviously, they showed that Jesus was the Messiah, which made his teaching authoritative and worthy of emulation. Second, it showed that Jesus / God shows compassion for the sufferer as an example for those who seek after man’s last end, communion with God. In short, he is teaching us to love those that suffer. This second understanding of the message of the healings of Jesus as an example to us of showing compassion to the suffering is well attested from the teaching of the patriarchs to the current teachings of the Magisterium.¹⁰⁸ Finally, no teaching is credible if the

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 11: 5

¹⁰⁸ In *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press: 2009, pg 146), Gary B. Ferngren notes that the theme of “Christus medicus” (Christ the physician) was a prominent one in the early church, but the phrase referred to Jesus primarily as a healer of souls and secondarily as a healer of the body. In contrast with the healing religions of the classical world, Christianity was not chiefly concerned with physical healing in the early centuries of its existence except as a component of its charitable ministry. The *Catechism* takes a similar position. In a paragraph titled “Christ the physician” (#1503), it states “ Christ's compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that "God has visited his people" and that the Kingdom of God is close at hand.” John Paul II also recognizes Jesus’s miraculous healings as a sign of his solidarity with the suffering in *Salvifici doloris*, stating in paragraph 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.” John Paul II continues the thought in paragraph 30, “In a superabundant way Christ carries out this messianic programme of his mission: he goes about "doing good" 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.”

teacher does not practice what he taught. That Jesus did this in such spectacular ways made the teaching that much more memorable.

John Paul II concludes his discourse on suffering by turning to the Gospel parable of the Last Judgment.¹⁰⁹ In this parable, Jesus separates those to be judged into two groups: the sheep on the right and the goats on the left. To those on his right, he says: “Come, you who are blessed by 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, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” When the righteous question him about when this occurred, Jesus responds: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” He then turns to those on his left and condemns them for their failure to do the same.¹¹⁰

While he admits that the list of the forms of suffering in the parable could be expanded beyond physical suffering, John Paul II says that Christ’s words about the Final Judgment unambiguously show how essential it is for the eternal life of every individual to stop and help his or her suffering neighbors. The Pope maintains that “in the messianic program of Christ, which is at the same time the program 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 neighbor, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a ‘civilization of love.’”¹¹¹ This is a profound

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 25: 31-46.

¹¹⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 30

¹¹¹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 30.

statement because it asserts that in God's plan, suffering's very purpose is to release the love that is essential for eternal life for the Good Samaritan, the one giving aid to the sufferer.

John Paul II says that Jesus's salvific work liberates humanity from sin and death and as a result, mankind exists on earth with the hope of eternal life and holiness. He readily admits that this victory over sin and death does not abolish temporal suffering, instead it throws a new light upon every suffering: the light of salvation.¹¹² Indeed, the purpose of Christ's victory could not have been to eliminate temporal suffering since it exists to highlight impediments to salvation and to motivate mankind to correct them. As we have seen, its purpose in this task is to unleash love or charity in the human person.

A question that one might ask in terms of a Good Samaritan, is what if the person is willing but unable to alleviate the pain the sufferer is enduring. In this case, it must be pointed out that charity has two attributes: unity and aid and that it is unity that defines love and drives one to seek the good of the other.¹¹³ If the good cannot be gained despite loving efforts, it does not diminish the unity and may actually enhance the love between the parties. In fact, Dorothee Soelle believes it can even relieve the suffering.

Building on the thoughts of Simone Weil, Soelle explains that true suffering begins with physical pain, which leads to psychological distress and ultimately results in social isolation. In her view, there is no real affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another.¹¹⁴ Therefore, she asserts that the way to resolve suffering is to basically

¹¹² John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 15

¹¹³ ST II-II 27.2

¹¹⁴ Soelle, *Suffering*, 14.

“unwind” the process, beginning with socialization. She feels that if the sufferer is given the opportunity to lament and sensitize others to the evil he or she is experiencing, it begins to normalize the situation and removes the social stigma. From there, the sufferer can develop actions to effect changes that reduces the psychological pressure, leaving only the physical pain, which either resolves or becomes bearable.¹¹⁵

Soelle’s observations make it clear that there is great value in a “Good Samaritan” who provides moral support and compassion by being present with the sufferer, even if the good they lack cannot be procured. This is also consistent with the observations of Eric Cassell, who holds that suffering requires a person’s existence to be challenged. A show of compassion by another is a recognition of the sufferer’s existence and more importantly, his or her value and dignity, which according to Cassell, will resolve the suffering, if not the pain.¹¹⁶ Therefore, it seems clear that even unresolvable injuries and illnesses provide opportunities for the release of love toward the sufferer and a path to salvation for those that are present with them for the love of God.

This brings up a final point, the question of whether suffering always unleashes love. It clearly does not, as demonstrated by the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* itself. Afterall, the priest and the Levite pass the injured man without offering aid before the Samaritan shows him charity. What suffering does is offer opportunities for people to demonstrate charity – opportunities that all too often are passed by unheeded for countless reasons. Many people are simply so unnerved by suffering that they avoid any contact with it, which isolates the sufferers,

¹¹⁵ Soelle, *Suffering*, 70-73.

¹¹⁶ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 42-44

adding to their problems. Fallen man is naturally self-centered, so most will not act charitably toward their neighbor even though helping them would bring them spiritual rewards.¹¹⁷ Giving of oneself and resources in this way is virtuous. Those infused with grace will take the opportunity to demonstrate the supernatural virtue of charity, while others may not act at all, even for self-centered reasons like public acclaim, which falls short of true virtue.

Suffering, then, plays an important role in God's plan for salvation by providing the opportunities for those infused with faith and charity to demonstrate them, first by being with the afflicted one and then by providing whatever they can to provide the good that the sufferer lacks. In this, the "Good Samaritan" has the more lasting benefit, receiving eternal salvation while the sufferer gets only temporary solace on Earth. In this case, it truly is better to give than to receive love. Yet, those who suffer are also given the opportunity to love in a mystical, redemptive way that is the pinnacle of grace, exceeding that of the Good Samaritan.¹¹⁸

The Fourth Task: Redeeming the Sufferer

In the fourth and final task of suffering in God's providential plan is to lead the sufferer to realize that his or her suffering is for the good of another and to embrace it for the glory of God, even if it leads to his or her own physical death. In this way, we completely align with Christ and become sharers in his redemptive suffering, not just spiritually but actually, and those

¹¹⁷ Matthew 9:13 which references Hosea 6:6. Ironically, many commentators assume that the priest and Levite avoid the injured man because they wanted to retain ritual purity so they could sacrifice in the temple, never considering that God desires mercy, not sacrifice as pronounced in both the Old and New Testaments.

¹¹⁸ John Paul II. *Salvifici doloris*, 22 The Pope calls this final step where humans share in Christ's sufferings and in doing so understand its meaning the "supreme gift of the Holy Spirit."

that share in his suffering also share in his glory. Knowing that our suffering is part of God's Providential Plan for the salvation of others provides meaning to it and leads to joy. Not surprisingly, John Paul II recognizes this type of redemptive suffering as the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁹ As such, it is also the final lesson in achieving the knowledge of good.

The idea of redemptive suffering has played a central role in Christianity since Jesus suffered on the Cross to redeem mankind. Jesus takes on his suffering and death voluntarily, despite his innocence. It is an act of true love, done for the benefit of others. John Paul II explains that "although Jesus's suffering has human dimensions, it was of a depth and intensity that only he, the only-begotten Son could endure."¹²⁰ He says that Jesus's prayer to "let this cup pass from me" attests to the truth about his suffering while his qualifier, "but not as I will, but as you will" demonstrates his obedience to the Father. Jesus then experiences on the cross the entire evil of the turning away from God which is contained in sin. Through the divine depth of his filial union with the Father, Jesus perceives in a humanly inexpressible way the suffering of estrangement from God, to whom he calls, "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?"¹²¹ John Paul II concludes his explanation by saying that "it is precisely through this suffering that (Jesus) accomplishes the Redemption and can say as he breathes his last: 'It is finished.'"¹²²

Just as Jesus demonstrates how to love those who suffer, he also demonstrates how to love *through* suffering. This type of love, suffering for the sake of others, is beyond the natural

¹¹⁹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 22

¹²⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 18

¹²¹ Mark 15:34.

¹²² John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 18.

capability of humans in our corrupted state and requires Christ's intercession and indeed, John Paul II asserts that through Jesus's suffering, "human suffering itself has been redeemed."¹²³

This is the main theme of *Salvifici doloris* which is made obvious from the very first line:

"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.'"¹²⁴

John Paul II builds on this thought as the document progresses, first making the point that "in the Paschal Mystery, Christ began the union with man in the community of the Church."¹²⁵ After noting that the Church is continually being built up spiritually as the body of Christ through his sacraments, the Pope insists that Christ wishes to be united with every individual in this body, especially those that suffer. He concludes that "in so far as a 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."¹²⁶ He notes that this does not mean that Christ's achievement of Redemption is not complete, "it only means that the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all love expressed in human suffering."¹²⁷

While it is easy for people to see how a person loves someone who is suffering by giving them aid and comfort, it is perhaps more elusive to see how a suffering person can express love toward others. The most obvious way is to directly emulate Jesus in voluntarily suffering for the

¹²³ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 19.

¹²⁴ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 1 quoting Colossians 1:24

¹²⁵ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 24.

¹²⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 24.

¹²⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 24.

good of another. Pope John Paul II spoke about such a situation in his homily at the mass of canonization for Maximilian Maria Kolbe on October 10, 1982.¹²⁸ Quoting Jesus from the Last Supper Discourses, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,"¹²⁹ the Pope relates how Father Kolbe volunteered to take the place of a man he never met who was arbitrarily chosen to starve to death in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz in July 1941. Kolbe explained that he wanted to do this because the other man had a wife and children depending on him and as a Catholic priest, he had none. He then suffered for two weeks in the starvation chamber before being executed by lethal injection on August 14, 1941. The Pope goes on to say. "He bore witness to Christ and to love. For the Apostle John writes: 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren' (1 John 3:16). By laying down his life for a brother, he made himself like Christ."

Because he bore witness to Christ to the point of death, Father Kolbe was specifically declared a martyr by John Paul II.¹³⁰ This is important because *The Catechism* describes martyrdom as the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith in which the martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose and to whom he is united in charity.¹³¹ Thomas adds that of all virtuous acts, martyrdom is the greatest proof of the perfection of charity and the most perfect of human acts. He argues that "a man's love for a thing is proved to be greatest by what he is willing to give up or suffer for its sake and there is nothing greater than life to give up and

¹²⁸ John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe*, Vatican, October 10, 1982 https://www.piercedhearts.org/jpii/jpii_homilies/homilies_1982/oct_10_1982_canonization_max_kolbe.htm

¹²⁹ John 15:13.

¹³⁰ John Paul II, *Canonization of Saint Kolbe*, 1.

¹³¹ CCC 2473

nothing worse to suffer than death, especially when it is accompanied by the pains of bodily torment.”¹³² While clearly martyrdom is the surest way to beatitude because it entails the largest sacrifice, it is not the only path to redemption through suffering.

It should be pointed out again at this point that self-inflicted suffering is not redemptive. Simone Weil is right when she says that “it is wrong to desire affliction; it is against nature, and it is a perversion; and moreover, it is the essence of affliction that it is suffered unwillingly.”¹³³ After all, if Christ’s purpose is to free humanity from evil, creating one’s own evil cannot be understood as aligning one’s self to Jesus.¹³⁴ Instead, the point is that suffering, understood properly, is a grace bestowed on people to bring them back into alignment with God and in doing so, achieve perfect happiness (beatitude). As part of God’s providential plan, each person will suffer at the appropriate time and place and with the appropriate intensity for them in order to lead them to their last end, union with God.

Sometimes people are called to suffer for the good of the Gospel or as an example for others. For instance, Paul recalls in his Second Letter to the Corinthians that when he complained of a “thorn in the flesh,” he was told that “power is made perfect in weakness.”¹³⁵ Indeed, throughout his ministry he was tested mightily, having by his own count received 39 lashes five times, beaten by rods three times, stoned once, and shipwrecked three times¹³⁶. Having endured all that made his message more credible. It is redeeming in cases like this to accept and bear this

¹³² ST II-II Q124.3

¹³³ Weil, “The Love of God,” 454.

¹³⁴ This is not a critique of penitential practices such as fasting or even self-flagellation, which were more popular in the past. These do not rise to the level of suffering and so are beyond the scope of this work.

¹³⁵ 2 Corinthians 12:7-9.

¹³⁶ 2 Corinthians 11:24-25.

suffering out of love for God and the people that were convinced by Paul's perseverance. What makes suffering redemptive is its self-sacrificial nature in service of God. It does not need to reach the level of martyrdom to have salvific value as demonstrated by the non-martyred saints of the Church. Paul sets an example of the attitude needed for redemptive suffering by saying, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints for the sake of Christ, for when I am weak, then I am strong."¹³⁷

Unlike Paul, most people who enter into redemptive suffering are unaware that it is part of God's plan. In his gospel, John uses all of chapter nine to tell the story of the man born blind, a testament to its significance. As the account opens, Jesus' disciples ask him about whether a certain man had been born blind because of his own sins or those of his parents. Jesus assures them that the reason the man was born blind was not due to sin but so that the works of God might be made visible through him. Being the recipient of a miraculous healing is not redemptive, however. It was what he did after his healing that redeemed his soul.

After Jesus heals the man, the man becomes a vocal and credible witness to Jesus' ministry before the people of Jerusalem and the leaders of the Pharisees. This willing acceptance of his participation in God's plan through his suffering blindness up to the point of his cure was redemptive in itself. In addition, as the chapter ends, the no-longer blind man, despite being ejected from the synagogue for his witness, professes his faith in Jesus and worships him. Unlike scores of other people Jesus healed, this particular man was willing to incur a second type of

¹³⁷ 2 Cor 12:10

suffering, that of social isolation, as he was expelled from the community, in order to spread the gospel. This is also redemptive.

Most people will experience at least one of the two forms of suffering that the man born blind did at some point in their lives, and they too will have the opportunity for redemptive suffering. Some will be called to witness to the Gospel and will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. For some, this may end in martyrdom, others in social isolation. In many parts of the world, this type of suffering is very real and takes great grace and fortitude to endure, but there is no question that this type of suffering can be redemptive because at the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus issued this statement of both warning and promise, “You will be hated by all because of my name but the one who perseveres to the end will be saved.”¹³⁸

Not everyone is called to be a martyr in this way, however, and redemptive suffering does not always require death. What makes suffering redemptive is that the sufferer is willing to endure it for the benefit of another, whether they step forward as a substitute like Maximillian Kolbe or if the suffering is thrust upon them, like the man born blind. Everyone who suffers is providing an opportunity for others to love them in a way that is spiritually beneficial to the “Good Samaritans.” To state it plainly, like the man born blind, these sufferers become God’s instruments of salvation for those who help them.

This is not to say that the sufferer does not or cannot benefit from his or her suffering as well. As was previously discussed, suffering identifies a lack of some good in a person’s life and motivates the person to correct it. For instance, an alcoholic suffers from various symptoms

¹³⁸ Mark 13:13.

because of her drinking. When they get bad enough, she will seek help or others will intercede, and, hopefully, she will ultimately stop drinking. Suffering has also been shown to drive conversion by refocusing the sufferer on what is important in life. In both these previous discussions, the implied assumption is that these types of suffering, once the problem is identified, can ultimately be resolved. There is a class of problems, however, that will eventually lead to death, whether it be in the short term or after a prolonged period of suffering. It is these cases that the grace of God is most needed to love.¹³⁹

As Weil so poignantly writes, such suffering can be felt as “an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain.”¹⁴⁰ It requires grace to see the good in such a situation, even more so to willingly undergo suffering for the benefit of another who you may not even know because you love God and want his plan to succeed. As will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, this could apply to any suffering situation from that of a child with a debilitating birth defect, to a young mother with breast cancer, to a severely injured soldier, to an elderly patient with Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s Disease. If that person can see past their own suffering to grasp that their situation is providing opportunities for others to practice the virtues that are required for salvation, and if he or she can embrace their suffering for the good of the others and the love of Christ, then the suffering will be redemptive for them, leading to eternal salvation. At the same time, this recognition of the salvific opportunity the suffering provides

¹³⁹ These issues, briefly mentioned here, will be dealt with in far more detail in the next section.

¹⁴⁰ Weil, Simone. “The Love of God and Affliction” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, Edited by George A Panichas. New York: McKay, 1977. 440.

for both the sufferer and the people who help will also provide meaning for the suffering which as Cassell and Soelle both note, can mitigate or even resolve the feeling of suffering in the agent, giving some level of temporal relief.

The key of course is for the sufferer to be both aligned with Christ will's and to act in love accordingly. Even the execution of a criminal can involve redemptive suffering if the criminal confessed his or her crime with full contrition because it was counter to Christ's will and then accepted the punishment because he or she felt justice was being served and that it would deter others from sinning. This was demonstrated by St. Dismas, the "good" criminal who was crucified along with Jesus. In Luke's account, Dismas says to the other criminal, who had been taunting Jesus, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal."¹⁴¹ Turning to Jesus he adds, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The way that the sufferer benefits from these scenarios is by recognizing that he or she is sharing in Christ's redemptive work and embracing it. Weil states it well when she concludes that "the only valid desire is that if affliction should come that it may be a participation in the Cross of Christ."¹⁴² Dismas did, of course, have a participation in a very real way in the Cross of Christ. He embraced it, recognizing it was justice for his crimes and he shared in Christ's redemptive work, ministering to the bad thief in the hopes of saving him from condemnation.

¹⁴¹ Luke 24:39-43

¹⁴² Weil, "The Love of God," 464.

From a simply human perspective, this gives meaning to the suffering and as both Cassell and Soelle observe, will help to resolve it, even if the pain remains.

In *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote about an extension of this concept in terms of “offering up” our hardships to Christ:¹⁴³

I would like to add here another brief comment with some relevance for everyday living. There used to be a form of devotion—perhaps less practiced today but quite widespread not long ago—that included the idea of “offering up” the minor daily hardships that continually strike at us like irritating “jabs”, thereby giving them a meaning. Of course, there were some exaggerations and perhaps unhealthy applications of this devotion, but we need to ask ourselves whether there may not after all have been something essential and helpful contained within it. What does it mean to offer something up? Those who did so were convinced that they could insert these little annoyances into Christ's great “compassion” so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race. In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love. Maybe we should consider whether it might be judicious to revive this practice ourselves.

This devotion effectively assumes that our suffering benefits others when we offer it up to Christ as a willing spiritual sacrifice to join with his, thus making us sharers in his suffering. This show of solidarity with Jesus, as Pope Benedict attests, can provide meaning for the sufferer and also the on-lookers who recognize the willingness to love others in the devotion and might themselves be converted.

The spiritual benefits are far more expansive and important, however, as John Paul II describes in *Salvifici doloris*. One way this is described is that it is necessary to share Jesus' suffering to be made worthy of sharing in the Kingdom of God. John Paul II says that through

¹⁴³ Benedict XVI. *Encyclical Letter: Spe Salvi*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana ,2007. 40.

their sufferings, in a certain sense they repay the infinite price of the Passion and Cross of Christ and also through their sufferings, they become mature enough to enter this Kingdom.¹⁴⁴ As Paul explains in the Letter to the Romans, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”¹⁴⁵ John Paul II observes that by persevering in suffering, the person recognizes that it will not deprive him or her of human dignity and through the working of God’s love, the meaning of life will become known. The more the person shares in this love, the more he discovers himself in suffering.¹⁴⁶

To be able to grasp this final stage of redemptive suffering is part of the pilgrimage of faith. John Paul II cautions that this learning process happens differently for everyone, often begins and is set in motion with great difficulty, and can take a long time before the truth is interiorly perceived.¹⁴⁷ Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of the suffering is revealed to him or her through grace. The Pope concludes that it is then that the person finds inner peace and even joy.

This sense of joy is consistent with the observations of Eric Cassell, who found in his medical practice that suffering was resolved when people could attach meaning to their pain.¹⁴⁸ St. Paul also felt it, telling the Colossians, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.”¹⁴⁹ John

¹⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, #21.

¹⁴⁵ Romans 5: 3-5.

¹⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, #23.

¹⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, #26.

¹⁴⁸ Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 43-44.

¹⁴⁹ Colossians 1:24.

Paul II reiterates the point that the discovery of the salvific meaning of suffering in union with Christ transforms the depressed feeling of the sufferer to the joy of recognizing that he or she is carrying out the irreplaceable service of serving the salvation of his or her brothers and sisters. According to the Pope, “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 it with others.”¹⁵⁰ This is among God’s greatest blessings.

Furthermore, as John Paul II points out, “Those who share in the sufferings of Christ are called, through their own sufferings, to share in his glory.”¹⁵¹ The Pope shows that this point is well attested to by the Apostles in Sacred Scripture, quoting both Peter and Paul.¹⁵² He goes on to say, “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.”¹⁵³

The Grace and Ultimate Joy of Suffering

When suffering is described as the result of original sin, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, most people recognize only the evil aspect of it. This is

¹⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, #27

¹⁵¹ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 22.

¹⁵² 1 Peter 4:13 “But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” And Romans 8: 17-18 “We are... fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we might 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.

¹⁵³ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 22.

understandable because Genesis is clear that death was the punishment for our first parent's disobedience and St. Paul reiterates that through one man (Adam), sin and death came to the world in his *Letter to the Romans*.¹⁵⁴ However, it must be remembered that the fruit produced the knowledge of good as well as evil and in fact the two are naturally intertwined. Since everything God made is good, evil does not exist on its own but is the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light.

Suffering gives humans the knowledge of evil in a very direct way that is unmistakable in its intensity and persistence, but more importantly because it is thoroughly unpleasant. This highly motivates people to seek the good they lack, driving them to develop virtues, proper self-love, love of God, love of neighbors and the knowledge of good. Suffering clearly is not evil itself, but because it warns people of evil, it is often mischaracterized that way. Suffering is God's gracious answer to original sin, designed in a way that it highlights the good we are lacking with such intensity that we are highly motivated to pursue it. All people experience it, either directly or as a threat, and its cumulative effect can be seen at every level of society, from individual family units to the entirety of humanity. The great paradox is that what John Paul II calls an experience of evil is also a great blessing because it constantly drives people toward the good that they are missing, leading ultimately to union with God for those willing to accept God's grace and order their wills to his.

The key to understanding suffering is to embrace the Christian teaching that evil is not an entity but an absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light and silence is the absence

¹⁵⁴ Genesis 3:1-15 and Romans 5: 12-14.

of sound. This allows sufferers to think of their suffering in a positive light, as a warning from a loving God that they are lacking some good that is threatening their existence and as a motivator to pursue it. Whether they understand this or not, however, suffering will still drive them toward virtue as they seek to relieve their pain or anxiety.

Suffering is like a divine fire alarm, going off whenever someone senses that they are lacking some critical good that deprives them of their sense of purpose and their personal dignity. It is in no way subtle, nor is it meant to be. It grabs one's attention in a way every bit as piercing as the loudest human alarm and it does not stop until either the lost goods are attained or that they are found to no longer threaten one's existence by depriving them of their sense of purpose or their dignity. These goods could be removed or deprived from a person by physical and natural evils, by the evil of sin, or as punishment. In true suffering, there will always be an element of uncertainty concerning the continued existence of the person when they lose their sense of purpose. There is also a fear of isolation when they feel that others do not recognize their value and dignity as children of God, often driven by loss of physical or mental capability or through social isolation. This is why those who suffer can be comforted when others show solidarity with them and help them find meaning in their suffering and in their lives.

When most people hear that the fruits of eating from the tree of good and evil are suffering and death, they naturally assume that this punishment is an act of vengeance by a vindictive God, stung by the ingratitude and disobedience of man, his greatest creation. Such a view is inconsistent with a God that is the source of all that is good and of love. This true God

can make something from nothing, which is the equivalent of saying he can make good from evil, which is after all, the absence of good.

Suffering plays a pivotal role in every step of God's plan for redemption, directing humanity toward goodness with an efficiency and relentlessness that demonstrates its divine origins. It is not to be avoided, but to be heeded as divine direction and a catalyst for conversion. Those who come to understand its function, rejoice in its meaning: God wants us to join in his divine nature and has put suffering in place to facilitate that. That is why John Paul II, a man who knew and understood suffering, was so effusive in his praise, calling it a "special grace," and "the firmest basis of the definitive good." It is also why he, along with St. Paul, rejoices in the discovery of the meaning of suffering and because of all those whom it can help understand its saving power.¹⁵⁵

Finally, suffering provides a way to discern God's will that helps people re-orient themselves to the virtuous activities that lead them to beatitude, the eternal happiness of living in communion with God. When we do something counter to God's plan for us, we are made aware of this transgression by suffering. This is intended for use as a final check on our behavior, however, because we can learn God's intentions for us through other, non-painful means of revelation including Sacred Scripture and Church tradition. We can also learn from the witness and warnings of others who have suffered, without suffering ourselves. This is why it is so important that suffering people take seriously their positions as messengers of God and bear witness to their suffering before others. This has obvious benefit to those people who are spared

¹⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 1.

their own suffering, but it also benefits the messenger by giving him or her a sense of purpose and potentially the gratitude of others. This can change the sorrow of suffering to the joy of redemption.

The theology of suffering reaches its full fruition when in a moment of great grace, the sufferer realizes that his or her suffering is truly for the spiritual benefit of others and embraces it joyfully out of love for God and those who benefit from his or her suffering. These might be the very people who gained spiritual merit by showing love to the sufferer or others who were inspired by the sufferer to orient themselves to God. Whatever the case might be, people at this stage can echo the words St. Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I complete what is lacking for the sake of his body, that is the Church.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, by willingly giving fully of oneself for the good of another, such a sufferer has emulated and in fact, shared in Christ’s redemptive suffering. John Paul II confirms that those who share in Christ’s sufferings will share in his glory.¹⁵⁷ The sufferer, having developed the full measure of charity by willingly embracing his suffering for the good of others and God’s providential plan, shares fully in the divine nature to his everlasting joy. In this, he has become like God, through the knowledge of good and evil, achieving what Eve desired in the Garden of Eden.

¹⁵⁶ Colossians 1:24.

¹⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 24.

Chapter 2: Suffering in God's Providential Plan

The Importance of Suffering and Evil in understanding Divine Providence

As befits a theology of suffering, the first chapter dealt primarily with the explanation of suffering and the four tasks it has to lead humanity to the development of virtue that enables it to share in the divine nature in the glow of the beatific vision. To explain the nature of suffering, it was also necessary to briefly discuss the nature of evil to make it make sense. However, it is understood that that short discussion is insufficient to address the concerns of many people that the presence of evil is inconsistent with providence, the saving plan of a benevolent God. For many people, it is unfathomable that an omnipotent, omniscient, supposedly benevolent creator of the universe, would allow, much less be responsible for, atrocities like fatal childhood genetic disorders or physical disasters like tornados and earthquakes that can devastate a community. Many people respond to this “problem of evil” by denying the existence of God, while others develop theodicies, apologetic works that seek to explain how a good God can allow evil to exist, often by denying that God is really all-powerful or all-knowing. The arguments from participants of both sides of this debate will be addressed in Chapter three.

The focus of Chapter two is to show how God can utilize both evil and suffering as critical elements of his providential plan to bring his children home, where they will experience the joy that He always intended for them. Obviously, no human has the breadth of knowledge necessary to identify all the ways God can use suffering and evil in his plan, nor does any person have the depth of perspective to discern the particular reason or reasons for evil and suffering in

most individual cases. Instead, this section will focus on identifying scenarios in which God can and does use evil and suffering to carry out his providential plan to demonstrate their plausibility and to provide a basis for people who suffer to come to understand the role of evil and suffering in God's plan.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the nature and power of God and what He has revealed to mankind about His plan for us. This is grounded in revealed truth utilizing the deposit of faith held by the Church's Magisterium. From there, plausible cases are developed to explore how the four tasks of suffering are deployed by God in response to the four classic types of evil to bring mankind to its final end, the beatific vision. The first type is physical evil, defined as acts of God related to the physical, inanimate environment that deny, diminish, or destroy goods that men expect in their natural condition. It includes seismic events like earthquakes and volcanoes, weather events like tornadoes, blizzards, and hurricanes and also environmental dangers like cliffs, quicksand, and river rapids. The second is natural evil, those acts of God that affect living creatures, including illnesses, injuries, disabilities, and death. The third is the evil of sin, both individual and societal, followed by the evil of punishment, which is the fourth and final type of evil.

The most fundamental consideration in discerning God's plan is to understand its end goal (*telos*). As will be discussed in detail in chapter three, a common misconception held by people who are perplexed by the existence of evil in the world is that God's goals should be aligned with their goals of earthly comfort. The primary goal of God's providential plan is clearly not human temporal comfort or fulfilling any other corporal need because, as critics like

Epicurus, Hume, Mackie, and Rowe point out in the next chapter, the world is far from comfortable despite men's best efforts. This is also where problems lie for liberation theologians like Mary VandenBerg and Delores Williams when they argue that Jesus primarily aimed at temporal liberation. He clearly did not. While it is true that he begins the Galilean ministry with a prophetic passage from Isaiah that points to liberation, it is undeniably true that he also tells his disciples at the last supper as he gave them the cup, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."¹ To add emphasis to this point, these words are repeated in every Eucharistic liturgy everyday around the world. God's plan for man is far loftier than to merely provide him earthly comfort; it is to allow him access to God's self and to share in the divine nature as explained by St. Peter in his second epistle.²

Thomas makes this the center of his moral theology, covered in the *Treatise of Man's Last End* in the *Summa*.³ Thomas recognizes that while everyone wants to be happy and fulfilled as a person, not everyone understands this to be associated with the beatific vision because they have no knowledge of what is true happiness.⁴ He explains that it is the last, continual act to unite with God, resulting in man's supreme perfection. This union with God is a purely intellectual act, causing the will to experience delight in place of the desire that draws humans to their last end. Thomas describes this ultimate state of happiness as pure contemplation, with the

¹ Matthew 4: 12-17 recounts the start of the Galilean ministry. Matthew 26: 27-28 defines his mission.

² 2 Peter 1:4.

³ ST I-II Q1-5.

⁴ Thomas ST I-II Q5.8

person's mind united directly to God.⁵ Because union with God is an act of the intellect, comprehension is necessary to understand what is perceived as the intelligible end. Finally, rectitude of will is necessary for happiness because it consists of being duly ordered to the last end and once having achieved it, to will what God wills.⁶

This view of the beatific vision may seem rather obtuse and even uninteresting to modern audiences until it is put in terms to which they can relate. God is the essence of all that is good and true and the perfect union with Him gives a person instant, complete, and never-ending access to everything through the intellect. Imagine a version of the internet where one can access all that is good and true in the universe and in which there is no evil. Imagine further that it requires nothing but the mind to access and that that access has infinite speed, bandwidth and can never be lost or interrupted. Instead of virtual reality, it offers reality as it truly is, coming from the imagination of God, which is far beyond human imagination. When one considers how intoxicating and addicting the human-constructed internet can be, is it any wonder that Thomas would say that it is impossible for anyone seeing the Divine Essence to wish not to see it. As he says, "the Divine Essence fills the soul with all good things, since it unites it to the source of all goodness, leaving nothing to be desired."⁷ Because there is nothing left to be desired in heaven and because death no longer threatens one's existence, there is no suffering there.

⁵ Thomas ST I-II, Q3.1-4.

⁶ Thomas, *ST* I-II Q 4. 1-4.

⁷ Thomas ST I-II Q5.4

However, this does not mean that God ignores temporal goods altogether. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks to the crowds about their priorities:

So do not worry and say, ‘What are we to eat?’ or ‘What are we to drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear?’ All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness and all these things will be given you besides.⁸

As he showed in his earthly ministry, Jesus often provided temporal goods in the form of healing as a means to lead people to union with God.⁹ In a similar way, Jesus fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish and then used the occasion to preach the “Bread of Life” discourse, telling the crowds, “Do not work for food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”¹⁰ His message is unmistakable: the goal of life must be to enter into the heavenly kingdom, which requires us to share in the divine nature; earthly goods are valuable primarily as a means of getting there. This does not deny that they are real goods, only that their value is limited compared with the greatest good, union with God. It is only in the heavenly kingdom that one can be truly happy because it is only there that men can be continually united with God. St. Thomas explains that on earth, happiness is imperfect because people must break from the contemplation of God to sustain themselves, even those living the contemplative life. The ability

⁸ Matthew 6: 32-33. Note, the kingdom of God is not a place, it is the presence of the divine nature, which can exist on earth in a limited fashion as Jesus noted in Luke 7:20-21 : Asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he said in reply, “The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, ‘Look, here it is,’ or, ‘There it is.’ For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.”

⁹ In Matthew’s gospel alone, there are sixteen healing references.

¹⁰ John 6:27 NABRE

for those living an active life to be happy is even further diminished since they are more distracted by the requirement to sustain themselves.¹¹

This perspective on the goals of God's plan for mankind is of the utmost importance in understanding how suffering and evil can be utilized in its execution. If there is no afterlife to aspire to, then evil, suffering, and particularly death cannot easily be reconciled with a benevolent God, which is the point of those who see the problem of evil as intractable. However, if there is an afterlife where those who align themselves with God in life and who seek to share in the divine nature and bask in the glow of the beatific vision, then there are ways that God can use suffering and even evil to bring it about as will be described in the remainder of this chapter.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, suffering is at the center of current debates on the theology of providence. David Fergusson notes in his 2018 book, *The Providence of God*, that the theology of providence encounters two problems everywhere- suffering and divine action.¹² The concern with suffering is the same that drives the "problem of evil" debate which is discussed in detail in chapter three: how to reconcile providence with the existence of evil. Convinced that the problem of evil is intractable, Fergusson advocates separating the task of resolving the problem of evil from the development of the theology of providence. However, suffering and evil are integral parts of God's plan, which cannot be adequately understood without them.¹³ In fact,

¹¹ ST I-II, Q2 reply to objection 4.

¹² Fergusson, David. *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 2018, 217.

¹³ Fergusson. *The Providence of God*. 216-217.

correctly understanding the nature of evil and suffering will resolve many of the issues currently under debate.

One such issue is whether God takes an active role in carrying out his plan in specific circumstances, called particular providence, or is his role limited to general providence, operating only through the fixed rules established at the time of creation with any appearance of particular providence for individuals being strictly accidental. Fergusson maintains that most people now deny that particular providence exists, aligning themselves with the Deists. He describes this as being driven by three considerations.¹⁴ The first is the perception of modern man that science can explain what was formerly attributed to divine agency in natural terms. The second assumes that God's original design was sufficiently robust that no particular divine action is necessary. The third consideration is that there is no decisive criterion for determining which events are acts of God and which are not, so many default into a denial of particular providence in favor of the Deist view, that only general providence exists. Further, some apologists deny the existence of particular providence in an effort to protect God from the charge of being the author of evil.¹⁵ As will be shown, this concern results from a misunderstanding of the nature of evil.

¹⁴ Fergusson. *The Providence of God*. 218-219.

¹⁵ As discussed in chapter three, some apologists argue that somehow God is not responsible for the evil experienced from events related to the way the universe functions if God does not take specific steps to cause the evil. However, since he set up the universe in a way that led to this evil, it is clear that they are acts of God and to deny this strains credibility and also calls into question God's omnipotence. Accordingly, no evil in this work will be considered accidental.

Saint Thomas introduces two concepts to the discussion of providence. First he separates the development of the plan (providence), which is solely God's purview, from its execution (governance), which God assigns to secondary sources, whether it be to physical laws such as gravity or to creatures, who all have their roles.¹⁶ Unlike the Deists, however, Aquinas recognizes that governance still remains under God's control, since he retains and utilizes the ability to reward and to punish those he has assigned as intermediaries.¹⁷ Thomas's view is that God extends his providence in a more excellent way with the righteous, impeding them from doing evil, whereas, he does not restrain the wicked from the evils of sin.¹⁸

The second concept is that God plans not only for each individual but also at a universal level and that universal plans supersede individual ones. In this transaction, Thomas notes that at times, the good of the individual is compromised for the greater good. In his example, the lion needs to eat so other animals will be prey. However, an omnipotent and omniscient God does not need to compromise the individual for the greater good and because there is an afterlife, not all the benefits have to be corporeal. He can accomplish this by putting in place scenarios where both parties benefit, even in the face of evil. In fact, Jesus demonstrated this when he suffered on the cross to reconcile mankind with God, opening up heaven for us while completing his mission for the Father.

¹⁶ ST I Q 22.1

¹⁷ ST I Q22.2 reply to obj. 5

¹⁸ ST I Q22.2 reply to obj 4

When we offer up our own suffering for the sake of others to Jesus, we share in the nature of Christ and if we accept his grace, we will share in his glory. This links particular and universal providence by making it clear that while each individual has his or her own path to salvation, these paths are interlinked and communal in nature. In fact, in Christ's *Parable of the Last Judgment*, he explicitly says that those who will be saved will be those that served the least of their neighbors in their hour of need.¹⁹ It also acknowledges that each person is responsible for his or her own decisions and will be held accountable for them. At the same time, the goal of union with God begins with union with Christ through baptism into his Church and therefore, outside the Church there is no salvation.²⁰ This is a topic that will be further expanded in chapter four.

Although God is the master of his plan, he makes use of his creature's cooperation to carry it out, not because he is weak, but because he is good and allows them the dignity of acting on their own.²¹ The Church understands this as being most fundamentally a statement of the dignity of man as explained in the *Catechism*:

To human beings, God even gives the power of freely sharing in his providence by entrusting them with the responsibility of "subduing" the earth and having dominion over it. God thus enables men to be intelligent and free causes in order to complete the work of creation, to perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors.²²

¹⁹ Matthew 25: 31-46.

²⁰ CCC

²¹ CCC, 306

²² CCC, 307

This statement has important ramifications in a theology of suffering because it makes it clear that God deliberately left creation in an unfinished state (i.e., with physical evil) to allow humanity the opportunity to perfect it. This allows mankind to grow and evolve and to share in the divine nature. While this might appear to be a statement of general providence, it actually shows how God uses suffering to bring about particular providences, which in aggregate, lead to universal providence. The *Catechism*'s explanation continues, noting:

Though often unconscious collaborators with God's will, they can also enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions, their prayers and their sufferings. They then fully become "God's fellow workers" and co-workers for his kingdom.²³

Within this simple statement from the *Catechism*, one can find the seeds of the four tasks in which suffering acts on men for their salvation as discussed in section one. The first task is for people to develop the cardinal virtues even as they collaborate with God in an unconscious way to subdue the earth in response to their sufferings. The second task is for suffering to cause them to experience a change of heart and to re-orient their wills toward God which causes them to enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions and prayers in response to the needs of others. This response to the needs of others relates to the third task of suffering which is to release love by providing opportunities to utilize the infused virtues in the service of others. Finally, the fourth and final task is fulfilled when they willingly suffer for the sake of others, becoming "God's fellow workers and co-workers for his kingdom."²⁴ In this chapter, it will be shown how these tasks of suffering are carried out to lead humans to salvation in the face of each

²³ CCC, 307

²⁴ CCC, 307.

of the four types of evil. These are clearly acts of particular providence, with God taking specific action in the lives of individual people to bring about their salvation. This salvation inevitably involves serving and often suffering for the benefit of others, sharing in the nature of Christ, and is made possible through the grace of Christ, made available through his church.

Another important element to consider in understanding divine providence is how God carries out his plan in light of man's freedom, of which the *Catechism* has this to say:

God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. "God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his own counsel,' so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him."²⁵

It also adds this insight from Saint Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*: "Man is rational and therefore like God; he is created with free will and is master over his acts."²⁶

The *Catechism* explains that God is the primary cause of all actions, who operates in and through secondary causes, including humans.²⁷ St. Paul added slightly more clarity in his letter to the Philippians when he tells them that "God is the one who, for his good purpose works in you to desire and to work."²⁸ This can be understood to mean that God carries out his plan, not by forcing men to do his bidding by controlling their thoughts, but by providing them with the motivation to make that choice on their own. This is not to deny that an omnipotent God could control a person's thoughts but instead recognizes as the *Catechism* states, that God in his

²⁵ CCC, 1730.

²⁶ CCC, 1730, quoting Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 4,4,3.

²⁷ CCC, 308.

²⁸ Philippians 2:13.

goodness, “grants his creatures not only their existence but the dignity of acting on their own.”²⁹

An omniscient God, living outside of time, sees all of eternity at once and therefore knows with complete accuracy what each person will do given a specific set of stimuli, particularly given the fact that he made them and knows them better than they know they know themselves. Further, an all-powerful God has no limitations on how to provide these inducements to act. Therefore, God’s plan will be executed according to his wishes, without having to infringe on human free will.

To be a little more specific about how God can carry out his plans without infringing on human free will, God creates an environment that will motivate each person to act in accordance with His plans. Environmental changes often are perceived as evil by humans, particularly those who have established habits based on the old environment. The change could be an illness that threatens the person or a loved one; it could be an earthquake that devastates a community. It can be an act of God or a human act, such as a war or the rise of an oppressive government that God anticipates. God’s desire is for man to share his divine nature and his life, just as in the parable of the prodigal son. Evil is not an entity in opposition to God but is the absence or deprivation of good. When God withholds a good from us, which we perceive as an evil of some sort through our suffering, it is to motivate us to attain that good. In fact, God continues to present us with these opportunities throughout life as he sees appropriate to lead us to salvation.

²⁹ CCC, 306.

As St. Thomas notes, God presents more of these opportunities to those that will be saved than to those who will be condemned.³⁰ This dynamic is also noted in the Book of Wisdom:

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them.
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;

and their passing away was thought an affliction
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.
But they are in peace.
For if to others, indeed, they seem punished,

yet is their hope full of immortality;
Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed,

because God tried them
and found them worthy of himself.
As gold in the furnace, he proved them,
and as sacrificial offerings- he took them to himself. ³¹

Perhaps the best example of how God motivates action by providing the necessary environment and inducements is that of the reluctant prophet, Jonah, who was called by God to preach repentance to the Ninevites. However, Jonah objects to helping his enemy and chooses to flee instead, taking passage on a ship to Tarshish, which is to go in the opposite direction. God first raises up a storm to make the environment hostile to Jonah's plan and uses suffering in the form of fear for their lives, to motivate the sailors to toss Jonah overboard. God then saves Jonah by having a whale swallow him up and vomit him out on the shore and again asks him to preach in Nineveh. At this point, Jonah decides that doing so is the path of least resistance for him, and

³⁰ ST I Q22.2 reply to obj 4

³¹ Wisdom 3:1-6. NABRE.

proceeds to preach repentance in Nineveh, which to his shock and dismay, the Ninevites heed, taking on sackcloth and ashes.³²

In the narrative, God employs physical evil, in the form of a storm, to create an environment of fear that motivates the sailors to do what he needs them to do for his plan to succeed. God also makes it clear to the sailors that Jonah is the reason for their danger, when he implicates him as the guilty party through the casting of lots. When Jonah confesses to them that he is fleeing the Lord God of heaven, the sailors are afraid of God's wrath and ask Jonah for a solution that will placate God. As St. Jerome notes in his commentary, Jonah knows he is responsible for putting the sailors in danger, so he tells them to throw him into the sea.³³ After praying for forgiveness, they do just that. God then acts again, showing that throwing Jonah into the water was his desire by calming the sea immediately after they threw him in. This stops their suffering and has the added benefit of serving as a catalyst for conversion for the sailors because, "seized with great fear of the Lord, the men offered sacrifice to the lord and made vows."³⁴ Finally, suffering from the experiences of the evils of the storm, being thrown into the raging sea, and then being swallowed by the whale was clearly enough to get Jonah to reconsider his decision and to align himself with God's will.

In the story of Jonah, it is made clear that God is taking specific action to ensure that his plan remains intact by employing the storm and the whale to do his bidding. The appearance of

³² Jonah 1-3.

³³ Jerome "Commentary on Jonah" *Aquinas Study Bible* chapter 1.11

<https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/jonah/st-jerome-on-jonah/chapter-1>

³⁴ Jonah 1.1-1.14

the storm and the whale at precisely the time they are needed is not accidental. This is a prime scriptural example of particular providence, utilizing evil to provide the right environment and suffering to motivate the desired behavior in the affected individuals (both the sailors and Jonah). As St. Jerome says in his commentary, God's plan not only led to Jonah aligning himself with God's will, but also the sailors on the boat and the people of Nineveh.³⁵ In each of these cases, there was a particular plan for each individual, with an omnipotent, omniscient God capable of integrating them for efficiency. Jerome goes further, stating that "The flight of the prophet can be related to man in general, who, forsaking the commands of God, flees from his face and goes out into the world. But in consequence a storm of wickedness and the shipwreck of the entire world are sent against him, and he is made to pay attention to God and to return to that which he had fled. From this we can understand that what appears to be advantageous to mankind, turns into their downfall by God's will."³⁶ As discussed above and again in Chapter three, there is no need or reason for a person's salvation to be a matter of chance or accident when in the hands of an omnipotent, omniscient God who cares deeply about his creation.

It must be emphasized at this point that God is actually using evil, which is the deprivation of good, to provide the environment he knows is needed for humans to grow spiritually. People need challenges to grow. Eleanor Stump notes that human experience in child rearing supports this claim, where spoiled children often grow up into unpleasant adults

³⁵ Jerome "Commentary on Jonah" *Aquinas Study Bible* chapters 1,2.

<https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/jonah/st-jerome-on-jonah/chapter-1>

³⁶ Jerome "Commentary on Jonah" *Aquinas Study Bible*, *Aquinas Study Bible*. Chapter 1

<https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/jonah/st-jerome-on-jonah/chapter-1>

whereas those who grew up facing challenges are more prepared to prosper as adults.³⁷ The next four subchapters will demonstrate how God uses particular evils to create the environment needed to facilitate human development and how he also utilizes suffering to direct that development.

Some will be uncomfortable with a position that God actively makes use of evil to bring about good, not merely that he allows it as a prerequisite of free will. However, this is well attested in the Tradition, both by the Doctors of the Church and the Magisterium. St. Thomas Aquinas holds that God is not responsible for the evil of sin but is responsible for natural evils and the evil of punishment.³⁸ John Paul II in *Salvifici doloris* is clear that although God is responsible for punishment, it is not for the purposes of destroying a person, but to rebuild goodness.³⁹ It is also fairly clear that no one but God is to blame for natural evils such as birth defects and lightning strikes. Aquinas says that birth defects are given to people for the good of their souls or those around them.⁴⁰ In the story of the blind man in John 9, Jesus is explicit in saying that the man was born blind specifically to be used as an instrument of God's glory.⁴¹ Any argument that tries to explain these things away as God merely permitting evil is untenable because of the obvious argument that "who else is causing these evils like earthquakes that God 'merely permits.'"

³⁷ Stump, Eleonore. "The Problem of Evil." *Faith and Philosophy* 2. 4, (Oct 1985): 410

³⁸ ST I Q49.2

³⁹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 12.

⁴⁰ ST I-II Q87.7 Reply Obj. 1

⁴¹ John 9

Further, it is clearly the Christian position that everything God made was good for its intended purpose. The reasons that things are perceived as evil and cause suffering are they are misused or their form is corrupted.⁴² Actions are judged to be evil when a lesser good is chosen over a greater good.⁴³ When God called up the storm to reroute Jonah, he did it not out of malice to Jonah but to redirect him to the path of righteousness that he had planned for him. The storm was perceived by Jonah to be an evil because it was an impediment to his desired actions. He suffered as a warning that he was pursuing a path contrary to God's will. Actually, though, the storm was an instrument of salvation for Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites – a much greater good than the temporary loss of comfort of Jonah and his shipmates.

Key to understanding the nature of physical and natural evil is the concept from the *Catechism* that “the universe was created in a state of journeying toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it.”⁴⁴ This concept of an evolving and improving universe is consistent with current scientific understanding (Darwinism) and also has some significant theological implications. What people perceive as physical evils are actually the gaps in perfection still to be addressed in God’s plan. St. Thomas holds that the perfection of the universe requires that some things must fail in goodness because the universal plan includes corruptible beings.⁴⁵ Noting that God is so powerful that he can make good out of evil, he explains that many good things would be taken away if God did not allow evil to exist.

⁴² ST I Q48.1,5

⁴³ ST I Q48.2

⁴⁴ CCC, 302.

⁴⁵ ST I Q48.2 reply to objection 3.

Consistent with the points in the previous two paragraphs, these gaps are not accidental but reflect opportunities and challenges left by God to bring about growth in mankind and are part of his plan. Suffering highlights these gaps in goodness and motivates people to use their skills and resources to address them because they cause discomfort, thus creating ever increasing technical capacity in mankind over time. As will be discussed more fully in Chapter four, these challenges, ranging from basic self-protection to optimizing resources to pursuing eternal salvation, also drive people to work in community to prosper.

The next discussion will propose ways to understand how physical evils are used as part of providence. In fact, it is only logical that if God is truly omniscient and omnipotent, nothing is left to chance and if he is benevolent, then every action must result in some good. Because the good most valued by God is spiritual and eternal, judgments made on strictly temporal criteria will be inaccurate and need to be re-evaluated in light of the potential spiritual value.

The *Catechism* also reveals that “in God’s plan, this process of becoming involves the appearance of certain beings and the disappearance of others, the existence of the more perfect alongside the less perfect, both constructive and destructive forces of nature.”⁴⁶ This is important in the theology of suffering because it helps to understand the forces behind natural evil. Nature comprises all living material which in a finite universe is fixed and recyclable, constantly evolving through natural selection toward its perfection, which is humanity. Anything that limits this evolution by threatening human existence is felt as an evil, yet as discussed in the next

⁴⁶ CCC, 310.

section of this chapter, this natural evil plays a fundamental role in alerting people to their need for God and should be considered another example of particular providence in action.

This will be followed by a discussion of the evil of sin. This is a particularly interesting discussion because while our sin separates us from God, God can make use of it to create an environment that can lead others to beatitude. In fact, in his plan, it is the victims of sin that can help save their oppressors, just as Jesus demonstrated on the cross.

Following that will be a discussion of the evil of punishment, which is the most straightforward case where an evil is designed to lead to good. Punishment is designed to restore the natural order of things and so must be considered medicinal. For those that accept and embrace their punishment, the resulting suffering will become redemptive and lead to joy. Those that cannot see the suffering they cause others by their actions, will persist in their own suffering until they have satisfied their debt.

Each of these discussions will identify ways that God can and has used these forms of evil to create environments in which the four tasks of suffering can lead someone, but not necessarily the direct sufferer, to heaven. Because human perspective is limited and flawed and there are infinite ways to separate one's self from God and there are also a large number of ways that people interact, this list cannot be comprehensive, nor can it accurately apply to any specific case. What it can offer is perspective about how God can use evil and suffering as tools to lead people to salvation. This can be used to provide understanding and hope for the sufferer by offering a theology that is consistent with the revealed nature of God as the loving Father of billions of prodigal sons and daughters.

Physical Evil as Opportunities for Growth

The *Catechism* teaches that “God willed creation as a gift addressed to man, an inheritance destined for and entrusted to him.”⁴⁷ God gave humanity dominion over the world and deftly guides humanity through suffering in its efforts to perfect the earth for its own usage. As Pope Francis points out, “our ‘dominion’ over creation should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.”⁴⁸ This makes sense because man and his environment are co-dependent: man depends on the material world for his sustenance while the material world depends on man for its care and upkeep.⁴⁹ It is a world of beauty, rich in resources that can provide humans with not only simple pleasures but great power if they can find these resources and discover how to use them. In many cases, the very things that sustain us can also imperil us if not used properly. The sun that warms us can also burn us. We can drown in the water we use to drink and bathe in. Nuclear power can run a city but can also be used to destroy a city.

Simply stated, what humans perceive as physical evils are the gaps in the perfection of a still evolving universe that affect people’s well-being, generally by causing them discomfort or to fear for their safety. Divine revelation suggests that God deliberately places these obstacles in our path to provide us with the challenges we need to grow and also to provide us the

⁴⁷ CCC, 299.

⁴⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, (Praise be to You: On Care of Our Common House). San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015. 116.

⁴⁹ While this is perhaps more obvious in modern times, when man’s destructive power from wars and pollution can render an area unproductive and even uninhabitable, even in antiquity, over-farming could render the land barren if crops were not rotated.

opportunity and responsibility to mold our environment to meet our needs.⁵⁰ Often, what we see as physical evils are merely a failure on the part of humans to recognize or utilize their potential for goodness. This explains why the *Catechism* would note the intrinsic linkage between humans and the material world.⁵¹ If man does not care for his environment, it will eventually lack the ability to sustain him. Suffering will gradually increase during this process of decay and if not heeded, death and decay for both humans and the environment will eventually follow. As Pope Francis notes, this has been a significant concern for the last half century, eliciting warnings from Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, culminating in his own 2015 encyclical, “*Laudato Si’*: On Care for Our Common Home.”⁵²

In his providential plan, God provides the challenges and opportunities that individuals and communities need to reach their fullest potential in the form of physical evils. This may at first be hard for most people to understand, since physical evil consists of seismic activity like earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis; weather events like hurricanes, tornados, blizzards, floods, and droughts; and physical dangers like cliffs, undertows, and quicksand, all of which can result in destruction, injury, and death. Some will argue that large scale physical disasters are the works of a punitive God and others will argue that the people involved are incidental to the bigger picture of the evolving universe.⁵³ However, when put in the right perspective, one can see how suffering from physical evils brings out greater goods that are important to man’s

⁵⁰ CCC, 307.

⁵¹ CCC, 1046.

⁵² Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 4-7.

⁵³ There is a wide range of views associated with God’s role in major physical disasters that are discussed in detail in the pages that follow

redemption. As discussed in the last section, there are no accidents in God's plans. If someone suffers, it is for a reason and in fact, is directed toward the greatest good for someone, but not necessarily the immediate sufferer.

The physical universe, then, was created in a way that would provide humans the opportunities to "complete the work of creation, to perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors."⁵⁴ Here, it is important to remember that "man's last end," is union with God in the beatific vision, not the perfection of the earth. It is clear that an omnipotent, omniscient God could have, and if Genesis is to be believed, did place humans in a paradise where there was no suffering because everything God made was good.⁵⁵ But just because everything that was made was good, does not mean that everything was made that would ultimately be needed. God left those gaps in the perfection of the physical universe to give humans something to do and provide purpose in their lives. In many cases, people will recognize their purpose to be to correct the gaps experienced by humans as physical evils, impediments to comfort and safety, but clearly are they also present opportunities to grow in virtue, leading to the true purpose of man- his salvation and the beatific vision.

This is true of even the most devastating physical calamities. One such event was the devastating earthquake that laid Lisbon to waste on the morning of All Saints day, 1755. A current guidebook to the city describes the three-fold terror of the event.⁵⁶ It began with an

⁵⁴ CCC, 307.

⁵⁵ Genesis 1

⁵⁶ LisbonLisboaPortugal.com. "The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755". <https://lisbonlisboaportugal.com/Lisbon-information/1755-lisbon-earthquake.html>, retrieved July 13, 2019.

estimated 8.5-9.0 magnitude earthquake that lasted for three and a half minutes, creating 2 meter -wide fissures in the streets, while collapsing many buildings and churches. Forty-five minutes later, a 9 meter-high tsunami hit the city, toppling buildings and causing widespread flooding. This was followed by five days of devastating fires, many caused by the upended candles from masses in honor of the saints. In all, over 75,000 people died and over 90% of the buildings were destroyed.

Michael Peterson describes the event as a turning point in intellectual history because rationalist religious systems supporting unqualified optimism were discredited.⁵⁷ He references Voltaire's poem, "The Lisbon Earthquake" as a direct attack on Gottfried Leibniz's view that this is the best of all possible worlds, which will be discussed in chapter three. More importantly, perhaps, was that the well-known poem put to words what many felt, that God had abandoned them for some unknown reason, leaving them without hope. Given that many died in Mass on All Saints' Day as the church's roofs collapsed, many lost faith in God altogether. So, along with Voltaire, many ask, "what was gained?"

The physical world presents men with choices, much in the same way that it presented Adam and Eve with a choice. Our first parents could have remained in paradise indefinitely if they had simply responded according to God's will that they refrain from taking the fruit that they were told would cause death.⁵⁸ So too, can every human aspire to spend eternity in an even

⁵⁷ Peterson, Michael L. *The Problem of Evil*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 2.

⁵⁸ Genesis 3: 1-3 NABRE.

better situation in heaven if they respond according to God's will when confronted with environmental challenges or they can choose a path that leads to eternal damnation.

In the specific case of Lisbon in 1755, the population was severely tested and, like in all crises, some reacted with charity toward their neighbors and others undoubtedly turned to looting. Some people prospered, like the prime minister Sebastiao de Melo, known to history as the Marquis of Pombal, who proved adept at dealing with disaster.⁵⁹ His simple philosophy of "Bury the dead and heal the living" resonated with the populace, and, in just over a month, his chief engineer Manuel de Maia had designed five plans for the rebuilding of Lisbon. Pombal chose the complete redesigns of the neighborhoods of Rossio and Baixa and implemented the first grid system, which was copied the world over. The city was rebuilt and a statue of the Marquis of Pombal has a prominent place overlooking it.

The entire point of the Lisbon Earthquake was certainly not to improve the career of the prime minister or spread the design ideas of Manuel de Maia, but yet, this might have been some of the point if it led somehow to the salvation of souls. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, God is attentive to every one of his creatures and therefore, there is a specific reason for what happened to every individual that was affected by this or any other disaster. Most people's judgment of the event is based on some sort of aggregation of the experience of each affected person. For instance, on city tours, the discussion is about the thousands who died or were displaced. But doing so is to miss the bigger picture. Ultimately, this is not about an aggregation

⁵⁹ LisbonlisboaPortugal.com . "The Lisbon Earthquake"

but is about how it affected each individual. It is not about punishment or indifference on the part of God, either. It is about his reaching out to the elect and calling them to himself.

Granted, there was incredible suffering and hardship among those in Lisbon and its vicinity that day and in the aftermath: Voltaire catalogs this quite well. But Voltaire, or any other human for that matter, cannot adequately catalog the good that came out of it.⁶⁰ Not because it does not exist, but because there is no way for us to quantify how many souls were saved, nor how to value the eternal bliss of a person versus the suffering it took to gain it. As discussed throughout this dissertation, suffering has four tasks to complete in God's plan for salvation and disasters like this bring them out. While it is true that the lack of institutional control during disasters can encourage some to exploit the defenseless, some people also develop virtuous habits based on proper self-love to mitigate the suffering. While some people's faith in God is shaken, others turn to God when there are no temporal solutions to their problems. Disasters, particularly of the scope of the Lisbon Earthquake, provide copious opportunities to aid the suffering as well as many opportunities to share in the suffering of Christ by suffering for the benefit of others, whether through heroic actions to save lives or by simply offering one's suffering for the spiritual good of those that provide aid. All these things have spiritual value and in the case of those who share in the suffering of Christ, the promises of sharing in his

⁶⁰ In *Veritatis splendor* #77-78, John Paul II condemns proportionalism, the method of drawing the criteria for the rightness of an action by the ratio of good versus evil in the act, because people do not have the ability to fully understand the consequences of a given action, nor can they accurately evaluate their benefits relative to another. Finally, humans also lack the moral grounding of what is ordered to God so human practitioners were prone to judging intrinsically evil acts as licit using this method. None of this applies to God, who with perfect foresight, understanding and goodness, can choose actions that will truly yield the greatest good.

glory.⁶¹ God must believe that the spiritual gain is worth the temporal pain or else, he would not have caused the Earthquake to begin with.

The Lisbon Earthquake provides an excellent case study on how one's understanding of divine providence affects his attitude toward God and his subsequent actions. As already discussed, Voltaire dismisses the entire concept of divine providence because he deems it incompatible with the suffering involved in the disaster. In answer to Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau maintained his commitment to providence, choosing to blame humans for the extent of the disaster, from poor choices in building to the inadequacy of their response. Fergusson rightfully sees Rousseau's response as reflecting only a general rather than a particular oversight by God.⁶² He shifts the blame but does not recognize how it could be part of God's providential plan.

Fergusson offers other theologians' insights as well. John Wesley recognizes the disaster as God's judgment on Lisbon, an act of divine retribution that also represented an opportunity for repentance for those involved as well as those who heard about it.⁶³ This reflects a view of particular interest by God, but most see it as not beneficial to man and thus not providence. This is of course to overlook the spiritual benefits in favor of the temporal costs. Fergusson also notes that some theologians, including Aquinas, saw disasters of this type to be governed by God but

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 22 quoting Romans 8:17-18.

⁶² Fergusson. *The Providence of God*. 126.

⁶³ Fergusson. *The Providence of God*. 127.

not as specific divine action. Others blamed natural causes directly, some as the primary cause, others as a secondary cause.⁶⁴

Fergusson maintains that the “somber reflections on the Lisbon disaster cast doubt on a providence that actively wills each event.” He feels that this strengthened the position of the Deists, who denied particular providence in mundane matters in favor of a general providence that runs the world through a pre-ordained plan and a set of divine rules. He understands this as the prevalent view in the world today, as people have become increasingly reliant on technical expertise to explain what they experience.⁶⁵

While Fergusson may be correct in his assessment of the modern view of God’s providence, this view is clearly inconsistent with the revealed truth held by the Church. First of all, the salvation of individual souls is not mundane to the God represented by the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, it means everything to him. If God is not active in our lives, then there would be no reason to pray, yet Jesus admonished us to do so, saying, “Ask and it will be given to you.”⁶⁶ In fact, every bit of suffering we endure supports the view that God is active in our lives, since each incidence is a warning from God that we are somehow lacking something we need. Even many of the evils we perceive are acts of providence, leading us to order our lives to the greatest good, uniting with God. The fact that earthquakes are the result of the movement of tectonic plates might make some believe that they are purely natural events until they stop to consider who made the plates the way that they are. If we understand God as

⁶⁴ Fergusson. *The Providence of God*. 128-129.

⁶⁵ Fergusson. *The Providence of God*. 132.

⁶⁶ Matthew 7:7 NABRE

omnipotent and omniscient while also having the benevolent characteristics of the Father of the Prodigal Son, we might recognize that he is capable of setting a plan in place that would arrange for an earthquake at precisely the time it was needed to provide what was required for the salvation of souls.

Another way of understanding suffering from physical evils and one perhaps more illustrative of the dichotomy of decision paths associated with ordering one's life to temporal versus eternal goals is how people use physical resources to conduct their daily lives. Using the world's resources responsibly alleviates suffering, meeting human needs for food, drink, shelter, clothing, medicines, transportation, and the sharing of knowledge. Unfortunately, people are often self-centered, causing them to pursue luxury instead of need and to put their own interests above that of the environment they are supposed to be maintaining and above what is required for the common good. This will lead to suffering. People have caused suffering by unwisely building on flood plains, fault lines and in coastal areas that subsequently were destroyed by predictable events, making the impacts far worse than they might have been. This was Rousseau's criticism of Lisbon. In addition, people have poisoned the land, the air, and the seas with pollution from factories and automobiles, oil and chemical leaks, and radiation from nuclear events that have made some areas unlivable. People have destroyed forests by clear-cutting, mountains through strip mining and fields by over-farming. Many believe that man's activity over the last century has warmed the earth, leading to more extreme weather activity in the near term and uncertainty in the future.

God permits humanity to make poor decisions as is required to maintain true free will but God also admonishes humanity through suffering when it fails in its duty as the steward of creation and motivates it to correct the problems it causes through relentless feelings of discomfort and pain as will be explored in the pages ahead. Unfortunately, as Pope Francis points out in *Laudato Si'*, often environmental concerns in the modern age are caused by those remote from the situation (businessmen, politicians, etc.), and without the witness of those directly affected, there is little to no motivation to stop harming the environment.⁶⁷

The world is beautiful, intricately made to the smallest, microscopic detail, which reflects the beauty and intellect of the Creator. But hidden within it are also challenges, steep peaks that are difficult to climb, rivers and oceans that are difficult to cross, ocean cross currents and undertows that endanger the swimmer, cliffs and falling rocks that endanger the hiker. These things cause suffering when encountered without the right tools and training. Yet, with experience and training, humans have mastered them all, or at the very least, learned how to avoid the danger. Steep mountains become ski slopes, high waves become prime surfing locations. What before caused suffering now becomes fun as people learn how to use what God created to their advantage.

God provided the created universe as an environment capable of bringing humanity to its fullest potential, to share in the divine nature. What people experience as physical evils, things like hurricanes and earthquakes, but also heat waves and cold rains, are actually opportunities for men to subdue the earth and make the world a more hospitable place as well giving us the reason

⁶⁷ Francis. *Laudato Si'*. (49)

to provide aid and comfort for those caught up in disasters we cannot avoid or mitigate. God sets the physical stage in such a way that the gaps in its perfection appear at the very time they are needed to provide mankind the challenges it needs to develop in virtue and the opportunities it needs to share in the divine nature and the perfection of the universe. The suffering associated with those gaps alerts us to the good that is lacking and motivates us to attain it, whether it be ways to subdue the earth or to improve our knowledge of God and his will for us. For those who are open to the graces it offers, the suffering associated with physical evil is a blessing that leads to union with God and eternal happiness. However, to those who reject God's call and abuse their free will to sin, suffering from all its sources will remain a curse, never to be resolved.

God's ultimate goal in presenting man with an imperfect environment is the perfection of the human race, not the perfection of the physical universe, although that will be a consequence of the former. The *Catechism* provides the linkage between our suffering in the current world and our attaining to the next one, when it asserts:

Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectancy of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age which is to come. That is why, although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society.⁶⁸

In other words, by working together in subduing the environment, we develop the virtues that clear the path for grace to enter our hearts. This in turn, builds up the kingdom of God on earth.

⁶⁸ CCC, 1049

The *Catechism* explains that at the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness. After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe itself will be renewed:

The Church . . . will receive her perfection only in the glory of heaven, when will come the time of the renewal of all things. At that time, together with the human race, the universe itself, which is so closely related to man and which attains its destiny through him, will be perfectly re-established in Christ.⁶⁹

Note, God perfects the universe after perfecting man through suffering to provide the kingdom a suitable environment, free of evil that is the source of suffering. This final realization of God's plan is called the "new heavens and the new earth" in Sacred Scripture:⁷⁰ The *Catechism* explains;

Those who are united with Christ will form the community of the redeemed, "the holy city" of God, "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." She will not be wounded any longer by sin, stains, self-love, that destroy or wound the earthly community. The beatific vision, in which God opens himself in an inexhaustible way to the elect, will be the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion.⁷¹

The physical world, then, is a training ground of sorts, provided for humanity to develop the virtues that ultimately lead to beatitude. What men perceive as physical evils are actually opportunities to demonstrate stewardship consistent with the nature of God. It is incumbent on man to care for this world and to maintain it because to fail to do so would not only deprive man of this "training ground" that is necessary to demonstrate his merits, it would also not allow man to sustain himself, resulting in temporal death. Even worse, it would mean that man had failed to

⁶⁹ CCC, 1042.

⁷⁰ CCC, 1042.

⁷¹ CCC, 1045.

develop the virtue that leads to the beatific vision, causing permanent separation from God in hell.

Natural Evil in a Contingent World

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, natural evil refers to the loss of human function or threats to human existence that are related to nature, the living matter of the universe. These include disability, injury, illness, physical degradation and culminates with death. Each of these is an integral part of the universal design that perfects and elevates man to ultimately share in the divine nature and partake of the beatific vision and as such, each will be discussed in turn in this chapter. As the *Catechism* notes, “of all visible creatures, only man is able to know and love his creator. He is the only creature on earth that God willed for its own sake and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity.”⁷²

In the Thomistic framework, there is a large subset of the evil of pain and punishment called the evil of natural defect. This evil exists because God allows some things to be corrupted as part of the natural design of the universe.⁷³ First of all, Thomas holds that:

God brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and at the same time, represented by them and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse

⁷² CCC, 356

⁷³ ST I Q19.9.

creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another.⁷⁴

He also asserts that the same divine wisdom that causes things to be different for the sake of the perfection of the universe also causes there to be inequality between them.⁷⁵ Using the example of a house which uses different materials for the roof and the foundation, Thomas demonstrates that inequality is necessary for the perfection of the whole.

Disability

Many people feel that such inequality is unfair and inconsistent with a benevolent God, particularly when confronted with natural or physical evils that are clearly “acts of God.” Perhaps the natural evil that people have the greatest difficulty reconciling with a benevolent God is that innocent children are born with abnormalities, whether it be lack of sensory perception like being blind or deaf, lack of limbs or the use of them, lack of physical size, strength or control, or lack of mental or psychological capability. St. Thomas answers this concern by reminding the reader that original sin deprived humanity of original justice and left human nature on its own and in a disordered state.⁷⁶ Not only did this untether reason from God and disorder the powers of the soul but disorder in the body made it subject to corruption.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ *ST I-II Q47.1*

⁷⁵ *ST I-II Q47.2*

⁷⁶ *ST I-II Q87.7.*

⁷⁷ *ST I-II Q85.5.*

Consistent with this view, Thomas is unapologetic in saying that birth defects and other infirmities which children suffer from, are the effects and the punishments of original sin. He also explains that the reason that some people have more defective bodies than others is that without God they are subject to the diversity of nature. This does not mean, however, that God abandoned humanity in a punitive act of spite. Far from it. Indeed, Aquinas insists that “defects and infirmities are directed by Divine providence, to the salvation of men, either of those who suffer, or of others who are admonished by their means--and also to the glory of God.”⁷⁸ Thomas’s point is important because it is unambiguous in its assertion that God has a specific salvific reason for every incidence of defect and infirmity, even if the reasons are often unintelligible to those directly or indirectly affected. As discussed in the introduction of this section, God cares about every element of his creation.

Birth defects need to be treated in two broad categories, lethal and non-lethal, because the ramifications are very different. Some defects are so significant that the person will not survive childhood. One example is Tay-Sachs Disease, a rare, inherited lipid metabolism disorder which causes too much of a fatty substance to build up in the brain, a process that begins in the womb.⁷⁹ Affected children appear to develop normally for their first six months and then experience progressive loss of mental ability, dementia, blindness, deafness, difficulty swallowing, seizures, and even with the best of care, death before their fifth birthday. There is no cure; the best that

⁷⁸ *ST I-II Q87.7.*

⁷⁹ NIH. “Tay-Sachs Disease Information Page.” <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Tay-Sachs-Disease-Information-Page>, retrieved 7/15/19

can be done for the child is to manage his or her symptoms and show them love and attention for as long as they live.

Fatal childhood diseases like Tay-Sachs are very challenging because they involve the suffering of innocents. The child is a martyr of sorts, suffering and dying for the spiritual benefit of others, without the benefit of understanding why it is happening to them. Since they live and die in a state of innocence, their path to eternal life, while painful, is fairly clear.⁸⁰ In these types of situations, it seems that the children suffer not for themselves but for those around them.

Many people assume that the child is better off dead than to suffer so severely so they procure an abortion when they are made aware of the situation.⁸¹ Others do so to spare themselves of what is undoubtedly a heart-wrenching experience of watching their child suffer without hope of a cure. In fact, Marrick Kukin came to the conclusion that “not taking precautions to prevent a Tay-Sachs tragedy seems to be the cruelest path to follow.”⁸² However, when they do so, they sell God short, who does everything for a reason, and they overestimate their own knowledge of the situation. Indeed, despite what Kukin calls “suffering of unimaginable dimensions, affecting every aspect of a couple’s life” in caring for a Tay-Sachs child, those that chose to try to avoid it through abortion may simply be adding to their

⁸⁰ CCC, 1261. Incapable of committing personal sin before the age of reason, baptized children are assumed to be in the state of grace and heaven-bound. However, the Church also hopes that God will have mercy on the unbaptized children but implores its members to baptize their children as soon as possible since that is what the Lord said was required in John 3:5.

⁸¹ Kukin, Marrick. “Tay-Sachs and the Abortion Controversy”. *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 1981. 224

⁸² Kukin, “Tay-Sachs and the Abortion Controversy”. 225

suffering.⁸³ For example, Michael Ruse reports that “it seems overwhelmingly clear that couples who have a fetus aborted because it is found to be diseased suffer a great deal.”⁸⁴

Looking at it a different way, couples with a lethally disabled child might see that God is teaching them to love profoundly by caring for the suffering child, giving of themselves in a way that most are not called to do. As hard as it is, when they hold their Tay-Sachs child and offer him or her comfort, they are taking on part of the child’s suffering. This is suffering carrying out its third task, unleashing love, but also the fourth task, redeeming the soul of the suffering parent, as the parent suffers for the benefit of the child. If the suffering is borne well by the parent or caregiver, it can also encourage others in similar situations to look at it differently and perhaps see the value in the love they give to their afflicted child and the wisdom of God. In fact, loving, devout parents of lethally disabled children can be effective catalysts for conversion while unleashing love by the witness and example they give to the community at large.

The concerns of both the child and their families are different if the child’s disability is non-lethal but instead, limits natural human function in some way. Such birth defects are truly evil in that they are, by definition, the lack of some good, whether it be the lack of a limb or some other body part, or the lack of capability whether it be sensory, intellectual, psychological or social.

⁸³ Kukin. “Tay-Sachs and the Abortion Controversy”. 226.

⁸⁴ Ruse, Michael. “Genetics and the Quality of Life.” *Social Indicators Research* 7 (1980) 429-430. He notes that in an admittedly small study of 13 couples who had a therapeutic abortion, almost all the men and women suffered severe depression following the abortion and 4/13 couples separated.

The reality of birth defects of this kind is that they only are disabling relative to specific roles. Indeed, what disables a person for one role can often position him or her for success in another. For instance, being short in stature is a disadvantage for basketball and volleyball players but an advantage for jockeys and gymnasts and has no impact at all on the vast majority of vocational choices. The blind are at a disadvantage in roles where sight is required but lack of sight has not impeded people from having highly successful careers in music, computer programming and other vocations in which their limitations are not a factor or can be reasonably accommodated.

A central tenet of Thomistic theology is that for perfection of the whole, the world needs every kind of good and that is the reason for both diversity and inequality.⁸⁵ Said another way, every person has a role to fill and is built specifically for that role. Even the most limited individuals have a role to play, if only to provide others the opportunity to demonstrate love toward them.

This is not meant to minimize the challenges that people with disabilities and their families face; in many cases, they can be overwhelming. The point is that every person has some form of limitation that is part of what defines the person. Even the most limited people are part of the human continuum of diversity and were made with a specific purpose in mind. Most do not suffer from their disabilities because non-lethal defects do not threaten their existence, they define their existence. Nevertheless, they can certainly be causes of frustration and irritation.

⁸⁵ *ST I Q47.2*

An example is the case of Diane DeVries, who was born in 1950 without legs and with above elbow upper extremity stumps.⁸⁶ Her physician saw her birth as such a shocking catastrophe that he passed out during the delivery. While her maternal grandmother rejected her, labeling her as “the devil’s daughter” because of her impairment, her parents were loving and supportive, helping her to develop a remarkably positive self-image. Taking a cue from her father, she accepted her unique body as being something that could not be helped and was nobody’s fault. She explains that she has always been “really in tune with my body,” which she understood to be compact and streamlined; different, yet intact and healthy. Despite her lack of limbs, DeVries experienced many of the ordinary events for a woman of her age. She was raised at home with her family, went to public school and graduated from UCLA. She had an active social life, got pregnant, was married, and later divorced. As Nancy Eiesland put it, “She has lived an ordinary life in an unconventional body.”⁸⁷

The disability experience of those with mental handicaps is different and, in many ways, worse than that experienced by those with physical handicaps like DeVries.⁸⁸ First of all because they think and communicate less efficiently than other people, some will find them hard to relate to, resulting in a tendency to dehumanize those with mental handicaps. Secondly, they are incapable of advocating for themselves, which leaves them vulnerable. Third, their deficiencies

⁸⁶ Eiesland, Nancy L.. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press: 1994, 33-34.

⁸⁷ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 39.

⁸⁸ Hauerwas, Stanley. *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped and the Church*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 1986. 176

cannot be solved by physical accommodations so in most cases, they require care from others. Fourth, they do not hide their needs, which makes others uncomfortable, leading to alienation. Nevertheless, Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian and an advocate for the mentally disabled, asserts that “there is no reason to think they would on their own come to understand their condition as ‘retardation’ or that they are in some decisive way suffering.”⁸⁹ It seems that even without a reasoning impediment, they would not miss what they never had. Further, even if they notice that others can do things faster or better than they can, that doesn’t constitute suffering. In fact, everyone is subject to the experience of someone else doing something better than they do.

While it is likely true that those with Downs Syndrome do not suffer because of their mental limitations, it is also likely that they will be discriminated against because of their disability, which will cause suffering. Hauerwas points out that those born with Downs Syndrome suffer from inadequate housing, inadequate medical care, inadequate schooling, and a lack of love and care. They will be discriminated against, teased and bullied.⁹⁰ The situation can be much the same for those with physical defects. As she got older, Diane DeVries was also regularly exposed to hostility and prejudicial treatment by people who interpreted her lack of limbs as monstrous.⁹¹ For instance, a waitress objected to her sitting at the front of a restaurant because “she will make people sick.” DeVries even was discriminated against by a charismatic Christian church she belonged to, when the pastor refused to let her join the choir because “it just would not look right.” This treatment is not because of anything they do or fail to do, it is simply

⁸⁹ Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 171.

⁹⁰ Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 172

⁹¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 34-35.

because they are different. Therefore, this type of suffering is caused by the evil of sin and not natural evil and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Although it has been shown that non-lethal birth defects are not directly related to suffering, the question still lingers for the people affected, “why them?” There are as many reasons as there are people, in fact, there are more than that because God can often make multiple goods out of an evil. One truth is that limits create focus and help people find their true calling. Limitations force a certain level of humility before God and man and can also teach patience and gratitude toward those that help them. As David Elliot put it, “when one door closes in terms of physical capability, another one opens in terms of moral awareness.”⁹² There can also be spiritual benefits in being disabled. It can provide the time and aptitude for contemplation. To the extent that the disabled recognize and embrace the fact that their condition leads others toward God, their condition can be redemptive. On the other hand, some people with severe mental handicaps remain forever in a state of innocence.

Sometimes the most compelling reason for a person to have disabilities is for the positive effect they can have on other people. As related in the first section, the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John describes such a situation. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus is asked by his disciples, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through

⁹² Elliot, David. "Defining the Relationship Between Health and Well-being in Bioethics." *The New Bioethics*, 22:1, 2016, 14-16.

him.”⁹³ Jesus then heals the man, who proceeds to be an effective witness to the Gospel, both because of his physical healing and because of his credible witness to the event.

There are many other ways that disabled people can influence those around them. Having a child with a disability can teach a family to love for the right reasons: because the child is a child of God entrusted to them for care. Hauerwas observes that the mentally handicapped bring their parents together in greater solidarity, force them to recognize the value of suffering, and teach them to advocate for themselves and to take responsibility for their child, rather than relying on professionals.⁹⁴ While as discussed above, a person’s disability might cause people to discriminate and sin against him or her, at the same time, it can bring out charitable love in others who take the opportunity to support the person. Seeing the disabled person might also make a person reflect on life and in some cases, might change the person’s perspective and drive moral growth. It might also motivate the right people to develop accommodations to reduce the impact of the disability.

In net, people born with disabilities are part of the human continuum of diversity with a role to play in society, just like everyone else and like everyone else, they are worthy of respect and of love. While their limitations can provide challenges both for the disabled people and the people trying to help them, they also offer an opportunity for moral and spiritual growth for everyone involved and can in fact, be considered acts of particular providence. In fact, as Jesus

⁹³ *John 9: 2-3.*

⁹⁴ Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 215

pointed out, it is our treatment of the least of our brothers that is the decisive factor in our final judgment.⁹⁵

Death

As was made obvious in the discussion on disability, the existence of death changes everything in regards to natural evils and suffering. Without the threat of death, evil lacks its sting and might be regarded as no more than an irritation or an inconvenience.⁹⁶ Going back to the definition of suffering developed in the first chapter, *suffering is the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually*, it becomes obvious that the existence of human death is a criterion for suffering because it is death that ultimately threatens human existence. Death is thus the ultimate punishment for original sin, and suffering is the warning given to mankind that it is near.

Before going further, it is important to point out that the institution of death by God was not done out of malice for mankind or retribution, but out of love. As John Paul II states in *Salvifici doloris*, “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

⁹⁵ *Matthew 25: 31-46 NABRE.*

⁹⁶ One could argue that people are socially or psychologically threatened by loss of relationships or a loss of a person’s source of meaning or that the possibility of being relegated to hell for an eternity can potentially cause one to suffer even without the threat of death. This is true, but for most people, death represents the most fundamental threat to their existence and thus, plays a fundamental role in differentiating suffering from irritation, particularly in the case of natural evils.

of rebuilding goodness in the subject who suffers.”⁹⁷ In fact, as will be shown, death plays a large role in the redemption of man, providing man with a second chance to live the life of joy God always intended for him.

The *Catechism* teaches that “after his Fall, man was not abandoned by God. On the contrary, God calls him and in a mysterious way, heralds the coming victory over evil and his restoration from his Fall.”⁹⁸ God foresaw that man would abuse his freedom as part of the growing process, so he planned accordingly, making use of man’s sin to bring about good while providing suffering and punishment to guide man back on track. As discussed throughout this dissertation, suffering is the God-given ability of humans to sense when they are lacking a critical good. Because the sensation is intense and uncomfortable, people are highly motivated to avoid it. In this way, suffering becomes directive. And because suffering highlights the lack of good, it directs us toward attaining the good we are lacking. In effect, when man chose not to listen to God, who was telling him how to live in joy, God chose to direct man to his final end through varied forms of divine revelation including suffering. It is important to note that considered in this way, suffering becomes a tool of divine providence rather than the proof that God is not benevolent that turned Voltaire and so many others against the concept of particular providence.

From a purely secular standpoint, Martha Nussbaum asserts that death is good since value, beauty, and meaning are all worthwhile because they can be lost and because they are

⁹⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 12.

⁹⁸ CCC, 410.

needed to survive.⁹⁹ Furthermore, death is a good because without it, there would eventually be a lack of resources to support the growth in the population. However, Death is an important reality in the plan of God's perfect universe not only because things need to die so that there are resources for the next generation to exist and to use. It also provides a second chance by being the gateway to eternal life. It is this reality that creates the opportunity for God to use the suffering associated with natural corruption for the benefit of individuals in addition to the benefit of the whole as Thomas claimed. Indeed, as will be shown in remainder of this chapter, there are many ways that God can use natural evils like injuries, illness and even death to re-orient people to God and beatitude as John Paul II envisioned.

In the end, however, death looms, not to end everything, but to give the elect a second chance at the life God intended for mankind, united with him in the glow of the beatific vision. The *Catechism* notes that "bodily death, from which man would have been immune if he had not sinned, is thus the last enemy of man left to be conquered."¹⁰⁰ It is through the four tasks of suffering that this is accomplished in many, but not all, cases. Indeed, as their faith becomes

⁹⁹ Nussbaum, Martha. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009, 226-233. Note, there has also been a long-standing debate in the Church about the nature of death. As an example, some Church Fathers, Augustine (*City of God*, Bk XIII.6-7) and Aquinas (*ST I-II* Q85.5-6) among them, see death as an evil because it is the punishment for original sin and because it breaks the body-soul unity. Ambrose disagrees, saying that "Death is in every way a good (except that due to sin). It is the end of sin and the harbor of rest and frees people from their sinful bodies." (Ambrose. "Death as a Good (*De bono mortis*)" In *Seven Exegetical Works*, edited by Michael P. McHugh. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1972. 80.) Cicero gives a philosophical view that death is a good because it releases the person from suffering. (Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *Tusculan Disputations*, Translated by Andrew P. Peabody. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1886. iii-v, Book I, 8). Many people feel the same way today when their loved ones have been suffering, particularly the elderly, declaring it a blessing when they are relieved of their suffering through death. Many of these same people would consider death to be a curse when a person "in the prime of life" dies. Many will judge death based on the circumstances of the dying. Dying in battle can be considered "glorious", dying in one's sleep is generally considered "peaceful," being burned at the stake would be considered "horrific," and a young mother's death as "tragic."

¹⁰⁰ CCC, 1008.

more mature, people can overcome this fear of death to the point that they will willingly embrace it for the love of God and their suffering neighbors. By sharing in the redemptive suffering of Christ, they overcome death just as Jesus did, rising to new life. The *Catechism* explains that death is transformed by Christ, who through his obedience and free submission to his Father's will, “transformed the curse of death into a blessing.”¹⁰¹ It is a blessing because in death, God calls man to himself.¹⁰² As Paul wrote to Timothy, “This saying is sure: if we have died with him, we will also live with him.”¹⁰³ Put another way, death is the entrance to eternal life, a reality that is prefigured in the baptismal rites.

God is no tyrant, however, and he does not force men into communion with himself. Rather, he makes use of natural evils and suffering to lead men to understand the choice before them. Natural evils like disability, illness, and injury provide men with a constant and vivid reminder of their finitude and the lack of good in the physical universe that awaits those that choose to stay separated from God. As in the case with physical evil, God uses natural evil to create an environment conducive to redemption and then employs the four tasks of suffering to lead humans to beatitude: to instill virtue, re-orient the soul to God, release love in humans, and then to redeem them. This was all made possible by the incarnation, when God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, who by his self-giving sacrifice, demonstrated to man the path to eternal joy.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ CCC, 1009.

¹⁰² CCC, 1011.

¹⁰³ 2 Timothy 2:11

¹⁰⁴ CCC, 457-460. The Catechism lists four reasons for the Incarnation: to reconcile us with God, so we might know God's love, to be our model of holiness, and to make us partakers of the divine nature.

Injuries

Natural evils, then, are a key component of God's plan of redemption, because by potentially leading to death, they serve as standing reminders that choices lay before each of us. Injuries are bodily damages that can be caused by any source of evil and they result in suffering when the injuries are significant enough to threaten one's existence. Injuries from natural sources are generally related to the food chain, either from predators attacking their prey or from potential prey, defending themselves. Because in modern times, most people do not actively hunt for their food, injuries from natural evils are now relegated to things like snake bites and the occasional shark attack. They are mentioned here simply for completeness while identifying a few specific cases below.

Suffering due to injuries serve as warnings both to others and to the injured themselves to stay away from the situations that caused the injury. This can teach prudence but also can re-orient people to God as they contemplate their mortality. Suffering injuries from nature can also unleash love to those who aid the injured and even redemption as in the case of a person who sacrifices himself to the lion so that his companions escape unharmed. Although injuries can lead to death, more often in natural disasters and wars than from natural evils, it is illness that God uses most of the time to bring death.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ *Global Health Estimates 2016: Deaths by Cause, Age, Sex, by Country and by Region, 2000-2016. Geneva, World Health Organization; 2018.* While it is true that everyone ultimately dies of injury or illness, in today's world, injuries account for less than nine percent of the total. In the most affluent nations, they account for less than six percent of all deaths and if intentional and road deaths are excluded, it is less than two percent. In 2016, less than 5 Million people died of injury out of a worldwide population of approximately 7.5 Billion people. In comparison, over 52 Million died of an illness.

Illness

Contrary to the view of Peter van Inwagen, among others that will be explored in Chapter 3, suffering from illness is not random.¹⁰⁶ As previously discussed, God ensures that every illness serves his providential plan for mankind. It has already been shown through both scripture and tradition that God is attentive to his creation, so this is just another example. There are three basic types of illness: the first results from a failure to supply the body with its basic needs, the second results from the attacks of micro-organisms, and the third by a degradation of the body itself.

The oldest problem that humanity had to face was to feed itself. In the story of the Fall of Man, Adam's primary penalty was that he would have to toil for his food.¹⁰⁷ This was the first way in which man needed to subdue the Earth. Genesis tells us that Abraham went as far as Egypt to escape famine and that in the time of Joseph, there was a worldwide famine for seven years that forced the tribe of Israel to travel twice to Egypt to keep from starving.¹⁰⁸ Spurred on by the suffering that the hungry feel and articulate, humans have developed countless innovations to supply and distribute enough food to meet its collective needs.

It is with good reason that the first work of mercy that Jesus acknowledges to the righteous in his story on the last judgment is that they fed the hungry.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, every hungry person represents an opportunity for others to practice charity both as individuals and as a

¹⁰⁶ van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 89.

¹⁰⁷ Genesis 3:14

¹⁰⁸ Genesis 12:10, 42:2, 43:1.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 25:35.

society. Because people have responded to the suffering, sometimes for selfish reasons, others time out of genuine charity, very few people die of starvation in the industrialized world today.¹¹⁰

The problem is more acute in the lowest income economies but even there, the rate of death from malnutrition has dropped 50% in the last 16 years. Nevertheless, there is still work to be done in these countries since malnutrition causes almost three percent of all deaths, a level that is more than ten times higher than in affluent countries. This is almost entirely a problem of political and economic policies in the affected countries. Those that are aligned to the will of God will be charitable to the least of their brothers, resulting in low starvation rates. Those whose governance is controlled by those without charity, will consolidate the resources in the hands of the ruling regime, leading to suffering of the masses. As will be discussed in the following discussion on the evil of sin, structural sins like these also provide opportunities for redemption through suffering.

Suffering from malnutrition, like all forms of suffering, typically takes four steps to lead humans to reach their fullest potential in God's providential plan. The first is to drive humans to attain the physical good that is lacking, in this case, nutrition. This initial drive is self-centered but can cause people to acquire human virtues like temperance, fortitude, prudence and even justice in dealing with others as they work together to feed themselves. This predisposes people to seek greater goods, leading to the conversion of heart, the second step that allows them to look

¹¹⁰ WHO, *Global Health Estimates, 2016*. 18 people per million die of starvation annually in the highest income economies. In the lowest income economies, the rate has dropped from 448 to 226 per million since 2000.

beyond their own needs to serve God and the greater good. In the third step, suffering provides an opportunity for that service as people minister to those starving around them. To the extent that they give fully of themselves for the poor, this can be redemptive for “good Samaritans.” The final and ultimate step is for it to become redemptive for the sufferers, who recognize and rejoice in the fact that their suffering is for the benefit of others. This can be accomplished by accepting suffering that is thrust upon oneself, content to be a servant of God, or through active martyrdom, like Maximillian Kolbe, who as discussed in chapter one, allowed himself to be starved to death in place of another in a Nazi death camp.

Infectious diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, chicken pox, pneumonia and leprosy comprise the second category. For most of human history, people lived in fear of contagious diseases. Indeed, the Book of Leviticus devotes two chapters to the identification and control of leprosy to protect the community.¹¹¹ When the Black Death descended upon Europe in the mid-fourteenth century, it killed one third of the continental population in less than three years. It continued to reappear in various localities for the next four centuries.¹¹²

In a very simplistic way, these micro-organisms are part of the “recycling process” that is necessary in a contingent, evolving world to create the raw materials for new life. All of them are potentially life threatening, with some more deadly than others. Most do not have lingering effects, they either kill a person or after a relatively short illness, the person’s immune system recovers and removes the intruders. Because they are contagious, these illnesses have the

¹¹¹ Leviticus 13-14.

¹¹² Hitchcock, James. *History of the Catholic Church: From the Apostolic Age to the Third Millennium*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012. 219-220

capability of causing wide spread epidemics and can pose a high risk for non-immune people to care for others.

There are specific reasons why some people and not others are infected at a given time and why some of the infected die while others live as part of God's plan. The thought that God actively decides who becomes ill and who dies from it may distress many who are ill or those caring for them but aside from some secondary human culpability, there really are no other valid options. There are no accidents with God and if we trust that He is benevolent, then we should be able to trust that some good will come of it, even if we can not perceive it ourselves. As will be discussed in more detail in chapter four, suffering is a religious calling of sorts, meant to bring us and others to our ultimate happiness in the beatific vision. Illness and other natural evils are reminders of this, as well as the means by which most people "graduate" to the next life.

Most of the time, only a relative few die of infectious diseases, and they usually are the very young with underdeveloped immune systems or the elderly whose immune systems were somehow compromised. In the case of the young, death can be a protective step to save an innocent child from being lost to sin later as described in the Book of Wisdom.¹¹³ The scriptural account notes that in his mercy God calls the innocent child to himself rather than subject him or her to the wickedness, deceit and whirl of desire that could corrupt the innocent soul and cause it to be lost for eternity. In the case of the elderly, death could be desirable if they have been suffering or if they have completed their mission on earth. In the normal cold and flu season, most will view their illness as a relatively minor inconvenience that may have caused them to

¹¹³ *Wisdom 4: 7-14*

alter their normal routine and take care of themselves. Some who are naturally more reflective or are sick for longer or with more intensity may develop some humility and look to God for meaning that will resolve their suffering while others may be hardened. Illness, like all suffering is a test for on-lookers, who can either help the sick or turn from them. As Jesus taught, this decision is what distinguishes the saved from the damned.¹¹⁴

It is also important for those that suffer from illness to share what they are feeling with others for a variety of reasons. It sets expectations for future sufferers, which helps reduce the uncertainty that is intrinsic to true suffering. It also helps to create solidarity with fellow sufferers, which can help both parties realize their own dignity and value, which all people need and contributes to suffering when it is lacking. It can help the medical community develop better treatment and it lets caregivers know that they need help and provides direction on what they need. Because suffering elicits compassion in others, it can also spur others to take action on their behalf, acting as the Good Samaritan did, which has spiritual merit.

Over the last century and a half following the discovery of the principles of vaccination by Louis Pasteur, man has made impressive progress in fighting infectious diseases. In fact, simple infections that would have killed a person a century ago are now routinely cured with a ten-day regiment of penicillin, costing less than a dollar. There are now effective cures for diseases that were the scourges of the ancient world, including small pox, leprosy, measles, mumps, malaria and even the bubonic plague. In fact, in the high-income economies, it is now

¹¹⁴ *Matthew 25: 31-46.*

relatively rare for a person to die of an infectious disease.¹¹⁵ Infectious diseases still kill over one-third of the people in under-developed countries, but this has been rapidly improving in the twenty-first century.

Non-communicable diseases, those in which the body malfunctions in some way, is literally the final type of illness. If a person does not die of malnutrition, predation, infection, or injury, he or she will surely die from degradation of the body. This can actually be seen in the World Health Organization's data on death by cause and region.¹¹⁶ In the most affluent economies, death by malnutrition, predation, injury and even infectious diseases have been greatly reduced to the point that 88% of all deaths are due to some form of bodily breakdown and 65% of males and 80% of females live at least 70 years. This level has been stable since at least 2000, with very modest changes in longevity. This might suggest that humanity is approaching its medical limits in terms of controlling nature.

On the other hand, in the lowest income economies, where modern medicines, practices, and resources are not as readily available, only 37% die of non-communicable diseases and only 18% of males and 24% of females live to 70 years.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, even though people in these undeveloped areas die younger because they are still exposed to non-degradation forms of death,

¹¹⁵ WHO, *Global Health Estimates*, 2016. Summary table. Only about 6% of people die from infectious diseases in high-income economies, a level that has remained stable since 2000. In 2000, the rate of death from infectious diseases in low-income economies was 15 times higher than that, representing over 50% of all deaths. Over the last 16 years, this rate has improved by 60% but is still more than 5 times higher than in the high-income economies.

¹¹⁶ WHO, *Global Health Estimates*, 2016. 2016 HI table.

¹¹⁷ WHO, *Global Health Estimates*, 2016. 2016 LI table

the overall rate of death is the same everywhere: 100%. This obvious fact might be taken as confirmation that although one might be able to delay death, one still cannot deny it.

Thomas Aquinas takes the position that this type of illness occurs because with the loss of original justice in the Fall, the body is no longer under the control of the soul and becomes disordered.¹¹⁸ It is not readily apparent that medical science has a better explanation. Granted, there are many different ways that people's bodies degrade. Sometimes, this can be manifested initially by chronic disorders that limit capability but are not immediately life threatening. This can include diseases of the eyes which limit vision, diseases that cause deafness, psychiatric disorders, and damaged joints, muscles and connective tissue that can limit mobility and cause chronic pain. Ultimately, bodily degradation affects life-sustaining organs and processes in a way that will ultimately be terminal. This includes diseases like muscular dystrophy, ALS and Parkinson's that degrade neuromuscular function; diseases like Alzheimer's that degrade mental function, advanced cancers, and diseases of critical organs. People have made inroads on mitigating human degradation, with artificial joints, pacemakers, eye glasses, hearing aids, Lasix surgery and even organ transplants. Sometimes, these advancements have reduced suffering, enhanced capability, and even extended life, but, as will be discussed at length in chapter four, the results are not always positive.

¹¹⁸ *ST I-II Q85.5* The sin of our first parent is the cause of death and all such like defects in human nature, in so far as by the sin of our first parent original justice was taken away, whereby not only were the lower powers of the soul held together under the control of reason, without any disorder whatever, but also the whole body was held together in subjection to the soul, without any defect, as stated in I:97:1. Wherefore, original justice being forfeited through the sin of our first parent; just as human nature was stricken in the soul by the disorder among the powers, as stated above (Article 3; I-II:82:3), so also it became subject to corruption, by reason of disorder in the body.

Given that it has already been shown that God is attentive to his creation and that everything He does support His providential plan, it follows that God initiates the degrading process strategically in the life of every individual both for their benefit and the benefit of others. As is always the case, the reasons that a person's function is limited in a particular way at a particular time is not always clear because of the complexity of interactions with others and because human perspective is relatively limited. Nevertheless, it is possible to think of reasons that God might have to degrade a person's capabilities for his or her benefit.

The most obvious reason that God limits a person's options is to focus him or her on the ultimate goal of re-orienting the person to God. Both Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Ignatius Loyola had conversion experiences while forced into inactivity by sickness or injury. It can also serve to redirect a person toward a new goal or to facilitate new relationships. At times it can be to remove people from situations or relationships that are detrimental to them. It can make people appreciate what they have and also what they have lost. It can serve to break bad habits and to offer new perspectives and can be the impetus for developing virtues like humility, patience, fortitude and temperance. The way a person deals with his or her disability can serve as an inspiration or a warning to others. It can be a source of grace and an opportunity to both love and to be loved. It is not unusual for people to realize in retrospect that one or more of these benefits applies to a situation they had thought was wholly evil.

Nancy Mairs is an example of such a person.¹¹⁹ Her life as a disabled person began at age twenty-nine when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) just after starting graduate

¹¹⁹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 40-42.

school to study creative writing. She did not adjust well, moving out on her husband and two children, having a series of affairs, and ultimately attempting suicide. After a year of depression and roaming, Mairs recognized that her body was degrading slower than anticipated, causing her to take stock of her situation. She realized that she could continue to do many of her normal activities and returned to a normal life similar to what she would have led without MS.

Mairs slowly began to have an increased awareness of her body and its unity with her soul.¹²⁰ She also began to accept her braces as part of her embodiment and to write as a “crippled woman.” Her descriptions and self-revelations portray disability as part of an ordinary life. She explained unapologetically to her readers that it could happen to them as well and urged them to accompany her as she came to realize she could indeed live in her crippled body.

Something else happened on this journey: Mairs found God and converted to Catholicism.¹²¹ With this conversion came an understanding of her own need for mercy, an acceptance of suffering and ultimately that she would die. Mairs admits that while she would certainly take a cure if one became available, she does not actually need it. As Nancy Eiesland says, “Recognizing and coming to terms with the difficulty that comes with disability, Mairs lives not with the grace of a martyr but with the resolve of someone who realizes that an ordinary life is filled with blessings and curses and that sometimes it is hard to differentiate between the two.”¹²²

¹²⁰ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 43-45.

¹²¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 45-46.

¹²² Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 46.

There is an important commonality between the witnesses of Diane Devries and Nancy Mairs: they both saw themselves as living normal lives. Despite their hardships and handicaps, they recognized themselves to be within the human continuum of diversity, even though others might attempt to dehumanize them. This attitude of normality is important because it mitigates suffering. It speaks to the insight of Simone Weil, who recognized that social isolation is a key component of suffering and suggests that caregivers can relieve suffering by helping people recognize the “ordinary” things they share with the rest of humanity.¹²³

Perhaps this is most difficult in cases of dementia, which most people associate with Alzheimer’s Disease. This disease, which is marked by severe memory loss, affects mostly the very old who have survived everything else. Over 96 percent of those who die of Alzheimer’s Disease are beyond seventy years old.¹²⁴ As medical science has cured other diseases, the percentage of people who die from Alzheimer’s has increased, nearly tripling to seven percent in the high-income economies since 2000.

A significant problem of dementia, beyond the memory loss, is that of disturbing clinical behavior. Athena McLean explains:

Behaviors seen as problematic include those that may cause harm to the person with dementia or others, that overly stress or tire out the caregiver and that may be regarded as socially unacceptable. Examples include repetitive questioning about the same subject, screaming or yelling for no apparent reason, agitation, wandering, inappropriate sexual behaviors, destructive or self-destructive behavior, or physical aggressiveness.¹²⁵

¹²³ Weil, “The Love of God,” 439-441.

¹²⁴ WHO, *Global Health Estimates, 2016. 2016 HI table*.

¹²⁵ McLean, Athena. *The Person in Dementia: A study of Nursing Home Care In the US*. Ontario, CA: Broadview Press, 2007. 22.

Interestingly, there is an active debate involving social scientists and the medical community about whether Alzheimer's should be considered a disease at all or simply what is "normal" for older populations. Jaber Gubrium, an American sociologist, has been describing the extension of the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease to the elderly a social construction since 1987.¹²⁶ This does not negate the existence of underlying natural processes; rather, it draws attention to the deliberate social processes by which professionals redefined dementia as a pathology and placed it within biomedical jurisdiction. This has important ramifications concerning how the elderly demented are viewed and cared for and also in how they see themselves. This also is critical to the question of suffering for those with dementia. Clearly, if there is an expectation in the community that the elderly will naturally lose memory as they age, then the social stigma would disappear or at least be mitigated since the elderly person with dementia is normal. However, if the person is viewed as diseased, then the view is much different in the community.

If dementia is seen as the normal condition for people at the end of their lives, then our temporal lives can be seen as an arc or a cycle of sorts. When a person is born, he or she is totally dependent on his or her parents for everything: food, drink, clothes, shelter, training, love, protection. The infant presents an opportunity to love that only the worst of parents does not fulfill. The infant can offer nothing in return but affection and the potential to love in the future. The infant has no means of communicating other than physical demonstrations like crying and

¹²⁶ McLean. *The Person in Dementia*: 29

hitting. Yet that does not deter the parent from going through a mental checklist of potential needs (is the baby hungry, cold, tired, need a diaper change, bored, hurt?) to ease the suffering of the infant. Virtually all parents recognize that parenthood has taught them to love in a most profound way because they realize they have been given the awesome responsibility of a caring for a child of God that cannot possibly survive without their attention.

Elders with dementia present a similar opportunity to love for their spouses, children, and grand-children. Like the infant, a fully demented senior is dependent on others for all his or her basic needs and like the infant, the fully demented elder has no means of communicating other than physical demonstrations like crying and hitting.¹²⁷ Unlike the infant, however, the elder does not deserve love because of potential but because of a legacy of love and even the most demented individual can recognize kindness and affection towards them and return it.¹²⁸ Family members who care lovingly for their elders know the benefits. In fact, St. Paul, commenting on the fourth Commandment states, “Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Athena McLean explains the agitated and occasionally violent behavior exhibited by patients with dementia is actually their attempt to communicate their needs, feelings, and wishes. McLean states that when patients can no longer verbalize their intentions, organize their thoughts, or interpret the caregivers’ intentions or directions, they must use their bodies to communicate needs, distaste or fear. Similarly, the body is used to protest or resist caregiver treatment. McLean goes on to say that the common practice of using drugs to stop the physical behavior serves to eradicate patient selfhood and that the proper approach to patients with Alzheimer’s is to acknowledge their agency, recognize that they are doing the best they can within their limitations, and try to understand what they are communicating. She maintains that there is promising evidence that this approach will profoundly impact the patient’s outcome, even in the absence of medical interventions.

¹²⁸ Both infants and elders deserve love because they have the dignity of being made in the image of God. The point being made here is that in addition to that, the elder has given love while the infant has not.

¹²⁹ Ephesians 6:2-3..

This does not mean that families cannot seek out aid in helping their elders any more than parents cannot legitimately seek aid in caring for their infants. Just as children gain from the social and intellectual stimulation of being with their peers in schools taught by professionals, so too can elders gain from social and intellectual stimulation of being with their peers and from the professional care in appropriately run senior living environments. For most families, this will be the best and only option once their loved ones lack the mobility to get around and require medical treatment beyond the expertise of family members. This does not mean that the elder can be “warehoused” in senior facilities, never to be visited, any more than a child can be abandoned by their parents. It simply means that they should feel free to get the aid they need for their loved ones, while still demonstrating the love and affection that the elderly need and deserve.

There is a second debate associated with senility discussed by Michael Banner in *The Ethics of Everyday Life*, that focuses on whether the person still exists after their memory capability is totally lost.¹³⁰ Athena McLean asserts that the dominant view is that the self depends on memory and once memory is lost, so is the self.¹³¹ As an example, Jonathan Franzen described his father’s disability trajectory as “death of autonomy, death of memory, death of self-consciousness, death of personality and finally, death of body.”¹³² This view leads to descriptions of dementia as being “death before death”, “death of the person” and the “loss of self.” It caused one doctor to describe treating an Alzheimer’s patient as comparable to doing

¹³⁰ Banner, Michael. *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology and the Imagination of the Human*. New York:Oxford University Press, 2014, 107-134.

¹³¹ Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life*. 130.

¹³² Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life*. 126.

veterinary medicine. Alzheimer's patients are considered to be shells of their former selves or simply as husks.¹³³ Because caregivers often act as if the actual person is gone, it is easy for them to disregard the statements or actions of an Alzheimer's patient as meaningless.¹³⁴ This discounting of their agency, however, tends to lead to agitation, repetitiveness, wandering, hitting, and screaming by the demented patient. In turn, caregivers will typically try to control or eliminate these behaviors, often through medication, or to use them to justify "warehousing" the patient. This is blatantly dehumanizing them and the resulting suffering is not caused by natural evil but by the evil of sin and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

In *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, Scottish Theologian John Swinton explains that describing Dementia as a "loss of self" is most assuredly wrong. Building off the work of Steven Sabat, Swinton describes three aspects of the understanding of self.¹³⁵ Self 1 relates to the person's experience of himself/herself in the present moment and is manifested by references to the first person in language and gestures. It acknowledges the self as a reference point to experiencing the rest of the universe and Swinton explains that unless a person is terminally unconscious, Self 1 remains throughout the experience of dementia. Therefore, it is clear that any suggestion that the self is lost is seriously mistaken.

Self 2 contains a person's understanding of their physical characteristics and life experiences.¹³⁶ It would include things like one's hair color, one's skill level at painting or

¹³³ Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life*. 125.

¹³⁴ Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life*, 131.

¹³⁵ Swinton, John. *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2012. 94-95

¹³⁶ Swinton. *Dementia*, 95-96.

dancing, one's strengths and weaknesses and one's view of self-worth. This of course changes over time with new experiences and interpretations and Swinton notes that a person's Self 2 can be severely damaged when those around the person treat them as non-entities.

Self 3 describes the different social personae that a person has: father, son, uncle, teacher, sports enthusiast, spouse, friend, etc.¹³⁷ Swinton argues that when dementia is treated as a malignant social pathology, then a person's positive Self 3 cannot be maintained because the only persona now recognized by society is "dementia patient." His conclusion is that "the neurology of dementia does not destroy the self. Any dissolution of the self reflects the dissolution of the community."¹³⁸

Swinton reframes what the medical community assumes are defects associated with dementia, creating a much different understanding of the person with dementia.¹³⁹ First, he notes that dementia involves more than neurological degradation, it also has significant linguistic and relational components which inhibit communication and socialization. As such, it involves more than just the person's neurological makeup, it belongs to and emerges from some kind of community. It is not, therefore, a loss of the mind, but a change in how a person's thoughts are communicated and understood, both by the demented elder and those around him. Dementia does not involve a loss of self, even in extreme cases; any loss of self involves a failure of community. Behavioral symptoms such as yelling and hitting, understood properly, can be seen as reasonable responses to difficult, frightening or frustrating situations, rather than the result of

¹³⁷ Swinton. *Dementia*, 96-97.

¹³⁸ Swinton. *Dementia*, 98

¹³⁹ Swinton. *Dementia*, 108-109.

failing neurological processes alone. Swinton points out that if these insights are taken seriously and we give people with dementia the benefit of the doubt, a much different picture of dementia results.

Besides offering their families and caregivers with opportunities to love, elderly dementia involves a few more dynamics that highlight its benefits versus other means of death. First, it typically takes place gradually, where the elder becomes increasingly dependent on others, which gives both the elder and the caregiver time to adjust to the new circumstances if they both act in charity towards each other. Second, the first thing that is lost is short term memory, which greatly reduces functionality but also the ongoing sense of loss. Often, the senile remember vividly the epic stories of the past, which they can continue to share long after they can no longer remember what they ate for breakfast. Further, the habits they have formed over a lifetime still remain as reminders of what they deemed important and also the life choices they made. Pia Kontos claims that “selfhood resists the ravages of Alzheimer’s disease precisely because it exists in corporeality.”¹⁴⁰ In saying this, she references Pierre Bourdieu’s insight that most human action is autonomous, relying not on rational conscious thought but on internal habits based on a person’s experiences and perceptions.¹⁴¹ She uses examples of Alzheimer’s patients being able to groom themselves, weave, and read the Torah long after they lost their memories to bolster her point.¹⁴² Unlike people who die of cancer or organ breakdown, those that die the “natural death” from dementia simply fade away over time, often without the pain of other forms

¹⁴⁰ Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life*. 130.

¹⁴¹ Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 18-19

¹⁴² Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life*. 130.

of death. This slow goodbye allows everyone to prepare for the end if it is considered a part of the natural life cycle.

Although there is clearly loss of goodness in dementia, as the elderly lose capability, suffering can be mitigated if their situation is kept in the right context. If the elderly continue to be respected not only for what they have done in the past but also for what they continue to provide (love, good habits built over a life time) and they are given opportunities for social engagement, they will have purpose in life and social status which mitigate suffering.

John Swinton makes three points in *Dementia* which support this view. The first is the point that those with Dementia, deprived of their memory, live in the moment and can appreciate the love and kindness given them in that moment.¹⁴³ The second is that those with Dementia do have moments of lucidity when they recognize what others do for them.¹⁴⁴ In each of these cases, people were being present for the demented elder, which conferred a sense that they were valued, reducing the social isolation and mitigating the suffering. In perhaps the most touching example given in what is a very profound book on the subject, Swinton explains how an elderly woman with dementia was found in an agitated state, pacing the corridors repeating the word “God” over and over.¹⁴⁵ A particularly enlightened nurse walked alongside her for a while and then, in a flash of inspiration, asked her if she was afraid of forgetting God. When the older woman emphatically answered yes, the nurse told her, “You know even if you should forget God, He will not forget you. He has promised that.” The old woman, thus assured of God’s

¹⁴³ Swinton, *Dementia*, 235.

¹⁴⁴ Swinton, *Dementia*, 243.

¹⁴⁵ Swinton, *Dementia*, 196-197.

continued love, became peaceful. This shows the importance of recognizing the agency of those with dementia as well as the capacity of providing meaning and purpose to ease suffering.

Unfortunately, this is often not the case. Athena McLean explains that the biomedical model, which is the dominant view of elderly senility, has six features that impact how people with dementia are treated and thus have a direct impact on their suffering.¹⁴⁶ Mclean concludes:

Biomedically oriented caregiving assumes a model of dementia care that prioritizes the body over the person's experience, attempts to control or suppress disturbed behaviors rather than to try to understand them and objectifies the person in order to carry out care tasks. Once labeled disease, behaviors that may express legitimate needs, discomforts and concerns are either disregarded or are marked as symptoms and targeted for treatment by chemical or physical restraints (which are rare today).¹⁴⁷

When people have dementia, like all terminal diseases, it gives them time to contemplate death and decide what is important to them. This is God calling them through suffering. Because Alzheimer's progresses slowly, with increasing dependency and decreasing awareness, there is a "slow goodbye" that might be considered by the patient to be easing into death while preparing

¹⁴⁶ McLean. *The Person in Dementia*. 30-32. The six features of the biomedical model are:

- First, it is a mechanical model grounded in a materialist philosophy in which the laws of nature are seen as determining how matter must behave. Therefore, deviant clinical behavior is seen as diseased natural processes and the cure is to cure the disease.
- Second, the biomedical model is reductive in its focus, applying scientific approaches to understanding causality. This requires that phenomena be reduced to its component parts. Focus is on the process, not the person experiencing it.
- Third, some of these distinctions derive from Cartesian dualism. In dementia, this locates the problem in the body and dismisses the relevance of the agency of the elder, whose disordered behaviors may be intentional act in light of other psychological, physical or environmental conditions to which he is responding.
- Fourth, biomedicine adopts the assumption that there is one specific cause for every disease. It handles acute situations well, but not chronic conditions. In dementia, the deviant behaviors are seem as driven by the specific cause of the disease and day to day concerns are not considered.
- Fifth, biomedicine encourages a neutral stand toward the patient, actually encouraging detachment or disengagement by the medical professionals
- Sixth, the biomedical model attempts to universalize phenomena and causation and generalize it to everyone. This leads to the ignoring of vital biographical data that can explain behavioral issues.

¹⁴⁷ McLean. *The Person in Dementia*. 34-35

the surviving family for its inevitability. It teaches patience and humility to both patients and caregivers and is clearly an opportunity for others to demonstrate love and for the sufferer to share in the sufferings of Christ in some way known only to God.

Illness as a Catalyst for Conversion

The *Catechism* describes the Church's experience with illness in its prelude to the discussion on the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick:

Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him.¹⁴⁸

These are important insights. Illness then exists as a vivid warning of human mortality and Thomas might add, of human sinfulness. Illness is universal for humans because death is universal. The *Catechism* is clear about the role of illness in the economy of salvation, noting that "illness becomes a way to conversion; God's forgiveness initiates the healing. It is the experience of Israel that illness is mysteriously linked to sin and evil, and that faithfulness to God according to his law restores life."¹⁴⁹ Understanding this can mitigate suffering. As its purpose becomes clear, joy can replace suffering. For those who do not believe, sickness, and in

¹⁴⁸ CCC, 1500-1501.

¹⁴⁹ CCC, 1502.

particular, dementia can be a terrifying experience when a person's existence is so severely threatened.

Jesus' ministry clarified the linkage between illness and evil. Healing the sick was a significant part of Jesus's ministry and in fact, the Gospels record that it was the reason that he initially gained the attention of the crowds.¹⁵⁰ However, although Jesus is compassionate toward all who suffer and identifies with them, he did not heal all the sick; "his healings were signs of the coming of the kingdom of God."¹⁵¹ In other words, Jesus healed for a greater purpose than temporal comfort, he healed in order to lead people to eternal life. The *Catechism*, under the title of "Christ the Physician," notes that "he has come to heal the whole man, body and soul."¹⁵² This is the key to understanding the mystery of the linkage between illness and sin. Illness is a sign of human mortality and suffering's role is to highlight goods that are needed for the person to exist and to flourish. Like all types of suffering, there are two ways to resolve it. The first is to attain the good which threatens the person's physical existence- to find a cure. The second is to find meaning in the suffering that allows the person to maintain their identity, even after death. This results in the person seeking God.

Suffering from illnesses leads people to salvation through the same four steps that are needed in the case of injuries. The first way that people react to illness is also the first way they react to injuries: they look for healing. The Church supports this, teaching that "part of the plan laid out by God's providence is that we should fight strenuously against all sickness and

¹⁵⁰ *Matthew 4: 23-25; Mark 1:23-34; Luke 4 31-41;*

¹⁵¹ *CCC, 1305.*

¹⁵² *CCC, 1503.*

carefully seek the blessings of good health, so that we may fulfill our role in human society and in the Church.”¹⁵³ This first response is consistent with human nature, focused on temporal goods. God uses suffering in this manner to direct man in the way to subdue the earth, highlighting the goods to be pursued and causing the strong sensation we know as pain to remain until the goods are attained. Yet even in this first step, suffering pushes men toward higher goals because as John Paul II notes, “It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls.”¹⁵⁴

The more important work of suffering is not to motivate people to find temporal healing but to facilitate the healing of the soul. It does this through illness by making people aware of their own mortality. As people come to understand that their particular injury or illness is life-threatening without a readily available cure, or if they face a long, painful convalescence, they often seek God for meaning and help, resulting in conversion.¹⁵⁵

As discussed in Chapter 1, John Paul II attributes this to a special grace concealed within suffering that draws a person interiorly close to Christ. The Pope notes that

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.... 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

¹⁵³ Paul VI. *Apostolic Constitution: Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick*, 3

¹⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 27.

¹⁵⁵ CCC, 1501

world, into this Kingdom of the Father, suffering man, in a certain sense through the very heart of his suffering.”¹⁵⁶

This conversion is a re-orienting of the will from selfish pursuits toward God’s will for the sufferer. In some cases, the person is healed in body and soul and can take up the work of the “good Samaritan,” practicing charity and the other infused virtues in the aid of those still suffering. In other cases, where the illness or injury is so debilitating that the sufferer cannot practice charity in this way, the opportunity for redemption lies in understanding and rejoicing in the fact that his or her suffering is providing an opportunity for redemption for those that help the sufferer. This is the greatest act of redemptive suffering because it is sharing in the divine nature by sharing in the suffering of Christ for the benefit of others. John Paul II says “it often takes time, even a long time, for this answer to be interiorly perceived... It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy.”¹⁵⁷

The Church recognizes this aspect of redemptive suffering most obviously in its explanation of the effects of the sacrament of anointing of the sick. It makes it clear that it is the healing of the soul that takes priority, explaining that “this assistance from the Lord by the power of his Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God’s will.”¹⁵⁸ It further explains that this sacrament allows the sick person to participate in the saving work of Jesus by giving him the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion. Thereby, “suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new

¹⁵⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 26.

¹⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 26.

¹⁵⁸ CCC, 1520.

meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.”¹⁵⁹ The *Catechism* concludes that the sick who receive this sacrament, by freely uniting themselves to the passion and death of Christ, contribute to the good of the People of God.¹⁶⁰ This can be thought of as a way that a person recognizes that his or her suffering is for the benefit of others without knowing the specifics of which others and how they benefit. It is essentially a sign of faith in the goodness of the Lord that God would not subject us to pointless suffering but that whatever goodness we lack is borne for someone’s benefit.

In the final analysis, what are perceived by humans as natural evils - disability, illness and death- are not only required, but are elements of particular providence providing an environment conducive to the acceptance of grace that leads to salvation. People who seem to be disabled from a human perspective, were made perfectly for the role God has in mind for them. Illness is the way to conversion and death is the gateway to eternal life. Suffering, the ability humans were given to sense when they are lacking some critical good, is a grace in that it is a free gift of God, and a blessing because it relentlessly drives us toward the ultimate good which is God himself.

Natural evils, then, are a necessary part of the evolutionary design of the universe that relies on constant recycling of all living matter to bring it to its ultimate perfection in man. Suffering from natural evil can highlight ways for humanity to facilitate this evolutionary plan by taking its position as stewards of creation but paradoxically, it also makes man aware of his

¹⁵⁹ CCC, 1521.

¹⁶⁰ CCC, 1522.

mortal finitude and focuses him on the true purpose of his life which is to share in the divine nature and unite with God in eternity. As counter-intuitive as it seems to those whose focus remains on temporal goods, these natural evils are actually part of God's particular providence, leading those who are aligned with his will to beatitude.

Suffering, Conscience and the Evil of Sin

St. Thomas provides a good explanation of the evil of sin that can be used as a basis for understanding its relationship to suffering in God's plan. He reasons that because good is defined by desirability and evil is opposed to good, no rational being would ever choose any evil.¹⁶¹ However, sometimes evil, the privation of one good, may be sought accidentally if it is attached to another good. The example Thomas uses is that a lion seeks food, which is a good that is attached to an evil, killing the stag. Thomas assures us that "people do not seek evil, not even accidentally, unless the good that accompanies the evil is more desired than the good of which the evil is the privation."¹⁶² In many cases, this is choosing the greater good and thus is morally licit. The evil of sin results from an inordinate choice of a lesser good over a greater good.¹⁶³ Thomas asserts that this is caused primarily by a defective will and reason and secondarily by inclinations on the part of the imagination of the sensitive appetite.

Thomas vigorously argues that "God is rational and thus, wills things toward an end, which is his own goodness. In no way does he will the evil of sin, which is the privation of right

¹⁶¹ *ST I*, 19.9

¹⁶² *ST*, I, 19.9

¹⁶³ *ST I-II* Q75.3.

order towards the divine good.”¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, he does will the evil of punishment because it is attached to the greater good of justice. These two are interrelated in that they both are required accidentally for true free will and hence, freely-given love to exist. God desires humans to have free will so that they can love but freedom of choice is necessarily attached to the possibility of errant choices. Therefore, God permits sin. Perhaps just as importantly, if choices do not have ramifications, they are not meaningful choices, so punishment is a necessary requirement for free will and love to exist.

The Evil of Sin differs from physical and natural evil in several important ways. The most obvious way is that unlike the other two, it is an act of man and not an act of God. In fact, at its most basic level, sin is man foolishly trying to usurp God’s role despite lacking the knowledge, power, and goodness to do so. As the *Catechism* puts it: “Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become ‘like gods,’ knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus love of oneself even to contempt of God.”¹⁶⁵

Unlike other evils, which are principally highlighted and resisted through suffering, the evil of sin is highlighted and resisted primarily through conscience. *The Catechism* notes:

Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ *ST* I, Q19.9

¹⁶⁵ *CCC*, 1850.

¹⁶⁶ *CCC*, 1778.

Conscience, then, is a human competency to recognize right from wrong based on God's gift of reason, although it can be overwritten by reason and ignored by the will. It is man's first line of defense against sin. This does not mean that suffering has no role in addressing the evil of sin concerning others. Far from it. In fact, suffering addresses the evil of sin through the evil of punishment, which is covered in the next section of the chapter and through the redemptive suffering of the victims of sin, which will be the subject of the rest of this section's discussion.

It is important at this point to explore suffering for sin from the vantage point of the victim. Whereas committing a sin separates one from God, being the victim of sin can provide a path to redemption in much the same way as being the victim of a physical or natural evil. Being the victim of a violent crime might seem unjust and random to many readers but Thomas sees it as medicinal since it is intended for the good of the victim's soul, if he or she bears it patiently.¹⁶⁷ There are "general" and "particular" reasons for individuals to suffer for the sins of another and an omnipotent, omniscient God can manage both simultaneously. The most obvious "general" reason people are allowed to suffer for the sins of others is that for free will to exist, people have to be allowed to make free decisions, even if they result in crimes. On an individual level, however, there is a particular reason that is unique to each individual and contributes to God's providential plan: there are no accidents in God's plan. As Augustine explains, "When He

¹⁶⁷ *ST* I-II Q87.8.

subjects me to adversity, this is either to test my merits or chastise my sins; and He reserves an eternal reward for my pious endurance of temporal ills.”¹⁶⁸

Sometimes the victims are called to suffer for a cause they understand is greater than themselves. Such is the case for all Christian martyrs as well as battlefield heroes and those that suffer for a multitude of good causes. Others suffer because their lives need redirection unrelated to the sin that provides it. Still others suffer to give a third party the opportunity to aid them. As will be discussed later, this can be redemptive for the sufferer as well.

It is understandable why people find it hard to understand how anyone benefits by being murdered, maimed, or raped. In fact, it is hard to imagine any temporal scenario where this would be the case. But the point of suffering is to drive people to the ultimate good which is God while motivating virtuous behavior here on earth. Therefore, to understand how being the victim of a sin can be beneficial requires evaluation with the perspective that eternal life is the goal for which temporal suffering can be accepted.

As discussed in the first chapter, suffering can be redemptive when someone willingly uses his suffering for the benefit of another. Being the victim of another persons' sin can present this type of opportunity if the victim socializes his or her suffering in a way that activates the conscience of the sinner and causes the sinner to repent and make amends. This powerful linkage between conscience and suffering was actually understood and leveraged by both the greatest of sinners and the most prominent social reformers of the last century.

¹⁶⁸ Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans*, edited and translated by R.W. Dyson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Book 1, Chapter 29.

In Hannah Arendt's classic study on the banality of evil, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she explains that to carry out "the final solution to the Jewish problem," Heinrich Himmler recognized he was giving the "most frightening order an organization could ever receive."¹⁶⁹ She reports:

The problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering. The trick used by Himmler—who apparently was rather strongly afflicted with these instinctive reactions himself—was very simple and probably very effective; it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavy the task weighed up my shoulders!¹⁷⁰

It was not only mass murderers like Heinrich Himmler who recognized the power of suffering to activate the conscience of another. This is the main principle behind the non-violent resistance movement developed by Mahatma Gandhi,¹⁷¹ and used successfully by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.¹⁷²

Marilyn McCord Adams embraces these same fundamental concepts as forms of martyrdom. She describes a martyr as a witness who gives testimony about a person, some events, or an ideal and is made to pay a price for doing it. She notes that this price usually involves the loss of some temporal goods, for example, the experience of social disapproval or exclusion, the deprivation of educational and professional opportunities, economic losses, moral

¹⁶⁹ Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994. 105

¹⁷⁰ Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. 106.

¹⁷¹ Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work and Ideas*, edited by Louis Fischer. New York: Vintage, 2002, 79.

¹⁷² Commings, "Is Suffering Redemptive," 62

disapproval, imprisonment, exile, and death. Despite all of this, Adams makes a persuasive argument that “martyrdom is an expression of God’s righteous love toward the onlooker, the persecutor and even the martyr himself.”¹⁷³

Adams explains that for onlookers, the event of martyrdom may function as a prophetic story and that martyrs who persevere to the end are inspiring. The onlooker, if sympathetic to the cause, may be inspired to a higher level of commitment. Alternatively, the onlooker may see themselves in the persecutor and be moved to repentance. Either way, if the onlooker has ears to hear the martyr’s testimony, he may receive God’s redemption through it.¹⁷⁴ She explains that martyrdom is potentially redemptive for persecutors by allowing them to see what they are really like: “the more innocent the victim, the clearer the focus.”¹⁷⁵ Given this view, some persecutors will reform their lives and avoid eternal punishment (and in some cases, forge better relationships on earth by ceasing the persecution.) Finally, Adams explains that martyrdom is beneficial to the martyr as a way to demonstrate the depth of his commitment to the cause and to build a relationship of trust with God, who will redeem him.

This does not mean that the concept is embraced by all. Womanist theologian Delores Williams criticizes it, saying “It asks people to suffer for the sake of helping evildoers see their evil ways. It puts concern for the evildoers ahead of concern for the victim of evil. It makes victims the servants of the evildoers’ salvation.” Williams recognizes that King’s strategy is

¹⁷³ Adams, Marilyn McCord. “Redemptive Suffering as a Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil” in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 219-220.

¹⁷⁴ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering,” 220.

¹⁷⁵ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering,” 220-222

consistent with the “moral suasion” argument used by Frederick Douglass a century earlier which assumed that black people could obtain their rights by appealing to the moral conscience of their white oppressors. She says that this strategy is antiquated because “white America seems moved more by the loss of money than by any working of its moral conscience.”¹⁷⁶

Gandhi has a ready answer to this charge:

A Satyagrahi (supporter of passive resistance) bids goodbye to fear. He is therefore never afraid of trusting the opponent. Even if the opponent plays him false twenty times, the Satyagrahi is ready to trust him for the twenty-first time for an implicit trust in human nature is the very essence of his creed. Satyagraha is based on self-help, self-sacrifice and faith in God.¹⁷⁷

In addition, taking a moral stand against injustice has implications beyond reforming the oppressors (who may or may not reform their action). It can also bring about social change by affecting the consciences of those in power so that society may change and future individuals will not have to bear such suffering.

It must also be pointed out that Dorothee Soelle is absolutely justified in her assertions that the key to removing suffering is to socialize it, particularly in suffering caused by the sins of others.¹⁷⁸ She reminds us that “without the capacity to communicate with others, there can be no change.”¹⁷⁹ Following Gandhi, we must be prepared to trust our oppressors, because they too are children of God.¹⁸⁰ Following Jesus, we must be willing to love our oppressors and act for their

¹⁷⁶ Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 273-274.

¹⁷⁷ Gandhi. *The Essential Gandhi*, 81.

¹⁷⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 71.

¹⁷⁹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 76.

¹⁸⁰ Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, 83.

salvation because in doing so, our own suffering can be redemptive, leading to eternal bliss. This is sharing in the divine nature and more specifically, sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

As discussed in the last chapter, making the victims the servant of the evildoers' salvation is actually what is required for suffering to be redemptive. Is this not what Jesus did on the cross? He died for the salvation of sinners, including those who crucified him. Even more to the point, it ties together the concerns of both the oppressor and the oppressed. If the oppressed understands that his or her suffering is being done for the good of the soul of the oppressor, the oppressed is sharing in the suffering of Jesus and will share in his glory. Furthermore, by seeking change in this way, one serves others who also suffer the same injustices. This must be active suffering, where the oppressor is made to understand the impact of his or her actions, not passive suffering where the victim silently absorbs abuse. Because conscience is an apprehensive rather than a sensitive faculty, suffering must be articulated in a way that the oppressor's conscience can comprehend. Love and vulnerability will touch the conscience much more readily than hatred and anger. If the oppressor's conscience is touched and he or she removes the oppressive action, then everyone benefits, both spiritually and temporally. This is what Jesus calls for when he said in the Sermon on the Mount, "love your enemies."¹⁸¹ It challenges both the oppressed and the oppressor to be charitable toward the other and will fail if either side fails to love. If the oppressed cannot forgive,

¹⁸¹ Matthew 5:44.

they cannot be saved. As the *Didache*, a first century catechism succinctly puts it, “love those who hate you, and you shall not have an enemy.”¹⁸²

Some may ask why a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God would allow humans to sin, particularly now that man’s technological capability is sufficiently “advanced” that a single sinner like Adolph Hitler can send millions of people to their deaths. The obvious answer is that God wants humans to be able to freely partake of the divine nature, so He is willing to accept that people will abuse that freedom, some horrendously so. To mitigate that, as just discussed, God gave humans moral consciences to guide them, attached the debt of punishment to sin to deter it, and allowed the victims to suffer so that they too would be motivated to ignite the sinner’s conscience through their witness. Furthermore, God ‘s creative power is such that he can create something good where before there was only evil, the privation of good. A perfect example of this is when the oppressed willingly activate the consciences of their oppressors by socializing their suffering with them, thus leading to the end of the oppression and the opportunity for redemption of both parties. As Martin Luther King described in reference to his non-violence policy in the U.S. Civil Rights movement, “We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force... We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer and in winning our freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.”¹⁸³

¹⁸² *The Didache*, Translated by M.B. Riddle. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm>>

¹⁸³ Commings, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 62.

Gandhi shows that leveraging redemptive suffering in this way is powerful. He calls it “soul-force,” and asserts that “real suffering bravely born melts even a heart of stone.” He adds that “thousands, indeed tens of thousands, depend for their existence on a very active working of this force. Little quarrels of millions of families in their daily lives disappear before the exercise of this force. Two brothers quarrel, one of them repents and reawakens the love... lying dormant in him, the two again begin to live in peace.”¹⁸⁴ Contrasting the use of punishment with that of self-sacrifice and redemptive suffering to control evil, Gandhi comments that “the law of survival of the fittest is the law for the evolution of the beast but the law of self-sacrifice is the law of evolution of the man.”¹⁸⁵ This is an apt description of how suffering from sin can be used creatively by God to bring humans to beatitude. Suffering, bravely borne **can** melt the heart of stone. As discussed above, if Arendt is to be believed, even Heinrich Himmler, the notorious head of the Nazi Gestapo and one of those most responsible for the Holocaust, was susceptible to its powers.¹⁸⁶

This “soul-force” can be wielded most effectively by the innocent. Whose conscience would not be moved to address the suffering of a young child beaten and raped or that of an equally young and innocent child with Down’s Syndrome or one born without limbs being ostracized by others simply for being different. Would any child be aborted if the mother was aware of the suffering being felt by her unborn child during the “procedure?” But suffering can only be effective if it is observed and shared with those in a position to help. That is why Soelle

¹⁸⁴ Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, 79.

¹⁸⁵ Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi*, 79.

¹⁸⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. 106.

is so forceful in denouncing religious or philosophical systems that restrain people from socializing their suffering.¹⁸⁷ The sufferer must be allowed to offer up their suffering for the benefit of others because only by doing so is it of spiritual benefit to the sufferer. Further, if the suffering is not socialized, then those in position to help, whether it be the oppressor whose conscience forces a change in attitude and actions, or bystanders whose consciences lead them to intercede for the sufferers or at least show solidarity with them, may not be aware of the opportunity, to the spiritual and temporal detriment of all those involved.

While Gandhi and King espoused the need for individuals who suffer to stand up to their oppressors, they also recognized that lasting social change required movements in which the oppressed join together in solidarity to socialize their suffering. Soelle notes that “everyone’s natural reflex is flight from suffering; but even when it succeeds it as at the same time the perpetuation of universal suffering.”¹⁸⁸ She says that “to serve the pain of God by your own pain is to lead suffering out of its private little corner and to achieve solidarity.”¹⁸⁹ This is not easy to do; it requires not only significant leadership skills but extreme courage and conviction. Afterall, both King and Gandhi were martyred for their causes although as is often the case, their witness became even stronger and more effective in death. Oppressors understand this and the more astute ones will make an effort not to make martyrs of their opponents.

¹⁸⁷ Soelle, *Suffering*, 71.

¹⁸⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 45.

¹⁸⁹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 45.

It must also be pointed out that often the tactic used to circumvent or delegitimize the witness of the suffering victim is through their dehumanization: the Nazis depicted the Jews as an inferior race to justify their extermination; the same was said of Blacks when subjecting them to slavery. Unwanted pre-born children are labeled “fetuses” to justify their abortion. The senile are described as no longer persons to justify “warehousing” and euthanasia. Such tactics must always be resisted to resolve suffering, both on the part of the victim and also the oppressor.

As Gandhi asserts above, socializing one’s suffering and allowing the oppressor to witness the effects of his or her sins can activate the consciences of people at all levels and drive healing and repentance. This is true in individual families, where a person might not otherwise understand the hurt and damage their words and actions have on more vulnerable family members, as well as in the community, where structures of sin must be exposed by those that suffer from their effects in order for the responsible parties to recognize the lack of good in their actions and take the appropriate corrective action.

God has a specific plan for the universe that is sophisticated enough to account for disordered conduct (sin) on the part of individuals and groups of all sizes. Sometimes this level of distortion to the good can be extreme, as in the case of wars, genocides and nuclear fallout, causing widespread and deep levels of suffering. Other times it can be venial and isolated. In all cases, sin leads to suffering and suffering motivates people to seek change. Most of the time, this will result in temporal changes that if successful, may be habituated to prevent future suffering, which results in virtues and a return to order. If no temporal changes can be made

through human means, the person will often turn to God, even if it is a last resort. Sin can therefore result in good, through God's providential use of suffering.

The Evil of Punishment Rebuilds Goodness

As discussed previously, John Paul II's insight on punishment is that it "has 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."¹⁹⁰ This has a couple of ramifications. First, in the repaying of one evil with another evil, punishment serves as a deterrent to future sin, not only in the one who is punished for the offense, but also in bystanders who might otherwise be tempted to do the same. Second, by creating the possibility of rebuilding goodness in the subject, punishment is shown as benefiting not only the punished but society as a whole. In this context, punishment is about rehabilitation not retribution.

John Paul II notes that in the Old Testament, they began to recognize that suffering had meaning beyond that of simple punishment and had educational value.¹⁹¹ He points out that "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." He then demonstrates from the Second Book of Maccabees that the Israelites understood this, since the author wrote, "these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people."¹⁹² The Pope asserts that

¹⁹⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 12.

¹⁹¹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 12.

¹⁹² 2 Maccabees 6:12.

“the purpose of penance is to overcome evil, which under different forms lies dormant in man,” and also “to strengthen goodness both in man himself and in his relationship with others and especially, God.”¹⁹³

Similarly, Aquinas assures his readers that God does not delight in punishments for their own sake but because they are required for the sake of justice.¹⁹⁴ He explains that punishment is essentially related to the disturbance of the order and according to God's justice, will last as long as the disturbance lasts.¹⁹⁵ The severity of the punishment will also be in proportion to that of the disturbance that caused it.¹⁹⁶ St. Thomas points out that people can create disorders that they cannot repair on their own and that if they do not seek the help of God, who can fix anything, they will incur a debt of eternal punishment. These would be true in the case of sins that turn a person away from God, his last end, so as to destroy charity.¹⁹⁷ Aquinas notes that a similar dynamic also occurs in terms of human suffering when a crime such as murder is committed that cannot be undone. In these cases, the criminal is often punished by imprisonment or banishment or life, or even death, thus removing the offender permanently from the fellowship of the living.^{198 199}

¹⁹³ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 12.

¹⁹⁴ *ST* I-II Q87.3 Reply Obj.3

¹⁹⁵ *ST* I-II Q87.3 Reply Obj 4.

¹⁹⁶ *ST* I-II Q87.3 Reply Obj 1.

¹⁹⁷ *ST* I-II Q87.3

¹⁹⁸ *ST* I-II Q87.3 Reply Obj. 1.

¹⁹⁹ In 2017, at the command of Pope Francis, the use of the death penalty is now excluded and the applicable paragraph in the *Catechism* (2267) changed to read:

2267. Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Punishment is the legitimate use of coercion by a recognized authority to motivate a desired action or to deter an undesired action from taking place within an organization. The *Catechism* explains it thusly:

The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behavior harmful to people's rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirement of safeguarding the common good. Legitimate public authority has the right and duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense. Punishment has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offense. When it is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation. Punishment then, in addition to defending public order and protecting people's safety, has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party.²⁰⁰

This explanation of punishment makes clear that the use of punishment to drive moral action is ubiquitous in all levels of human society. Parents have rules, organizations have by-laws, churches have commandments and doctrines, and governments have laws and regulations. These provide the order that is required for an organization to survive and prosper and also provide for the safety and preservation of the rights of its members. Because there are people who choose to disobey its rules and laws, organizations must take measures to enforce them and maintain order and consistency within their organizations. Thus, some use of coercion is

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”,^[1] and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide”.

[1] FRANCIS, Address to Participants in the Meeting organized by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, 11 October 2017: L’Osservatore Romano, 13 October 2017.

²⁰⁰CCC, 2666.

necessarily seen as beneficial for society and is in no way an intrinsic evil. The only sense in which punishment might be considered an evil is that from the perspective of the punished, some good is withheld or taken away against their will to reestablish order in the organization. However, the *Catechism* also makes clear, as did John Paul II, that punishment should be medicinal in that it improves the guilty party.

This of course assumes that the punishment is just. This is clearly not always the case. At times, the innocent are punished to further the interests of those in power. Jesus Christ provides an example for consideration. The Jewish leaders felt threatened by his power and popularity and played on Pilates' insecurity in his position to have Jesus unjustly executed by the Romans for sedition. This should be considered under the evil of sin rather than the evil of punishment as should all unjust punishments.

As discussed in the first chapter, punishment is required for there to be true freedom because decisions without ramifications are not meaningful. These ramifications are best understood as being direct outcomes from certain behavior. As an easy to understand example, if one drinks too much alcohol, the person will get sick and have a hang-over in the morning. While not every sin has such an obvious ramification, Saint Thomas has the insight that "because sin is an inordinate act, it is evident that whoever sins, commits an offense against an order: wherefore he is put down, in consequence, by that same order, which repression is punishment."²⁰¹

²⁰¹ *ST I-II Q87.1*

Thomas notes that there are three orders to which the human will is subject: his own reason; his human governors, whether they govern spiritual or temporal matters; and the universal order of Divine government.²⁰² Because each of these orders is disturbed by sin, man can be punished by any or all of them, depending on the nature of his sin. St. Thomas next explains that sin can be self-propagating when it results in a fall from grace, allowing the person to be overcome by his or her disordered passions.²⁰³ However in this he recognizes that even when God punishes people by permitting them to fall into sin, this is directed to the good of virtue. Thomas notes that sometimes it benefits those who are punished “when they arise from sin, more humble and more cautious,” but its true purpose is for the amendment of others, “who seeing some men fall from sin to sin, are the more fearful of sinning.”²⁰⁴ Thomas defends this point by reminding the reader that even the punishment that is inflicted according to human laws is not always intended as a medicine for the one who is punished, but sometimes only for others. In his example, “when a thief is hanged, this is not for his own benefit, but for the sake of others, that at least they may be deterred from crime through fear of the punishment.”²⁰⁵

Aquinas explains that suffering does not always cease when a person is absolved from their sins and returns to virtuous living.²⁰⁶ He adds that sin is an act of the will to turn from God and the resulting stain of sin cannot be removed from people unless they voluntarily take upon themselves the punishment for their past sins or bear patiently the punishment inflicted upon

²⁰² *ST* I-II Q87.1

²⁰³ *ST* I-II Q87.2

²⁰⁴ *ST* I-II Q87.2 Reply Obj. 1

²⁰⁵ *ST* I-II Q87.3 Reply Obj. 2

²⁰⁶ *ST* I-II Q87.6

them by God. In either case, the punishment is called satisfactory, since it satisfies the debt of punishment as regards the will. St. Thomas cautions that even after the stain of sin has been removed from the will, punishment still may be suffered in order to heal other powers of the soul that may have been disordered by the sin committed, to restore the equality of justice and to remove the scandal given to others, so that those scandalized might be edified by the punishment.²⁰⁷

St. Thomas denies that anyone can suffer spiritual punishment for the sins of another, quoting Augustine's interpretation of scripture.²⁰⁸ As for physical suffering, Aquinas also denies that anyone can suffer penal punishment for the sins of another, except in the case of children or servants who are themselves complicit in the sin in some way. However, he says that if one is united in some way with the sinner, one may voluntarily bear their satisfactory punishment. St. Thomas notes that Christ bore a satisfactory punishment, not for His, but for our sins.²⁰⁹ He also notes that out of a union of love, even in human affairs, people willing take on the debts of another, bearing their punishment.²¹⁰ Another case is that of Maximillian Kolbe, who as discussed in chapter one, willingly took the place of a man he did not know who was randomly picked to starve to death in the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz in 1941.

Thus, combining the teaching of Thomas and the *Catechism*, one can see that punishment is the use of coercive force by an organization to keep order within it. The authority to punish

²⁰⁷ *ST* I-II Q87.6 Reply Obj.3

²⁰⁸ *ST* I-II Q87.8

²⁰⁹ *ST* I-II Q87.7 reply Obj. 3

²¹⁰ *St* I-II Q87.7.

rests with the lowest effective level of authority acknowledged by the oppressor and the oppressed for this purpose. But things are not always as they appear as Thomas points out:

Nevertheless, we must observe that sometimes a thing seems penal, and yet is not so simply. Because punishment is a species of evil, and evil is privation of good. And since man's good is manifold, viz. good of the soul, good of the body, and external goods, it happens sometimes that man suffers the loss of a lesser good, that he may profit in a greater good, as when he suffers loss of money for the sake of bodily health, or loss of both of these, for the sake of his soul's health and the glory of God.²¹¹

As noted above, Thomas also observes that suffering from punishment is not always for the direct benefit of the sufferer, although it can be.²¹²

Finally, it can often be the case that it appears that a sin goes unpunished by human authorities. This is because most sins disrupt human enterprises and thus depend on human authorities to administer temporal punishment. There can be many impediments to this being done correctly. The first is that only an acknowledged authority can rightly punish and there are many sins by people who are not under the control of an authority. For instance, when it is the governing authority that is exploiting its own citizens, there is no one who has the wherewithal to punish. Secondly, the authorities often do not know of sins within their jurisdiction unless someone brings them to their attention. Third, the authority may simply not see fit to punish the

²¹¹ ST I-II Q87.7

²¹²ST I-II Q87.3 reply to obj 2 Even the punishment that is inflicted according to human laws, is not always intended as a medicine for the one who is punished, but sometimes only for others: thus when a thief is hanged, this is not for his own amendment, but for the sake of others, that at least they may be deterred from crime through fear of the punishment, according to Proverbs 19:25: "The wicked man being scourged, the fool shall be wiser." Accordingly, the eternal punishments inflicted by God on the reprobate, are medicinal punishments for those who refrain from sin through the thought of those punishments, according to Psalm 59:6: "Thou hast given a warning to them that fear Thee, that they may flee from before the bow, that Thy beloved may be delivered."

sinner for a variety of reasons from mercy to corruption. In all these cases, it remains important that the sufferers are vocal about their needs, just as it was in the case of sin discussed in the last chapter. In all these cases, resolving the suffering will need to be through touching the conscience of the sinner and not through punishment, since in the first case there is no applicable authority to protect the sufferer and in the second and third, the applicable authority is not in a position or is not motivated to act on their behalf.

This lack of efficiency in human punishment does not, however, suggest that sin does not have ramifications. There remains God and our consciences to provide deterrence and ramifications when we sin. As discussed in the previous section, the suffering of others that results from sin, whether we are the sinner or just a bystander, can activate our consciences and cause changes in behavior. Granted, some people, including Heinrich Himmler, can devise arguments that can cause our consciences to err as was also discussed in the last section but even he was not oblivious to what he was doing.²¹³

Even if our consciences can be fooled and our human authorities are unreliable in instilling punishment, God can be trusted to be just in his judgments and punishment. Granted, that threat does not mean much to an atheist and may not deter one from committing crimes. Yet, it is important for the righteous to know justice will be served and that sin has ramifications so that they take heed, even though the wicked do not. As Paul wrote to the Romans:

By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, who will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality

²¹³ Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. 106.

through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness.²¹⁴

As has been described throughout this dissertation, suffering involves uncertainty and isolation in addition to physical discomfort. While death itself presents all humans with a certain sense of uncertainty and isolation, the potential for judgment with eternal consequences can add to the concerns, even among the devout, who are trained not to be presumptuous. Such a judgment is part of divine revelation and thus is an article of Christian faith. Jesus himself described its reality and the judgment criteria, in the passage in Matthew's gospel, typically titled, "the Judgment of the Nations."²¹⁵ In it, he describes separating all the nations into two groups. The ones to his right are offered entrance into the Kingdom of God for caring for those who are suffering while those to the left are condemned into the eternal fire for failure to do the same. The *Catechism* teaches that "Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven-through a purification or immediately, -- or immediate and everlasting damnation."²¹⁶

In addition to the particular judgment at the hour of a person's death, the Church teaches that at the end of time, there will be a Last Judgment. The *Catechism* explains that "on the last day, God through his son Jesus Christ will pronounce the final word on all history. We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation

²¹⁴ Romans 2:5-10.

²¹⁵ Matthew 25: 31-46.

²¹⁶ CCC, 1022.

and understand the marvelous ways by which his Providence led everything towards its final end. The Last Judgment will reveal that God's justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures and that God's love is stronger than death."²¹⁷

The *Catechism* then explains that the message of the Last Judgment calls men to conversion while God is still giving them "the acceptable time.eg.,. the day of salvation." It inspires a holy fear of God and commits them to the justice of the Kingdom of God. It proclaims the "blessed hope" of the Lord's return, when he will come "to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed."²¹⁸

The Theology of Suffering

The theology of suffering developed in the first two chapters of this dissertation is consistent with Catholic doctrine, having been based on scripture and Magisterial documents like the *Catechism* and *Salvifici doloris*. Its purpose is to fill a gap in current Catholic resources concerning suffering that will make Catholic moral teaching more accessible to those both inside and outside of the tradition. The next two chapters will apply the theology developed in the first two chapters to answer questions typically asked by critics of similar efforts and then provide recommendations on how to apply it in normal life scenarios. This second half of the dissertation will focus on making the theology more accessible and providing answers and solace to those who suffer.

²¹⁷ CCC, 1040.

²¹⁸ CCC, 1041

The main attribute of this theology is that it is consistent with God as the loving Father of the Prodigal Son as depicted by Jesus in his parable. It shows us that God's greatest desire is to be united with his wayward children and to provide them the happiness that he had always intended for us. Like the Father of the parable, he is always reaching out to us, ready to celebrate when we come to our senses and welcome us home. Like the Prodigal Son in the parable, many desire a life of dissipation and will not notice that they have lost everything until they suffer. Like the son in the parable, suffering will make them aware that the Father has every good thing they need and many will then decide to go home to God..

An omniscient, omnipotent Father, who desires nothing more than to be united with his wayward children certainly reaches out with particular providence and often it is evil with which he reaches out. Ironically, evil has a prominent place in God's plan for salvation, even when we sin. God created everything and it was all perfect for its purpose. Evil does not exist as an entity, it is the lack, loss or privation of good, the gaps in universal perfection. To provide humans with a sense of purpose, God left the universe in an unperfected state with physical and natural evils reflecting opportunities for human growth and initiative. He also made humans interdependent so they would learn to love. He gave man free will as a sign of his dignity, knowing that man would abuse the freedom in sin. But God also endowed humanity with reason so he could learn and grow. In his providential plan, God provides physical and natural evils at appropriate times for humans to develop the virtues consistent with the divine nature that leads to beatitude. In fact, God in his omniscience also uses the evil of sin to perfect the victims and the evil of punishment to perfect the sinner in much the same way.

Yet, despite that fact that God can make use of our sins for the sake of others, he does not wish it or condone it because for the sinner, the evil of sin is an intentional deviation from the path of righteousness and joy, to choose one's own path versus the one God laid out for us. It is to choose the way of the Prodigal Son, abandoning the Father and the way of abundant life for a life of dissipation. In doing so, we foolishly believe that we know better than the Creator of the universe what will bring us joy. Or perhaps, we just do not believe God has our best interest at heart without recognizing it is God who sustains our existence. Indeed, as the parable shows, God mourns for sinners as the Father mourned for his prodigal son, and he is anxious for their redemption. Because of his great love and respect for his children, he allows them the freedom to choose but he also provides a beacon to light their way home should then choose to return.

In a very real way, suffering is the divine beacon God has set up for us, showing us the existential dangers that surround us, providing an alarm when we deviate from the path to righteousness and joy, and directing us on the path home to him, where we can bask in the eternal joy of the beatific vision. People incorrectly associate suffering with evil, when it is in fact in opposition to it, warning us whenever it is present in our lives. The worldly recognize only the discomfort it causes without ever considering that that discomfort is required to warn us of the privation of good that evil represents and to motivate us to attain the good we are missing.

This theology of suffering also transforms the sufferer from a victim to a messenger of God, with a profound responsibility to reveal to others the lessons of his or her suffering. This has many purposes. It can alert bystanders of an opportunity to provide the sufferer with aid, which if done out of love is spiritually beneficial for the "good Samaritan" and at the same time, gives temporal benefits to the sufferer, and perhaps spiritual ones as well if the sufferer

consciously accepts the suffering for the love of God and the people who spiritually benefit from his aid. The witness of those who sufferer can also serve to warn others of the danger they are facing or to deter people from repeating the same mistakes they made, saving the by-standers the time and suffering needed to verify their experiences. The witness of sufferers is intrinsic to providing feedback to the leaders of organizations, both private and public, that are causing them to suffer in a way that touches their consciences and encourages them to find another way. Without the brave witness of whistle-blowers and other advocates and representatives of the oppressed, there would be little impetus for societal improvement.

For those engaged in the debates around divine providence, this theology makes it clear that God does act in everyone's life, providing what humans understand as evils to provide challenges and opportunities to grow at precisely the exact time that they are needed with suffering directing humans back on the path to eternal life. This is not done in a malicious or sadistic manner, but out of love. While it is true that those focused on temporal goals alone may come to doubt in God's providence, it is equally true that God will persist in his attempts to steer man back on the road to beatitude until the person either sees the light and returns to virtue or dies in his sin. Afterall, this is the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to save it.²¹⁹ It is also the God portrayed by the Father who ran to the Prodigal Son, ecstatic that the son who had been lost had returned. As much as he loves us and wants us to return to him for our own good, God does not force us to do so. However, because suffering is

²¹⁹ John 3:16

uncomfortable and persistent, it motivates men to choose the right path by giving them an example of what life is like without God.

Evil and suffering then, with the exception of when we turn away from God in sin, are instruments of God's providence, leading to men's happiness. Evil, understood properly as the absence of good, presents opportunities for man to develop and practice virtue in imitation of God and suffering makes the choices clear and motivates men to act properly toward God, themselves, and others. To the extent that men take action that alleviates suffering, they align themselves with God, sharing in his nature and his perfection of the universe, bringing forth his kingdom. On the other hand, if they fail to act, the suffering will have been endured in vain and when men sin, they create their own evil, separating themselves from God and adding to the suffering borne by their neighbors.

In the book of Genesis, we are told that our first parents were willing to risk death to be like God, partaking of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.²²⁰ God, in his omniscience, surely understood that his human children would want to be like him and in fact, like human fathers, wanted this as well. But God also knew that humans would need help and training to share in the divine nature and that the kind of love that takes must be freely given. He put the tree easily within their reach so that they would demonstrate their desire to be like him, but he warned them that this came with suffering and death to make it a meaningful choice. The serpent tricked our first parents into reaching out for deification before they were ready for it by emphasizing the gain while denying the costs, a classic half-truth. In essence, our first parents

²²⁰ Genesis 3

had chosen to steal what God was already preparing for them, and in doing so, separated themselves from the Father. Once the choice was made, they experienced evil because they separated themselves from the good provided by God, much as the prodigal son does when he leaves his Father to pursue a life of dissipation. As promised, the choice was coupled with suffering and death, not as a punitive measure but as the kind of punishment that causes a growth in goodness.

Ironically, suffering is the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, highlighting the evil and motivating us to seek the missing good that it implies. Through its four tasks, it takes men on the journey to share in the divine nature and become like God. To make it easier to understand, God also became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, demonstrating the divine nature for us, including the need for selfless love which he displayed on the Cross. He also demonstrated that death could be the pathway to eternal life in the presence of the Father through his resurrection and he explained how this could be achieved with parables and beatitudes, perhaps none as profound as that of the prodigal son, which shows how much God loves us. In the words of St. Irenaeus, “God became man so that man might become God.”²²¹ If we follow him, we can become like him and if we fall off the path, suffering will highlight it and show us the way back.

²²¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, chapter 19.

Chapter 3: Answering the Critical Questions

As the Catechism attests, “Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life.”¹ Obviously, such a profound and ubiquitous problem has generated much commentary through the ages, which in turn has generated critiques, questions, challenges and potential solutions that are readily available in the literature to be addressed by the theology of suffering proposed here. This allows direct comparisons with prior proposed solutions which will help clarify the proposal, highlight any weaknesses and demonstrate credibility.

This chapter will be organized at two levels. The first level reflects the positions of three groups in the ongoing discourses about suffering. The first group comprises the critiques, questions, and challenges put forth by those who believe that human suffering is incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God. The second group comprises a series of theodicies, apologetic solutions put forward by theists to explain how suffering is compatible with an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God. These solutions also raise critical questions about the key concepts associated with suffering. Together, these two groups represent both sides of the debate over the “Problem of Evil.” A third group comprises a line of questions and challenges to the Christian claim that suffering can be redemptive. As discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, these challenges have come from theologians concerned that the concept of redemptive suffering was being used to exploit

¹ CCC, 1500.

various disadvantaged groups or as a distraction from liberating people from various sources of temporal suffering. Any valid theology that includes redemptive suffering must be able to address these concerns as well.

The second level of organization of this chapter separates each of the three groups into subsegments which will focus on the specific questions developed in these debates. Organizing this chapter in this fashion highlights the key concepts of the theology of suffering proposed here and demonstrates their impact by contrasting the results of the theology with the alternatives. This is clarifying in that it shows the importance of each of the parts of the definition of suffering defended in this dissertation.

Questions about Suffering and the Problem of Evil

The “problem of evil” addresses the issue many people have with the concept of a benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God allowing suffering and evil to exist. This concern has been part of theological and philosophical discourse since at least the third century before Christ if we believe the Christian Church Father Lactantius, who, in a letter titled *De ira die* (On the Anger of God) addressed to Donatus in AD 318, attributes the following paradox to Epicurus, who lived over 500 years earlier:

God either wishes to take away evil and is unable, or he is able and is unwilling, or he is neither willing nor able, or he is both willing and able. If he is willing and is unable, he is weak, which is not in accord with the character of God. If he is able and unwilling, he is envious, which is equally at variance with God. If he is neither willing nor able, he is both weak and envious, and therefore not God. If he is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source are evils or why does he not remove them? ²

In his framing of the paradox, Epicurus makes three assumptions. Implied is the assumption that evils are opposed to the good of mankind, which is why Epicurus wants them removed. Stated directly are the assumptions that God is powerful enough to remove evil and that because God cares for humanity, he would want to remove evil. Because evil still exists, Epicurus highlights a dilemma because given this condition, at least one of his assumptions is false. For over two thousand years, there has been debate about which assumptions are false or whether the underlying assumption that there is a God is itself, false.

² Lactantius “*De Ira Dei*”, Translated by William Fletcher. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0703.htm>>. Bk 13.19

Writing in a philosophical environment in the 1950's which Michael Peterson describes as particularly hostile to religion and in which most felt the concept of God was meaningless, J. L. Mackie took on this problem with a series of arguments intent on demonstrating that the existence of evil disproves the existence of God.³ In doing so, Mackie has astutely provided a way to understand and evaluate the underlying theology that can be used to great advantage in this dissertation. He points out:

Now once the problem is fully stated, it is clear that it can be solved in the sense that the problem will not arise if one gives up at least one of the propositions that constitute it. If you are prepared to say that God is not wholly good or not quite omnipotent, or that evil does not exist, or that good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists, or that there are limits to what an omnipotent thing can do, then the problem of evil will not arise for you. There are then, quite a number of adequate solutions of the problem of evil and some of these have been adopted, or almost adopted by various thinkers.⁴

What Epicurus and Mackie have contributed to the understanding of the nature and purpose of suffering is a set of existential questions to address and the need for the answers to these questions to be synergistic to be credible. The questions that must be addressed include “What is the nature of God and what are his capabilities?”, “What are his goals for mankind?” and “What is the nature of evil?” Ironically, they don't think that an adequate solution is possible because their view of the nature of evil is incompatible with their view of the nature of God.

³ Peterson, Michael. *The Problem of Evil*. 3-4.

⁴ Mackey, J.L. “Evil and Omnipotence.” In *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings, Second Edition*, edited by Michael L. Peterson, 81-94. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2017, 82.

What are the Nature and Capabilities of God?

As described in the first two chapters, the theology of suffering presented here assumes the nature of God is that of a loving father as described in the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* and described in more detail by the Beatitudes.⁵ It also assumes that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. Perhaps surprisingly, this definition of God is not only accepted but defended and even extended by atheists in the debate over the “problem of evil,” because a strong, benevolent God supports the atheist narrative that his existence is incompatible with evil, which is defined as a force opposed to that which is good. As shown above, Epicurus is clear that a weak, envious God is inconsistent with the nature of God.

Both Epicurus and Mackie accept the claim that God is omnipotent, in agreement with the standard philosophical and Christian view. Ironically, in the long history of the debates of the problem of evil, it has been theistic apologists, not atheists, who have been willing to compromise this view in order to eliminate or minimize God’s culpability in the existence of evil. Indeed, it is theists who believe that evil opposes good that are motivated to impoverish God in an attempt to deflect the responsibility for evil from him. Some claim that all evil is due to man having free will.⁶ Others deny God’s coercive power over man in favor of strictly perusasive power, and still others deny God’s foresight.⁷ In fact, Mackie anticipates this and

⁵ Luke 15: 11-32 describes the Parable of the Prodigal Son while the Beatitudes are presented in Matthew 5:3-11 and described as “depicting the countenance of Christ” in CCC, 1717.

⁶ There is some subtlety in this statement, depending on how one defines evil. Moral evil, that associated with sin, is clearly due to man having free will. However, natural and physical evils are clearly acts of God as described in Section Two.

⁷ Process theodicy, which was inspired primarily by Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, attempts to work around the problem of evil by restricting the power of God to one of persuasion rather than coercion. In

demonstrates how misguided it is, as will be discussed below. The prevailing problem for this group, as well as the atheists they are debating, is that they both have the wrong assumption on the nature of evil, failing to recognize that it is a privation of good and not an entity in opposition to good.

What is The Nature of Evil?

The proposed theology of suffering agrees with Epicurus on the presumed nature of God as benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. What it offers is a better understanding of evil. As John Paul II explains, “Christianity proclaims the essential good of existence and the good of that which exists, acknowledges the goodness of the Creator and proclaims the goodness of creatures. Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation, or distortion of good.”⁸ St. Thomas, following Augustine describes “evil as the privation of good, just as darkness is the privation of light.”⁹ This alone should change the dynamics of the conversation since it would reframe the basic question from “Why does a good God allow evil?” to “Why does a good God withhold some goods from us?”

The restated question does not imply any existential contradictions. A good God, like a good parent, would realize that there is personal growth and a sense of accomplishment in allowing children to work and struggle for what they want, rather than simply giving them all

Open Theology, unlike process theology, God has full coercive power but unlike in orthodox Christianity, He is hampered in its use by the lack of foreknowledge. The God of Open Theism is “flying blind” and must take risks if He chooses any overt actions. Sanders compares this situation favorably to that of theological determinists, saying that in the Open Theology case God cannot be held accountable for evil that He did not know was coming.

⁸ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 27.

⁹ *ST* I, Q48.1.

they desire. A benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God would also understand that there are benefits to the person in providing the goods when they are actually needed.

Mackie's argument is basically a restatement of Epicurus' dilemma in which he asserts that if God is all-good and all-powerful, then the existence of evil proves there is no God.¹⁰ He understands that this bold statement rests on the definitions of good, evil, and omnipotence, so he outlines the assumptions that he feels would disprove the existence of God. Mackie's disproof requires that good opposes evil in a way that the good thing eliminates evil as best it can. This is why there is an inconsistency in his assumptions, as will be shown in addressing his arguments.

In his article, Mackie prepares arguments for what he anticipates will be the theist responses to the problem of evil. The first is "Good cannot exist without evil" or "Evil is necessary as a counterpart to good." He argues that this statement is inconsistent with God because it would either show God is limited in that he cannot create good without evil and cannot eliminate it.¹¹ None of this applies to this case. Since evil is the privation of good, God is not limited in his creation, and evil is eliminated when he brings the affected thing to perfection in his own time.

The second argument that Mackie offers for theism is that "Evil is necessary as a means to good." He argues that if this is the case, then the case for theism is destroyed because this would mean God's actions are severely limited.¹² But in this theology, evil is not needed to

¹⁰ Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 81-82.

¹¹ Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence", 84-85.

¹² Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence", 87.

create good, evil is the privation of good and it will be resolved with the missing good is attained.

The third argument, “The universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil,” is actually more subtle and complex. Mackie notes two alternate arguments for this. One is an aesthetic analogy, whereby contrasts heighten the beauty of the whole. The second involves the notion of progress, with the idea that an evolving universe where good gradually overcomes evil is a finer thing than the eternal unchallenged supremacy of good. Mackie treats these two cases the same way because he perceives evil as a nature rather than a privation.¹³ In reality, the second case is true but only for a time. The *Catechism* says “the universe was created “in a state of journeying” (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it.”¹⁴ At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness with the righteous reigning forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul and the universe itself being renewed.¹⁵ In the resulting “New Heavens and New Earth,” humanity will unite with God in the beatific vision in which there is an “ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace and mutual communion.”¹⁶ In the end, the world is not better with evil in it, but it will have evil until it is perfected.

¹³ Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, 87.

¹⁴ CCC, 302. *Note*, As the Catechism states, this implies that there was the potential for natural and physical evil prior to original sin. This makes sense because humans had basic needs even in Eden. For instance, God himself said that man needed a companion, which He provided in the person of Eve in Genesis 2.

¹⁵ CCC #1042.

¹⁶ CCC #1045.

Mackie states that “some have said that what we call evil is merely a privation of good, that evil in a positive sense, evil that would really be opposed to good, does not exist.”¹⁷ He addresses this point further, stating:

But often enough these adequate solutions are only *almost* adopted. The thinkers who restrict God’s power, but keep the term ‘omnipotence,’ may reasonably be suspected of thinking, in other contexts, that his power is really unlimited. Those who say that ‘evil’ is merely privation of good, may also be thinking, inconsistently, that privation of good is an evil.¹⁸

As is obvious from the above paragraph, Mackie is already aware of the argument that if evil is a privation of good, it is not inconsistent with the existence of a benevolent God. Apparently, some of his interlocutors may have suggested that it is an evil thing to deprive someone of goodness. If this was the extent of the argument, Mackie would be correct in saying that if privation is an evil, then nothing has changed in the original argument and evil would still contradict the existence of a benevolent God. But that is not the argument being put forth in this theology. Evil, in this construct, is nothing more than perfection yet to be realized or an opportunity to increase the good in our lives. Furthermore, it is clearly appropriate for a benevolent God to withhold certain goods until such time that they can be used appropriately. In fact, it is a logical necessity that some goods be withheld because there can only be one perfect being and that men are incapable of accepting all the good that an infinite being could provide.

Mackie then asserts that the argument that evil is the privation of good is inconsistent with theism because of his assumption that good must oppose evil. In his model, there is balance

¹⁷ Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, 83.

¹⁸ Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence”, 83.

where a first order good (happiness) is opposed by a first order evil (misery) and a second order good (bravery) is opposed by a second order evil (threat of injury). Mackie assumes that theists will argue that the benefits of first order good is worth the accepting the second order evil in conjunction with the first order good. He then concludes that there is misery left over in the exchange, which he considers a fatal blow to theism.¹⁹

The existence of God will not be validated by an accounting exercise. Mackie's groundrule that good must oppose evil effectively morphs in this exercise to good must balance evil, which means that evil can never be eradicated. The reality is much different. Because evil is the privation of good, it can be resolved by attaining the good that is lacking. Humanity, as the steward of creation, has brought about much in the attaining of goods. It has collectively subdued many diseases. Leprosy, the scourge of the ancient world, can be cured with pills. Polio has been largely eradicated. People can now be cool in the summer and warm in the winter. This does not mean that suffering is at an end for humanity. Far from it. It will continue to serve God and man until the end of time, highlighting goods to be gained and motivating humans to attain them.

What are God's Goals for Mankind?

The third consideration that has been a major factor in the problem of evil discourses that differs from the theology of suffering is God's goals for mankind, or said another way, man's last end or man's purpose in life. As discussed in the first two chapters, God created man to share in his divine nature, which will allow man to unite with God in the beatific vision in

¹⁹ Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence", 88-89.

heaven. This is consistent with a benevolent God as portrayed by the father in Jesus's *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. It is also consistent with evil as a privation of good that provides an opportunity for men to participate in the perfection of the universe while growing in virtue that will ultimately lead to beatitude.

There are several subcomponents of God's plan for man that have been addressed in the literature that require specific focus. One is the need for man to have free will in order to aspire to the divine nature and to love. The second is that God's goal for man is to not make him comfortable in this life but to lead him to resurrection in the next. The third is that the entire universe is evolving toward perfection which will be realized with a new heaven and a new earth.

Why does Man Need Free Will?

A key component of God's plan for mankind is that for man to partake of the divine nature, he must be able to freely love as God does. As discussed earlier, that freedom was abused by humanity, leading to sin and separation from God and precipitated death and suffering. Mackie challenges this view, arguing that God is responsible for his creation. His view is that this argument is a no-win scenario for theists and God. If God cannot create humans who will not sin, he is either not omnipotent, not wholly good, or both. But the reality is that God can create humans who will not sin (like the Blessed Virgin Mary) but they must freely accept the grace of God and follow his guidance. As discussed at length in the first two chapters, suffering contributes to the perfection of man in four ways: clearing the way for grace, re-orienting the soul God, releasing love, and sharing the redemptive suffering of Christ. This

conversion, for which suffering is the catalyst, is voluntary and takes time, which explains why there remains sin in the world.

Mackie also asserts that if humans have true free will, then by definition, God lacks the power to control them. To the obvious objection that an omnipotent God could retain his power but refrain from using it, Mackie maintains that the resulting choice to refrain from stopping an evil from happening would be cooperating with evil, an inconsistency that proves there is no God. In fact, this is not necessarily the case, God could be allowing a lesser evil (for example, a personal sin) because it is attached to a greater good (man's free will, which is necessary to love, which in turn is necessary for man to share in the divine presence). Had God chosen to allow men only "good" choices, that is tantamount to allowing no choices at all and love would not be possible, since it is by definition, freely given. This would undoubtedly be a more "evil" choice than God permitting sin. This argument also addresses the concern brought forward in the last paragraph about why there is sin in the world.

The debate over the problem of evil took a decisive turn in 1974 when Alvin Plantinga published the classic *God, Freedom, and Evil*. In it, he shows that there is no way to prove through logic that God and evil are inconsistent because it cannot be proved that an all-powerful and omnipotent God can eliminate every evil state of affairs. This is because evil is always attached to some good. As an example, Plantinga points out that moral heroism that inspires others is only possible in the face of suffering and adversity.²⁰ This argument is based on the Christian understanding that everything God made is good and that evil is the privation of good

²⁰ Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, 22-23.

that is also the basis of this theology of suffering. Therefore as Thomas teaches, “the evil that accompanies one good, is the privation of another good.”²¹ Plantinga also denies Mackie’s definition of omnipotence, arguing that if God grants a kind of free will to creatures that is incompatible with any form of determinism, then it is not within God’s power to control the outcome of their choices. This free will defense allows for the possibility of evil without implicating God in it.²² This is consistent with the argument made in the last paragraph.

Why Resurrection is Required in a Theology of Suffering

A second key part of God’s plan for mankind that is fundamental for understanding suffering is the concept of resurrection, or life after death. Indeed, without it, temporal suffering that leads to death can make no sense. As an example, for Epicurus, the lack of an afterlife requires that life’s meaning must be completely actualized temporally. His goals for life are therefore to rid himself of anxiety and pursue the pleasures to which humans are naturally drawn.²³ Since suffering of any type opposes these life goals by causing anxiety and reducing or even eliminating some pleasure, it is unsurprising that Epicurus would find it vexing.

Writing in the third century in the letter that introduced us to Epicurus’s Dilemma, Lactantius provides the following insight:

I know that many of the philosophers, who defend providence, are accustomed to be disturbed by this argument, and are almost driven against their will to admit that God takes no interest in anything, which Epicurus especially aims at; but having examined the

²¹ ST I Q19.9..

²² Peterson, *The Problem of Evil*, 4

²³ Konstan, David. 2014. "Epicurus." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/epicurus/>>.

matter, we easily do away with this formidable argument. For God is able to do whatever He wishes, and there is no weakness or envy in God. He is able, therefore, to take away evils; but He does not wish to do so, and yet He is not on that account envious. For on this account He does not take them away, because He at the same time gives wisdom, as I have shown; and there is more of goodness and pleasure in wisdom than of annoyance in evils. For wisdom causes us even to know God, and by that knowledge to attain to immortality, which is the chief good. Therefore, unless we first know evil, we shall be unable to know good. But Epicurus did not see this, nor did any other, that if evils are taken away, wisdom is in like manner taken away; and that no traces of virtue remain in man, the nature of which consists in enduring and overcoming the bitterness of evils. And thus, for the sake of a slight gain in the taking away of evils, we should be deprived of a good, which is very great, and true, and peculiar to us. It is plain, therefore, that all things are proposed for the sake of man, as well evils as also goods.²⁴

To elaborate on Lactantius' answer to Epicurus' dilemma, God has intended a greater good for humans than simply temporal peace and pleasure: he offers to share his Divine Nature for eternity with all those willing to unite with Him in love. To reach this union with God, we must align ourselves with his plan for us and God uses suffering to alert us when we deviate from that plan. At one and the same time, since it is uncomfortable, suffering also motivates our re-orientation toward God, first by making it undesirable to continue in our vices and then by drawing us closer to Him so that He can infuse virtue into us, beginning with faith. Eventually, we may come to understand that suffering is an opportunity to love others, both as a "Good Samaritan" who provides aid and comfort to the other, and also as a sufferer, who joins with Jesus in suffering for the benefit of others. This sequence, driven by suffering, leads to beatitude.

²⁴ Lactantius *"De Ira Dei"*, Translated by William Fletcr. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0703.htm>>. Bk 13.19

It is perhaps ironic that what Epicurus sees as the weakness of God, the inability to remove his suffering, is actually God's awesome power to motivate change in human actions and attitudes, leading to beatitude. Similarly, what Epicurus sees as God's unwillingness to remove the suffering that was causing him anxiety and impeding his pleasure is actually a sign of God's desire to call all people to separate themselves from the evils of sin and join Him in paradise. Thus, it becomes clear that Epicurus' dilemma results not from any weakness or envy on the part of God, but from the need for a different perspective on the part of Epicurus himself.

Nor is Epicurus the only philosopher to create a dilemma around the problem of evil by his assumptions about God's plan for man. In 1779, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was published three years after the death of its author, Scottish philosopher David Hume. It features three philosophers discussing the nature of God and religion in light of the overwhelming evil Hume perceives in the world. Hume speaks through the character Philo to claim that it is not possible to infer the existence of a good God from the facts of evil.²⁵ On the other hand, the existence of some good in the world blocks the inference of a completely malicious being, leaving Philo to surmise that the creator is completely indifferent to his creations. Like Epicurus, Hume assumes that God is all powerful and that evil is in opposition to good. Because there is both good and bad in the world, Hume's solution to the dilemma is to assume that God is indifferent to man's plight on earth. As discussed in chapter one, such a position is inconsistent with God being a rational being, who by definition would be end or goal driven.

²⁵ Peterson, *The Problem of Evil*, 3

Of the three protagonists, it is indeed Philo who brings up Epicurus' dilemma and who insists that his questions remain unanswered, even after two thousand years.²⁶ Cleanthes objects, defending the position that humanity has more enjoyment than ills but admits that Divine benevolence requires that this is true. Cleanthes tells Philo, "If you can make out this present point and prove mankind to be unhappy or corrupted, there is at once an end to all religion."²⁷ He thus provides a criteria for Philo to prove that the conditions of human life are inconsistent with the infinite benevolence, power and witness that faith alone would suggest. Cleanthes, therefore, is a convenient foe because he offers no real resistance to Philo's argument while agreeing to the supposition that his argument is valid if proven.

If Cleanthes is a useful foe, Demea, the third character, is a useful advocate for Philo's position since he stakes out a more extreme position, making Philo seem more reasonable.²⁸ Demea's position is that religion is required to provide hope for a humanity mired in misery and that the nature of the Divine being is incomprehensible. He is therefore a collaborator with Philo in cataloging the ills effecting mankind. The two of them go back and forth, bringing out the various ways humans are made to suffer. It is an effective vehicle for Hume to make his case that evil makes belief in a benevolent God unreasonable.

Philo lists four circumstances which he believes bring ills upon creatures that to human reason appear unnecessary or avoidable. The first is the existence of pain, as well as pleasure, to

²⁶ Hume, "Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable," in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 64.

²⁷ Hume, "Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable," 65.

²⁸ Hume, "Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable," 60-63, 76.

excite creatures to action and make them vigilant in the “great work of preservation.” His argument is that the pursuit of pleasure should be sufficient to motivate positive behavior without the need to resort to pain, which is also Epicurus’ argument.²⁹ While it may be true as he says that men pursue pleasure as eagerly as they avoid pain, Hume/Philo uncharacteristically ignores the much greater utility of pain and suffering as a warning mechanism that something critical is missing, which is its role, than pleasure could ever be, since pleasure is attractive and suffering is repulsive. Indeed, how would a man be trained to avoid the bite of a serpent if positive feedback were the only option? Simply put, negative feedback is required to drive men away from evil and that is the role of suffering. Pleasure surely has its place in attracting men to what is good and desirable but sometimes that is not what is needed to protect people from harm. More importantly, as discussed above, the work of suffering and of life in general is to help one grow in virtue and beatitude until one shares in the divine nature and the beatific vision. Earthly pleasure makes people content in this world and thus is opposed by suffering, which highlights their needs for the greater goods and pushes them to eternal bliss.

Philo’s second circumstance is that pain would not be necessary if the world were not conducted by general laws, which he says will result in evil when things or people come into opposition to these laws.³⁰ These general laws Philo references are physical laws like the law of gravity which maintain order and predictability in the universe and allow humans to use reason in carrying out actions. Philo instead prefers a more particular way of running things in which

²⁹ Hume, “Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable,” 70-71

³⁰ Hume, “Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable,” 71-72.

the Deity simply exterminates all ill, wherever it were to be found, and produce all good, without any preparation. He suggests that God could have restored liberty to a considerable part of mankind by raising one wave a little higher to bury Caesar and his fortune at the bottom of the ocean. Aware that such interference might make it difficult for man to use reason to conduct his business, Philo claims that the world is already unpredictable with health and sickness as well as tempest and calm seemingly happening at random, so it would be no worse. But there is more at issue here, than simply unpredictability. Philo assumes that God's goals for man should be the same as his, which is temporal comfort, when in fact they are much higher.

Philo has a third circumstance that he says proves that God is not benevolent. He asserts that God is stingy with his gifts, giving his creation only what they need for survival, nothing more. In particular, he thinks God should have given humans greater diligence because most of the natural evils of human life arise from idleness.³¹ Here, Hume forgets that God uses pain and suffering to motivate people out of their lethargy. In his first condition, Philo claims that pleasure would be enough to motivate people. Now, here in the third, it becomes abundantly clear why that is insufficient. If Hume is right that people are naturally lazy, it would only make sense that it would take pain to prod them out of their lethargy. This is done by God out of his benevolence to return them to the path of love, which leads to beatitude.

The fourth circumstance that is the cause of misery listed by Philo is what he calls "the inaccurate workmanship of all the springs and principles of the great machine of nature."³² Philo

³¹ Hume, "Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable," 73-74.

³² Hume, "Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable," 74.

notes that the rain is needed to nourish all the plants and animals of the earth but at times too much is given and at other times, there are droughts. He gives several other examples of elements of the universal design that at times are provided in excess and at other times are insufficient to meet the needs. It is Philo's assumption that an omnipotent, benevolent God should be able to frame the springs and principles of the universe in a way "that perserves the just medium and temperment."³³

Philo's disagreement with this theology of suffering in this last regard is to believe that terrestrial comfort is God's primary goal for mankind. It is not. God strives to bring man to a much greater end, sharing the divine essence for eternity.³⁴ God is no tyrant: he forces no one to unite with Him in love against the person's will but He does help us by making rebellion painful and union joyful. God makes life on earth a struggle so humans will seek something better. Every pain that is felt is a reminder of the imperfection of this current universe and an opportunity to make it better. Suffering is an indicator that we are lacking some good and motivates us to acquire it. The sensation of pain drives away complacency and forces us to seek change. Even the threat of it can drive us to amend our ways. Disasters like floods and wars and hurricanes will drive the survivors to band together in order to survive as described in the second chapter. Out of this, love is kindled and our eyes can be opened to the way suffering opens the doors for the grace that redeems us. At that point, our suffering takes on meaning and no longer vexes us as it does Hume and Epicurus.

³³ Hume," Evil Makes Belief in God Unreasonable,"74-75

³⁴ ST I-II Q2.8

In the end, Philo concludes that the original Source of all things is indifferent to its creation. He notes that the evil in the world precludes a benevolent God and that the good in the world militates against a purely malicious one. He thus believes that an indifferent god is the most likely. This position is opposed by logic, experience and scripture. As discussed in the introduction to chapter one, it is the very definition of being rational to do something with an end in mind, so no rational being would expend the effort to create a universe and then not take an interest in it.³⁵ Further, the author of the Book of Wisdom says to God, “For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for you would not fashion what you hate. How could a thing remain, unless you willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you?”³⁶ Because the God of Christianity created from nothing, if He was truly indifferent to His creation, it would cease to exist since there would be nothing to sustain it.³⁷

When Hume, in the guise of Philo, takes the position that God is indifferent to his creation because God allows and even causes suffering, it is because Hume does not recognize the goals that God has for men, nor does he recognize that evil is a privation of good and not an entity opposed to it. Because he has limited his horizon to the temporal and fixed his criteria for happiness on terrestrial comfort, it is not surprising that he feels God is indifferent. That is because God *is* relatively indifferent to human comfort in comparison to eternal beatitude. In fact, God uses suffering to highlight when people lack some critical good and deliberately makes life uncomfortable at times to break people of their unhealthy and unholy attachments and to

³⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1 Chapter1, Verse 1.

³⁶ Wisdom 11:24-25.

³⁷ CCC, 301.

motivate them to seek Him out. Human suffering is not a sign of God's indifference to His creation. It is the vehicle he uses to bring about virtue and ultimately beatitude in humanity and as such is a blessing, not a curse.

William L. Rowe initiated the argument that evil is evidence against theistic belief in 1978 in the aftermath of Plantinga's free will defense. Recognizing that he could not disprove the existence of God completely through logic, Rowe's innovation was to claim that the existence of evil was still evidence that atheism has a higher probability of being true than does theism. His argument is based on two premises:

1. There exists horrendous evils that an all-powerful, all knowing, perfectly good being would have no justifying reason to permit.
2. An all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being would not permit an evil unless he had a justifying reason to permit it.

For completeness, Rowe proposes two examples of what he considers unjustifiable evils: a five-year-old girl being beaten, raped and strangled and a fawn suffering for five days before dying of wounds from being caught in a forest fire. His conclusion is that the evidence, while not definitive, clearly calls the existence of God into question, with a high likelihood that He does not.³⁸

³⁸ Rowe, William, Daniel Howard-Snyder, and Michael Bergmann. "Evil, Evidence, and Skeptical Theism- A Debate." In *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings, Second Edition*, edited by Michael L. Peterson, 130-165. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2017; 132-133

Rowe's conclusion is based on a number of faulty assumptions. The first and most fundamental is that he fails to recognize that God's goals and priorities are not the same as his. This was the most basic argument of his chief interlocutors in the debate, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann. Their position is that regardless of what evils occur, we are not in a position to second guess God because we do not know whether these evils can be justified by goods we can not perceive.³⁹ Their position is called *skeptical theism*. Peterson points out that the debate between the evidential arguers and the skeptical theists been going on unabated for almost forty years with each side refining their arguments without significantly changing the dynamic.⁴⁰

When Rowe claims that there are evils that God is not justified in permitting, he does not account for the possibility that what he describes as evil are actually opportunities to bring about good by correcting what had been distorted or acquiring what is lacking. For Rowe, death is the ultimate evil, the end of one's existence. For God, death provides the chance for a new beginning, the chance for man to unite with Him in true happiness, no longer subject to the suffering he had in life since man will no longer be exposed to evil. For Rowe, suffering is an injustice, unfairly denying him the peace and comfort he feels all men are entitled to. For God, suffering is a critical tool to drive people toward virtue, to bring about faith, to provide a way to demonstrate love and ultimately to join him in partaking of the divine essence. Perhaps the peace and comfort Rowe seeks is an impediment to his finding true happiness. In this case it

³⁹ Howard-Snyder and Bergmann, "'Evil, Evidence and Skeptical Theism,'" 156.

⁴⁰ Peterson, "Christian Theism and the Evidential Argument from Evil," 166-167

would be a grace for God to deny him this peace so that he searches for God, the true source of happiness. Ironically, suffering is actually driving people to the peace and comfort the Rowe desires as it highlights the good that is lacking in this terrestrial life.

As for Rowe's examples of unjustifiable evils : a five-year-old girl being beaten, raped and strangled and a fawn suffering for five days before dying of wounds from being caught in a forest fire, they too can be addressed with the theology of suffering. Beginning with the case of the fawn, it is interesting that Rowe would think this situation is one of the best examples of unjustifiable evil since, according to the definition of suffering proposed in this dissertation, non-rational creatures can feel pain but cannot suffer since that requires the capacity to evaluate the threat to their existence which their injuries pose, a capacity they do not have.⁴¹ Unlike humans, who are driven toward union with God by their suffering, animals are purely temporal creatures, driven by instinct to live and to reproduce according to their nature. They will all die to provide resources for others, whether it be as food, fur, or fertilizer, with the choice of their individual deaths depending on God's need for them in his plan. This does not in any way deny that animals are valued by God and should be by men. The *Catechism* states that "each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection."⁴² Pope Francis adds in *Laudato Si'* that "together with our obligations to use the earth's goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes: 'by their mere existence, they bless him and give him glory', and indeed 'the Lord rejoices in all his works.'"⁴³ In addition, in

⁴¹ ST I-II Q17.2

⁴² CCC, 339.

⁴³ Francis. *Laudato Si'*, 69 quoting CCC, 2416 and Ps 104:31.

sympathetic cases like this one, empathy for the animal's plight may serve to drive people to develop ways to protect them, which builds virtue. As such, each and every death of all God's creatures is for a purpose.

The brutal death of an innocent child has much more moral significance since every person is in the image and likeness of God. As corporeal beings, humans are subject to death as part of the evolutionary plan for the universe, once they lost original justice.⁴⁴ Some will die young, others will live longer, each according to God's plan. As the Book of Wisdom explains, "But the righteous one, though he dies early, shall be at rest."⁴⁵ Note, however, there are spiritual reasons behind every case of human suffering as well, which will be specific to every individual case. While each case is different, there are some generic reasons that might apply to a 5-year old who is raped, beaten and strangled.

First of all, this was the result of a wicked choice by another human. In order to preserve free-will, the freedom to commit such a crime must be maintained although justice demands that there also must be ramifications. Indeed, such a heinous act will result in much suffering in order to restrain it from happening again. Such a crime would violate the perpetrator's conscience, causing internal suffering in the form of regret in all but the most hardened of criminals. It would violate the community's standards, subjecting the perpetrator to be segregated from society through prison or execution as restitution. It is also a sin against God, subjecting the perpetrator to eternal damnation without repentance. All of this reduces, but does

⁴⁴ CCC, 376

⁴⁵ Wisdom 4:7

not eliminate the possibility of the action being repeated, either by the perpetrator or by those witnesses that are deterred by the penalties paid by him or her.

From a strictly temporal standpoint, it is hard to conceive of how a 5-year old could possibly benefit from being raped, beaten or strangled, which is of course why Rowe chose such a heinous case. In fact, for an innocent 5 year old child, there is likely no spiritual benefit either since she, being younger than the age of reason, would have no culpability for personal sin and if baptized, should go straight into the arms of God, who is in effect, calling her home.⁴⁶

The bigger role for the victims in many cases like this is through the impact of their suffering on various other involved parties. Such an event causes bitter suffering in their families and acquaintances. For many, it is a profound sense of loss that will cause suffering until they can make meaning of it. Sometimes this drives people to greater faith as they realize the futility of hanging on to temporal things and gain hope in salvation for the child. Sometimes it drives people together and increases their family and community bonds. Other times, it unleashes love as others provide the help and compassion that the grieving need. Heinous crimes such as these also expose problems that are already in the community. Sometimes communities develop greater protections for their children after a case like this, with the first child suffering for the benefit of all that follow. The innocent victim's suffering

⁴⁶ CCC, 1261: As regards *children who have died without Baptism*, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them," allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism.

mercifully ends at death with the joy of the beatific vision but the survivors' suffering will continue for each individual until the required changes in understanding or actions are achieved. Some never achieve this and suffer until the day they die.

This theology of suffering also can address Paul Draper's restatement of the evidential model, in which he states that the distribution of pain and pleasure in the world is evidence that there is no God. Interestingly, his claim is that a Hypothesis of Indifference is more likely than theism, which, like in Hume's case, means that if there is a creator he is indifferent to the needs of his creation. Draper's basic thesis is that one would expect there to be less pain if there is a God than there actually is because a benevolent God would not need pain (or pleasure) to drive biological functions that were not of moral benefit, would not use pain to drive biological functions in sentient beings that are not moral agents (like young children and animals), and would not allow pain that is not biologically beneficial.⁴⁷

The problematic assumption that is the basis for Draper's misunderstanding is that pain is intrinsically bad from a moral perspective. Draper acknowledges pain and pleasure are beneficial from a biological perspective since they contribute to the goals of the body by enticing certain behaviors (like eating) while discouraging others (like touching a hot stove).⁴⁸ It is curious that he does not recognize that God uses suffering and not just physical pain in the same way to discourage improper moral behavior. Because Draper values comfort and pleasure, he expects a

⁴⁷ Draper, Paul. "The Distribution of Pain and Pleasure as Evidence for Atheism," In *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings, Second Edition*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. 553-575. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2017. 553-562.

⁴⁸ Draper, "The Distribution of Pain and Pleasure as Evidence for Atheism," 559.

benevolent God to provide those and when God does not, he assumes it is because there is no God or that God is indifferent to his needs. What he fails to appreciate is that God is using suffering to redirect people toward God's self, which is a far greater good than comfort.

Why is this Not the Best of All Worlds?

The other argument against theism based on the existence of evil is that a benevolent, all-powerful God would create the best of all worlds. This topic was touched upon as early as 1710 when Gottfried Leibniz wrote an essay in defense of God titled *The Best of All Possible Worlds*. It begins with the argument that because the world has evil, it is not the best possible world and if it is not the best, then its creator is lacking in power, knowledge or goodness. This is obviously a question that was being asked by others and to which Leibniz felt a need to respond. He argues against this assertion, saying that evil may be accompanied by a greater good and that the greatest good is free will. He then asserts that free will is compatible with God's foreknowledge and that God allows humans to exercise it, resulting in sin when it is misused. Leibniz concludes that "God created the best possible world because it allows the highest degree of freedom which is to be constantly led toward the good without constraint or displeasure".⁴⁹

Leibniz is correct in everything he said; unfortunately, his argument is the same basic free will argument that atheists have pointed out does not explain natural evil and does nothing to answer the atheist's challenge that there is too much evil in the world for there to be a God. In fact, recognizing this, Robert Adams argues that it is not necessary for God to create the best of

⁴⁹ Leibniz, "Best of All Possible Worlds," in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017 50-59.

all logical worlds because it might be required to have a less perfect world for some creatures to live.⁵⁰ Philip Quinn will accept neither of these arguments. Interestingly, he maintains that the reason that theists can believe in God is that God is perfectly good and thus worthy of adoration. But, alas, Quinn also asserts that the “created cosmos seems to contain less good than it might have contained.”⁵¹ Quinn rewords the proposition as, “If an omnipotent and superlatively good moral agent were to actualize a possible world, he would actualize some actualizable world of unsurpassable moral goodness,” to allow some freedom, and then explains why God does not exist because the world is not the best possible.

Quinn, Adams, and Leibniz are all chasing a “straw man,” because in Christian theology, there is an acknowledgement that this world is not designed by God to have unsurpassable moral goodness. In fact, consistent with the theory of evolution, the Church teaches that “creation has its own goodness, but it did not spring forth complete from the hands of the creator. The universe was created ‘in a state of journeying’ toward an ultimate perfection, yet to be attained, to which God has destined it.”⁵² That does not mean that this world is not perfect for its intended goal, which is to provide an environment in which people have the opportunity to grow mentally, physically, spiritually and socially, ever prodded by suffering to seek the good that is missing. This is all in preparation for the new heaven and the new earth, which as the *Catechism*

⁵⁰ Adams, Robert. “Must God Create the Best” in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, 426.

⁵¹ Quinn, Philip “God, Moral Perfection and Possible Worlds” in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, 432-429

⁵² CCC, 302.

explains, will come at the end of time. After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe itself will be renewed:

The Church . . . will receive her perfection only in the glory of heaven, when will come the time of the renewal of all things. At that time, together with the human race, the universe itself, which is so closely related to man and which attains its destiny through him, will be perfectly re-established in Christ.⁵³ ...“Sacred Scripture calls this mysterious renewal, which will transform humanity and the world, ‘new heavens and a new earth.’ It will be the definitive realization of God’s plan to bring under a single head ‘all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.’⁵⁴

Summary of Arguments against those who Deny God’s Compatibility with Evil

Those who view evil as an entity that opposes goodness rather than a privation of goodness will face the same dilemma that Epicurus faced because the existence of such an evil would be inconsistent with a benevolent, all-powerful God. This view is itself a failure to recognize the goodness of God, who makes nothing bad, but instead leaves some things incomplete to provide room for growth and evolution as discussed in Section II. To be self-consistent, one should recognize that a good, all-powerful God would not make something inherently evil but could leave something incomplete, providing an opportunity for men to contribute to the perfection of the universe. This opportunity to grow in capability and virtue relates to the generosity of God in his plans for men. However, to recognize the entire scope of this generosity, people need to look beyond the temporal world to a new life after death. It is in this new life that men can attain their last end, enthralled in the beatific vision, sharing the divine

⁵³ CCC, 1042.

⁵⁴ CCC, 1043.

nature. As we have seen, those that do not look to the redemption that leads to resurrection cannot reconcile the suffering in this life with the existence of a benevolent God because the threat of death is always there to cause anxiety.

Theodicy Challenges

Since the late 1970s period of renewal in the philosophy of religion, many theists have addressed suffering in the context of the problem of evil.⁵⁵ The best of these offer valuable insights that have been incorporated into this theology of suffering. At the same time, they have also been critiqued by others, which provides a test for this theology and in many cases, it will be shown that concepts developed in this theology of suffering, particularly those contained in the core principle that suffering is the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence, would provide solutions that would strengthen many of the theodicies. Comparing the theology of suffering with the most important theodicies as judged by their theological content, relevance and reputation provides the opportunity to better understand and evaluate its credibility while also offering additional insight into the problem of evil.

These theodicies are grouped by the theological concepts that separate them from the theology of suffering developed in this dissertation. Some of these solutions to the problem of evil retain the same view of evil as an entity in opposition to good that causes others to deny the existence of God. Others misunderstand the nature of natural and physical evils, the tasks associated with suffering, or how suffering motivates men to reconcile with God, limiting the effectiveness of their solutions. The main point of this chapter is to show how questions identified in these theodicies can be effectively answered by the concepts that make up this theology of suffering

⁵⁵ Peterson, *The Problem of Evil*, 4.

What are the Natures of Suffering and Evil?

John Hick, one of the most respected philosophers of religion in the 20th century, published his soul-making theodicy in 1985. It is valuable because it provides some insight into the creation of the human species that is consistent with the modern scientific theory of evolution and also effectively explains some ways that suffering is important to the moral growth of humans. Hick says his soul-making theodicy was inspired by the second-century saint, Irenaeus.⁵⁶ Comparing it positively to the Augustinian construct which acknowledges man's expulsion from Eden following Original Sin, Hick explains that Irenaeus taught that mankind had a two-stage development in which it was formed in the image and developed into the likeness of God. He puts this theory into modern terms, describing the "image" stage as the evolutionary process that resulted in the human species (*homo sapiens*). He notes that unlike the Augustinian construct which places the first humans in paradise, his construct places them in a hostile environment in a spiritually and morally immature state. From this point on, humanity has been given the freedom to come to know and love its maker, to make itself in the likeness of God.

From a metaphysical and theological standpoint, Hick's position that the Augustinian view of the Fall of Man, which is based on Genesis 3, is logically impossible is perhaps outside of Christian orthodoxy and an overstatement of the truth, but not irretrievably so. The main message in the account of original sin is that at the beginning of man's existence in his current

⁵⁶ Hick, John "Soul-Making Theodicy" in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 262-268.

form, he separated himself from God's will by his own selfishness. Since the *Catechism* accepts that this may have come as a result of evolution, this does not need to create a separation from what Hick suggests above and what the Church teaches. Further, the fact that the universe may have felt more hostile to man after this fall could easily be explained by the fact that suffering would ensue when sin created a perversion of what had been good as a signal and a motivator that corrective action was needed.

Hick is in agreement with all orthodox Christians when he says that the root of moral evil is choosing oneself over and above God but that men are also capable of self-giving love (albeit with the help of God's grace).⁵⁷ However, his identifications of pain as physical pain and suffering as mental and emotional pain, such as loneliness, anxiety, fear, remorse, envy and lack of love, is unique in its segregation of physical pain from suffering and fails to identify that it is an ability to sense evil (more accurately described as the privation of good) significant enough to threaten one's existence. Nevertheless, Hick acknowledges the truth in that pain and suffering can be caused by either moral evil (human sin) or natural evils like storms, floods and diseases. It is Hick's basic thesis that sin and suffering provide the kind of challenges that allow people to grow mentally and spiritually and without them, human action would not have moral significance.⁵⁸ He argues that the perfect world required by Hume to demonstrate the existence of God would allow no moral growth and in fact no morality at all, since there would be no

⁵⁷Hick. "Soul-Making Theodicy. 271-272. Agreement with CCC, 398: In that sin man preferred himself to God and by that very act scorned him. He chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good. Constituted in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully "divinized" by God in glory. Seduced by the devil, he wanted to "be like God", but "without God, before God, and not in accordance with God."

⁵⁸ Hick, John "Soul-Making Theodicy," 272.

ramifications for immoral action. Hick concludes, “It is by grappling with the real problems of a real environment, in which is one form of life among many, and which is not designed to minister exclusively to one’s well-being, that one can develop in intelligence and in such qualities as courage and determination.”⁵⁹ Said another way, the challenge of suffering leads to the development of virtue.

William Rowe, in his critique of Hick’s Soul-Making theodicy, while agreeing with the general premise that pain and suffering are required for a person to grow, insists that Hick’s solution does not solve his basic concern that too much evil exists in the world to justify belief in an omnipotent, perfectly good God.⁶⁰ The strengths of this particular theodicy include that it does not compromise the omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent nature of God while explaining that his plan utilizes pain and suffering to bring about individual and societal growth. Its weaknesses include a misunderstanding of suffering and evil that leaves it exposed to Rowe’s complaint above. If evil was understood as a lack of some good and suffering correctly understood as a sensing of the good that was lacking and a motivator to attain it, both Hick and Rowe would have had very different discussions. For instance, Hick could argue that God was using suffering to highlight the missing goods which effect people and motivate them to attain these goods, first by driving them to acquire the moral virtues, through which civilizations are built and individuals are prepared to accept grace, and then to provide an openness to the theological graces that lead to conversion, charity toward others and ultimately, to the sharing in Christ’s

⁵⁹ Hick, John “Soul-Making Theodicy,” 273.

⁶⁰ Rowe, William. “Paradox and Promise in Hick’s Theodicy” in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017,” 282-286.

suffering that brings us to the likeness of God. Understanding it from this perspective would enable Rowe to see evil as perfection not yet attained and suffering as God's blessing on humanity for leading us to what we need to do, rather than as an undeserved physical attack upon the sufferer.

Like Hick, David Ray Griffin, a leading advocate of process theodicy, has issues with Augustinian theology but his concern is that he believes Augustine teaches that there is no genuine evil in the world. Griffin correctly captures Augustine's position that everything God made is good and that there are two types of evil, the evil of sin and the evil of punishment.⁶¹ Griffin then points out that because punishment by God is justified, it is not a genuine evil.⁶² He also asserts that in Augustine's theodicy, even sin is only an apparent evil since God can make use of it to bring about a greater good. This causes Griffin to conclude that for Augustine, there is no genuine evil, which he defines as "anything, all things considered, without which the world would be better."⁶³ Griffin declares that the theodicy is inconsistent with human experience.⁶⁴

The weakness in Griffin's argument is that he does not appear to understand the nature of evil in Augustinian theology since his definition of genuine evil describes it as a thing. To repeat Thomas's explanation from the first section, good is defined as that which is desirable.⁶⁵ Thomas reasons that since every nature desires its own being and its own perfection, it must be said also

⁶¹ Griffin, "Denial of Genuine Evil", 242-243.

⁶² Griffin, "Denial of Genuine Evil", 258.

⁶³ Griffin, David Ray. "Divine Persuasion Rather than Coercion" in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, 289.

⁶⁴ Griffin, "Denial of Genuine Evil", 259.

⁶⁵ ST I, Q48.1.

that the being and the perfection of any nature is good. Therefore, since evil cannot signify being, or any form or nature, it can only be understood as the absence of goodness as darkness is understood as the absence of light.

When Griffin says that Augustine denies ‘genuine’ evil, he is correct in that Augustine denies that any entity is evil. He is incorrect however in saying that Augustine, Thomas, or any other orthodox Christian denies the reality of evil. It is as real as darkness, or silence, or cold or any other sensation that is the privation of another reality. What people experience as evil is a lack of some good that is part of a thing’s nature. If it is an action, it results from choosing a lesser good over a greater good. Punishment follows when some good is lost with that sinful choice and will remain until order is restored. Physical evil results from the imperfections in a universe journeying toward perfection.

The assumption that a benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God must bring about a world without evil demonstrates a lack of understanding of the nature of God, the nature of evil, and of God’s providential plan. If evil is the absence of good, then Griffin’s argument is without merit because it is not inconsistent for a benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God to withhold various goods from people until and unless he deems it appropriate. In fact, this is a philosophical necessity because only one being can logically be perfect (God), goods have to be withheld from every other being.

Alvin Plantinga’s supralapsarianism theodicy furthers this discussion because of his insights on whether it is fair for God to use people to further His providential plan without asking their permission. Plantinga argues that while the theodicies presented above were useful and

important and the atheological arguments were unsuccessful, Christian philosophers should turn to a different task: “that of understanding the evil our world displays from a Christian perspective.”⁶⁶ He developed his own theodicy in 2004, thirty years after he published his free will defense with *God, Freedom and Evil*.⁶⁷ It is based on a tenet of Calvinism called *supralapsarianism* which holds that God decreed to permit humans to fall into sin so that he could save some of them. In fact, Aquinas engaged in a medieval debate about whether the Fall was necessary for the incarnation to occur with Thomas taking the affirmative position based on scripture.⁶⁸ Plantinga takes this same position and his argument is relatively simple: a world where the Christian God resides is by definition a better world than one in which he does not reside and a world in which the incarnation and atonement exists is even better since these are each of infinite value. Because atonement requires sin and evil, Plantinga argues that the best possible world, therefore requires suffering.⁶⁹

Plantinga then takes note of John Paul II’s admonition is *Salvifici doloris*:

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 suffer has also been redeemed..., .. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Plantinga, Alvin. “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa’” in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 366

⁶⁷ Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism”, 363

⁶⁸ ST III Q1.3.

⁶⁹ Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism”, 369-374

⁷⁰ Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism”, 374 quoting John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 19.

Plantinga is a bit perplexed by the concept that Christ's atonement left anything lacking but given that St. Paul is John Paul II's source, he concludes that suffering of creatures must be a necessary condition of the world in question and that this gives other creatures the opportunity to be like Christ and participate in his redemptive suffering.

Plantinga then asks himself three questions to assure the *Felix Culpa* theodicy has no fatal flaws. He feels he has answered the question "why does God permit evil?" but that he still needs to answer why God permits suffering. His definition of evil is "a matter of free creatures doing what is wrong and/or displaying vicious character traits", while suffering is "any kind of pain or discomfort."⁷¹ He gives two answers as to why suffering exists. The first is that "significantly free creatures are free to do evil and some of them in fact do evil, causing suffering." Plantinga goes on to claim that "suffering is intrinsically a bad thing; accordingly God hates it; Satan therefore aims to promote suffering, to cause as much of it as he can."⁷² In fact, Plantinga goes as far as to claim that "much of the natural evil the world displays is due to the actions of Satan and his cohorts."⁷³

Interestingly, Plantinga's second answer to the question of why suffering exists is that suffering is of instrumental value, which contradicts the previous statement that suffering is intrinsically a bad thing. First, he notes that "some suffering has the effect of improving our character and preparing God's people for life in his kingdom, this world is in part a vale of soul-

⁷¹ Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism", 364

⁷² Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism", 376

⁷³ Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism", 377

making as John Hick and many others before have suggested.”⁷⁴ Second, he says that suffering may be the price of a regular world, as Peter van Inwagen asserts. Finally, he gleans from the writings of St. Paul that

First.. sharing in the suffering of Christ is a means to attain ‘the resurrection from the dead,’ i.e., salvation. Second. that it is a good thing that the followers of Christ share in his sufferings because this is a means of fellowship with him at a very profound level and a way in which they achieve a certain kind of solidarity with him; and third, in thus sharing his suffering, his followers come to resemble Christ in an important respect, thus displaying more fully the image of God.⁷⁵

Plantinga is unable to answer the second question about why there is so much sin and suffering in the world because he has no way of estimating how much of these were required to necessitate the incarnation and atonement events or how much suffering the best worlds contain so he declares the answer to be inconclusive.⁷⁶

More interesting is his work on the third question: is it fair for God to use people to further his providential plan without asking their permission.⁷⁷ First, Plantinga says that people are used as a means to an end every time they are hired for a job and so this should not be a problem. The second strand of the question involves God allowing people to suffer for the good of others or for the greater good of the world as a whole without asking permission. Plantinga says that people act as proxies all the time for people who are incompetent or incapacitated by

⁷⁴ Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism”, 378

⁷⁵ Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism”, 378-379

⁷⁶ Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism”, 380-382.

⁷⁷ Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism”, 383-386

assessing what was in their best interests and that God knows what it is in their best interests, so this should also not be a problem.

Plantinga's theodicy is basically Christian revealed truth but it would have been better supported with the theology of suffering than with his proposal. For instance, to equate suffering with pain and then say suffering is an intrinsically bad thing is inconsistent with reality. As has been discussed repeatedly, suffering and pain are warning signs that something is wrong and that they are indeed good to have. As a simple analogy: breaking your leg is bad, the pain merely lets you know it happened. As such, suffering as well as pain have great instrumental value to humanity because it protects people from further injury. Had Plantinga understood it this way, then he would have given only one consistent answer to why suffering exists: that it is instrumentally valuable to God and man to lead people from vice to virtue and ultimately to salvation. Further, the four tasks of spiritual development associated with suffering would have provided Plantinga a guide to explain how and when suffering becomes instrumentally valuable and would have made it clear to him that the three ramifications he gleaned from St. Paul about sharing the sufferings of Christ were actually all manifestations of partaking of the divine essence, man's last end.

The theology of suffering also would have allowed Plantinga to answer the second question of why there is so much sin and suffering in the world because he would have understood that evil is not an entity but is the absence of good and that natural evil is the imperfections in a universe still evolving toward perfection.

Why are There Natural and Physical Evils?

Richard Swinburne mounts a much different defense of God, addressing the athiests' objection to the free will defense that it does not adequately account for natural evils that cannot be ascribed to human sin. His work is valuable because it leads to an important debate about the propriety and value of using the suffering of one party to benefit another. Swinburne's main argument is that "if men are to have the opportunity to bring about serious evils for themselves or others by actions or negligence, or to prevent their occurrence, and if all knowledge of the future is obtained by induction, then there must be serious natural evils occurring to man or animals."⁷⁸ The other alternative Swinburne can imagine is if God gave men verbal knowledge of the consequences of their actions. He concludes that such a situation would greatly reduce human freedom with God so close to hand. Therefore, "there must be natural evils if men are to have a significant choice of destiny; which is why a good God might well bring them about."⁷⁹

Eleanor Stump thinks "Swinburne's argument would be cogent if the only way in which God could provide knowledge was by talking out loud and meeting man face-to-face."⁸⁰ She points out this is not the case, with many scriptural examples of God communicating through dreams. She also points out that men do not have to experience natural evils to take precautions against them and that it is not necessary for God to allow natural evils to occur in order to give

⁷⁸ Swinburne, Richard. "Natural Evils and Moral Choice" in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 456.

⁷⁹ Swinburne, "Natural Evils and Moral Choice", 457.

⁸⁰ Stump, Eleanor, ("Knowledge, Freedom and the Problem of Evil" in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 464.

man serious choices.⁸¹ Stump concludes that Swinburne's solution to the problem of evil fails because: "neither the need for knowledge or the value of it, on the one hand, nor the importance of serious choice on the other, justifies God's allowing all of the evil he does allow."⁸²

On a more positive note, John Knasas points out that Swinburne recognizes that evil actions can be for the benefit of others, consistent with the thought of Aquinas.⁸³ Knasas also believes Thomas would agree that if men are to avoid evil, there must be evil done to some as an example for others. Also, evil is required as an opportunity to show people at their best and that God intends to create beings with a choice of destiny.⁸⁴ However, Knasas says that Swinburne "overplays the soul-making purpose of natural evil," whereas "Aquinas sees human development properly occurring not within the sound and fury of *quandoque* evils but within the peace and tranquility of an ordered society."⁸⁵

While Knasas is no doubt correct in asserting that Aquinas favored contemplation as the proper vehicle for human development, the truth of the matter is that even those blessed with the time and temperament for effective contemplation are affected and developed by the environment in which they live and eventually die in so there is a "soul-making" aspect to natural evil. But Stump is also correct when she says that Swinburne's argument that natural

⁸¹ Stump, "Knowledge, Freedom, and the Problem of Evil, 466-469.

⁸² Stump, "Knowledge, Freedom, and the Problem of Evil, 470.

⁸³ Knasas, John F. X., *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel: Thomistic Reflections on the Problem of Evil* Washington: Catholic University Press, 2013, 245

⁸⁴ Knasas. *The Cry of Rachel*, 246-250

⁸⁵ Knasas. *The Cry of Rachel*, 250. Note: *Quandoque* is typically translated from Latin as "whenever" or "at some time or another" but in Knasas' usage as *quandoque* evils, the implication is that the evils occur randomly and unpredictably.

evils are required for men to have free will fails. As was discussed in great length in chapter two, natural evils are absolutely “acts of God” as St. Thomas would attest, and they are all purposeful, because an omniscient, omnipotent God does everything according to his will.⁸⁶ But recalling earlier discussions, these acts of God are acts of omission, withholding good, rather than imparting evil. Woven into the universe’s slow evolutionary path to perfection are countless individual challenges all with a purpose that is consistent with God’s Providential Plan. These are not to demonstrate evil for men to freely copy, but instead are opportunities to grow in goodness, which suffering highlights and provides the motivation for us to pursue.

Peter van Inwagen developed what he terms an expanded free-will defense because he thinks that atheists have a good rejoinder to the problem of evil because the suffering in the world is too great to justify the free will defense and that the free will defense is not applicable to evils like earthquakes that are not attributable to human action.⁸⁷ His proposal is that God first raised a small group of primates to rationality and free will through evolution.⁸⁸ He gave them free will so that they could love. They were also in union with God, which enabled them to live in harmony, free from wild beasts, natural disasters, and disease and decay. But somehow, they were not content in this state and separated from God, with disastrous results. They no longer had the beatific vision nor superhuman powers and grew in sin. God did not abandon them, but out of love, he put together a rescue mission to restore union with mankind. This requires man’s cooperation and suffering is required to make them recognize that they need to be rescued. Those

⁸⁶ ST I Q103.7 reply to obj 2.

⁸⁷ van Inwagen, Peter, *The Problem of Evil*. New York: Oxford, 2006, 84

⁸⁸ van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 84-91

that cooperate will eventually reach a place with no more suffering. Those that do not will end in hell in a state of elected ruin. Ultimately, van Inwagen's thesis is that God has limited suffering to the minimum it takes to cause redemption and that individual suffering is random.

Van Inwagen's theodicy has a number of attractive attributes. He has interpreted the first three chapters of Genesis in a way that takes into account the theory of evolution without losing any of the salient theological points. Equally important is his recognition of God's use of suffering to lead people to the beatific vision. However, van Inwagen sells God short when he says that individual suffering is random.⁸⁹ For God to be omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent, he would have to have a plan that encompasses each individual. Further, his theodicy does not address the nature of physical and natural evils in a way that shows how God uses them for good, a weakness that has been addressed in this theology of suffering.

What are the Different Tasks of Suffering?

Marilyn McCord Adam's work on a theodicy based on redemptive suffering has significant value in its discussion of the potential benefits of martyrdom to all parties but at the same time, has a significant liability in that it makes suffering seem too beneficial, a liability that this proposal would address. Adams says that the problem of evil for Christians is posed by the question "How can I trust (or continue to trust) God in a world like this?"⁹⁰ She says the Bible and church history shed light on this question by showing how "God fit evils, of the amount and

⁸⁹ van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 89

⁹⁰ Adams, Marilyn McCord. "Redemptive Suffering as a Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil" in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 212.

kinds we find in this world, into his redemptive purposes.”⁹¹ She explains that “God made human beings to enter into nonmanipulative relationships of self-surrendering love with himself and relationships of self-giving love with others” but that “God cannot get the relationships he wants with human beings unless he makes them with incompatibilist free wills.”⁹² He thus has to allow the possibility of sin but he also has the right to judge the sinner, not to condemn and punish, but to forgive and reconcile with the person. The Christian’s experience with forgiveness and a deepening relationship with God, convinces him that “God would not allow us to suffer evils that could not have, with our cooperation, a redemptive aspect.”⁹³

Adams says that God knows that direct judgment will not usually be redemptive for fallen human beings, so he tends to use an indirect approach that entices us to participate in arriving at the verdict.⁹⁴ For example, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to a self-righteous man who wants to know who is considered a “neighbor.” However, if that fails to touch the heart of the sinner, God is left with a more expensive redemptive strategy: martyrdom. This includes not only the martyrdom of Christ but also that of others that subsequently share in his suffering, which gives them a vision of the inner life of God. Adams’ thoughts on this, described previously in Chapter 2, are that martyrdom is a vehicle of God’s goodness to the persecutor, the onlookers, and the martyr as well.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 214.

⁹² Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 215.

⁹³ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 216-217.

⁹⁴ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 218-219.

⁹⁵ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 219-224.

She does recognize limitations in the martyrdom model, such as situations where the victim cannot or will not obtain the benefits of relationship development she ascribes to martyrdom, or where the suffering is generated by natural causes. But the biggest limitation is that suffering can only be truly justified in the context of a Christian worldview that includes heaven and hell because “the good of ‘face-to-face’ intimacy with God is simply incommensurate with any merely temporal evils and the evil of his total absence is simply incommensurate with any merely temporal goods.”⁹⁶ Said another way, it is the Christian’s belief in eternal bliss that allows him or her to justify the suffering it took to attain it.

Adams concludes by addressing some anticipated objections. One is that suffering, particularly the ability to see the inner life of God, is so appealing it might encourage people to hurt others to allow them to partake of it.⁹⁷ She rightly claims that Christianity has no vocations to sadism or masochism. The second objection she poses is that “someone might charge, on this view it would be fully compatible with divine goodness if human beings suffered eternally in hell forever. Indeed, insofar as suffering lasted forever, it would constitute for the damned soul an infinite good.”⁹⁸ She finds herself answering this by saying “Hell considered as everlasting eternal punishment is not the good Christians believe God to have in mind for his people.”⁹⁹

The main thrust of Adams’ theodicy is consistent with orthodox Christianity, and her recognition of the potential benefits of martyrdom to all parties is excellent and useful. The main

⁹⁶ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 228.

⁹⁷ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 229.

⁹⁸ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 229.

⁹⁹ Adams, “Redemptive Suffering”, 229.

reason that Adams finds herself in the predicament of making suffering sound too good is she does not acknowledge or at least does not emphasize the role of suffering in the earlier stages of spiritual development. Had she emphasized that it is because of the intensity and discomfort associated with suffering that people are driven in the early stages of spiritual development to seek out the goods that will alleviate it, then she would have been far less susceptible to the charges that suffering is to be sought out. Indeed, only with the greatest graces can a person reach the mystical and spiritual heights that will allow them to rejoice in suffering for the sake of others and becomes sharers in the suffering of Christ. Needless to say, many people never reach this level of beatitude and certainly, one cannot replicate the required graces by deliberately injuring themselves or others.

The most recent major theodicy published was by Scott Samuelson in his 2018 book *Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering*.¹⁰⁰ He dismisses the strict logical disproof of God, noting that if people never died, we would either have severe over-population or the possibility of new life would be eliminated. He recognizes that pain and negative emotions are alert systems for our bodies and our minds and that people need challenges or else their growth is stunted. He continues by saying that “suffering may well be compatible with an all-good, all-powerful God, but the overwhelming amount of suffering renders such a divinity extremely unlikely.”¹⁰¹ But then he opines: “Yet the logic of the evidential case against God, let alone the strict logical disproof, betrays our failure to understand how the mystery of pointless suffering is fundamental

¹⁰⁰ Samuelson, *Seven Ways*, 102.

¹⁰¹ Samuelson, *Seven Ways*, 103.

to our humanity.”¹⁰² He goes on to explain that it is the gap between what the world is and what we think it should be that is the driver for all human enterprise. He even makes the point that without suffering “the very concept of moral goodness would disappear, for virtue would be indistinguishable from selfishness.” He concludes with the comment that “The problem of evil disproves God only by refuting humanity!”¹⁰³ He proves this by showing that humanity, given the evil it is now capable of and has committed, could be challenged in much the same way that atheists challenge the existence of God.

Samuelson’s discussion of the problem of evil is interesting both because of what it contains and what it leaves out. He recognizes the role of suffering as both an alert system and as a driver of human enterprise and of virtue and he seems to be open to the possibility of the existence of God based on his comments. There is no obvious disagreement between anything he says and the proposed theology of suffering. However, he has not commented on anything associated with the post-conversion aspects of the theology including the grace associated with suffering and its role in God’s providential plan. In fact, this is what might be expected of someone being prepared by God to accept the grace that leads to conversion.

In his concluding chapter, Samuelson describes the preceding chapters as the examination of different philosophical attempts at increasing our humanity in light of pointless suffering.¹⁰⁴ He contends that we should paradoxically embrace suffering because it provides meaning to our

¹⁰² Samuelson, *Seven Ways*, 104

¹⁰³ Samuelson, *Seven Ways*, 105

¹⁰⁴ Samuelson, *Seven Ways*, 226

lives even as we struggle against it. He uses childrearing as an example, pointing out that we need to balance protecting children from harm with allowing them to take the risks that will allow them to grow.¹⁰⁵ He also warns that suffering cannot be adequately understood with the utilitarian view that everything can be fixed because much of it is shrouded in mystery.¹⁰⁶ Because of that, we shall always cry out in protest, with suffering driving some people into the arms of God and driving others away.

How does Suffering Motivate Human Action?

Eleanor Stump also presents a theodicy consistent with orthodox Christianity that has much to offer, particularly in her description of the effects of the Fall of Man, but it too has liabilities that can be addressed by this proposal.¹⁰⁷ She begins with the standard claims that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good and that there is evil in the world. However, she takes exception to the belief that evil is inconsistent with the existence of God unless there is no morally sufficient reason for God to allow instances of evil. Stump does accept Plantinga's claim that humans have free will but rejects his claim that it is a good of such value that it outweighs all the evil in the world.¹⁰⁸ After similarly rejecting the theodicies of Hick and Swinburne, Stump decides that she needs to evaluate a religious system more thoroughly to check it for consistency. Choosing Christianity, she adds three doctrines commonly held by Christians: that Adam fell, that natural evil entered the world as a result of Adam's fall and that after death, human beings

¹⁰⁵ Samuelson, *Seven Ways*, 227-229.

¹⁰⁶ Samuelson, *Seven Ways*, 235.

¹⁰⁷ Stump, Eleonore. "The Problem of Evil." *Faith and Philosophy* 2. 4, (Oct 1985): 392

¹⁰⁸ Stump, "The Problem of Evil," 393-395.

go to either heaven or hell.¹⁰⁹ While Stump cannot prove that any of these doctrines are true, neither can they be proved to be false when heaven is described as the beatific vision and hell as the absence of union with God, which she says “is arguably the best possible state of those whose free wills are not in conformity with the divine will.”¹¹⁰

Stump’s theodicy is at its most insightful in its discussion of the Fall of Man and the re-orientation of the will from pleasure in the greater good to an inclination to will one’s own power or pleasure. Beginning with Anselm and progressing to Aquinas’s development of his thought, Stump shows that after the fall, the will takes its direction from the appetitive desires rather than reason, resulting in disorder and that this tendency is inheritable.¹¹¹ She also holds that “no person suffered from diseases, tornadoes, droughts, etc. until Adam’s fall.”¹¹² Consistent with standard Christian doctrine, all human beings since Adam’s fall have had defective free wills which keeps them from going to heaven. Stump’s position is that God cannot correct this problem in humans without violating their free will unless humans request his help.¹¹³

In order to help people to request the help they need, Stump says that God needs to create an environment that “contributes to a person’s humbling, to his awareness of his own evil, and to his unhappiness with his present state.”¹¹⁴ She asserts that both natural and moral evils help create such an environment, although she recognizes that this cannot be proven either way. She

¹⁰⁹ Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 398.

¹¹⁰ Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 399-402.

¹¹¹ Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 403-404.

¹¹² Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 405.

¹¹³ Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 406-408.

¹¹⁴ Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 409.

does say that there is some historical data to support the claim in that “Christianity has tended to flourish among the oppressed and decline among the comfortable.”¹¹⁵ Stump also notes that human experience in child rearing also supports this claim, where spoiled children often grow up into unpleasant adults whereas those who grew up facing challenges are more prepared to prosper as adults.

Stump then addresses a few anticipated objections. The first is that of childhood suffering, which she says can be justified by an entrance into heaven. The second is that if suffering is the solution to the problem of evil, it seems that it should be promoted. She says that just “because God can use suffering to cure an evil will, it does not follow that we can do so also.”¹¹⁶ She concludes that “the attempt to eliminate suffering is likely to be beneficial to our characters, and passivity in the face of other’s sufferings will have no such good effects.”¹¹⁷

Stump’s solution to the problem of evil is more robust than the others developed over the last fifty years. It is the most consistent with traditional theological and philosophical assumptions as well as specifically Christian doctrines, never having to compromise the capability of man or God like many of the others. She is right that her solution ties the justification for natural evil to free will in a better way than either Plantinga or Swiburne, and that she gives a better rationale for soul-making than does Hick. Nevertheless, her solution could be made stronger still with the addition of some of the concepts from the theology of suffering.

¹¹⁵ Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 410.

¹¹⁶ Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” 412.

In Stump's construct, after the Fall, humans will need to be re-oriented toward God but God cannot effect that re-orientation without human permission to maintain their free will. He therefore uses evil and suffering to induce humans to ask for that help. This construct is open to criticism because it appears legalistic, puts God in an inferior position to man, who must give God permission to help, and because it involves God inflicting pain on men to induce them to return. According to the theology of suffering, suffering has four tasks in God's providential plan to motivate the development of virtue that ultimately leads to Beatitude. As in Stump's proposal, people exercise free will, but unlike Stump's theodicy, this is not to give God permission to change their will but to accept and cooperate with the graces he offers. This is a more accurate rendering of the relationship between God and humans, who have no power over God but only over their own ability to cooperate or not. It is also a more positive relationship, where God presents people with opportunities to attain the goods they are lacking rather than inflicting them with evil to convince them they need help.

In another alternative theodicy, Paul Helm's thoughts on meticulous providence are important because they provide a strong defense of God's sovereignty and goodness, explaining from the Christian scriptures that God meticulously governs the universe, taking no risks. He begins by pointing out that many of the differences in how people see evil in their lives is directly related to their perceptions of the relationship of humanity with God and the universe.¹¹⁸ He explains that those who perceive God as just another person such as a coach or a general

¹¹⁸ Helm, Paul "God's Providence Takes No Risks" in *The Problem of Evil*, edited by Michael L. Peterson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 345-346.

rather than the triune Creator of all there is, will approach evil in different ways. Similarly, those that think the universe is arranged for our pleasure and comfort will see evil differently than those who think that God works all things according to His will. The problem of evil also takes on a much different meaning if one believes in life after death or not. It seems obvious that evil cannot be properly understood without properly understanding the nature of God and his universal design since evil is part of that design and would reflect upon the nature of God.

Helm uses Divine Revelation from Scripture as the basis for his understanding of God's providential plan¹¹⁹. He describes God's governance of the universe as "purposive, means-end governing" and insists that "God works all things according to His own will, including the evils that beset us all, down to the last detail."¹²⁰ Helm addresses the concern that this seems to imply that God is responsible for evil by proposing two alternative arguments. The first is Augustine's concept of willing permission, which he quotes directly:

In a way unspeakably strange and wonderful, even what is done in opposition to His will does not defeat His will. For it would not be done if he did not permit it (and of course his permission is not unwilling, but willing); nor would a Good Being permit evil to be done except that in His omnipotence, He can turn evil into good.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 349-350. Helm says a worked out view of divine providence and evil has to be consistent with the following biblical data: that God is the creator and moment-by-moment sustainer of his creation (Gn 1:1, Col.1:16f, Heb 1:3); that of him and to him and through him are all things (Rom 1:36); that he knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10) and works everything after the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11); that nothing can impede his purposes; that seemingly chance occurrences are in his control (Prov. 16:33), as are the hearts of Kings (Prov. 21:1); that he intends good by the same actions that others intend evil by (Gn 50:20); that Satan and human tyrants are his servants (1 Chron 21:1 with 2 Sam24:1 and Ezra 1:1; Acts 4:27f), and that divinely inspired prophecies and dreams are fulfilled to the letter (Num 23:19; Deut 18:21-22, and, Gen 37:5-8 with 42:6-9).

¹²⁰ Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 347-348.

¹²¹ Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 351 quoting Augustine *Enchiridion*, trans. J. F. Shaw (Chicago:Henry Regnery, 1961), 117.

To further explain the concept, he gives the example of a parent allowing a sick child to undergo a painful but necessary treatment to show how an apparent evil can actually be a good.

Helm also provides an alternative way to describe it, which he calls the Action-Description argument. In this case, the same action can be understood in different ways.¹²² Helm gives two scriptural examples. The first is God's use of Cyrus to free the Jews from Babylon (Is 44:28-45:25). Seen from the Babylonian perspective, his attack was evil but in God's plan, it provided deliverance for the chosen race and of course, was seen as positive by the Jews. Similarly, Joseph's brothers meant evil when they sold him into slavery (Gn 50:20), but it was good in God's plan to have him in Egypt to save the family during the drought that followed.

Acknowledging the other major complaint against meticulous providence, Helm weakly addresses the concern that it turns people into puppets by arguing that the divine-human relationship is "*sui generis*" (in a class of its own). He explains that "while this move is philosophically unsatisfactory, since philosophers like to have answers to their questions, it is nevertheless appropriate."¹²³ He goes on to say that "if God is *sui generis*, then any relation between anything else and God looks likely to be *sui generis* as well."¹²⁴

The weakness in this answer is tied to the absence of an even bigger question for holders of meticulous providence: How does God induce us to do his will? He does not describe a mechanism, but does note that sometimes, like in the case of Hezekiah, God tests us, and other

¹²² Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 353-354.

¹²³ Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 355.

¹²⁴ Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 355.

times, like in the case of Paul's thorn in the flesh, he disciplines us.¹²⁵ Helm says that we can not know why evils occur in life, but that "the most appropriate reaction is surely to submit to the will of God in silence."¹²⁶

This is a misunderstanding of the intent of God, the nature of evil and His use of it to promote the greater good. God's intentions toward man is to share his divine nature and his life with us, just as in the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Evil is not an entity in opposition to God but is the absence or privation of good. When God withholds a good from us, which we perceive as an evil of some sort through our suffering, it is to motivate us to attain that good. In fact, God continues to present us with these opportunities throughout life as he sees as appropriate to lead us to salvation. Indeed, if we react as Helm suggests by submitting to the suffering in silence, then the suffering will indeed have been pointless. While it is true that suffering and evil are used to test and discipline us, it is also true that they show us what we lack to reach beatitude. Therefore, we need to heed our suffering, using our ingenuity to identify and attain the goods that are lacking, whether it be the result of oppression of sinful men or the ravages of a natural disaster that fundamentally changes our economic position.

¹²⁵ Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 356-357. In 2 Kgs 20:1-11, God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, initially tells King Hezekiah that his death is imminent but after Hezekiah prays to him, God relents and gives Hezekiah another 15 years of life. The Open Theists conclude that this proves that God changes his mind based on human input. Helm says that God always knew he was going to grant Hezekiah the additional 15 years but tests him to "bring out Hezekiah's faith or make him aware of his faith, or both." In 2 Cor 12:7-10, St. Paul discusses a "thorn in his flesh" that the Lord refuses to remove because "(Jesus's) grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Helm describes this as discipline.

¹²⁶ Helm, "God's Providence Takes No Risks", 358

In its own way, meticulous providence impoverishes God as much as process or open theism does because it does not appreciate that a truly omnipotent and omniscient God can make his plan work while giving humans true free will. Consider the fact that God made every creature in the universe and knows exactly what motivates and demotivates each one in every situation. Each individual then is free to act according to his or her own will and God's plan will provide an environment that he knows will lead to the choice his plan requires. Suffering is the vehicle that God uses to direct us away from bad choices, with joy the reward for doing God's will. This theology of suffering provides God the control that Helm's meticulous providence acknowledges but with an explainable mechanism that allows humans the freedom of action that Sanders' open theism requires, but with a truly omniscient God reacting with complete certainty to human actions *before* they happen. That mechanism is to provide the necessary environmental challenges, whether caused by God or secondarily, by men, that will motivate people to make the desired decisions that God has planned for. Because God allows each person to act freely, individuals are responsible for their own sins, even as God foresees them and plans around them. In essence, God permits these sins because his plan will use them for good. An example of this situation is recounted in Genesis 50 when Joseph tells his brothers who sold him into slavery, "Even though you meant harm to me, God meant it for good, to achieve this present end, the survival of many people."¹²⁷ This does not mean that God wants us to sin or even condones it, it just means he anticipates it and makes use of it to facilitate the creation of good in others. Nor

¹²⁷ Genesis 50:20 NABRE.

does it mean that God abandons the sinner. Indeed, he provides correction in the form of punishment to build goodness in the sinner.

Helm does not need to be defensive about God being the source of evil. As described in chapter two, evil is the absence or privation of good. God wisely deprives men of various goods to allow them to pursue what they are missing while developing the virtues that will ultimately lead to beatitude. Sometimes it is the sufferer who is the most direct beneficiary, while other times, it is for the benefit of others who help them or even simply witness the events in a way that changes them. God then uses the four tasks of suffering to direct this pursuit of the good because as John Paul II says, “suffering must serve for conversion, that is, for the rebuilding of goodness in the subject.”¹²⁸ Sometimes, this conversion experience can be extremely vigorous, as in the case of Saint Paul, who God threw from his horse and blinded,¹²⁹ so that he could not miss the point. Other times, the conversion experience may be more subtle but it must be acknowledged that God has the power and the foresight to provide the necessary inducements and environment that will change the human heart and as John Paul II attests, “it is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls.”¹³⁰

Questions about Redemptive Suffering

The third set of questions discussed is from social justice-oriented theologians who have difficulty with the concept of redemptive suffering that is so integral to Christianity in general

¹²⁸ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 12.

¹²⁹ Acts 9: 1-9. NABRE

¹³⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 27.

and the theology of suffering in particular. Sometimes their issue is that the concept is misunderstood or at least misused by those in power to reduce resistance by various marginalized groups. Sometimes people see redemptive suffering as an impediment to the establishment of a different priority. Others do not like the idea that something so uncomfortable as suffering is what a good God would use for redemption. Ironically, in many cases, the concerns of one of these theologians are answered by others within the same theological school. The goal of this section is not to answer every complaint that theologians have against Catholic teaching on redemptive suffering, but to address a representative set of issues that apply to the theology of suffering to help explain it, to highlight aspects of it that might not otherwise be apparent and also to help demonstrate its credibility.

How is Suffering Redemptive

Dorothee Soelle, whose insight in defining the nature of suffering was so helpful in the first section is a very harsh critic of the traditional Christian theology of suffering. In fact, she says “it is axiomatic for me that the only humanely conceivable goal is the abolition of circumstances under which people are forced to suffer, whether through poverty or tyranny.”¹³¹ She says that thanks to Karl Marx, this position no longer needs to be defended but the battle must still be waged “because of the continuing effects in society of Christian perversions of love.” In the theology of suffering, the goal is the perfection of man which leads to redemption and beatitude in the afterlife. With social justice being simply a means to that end.

¹³¹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 2.

Soelle begins that battle with a withering critique of Christian masochism. She notes that “suffering is there to break our pride, demonstrate our powerlessness, exploit our dependency. Affliction has the intention of bringing us back to a God who only becomes great when he makes us small.”¹³² She continues

It is not difficult to criticize Christian masochism, since it has so many features that merit criticism: the low value it places on human strength; the veneration of one who is neither good nor logical but only extremely powerful; its viewing of suffering exclusively from the perspective of endurance; and its consequent lack of sensitivity for the suffering of others¹³³

In reality, Soelle’s arguments have the same basis as that of Epicurus, the problem of reconciling suffering with her expectations of a benevolent God. Unlike Epicurus, her approach is not to jettison God, but to redefine how God is understood, particularly in light of suffering. This theology of suffering provides a more accurate understanding of Church teaching on suffering, man, and the nature of God than that critiqued by Soelle in *Suffering*. Indeed, if the Christian God was indeed as masochistic and sadistic as she charges, he would certainly not be worthy of veneration. Soelle misinterprets God’s intentions in the use of suffering and she overvalues temporal goods when she says the only conceivable goal is the abolition of circumstances under which people are forced to suffer, whether through poverty or tyranny.”¹³⁴

¹³² Soelle, *Suffering*, 19.

¹³³ Soelle, *Suffering*, 22.

¹³⁴ Soelle, *Suffering*, 2.

First of all, she is right that the purpose of suffering or affliction *is* to bring us back to God, but she is wrong on the motivation. God's purpose is not to make us small but to make us divine, as revealed in Sacred Scripture.¹³⁵ Soelle is fond of saying that God has no other hands than ours, and this is basically true, but it contradicts the charge that God or at least Christianity places a low value on human strength. In fact, as discussed in the last section, the Church teaches that God does indeed make use of his creatures' cooperation in carrying out his plan for creation.¹³⁶ Indeed, God gives human beings the power of freely sharing in his providence by making them the stewards of creation.¹³⁷ This is clearly not undervaluing human strength or agency. However, sometimes God does use suffering to break our pride by demonstrating our powerlessness and by exploiting our dependency because pride is often an impediment to moral growth by becoming a barrier to communion with others, limiting the socialization of suffering that Soelle values most highly, but more importantly, limiting our ability to partake of the divine nature.

¹³⁵ 2 Peter 1:4

¹³⁶ CCC, 306: God is the sovereign master of his plan. But to carry it out he also makes use of his creatures' co-operation. This use is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of almighty God's greatness and goodness. For God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of co-operating in the accomplishment of his plan.

¹³⁷ CCC, 307: To human beings God even gives the power of freely sharing in his providence by entrusting them with the responsibility of "subduing" the earth and having dominion over it. God thus enables men to be intelligent and free causes in order to complete the work of creation, to perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors. Though often unconscious collaborators with God's will, they can also enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions, their prayers and their sufferings. They then fully become "God's fellow workers" and co-workers for his kingdom.

Soelle charges that the God represented in traditional Christianity is neither good nor logical but only powerful, but she does not support her charges. It is to be inferred that because there is evil in the world that God must not be good, but as explained earlier in this section, evil is nothing but a privation of good and suffering is the God-given ability to detect the goods we lack that threatens our existence. Looked at from this perspective, one can see that contrary to Soelle's charges, God is good and concerned with the beatitude of men, which is entirely logical for the Creator of the universe.

Her final charge relating to Christian masochism is its viewing of suffering exclusively from the perspective of endurance; and its consequent lack of sensitivity for the suffering of others. This is an artifact of the current inaccessibility of the Church's teaching on suffering that this theology is meant to resolve. Obviously, this theology of suffering is much more robust than Soelle had access to, identifying suffering as a source of divine revelation and a key tool for God's plan for human redemption and beatitude by clearing the way for grace, re-orienting souls to God, releasing human love and making people sharers in Christ's redemptive suffering. This theology is highly sensitive to the suffering of others, making their care a requirement for salvation following Christ's discourse on the Last Judgment.¹³⁸

In addition to saying that Christianity is masochistic, Soelle also asserts that theologians, particularly in Calvin's reformed movement, have also defined a sadistic God.¹³⁹ She says, "The logic of this sadistic understanding of suffering is hard to refute. It consists of three propositions

¹³⁸ Matthew 25:31-46.

¹³⁹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 22.

which recur in all sadistic theologies: 1) God is the almighty ruler of the world, and he sends all suffering; 2) God acts justly, not capriciously; and 3) all suffering is punishment for sin.”¹⁴⁰

Again, Soelle’s charges do not apply to the teaching in the theology of suffering. While it is true that God is indeed the almighty ruler of the world and he does send all suffering, it is also true that suffering itself is not meant to destroy a person. It is a warning that some good is lacking in the person’s life and a call to happiness in union with God. This warning is a grace and a blessing because it alerts the sufferer to a problem he or she needs to address, not the curse that Soelle attributes to it. The problems that could cause suffering are discussed above as the four types of evil, which considered correctly are privations of good. In some cases, good is lost through personal sin or the sin of others. In other cases, God withholds some goodness from people until the appropriate time. As such God does act justly, not capriciously.

Soelle says that in Christian masochism, all suffering serves to punish, test, or train while in theological sadism, all suffering is punishment for sin. From her position as a liberation theologian, committed to ending suffering in the world, a God who uses suffering as part of his providential plan of redemption is a huge impediment to the success of her project. Therefore, it is in her interests to reinterpret God and Christianity. She starts with the story from Genesis 22 of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, offering three interpretations.¹⁴¹ In the sadistic view, God commands the death of Isaac and later Jesus. In the masochist’s view, Abraham is obedient. In her preferred view, the story shows why sacrifices are bad. However, there is a fourth view

¹⁴⁰ Soelle, *Suffering*, 24.

¹⁴¹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 28-32.

which Soelle does not discuss where Abraham knows that God can raise his son from the dead and trusts that God's plan is for the benefit of mankind and hence is willing to follow God's instructions. As it turns out, God is neither sadistic nor masochistic, but loving. He spares Isaac after showing how hard it is to sacrifice one's only son and then he asks Jesus to sacrifice himself as a model of redemptive love for mankind before raising Jesus from the dead in glory, which gives men hope and a path to eternal life and beatitude.

Despite having an overly pessimistic view of the nature of God, Soelle does have much to offer on the nature of suffering. Her general thesis is that socialization is the key to ending suffering. She notes that in post-Christian western societies, there is a general apathy about suffering that keeps it from being addressed.¹⁴² However, sometimes suffering can draw together an entire people with their common history understood as a process of liberation.¹⁴³ In such cases, she notes, "Suffering leads not to apathy and submission, but rather to productivity; hatred and pain are transformed."¹⁴⁴

For Soelle, suffering inevitably begins with physical pain which, if it cannot be resolved, leads to psychological trauma and ultimately to social degradation and isolation. Her solution is to simply "unwind" this process.¹⁴⁵ In this "unwinding," Soelle begins with the isolated sufferer who feels powerless to change the circumstance that led to his or her affliction. Her first step to healing is for the sufferer to lament, thus sensitizing others to what he or she is experiencing.

¹⁴² Soelle, *Suffering*, 33-43

¹⁴³ Soelle identifies Vietnam after the war as an example of the people coming together after joint suffering.

¹⁴⁴ Soelle, *Suffering*, 59.

¹⁴⁵ Soelle. *Suffering*. 65-78.

This leads to acceptance within the current social structures and an end to the social isolation.

Once social contact has been established, solidarity with the sufferer's position can be established, which in turn leads to the reduction of psychological trauma and increasing ability to develop the behaviors that shape a new situation of liberation for the sufferer.

Because, for Soelle, the key to resolving suffering is lamentation, she is harshly critical of religious and philosophical positions which drive people to accept their sufferings in silence.¹⁴⁶ As discussed in the first chapter, she advocates accepting reality and transforming it, following the three stages of the mystical way of Meister Eckhart.¹⁴⁷ This involves letting go of finite things so that the person can be united with God. This is not inconsistent with the theology of suffering, nor are the results of finding meaning in suffering. Soelle says that pain and suffering are easily borne, or barely perceived and that seemingly unbearable privations and dangers are accepted with ease when they are associated with some greater cause like freedom, survival, or the birth of a child. By providing meaning to it, the reality of suffering is transformed as is the person who suffers. Furthermore, Soelle believes suffering summons self-confidence, boldness, and strength when the sufferer "knows" that he or she was "sent" to actualize justice.¹⁴⁸ She says that those who suffer in this way are indestructible and that nothing can separate them from the love of God. These concepts are fully consistent with the theology of suffering proposed here but are extended beyond the end of justice to other goods in life.

¹⁴⁶ Soelle, *Suffering*, 92-98.

¹⁴⁷ Soelle, *Suffering*, 98.

¹⁴⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 140-141

While clearly seeing the benefits of suffering for a purpose, Soelle is acutely aware that when meaning cannot be found, atheism follows.¹⁴⁹ She attributes this to people expecting God to take care of them like a father. Instead, Soelle believes that God wants to use people to work on the completion of His creation and that for this reason, God must also suffer. Repeating the mantra that “God has no other hands than ours,” Soelle proposes that even those that die without finding meaning themselves can teach us to live better and to reduce future suffering.¹⁵⁰ She concludes that the social conditions can be changed to limit suffering and we can change ourselves and learn in suffering up to the point of death and disability, which are irreversible boundaries that cannot be crossed except by sharing the pain of sufferers with them.¹⁵¹

While most of the points made by Soelle in the last paragraph are correct and consistent with the theology of suffering, her comment that God must suffer indicates a misunderstanding of the nature of suffering. Suffering is a gift from God that allows humans to sense when they are missing a critical good. God lacks nothing, so he would never suffer, nor does he rely on senses, since he is omniscient. Jesus, being true God and true man, could and did suffer because of his human nature. So, once suffering is re-envisioned as a system indicating privation of a good that is given by God, Soelle’s desires for a positive use of suffering fit well with traditional theological understandings. In fact, many of her insights are an integral part of the theology of suffering offered in this dissertation.

¹⁴⁹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 141-148.

¹⁵⁰ Soelle, *Suffering*, 149-150

¹⁵¹ Soelle, *Suffering*.178.

Mary VandenBerg, like Dorothee Soelle, is a liberation theologian who denies that human suffering can be redemptive because “to glorify suffering is to misunderstand the overall mission of Christ on the cross. His was a mission of renewal, renewal of human beings and of the whole creation.”¹⁵² She adds that “Christ did not come to glorify suffering but to overcome suffering, sin, death and the power of evil through his suffering.”¹⁵³ However, VandenBerg is not willing to go as far as many of her counterparts in rejecting the redemptive nature of Christ’s Passion and death on the Cross, saying “to reject the redemptive suffering of Christ is to reject our hope.”¹⁵⁴ In this, she is consistent with God’s goal for mankind to be redeemed, but like Soelle and her counterparts, she misunderstands how human suffering can in fact lead to redemption without glorifying all suffering.

VandenBerg uses Scripture to demonstrate that Jesus’s suffering on the cross was redemptive. In the gospel accounts themselves, she can find only one verse (Mark 10:45 and its parallel, Matthew 20:28) that indicates that: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for the ransom for many.”¹⁵⁵ However, the New Testament epistles provide many validating statements for the redemptive power of Christ. For example, Paul tells the Ephesians about Christ: “In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace.”¹⁵⁶ In Romans, Paul writes:

¹⁵² VandenBerg, Mary. “Redemptive Suffering: Christ’s Alone.” *Scottish Journal of Theology*; Edinburgh 60.4 (Nov 2007): 409 (394-411)

¹⁵³ VandenBerg, “Redemptive Suffering: Christ’s Alone,” 409.

¹⁵⁴ VandenBerg, “Redemptive Suffering: Christ’s Alone,” 410.

¹⁵⁵ VandenBerg, “Redemptive Suffering: Christ’s Alone,” 402.

¹⁵⁶ Ephesians 1:7.

They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed through the forbearance of God—to prove his righteousness in the present time, that he might be righteous and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.¹⁵⁷

VandenBerg lists several others but the point has been made that Jesus's suffering is redemptive.

Using a similar survey of scripture. VandenBerg draws her conclusion that suffering is not redemptive for anyone other than Christ. She summarizes her survey of the Pauline epistles by asserting that “while Paul does commend suffering to his readers and even rejoices in his own suffering, the only type of suffering he suggests they follow is suffering because of their Christian beliefs.”¹⁵⁸ By this she means that because the gospel stands in opposition to the values and teachings of the world, Christians should expect to suffer because they are Christians.¹⁵⁹ There is one passage in the Letter to the Colossians that she cannot so easily explain away however: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church.”¹⁶⁰

Recalling Paul's emphasis throughout his writings about the impossibility of the flesh accomplishing anything salvific, VandenBerg dismisses the clear meaning of the text.¹⁶¹ She

¹⁵⁷ Romans 3: 24-26.

¹⁵⁸ VandenBerg, “Redemptive Suffering: Christ's Alone,” 407.

¹⁵⁹ VandenBerg, “Redemptive Suffering: Christ's Alone,” 410.

¹⁶⁰ Colossians 1:24.

¹⁶¹ VandenBerg, “Redemptive Suffering: Christ's Alone,” 409. VandenBerg reasons that given Paul's repeated emphasis throughout his writings of the impossibility of the flesh to accomplish anything salvific, we must not understand this to mean he is able to do anything to help with his salvation.

then quotes John Stott, who writes, “Since Jesus Christ is the one and only Redeemer, and the New Testament never uses redemptive language of anything we do, we will be wise not to talk of ‘redemptive suffering.’”¹⁶² VandenBerg concludes that “while our suffering may work to sanctify us or draw us into closer fellowship with God, it has no salvific effect.”

The Catholic tradition has a different understanding of redemptive suffering. Suffering in itself is not redemptive. What makes suffering redemptive is when we willingly suffer for the love of God and for the benefit of others. It is in this way that we become partakers of the divine nature and sharers in the suffering of Christ. For example, the Apostle Paul willingly suffered whippings, beatings, and a variety of other woes which made his witness of the Gospel more credible. In this way, he suffered for the benefit of others and out of love for God, just as Jesus had done. It is this redemptive suffering which Paul is referring to in the passage from the Letter to the Colossians that VandenBerg had problems with.

There is actually far more scriptural support for the concept of redemptive suffering than Colossians 1:24. As discussed in the first section, this concept is the key to *Salvifici doloris* and John Paul II defends it thoroughly through scripture. For instance, John Paul II notes that “those who share in the sufferings of Christ are also called, through their own sufferings to share in the glory.”¹⁶³ He supports this statement with no less than three scriptural passages. To the Romans Paul 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

¹⁶² VandenBerg, “Redemptive Suffering: Christ’s Alone,” 409.

¹⁶³ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 22.

comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.”¹⁶⁴ In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, he adds, “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.”¹⁶⁵ Peter shared the same sentiment in 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.”¹⁶⁶

As the paragraph above clearly demonstrates, when we share in the sufferings of Christ, it is redemptive. However, this does not mean that Christians should seek out suffering or refrain from resolving what they can. Suffering is best understood as people’s ability to sense when they are lacking some critical good. Therefore, seeking out suffering would require eliminating some good a person already had, which is clearly counterproductive. In addition, suffering is deliberately intense and uncomfortable to motivate the sufferer to seek out the good they are missing. Furthermore, charity requires us to help others that suffer. But there are situations in which suffering cannot be avoided or resolved. It is in those situations that the suffering can be redemptive if the sufferer willingly accepts it for the good of others and for the love of God.

Suffering is beneficial to man precisely because it highlights the good we lack that prevents us from reaching our true end of partaking in the nature and life of God and motivates us to take action to attain those goods. Suffering is redemptive when we accept or share in the challenges that others face and help them attain those goods by our actions. This is distinctly

¹⁶⁴ Romans 8: 17-18.

¹⁶⁵ 2Cor 4: 17-18.

¹⁶⁶ 1Peter 4:13.

different than creating our own evils to generate suffering, which of course, helps no one and in fact is damaging to our own souls. God's plan will present the evils we need to overcome in the appropriate time and highlight the needed actions through suffering. There is no benefit to creating suffering on our own.

Virtually all suffering can benefit someone else. At the very least, it provides an opportunity for others to exercise charity in helping relieve the suffering, a true spiritual benefit. A person's suffering can be a warning to others or provide learning so that others may suffer less. It can be in support of a greater good, such as the example of the Christian martyrs. The problem is not opportunity for most people, it is the willingness to align oneself so radically with Christ that they understand the meaning of their suffering. John Paul II says that the final stage of the spiritual journey in relation to suffering is when you recognize the meaning in it, which gives you joy.¹⁶⁷

VandenBerg was writing in response to feminist criticism of the traditional understandings of the atonement. She notes that "part of their criticism has been the assertion that to glorify Christ's sufferings entails glorifying all suffering, a connection that potentially leads to abusive behavior. Suffering, they claim is not redemptive – ever."¹⁶⁸ Although VandenBerg has effectively refuted their denial of Christ's redemptive suffering, it is certainly worthwhile to explore their claims and issues directly.

¹⁶⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 24,

¹⁶⁸ VandenBerg, "Redemptive Suffering: Christ's Alone," 394.

How Does Suffering Leads to Social Justice?

The essay that seems to have launched Vandenberg's work is "For God so Loved the World?" by Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker. They claim that "Christianity has been a primary – in many cases, *the* primary – force in shaping our acceptance of abuse."¹⁶⁹ They add that "any sense that we have a right to care for our own needs is in conflict with being a faithful follower of Jesus. Our suffering for others will save the world." Taking the position that "in order for us to become whole, we must reject the culture that shapes our abuse and disassociate ourselves from the institutions that glorify our suffering," they call for women to leave the church.¹⁷⁰

As Vandenberg astutely notes, "the big problem Brown and Parker have is the Christian belief that Christ's death was part of God's plan to deliver his people from their sins and the results of those sins. They care very little about the different constructions of how Christ's death accomplishes human salvation."¹⁷¹ Indeed, they complain that every theory of atonement commends suffering to the disciple and in their view "the imitation of Christ is first and foremost obedient willingness to endure pain."¹⁷² Ultimately, they conclude that "Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering" in which "the predominate image or theology of the culture is 'divine child abuse' – God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and

¹⁶⁹ Brown, Joanne Carlson and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" In *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, edited by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989. 2 (1-27)

¹⁷⁰ Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved the World?", 3

¹⁷¹ Vandenberg, "Redemptive Suffering: Christ's Alone," 394.

¹⁷² Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved the World?", 4

death of his own son.”¹⁷³ They proceed to construct their own version of Christianity, where “Jesus is one manifestation of Immanuel but not uniquely so, whose life exemplified justice, radical love, and liberation” and whose death was an unredeemed act to reject his way of life.¹⁷⁴

While it is important to recognize the feminist critique that some interpretations of redemptive suffering have and continue to cause women and minorities to both be abused and to accept the abuse, it is even more important to point out that these interpretations are not true reflections of Christian doctrine and particularly, the theology of suffering. Brown and Parker’s version also reflects a misunderstanding of Christian doctrine and practice that compounds the issue. Brown and Parker’s characterization of Christ’s Passion and death as divine child abuse is a case in point.¹⁷⁵ Christians certainly do not glorify child abuse but they do glorify Jesus for his self-giving love because as John Paul II observes “Christ suffers voluntarily and Christ suffers innocently.”¹⁷⁶ In fact, if Jesus had suffered against his will, it would not have been redemptive. What makes suffering redemptive is that it is aligned to God’s will for the good of others, a true act of charity. In the case of Jesus, it was determined at the Council of Ephesus in 431 that his divine will is one with the Father’s ontologically and that his human will is united to his divine will through the hypostatic union.¹⁷⁷ This doctrine is ignored by Brown and Parker.

¹⁷³ Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?”, 26.

¹⁷⁴ Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?”, 27.

¹⁷⁵ Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?”, 26.

¹⁷⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 18.

¹⁷⁷ CCC, 466.

Likewise, Christianity was founded on the premise of radical love of God and neighbor, not the willingness to obediently endure pain as Brown and Parker suggest. Pain was thrust on Christians by others because as Vandenberg notes, the gospel stands in opposition to the values and teachings of the world. Therefore, Christians should expect to suffer because they are Christians.¹⁷⁸ Christians, like everyone else, are motivated to resolve their suffering as expeditiously as possible because it is designed to be intense and uncomfortable so as to drive change. God does not want people to be abused or to be abusers, so people sense the lack of goodness in it as suffering, which motivates resistance and eventually change.

In some cases, suffering cannot be resolved or avoided, and, as described above, it is in those cases that it can be redemptive if it is done for the good of others out of love for God. Contrary to what Brown and Parker assert, Christians do not glorify all suffering, only the kind of heroic suffering that leads to redemption. For example, there is glory for the Christian martyrs who accept death as their witness to the gospel, but no one glorifies a criminal who is executed in the same way for his or her crimes. To demonstrate this point, Peter says in his first epistle:

Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let no one among you be made to suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as an intriguer.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Vandenberg, "Redemptive Suffering: Christ's Alone," 410

¹⁷⁹ 1Peter 4:12-15. NABRE

Likewise, no one is likely to glorify an abuse victim unless he or she takes action to stop the abuse. It is by doing this that good is done and suffering is resolved. This is true for secular issues as well as for Christianity, the only difference is in what is considered a good.

As discussed in chapter two, Gary Commins provides Martin Luther King Jr. and his non-violent civil rights movement as an example of redemptive suffering in action. King learned non-violence from Gandhi, who taught that “the voluntary assumption of suffering could be self-purifying, an example to others and a means to redress injustice.”¹⁸⁰ Commins notes that King was following Gandhi’s principles when he defined his non-violence strategy: “We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force... We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer and in winning our freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.”¹⁸¹ Commins also points out that King strongly asserted the redemptive nature of suffering, particularly in his classic ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, in which King “urged the ‘veterans of creative suffering’ to ‘continue with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.’”¹⁸² Like Gandhi, King was demonstrating how suffering can bring about the temporal good of equality for an oppressed people.

Speaking at the funeral of three of the four girls killed in a 1963 bombing of a Birmingham church, King spoke of them as “martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom

¹⁸⁰ Commins, Gary. “Is Suffering Redemptive? Historical and Theological Reflections on Martin Luther King Jr.” *Sewanee Theological Review* 51:1 (Christmas 2007): 73.

¹⁸¹ Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 62.

¹⁸² Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 61.

and human dignity.”¹⁸³ He continued, declaring “God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city.” Commins notes that “years later, network news anchor Walter Cronkite called the bombing ‘the awakening’ of white America.”¹⁸⁴ As discussed, suffering can bring about change when it can be used to lead to a greater good.

A similar effect surrounded King’s own death at the hands of an assassin in 1968. Commins notes that following his death, King was called a “holy icon” and a “prophet,” and that many tried to honor him with “new and innovative charities, community initiatives, scholarship programs and proactive admission practices.”¹⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, the famed contemplative Catholic monk wrote in a consolation letter to King’s widow, “He has done the greatest thing anyone can do. In imitation of his master, he has laid down his life for his friends and his enemies.”¹⁸⁶ King is generally credited with being the driving force behind the American civil rights movement and is honored a federal holiday in recognition of that achievement. Unlike most murder victims, King was glorified because his death was seen to be in service of others.

Commins points out that King was not glorified by everyone at his death and that the civil rights movement soon fractured without his leadership.¹⁸⁷ In fact, he notes that “just as

¹⁸³ Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 63.

¹⁸⁴ Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 64.

¹⁸⁵ Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 66-68.

¹⁸⁶ Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 70.

¹⁸⁷ Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive,” 71.

King's contemporaries like Killens and Carmichael considered him naïve about non-violence, so recent theologians have judged his belief in redemptive suffering problematic." Commins' observation is that:

Much of the womanist-feminist critique of redemptive suffering is, of course, in reaction to its ubiquitous misuse: men in religious authority advise abused and oppressed women to endure their suffering like the cross. Nothing is done to confront the oppressor, end the abuse, heal the pain, or correct the injustice. Those with power nurture a cult of suffering in order to exploit others and justify oppression; redemptive suffering becomes an opiate for the oppressed – or, more precisely, a placebo.¹⁸⁸

Commins is right in calling attention to the misuse of the concept of redemptive suffering by those in power to exploit others and justify oppression – that is reprehensible action on their part. As will be discussed below, it is also unhelpful that the womanist-feminine critique is focused on the concept of redemptive suffering rather than those that misuse it. They would be more effective in stopping the abuse by properly defining how suffering is redemptive, which would make the abuse obvious.

Commins asserts that King's theology has more in common with his critics than they realize.¹⁸⁹ While admitting that King did not always neatly differentiate random suffering from the purposeful risks that generate social transformation, Commins notes that in his funeral sermon in Birmingham, he clearly separated passive versus active suffering. King made clear that those who failed to resist their oppressors were consummating their sins while redemption is

¹⁸⁸ Commins, "Is Suffering Redemptive," 71

¹⁸⁹ Commins, "Is Suffering Redemptive," 73

through the converted hearts and reformed systems driven by resistance. Commins notes that this inability to distinguish non-violence from non-resistance is a key reason that people reject redemptive suffering. This is an important insight because it validates what was said earlier about the only suffering that would be glorified would be that which was acted on.

Commins concludes his essay with a guide to discerning whether suffering is redemptive that he says is based on King's assertions, Audre Lorde's poetic insights, and the critiques of theologians.¹⁹⁰ He states that to be redemptive, suffering needs to be "voluntarily endured and embraced for the sake of one's integrity, for the cause and for the other." It is not to be sought out but to be risked. There must be discernment that the cause is just and that the risks were proportionate to the benefits. The suffering must have meaning retroactively to be redemptive. Commins insists that Christ's crucifixion includes "the power of purposeful suffering to transform" and also pointedly asks, "Can the spirit who heals, comforts, and strengthens also transform violent death into a source of justice and life for others?" Finally, he makes the point that redemptive suffering is more concerned with doing justice than rationalizing evil.

It should be noted that Commins's list is focused on the kind of redemptive suffering that drives societal goods but not necessarily eternal reward, which is to miss the point entirely. It is a common misconception among liberation theologians that only suffering incurred in fighting injustice is an imitation of the Cross and thus redemptive.¹⁹¹ As discussed above, the difference is inherent in the end goal. To be truly redemptive in terms of attaining union with God requires

¹⁹⁰ Commins, "Is Suffering Redemptive," 76-77.

¹⁹¹ Yoder, Jon Howard. *The Politics of Jesus*

one to suffer to bring about God's will, not for the sake of one's integrity or for the cause. This is an important concept because it allows the suffering associated with incurable illness, if accepted as God's will and offered up in union with Christ's death, to be redemptive. But as stated before, suffering must be done for a spiritual reason to provide spiritual gain. Like those who pray in order to be seen, there will be no reward in heaven for those that seek earthly rewards since as Jesus said in Matthew 6, they have already gained the reward they sought. It can be a subtle distinction if God's will is for the cause to succeed but it is critical none the less because people will act differently if their goal is to better their own life by attaining equal rights than it might be if they are pursuing equal rights because that is what God desires.

As Commins indicates, the feminist-womanist critique of redemptive suffering is typically a misstatement of the problem as the inappropriateness of redemptive suffering rather than an abuse of the use of the term by those in power to exploit others.¹⁹² This is unfortunate because these critics are actually undermining the very technique that will ultimately resolve their issues. Dorothee Soelle has it right when she says the first step in resolving societal suffering is to lament.¹⁹³ Calling attention to the moral good that is lacking through public suffering can activate the consciences of both by-standers and perpetrators and lead to lasting societal change. Gandhi called it changing hatred to pity.¹⁹⁴ As discussed in detail in the section two discussion on sin, there is great power in the witness of the suffering to affect change so it is

¹⁹² Commins, "Is Suffering Redemptive," 71

¹⁹³ Soelle, *Suffering*, 92-98

¹⁹⁴ Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Essential Gandhi* edited by Louis Fischer. New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2002.

important to highlight the problem that the womanists and feminists create for themselves when they attack redemptive suffering.

Delores Williams is a case in point. Williams argues that the source of black women's oppression lies in their relegation to surrogate roles. As such, she has a special affinity for Hagar, the slave woman who, in the Book of Genesis, was forced to be a surrogate mother for Sarah, Abraham's wife and then, after giving birth, was driven out into the wilderness with her child.¹⁹⁵ Williams notes that before the Civil War, surrogacy was coerced with black women replacing black men in the fields, filling in for white women as toys of sexual pleasure, or as nursemaids for the white youth on antebellum Southern plantations.¹⁹⁶ Williams believes black women are now oppressed with voluntary surrogate roles as "mammies," field hands, and even as surrogate mothers.¹⁹⁷ This legacy of surrogacy provides the backdrop for Williams's womanist (black female) theology.

Williams maintains that "humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life and not through his death."¹⁹⁸ She objects to the implication that Jesus would die as a surrogate for humanity's sins in the same way she objects to any implication that God intended the surrogacy experience of black women. She concludes that "as Christians, black women

¹⁹⁵ Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993 15-23

¹⁹⁶ Williams. *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 63-70.

¹⁹⁷ Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 71-75.

¹⁹⁸ Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167.

cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement.”¹⁹⁹

There are two problems with this position. The first is that it is focused on temporal rather than eternal goods, on avoidance of suffering rather than communion with God. This is a common problem for many liberation theologies that make temporal liberation the goal rather than a means to the greatest goal. Second, glorifying Jesus’ self-giving sacrifice on the cross does not glorify all suffering nor render the exploitation of black women sacred. A more accurate explanation would be that Jesus died because black women were exploited, a grievous sin in a world full of grievous sins.

As already described in the chapter two discussion on the evils of sin, Williams aligns her womanist theology with the feminist theology of Brown and Parker in agreeing that women, black and white, are led passively to accept their own oppression and suffering if they are taught that suffering is redemptive. As discussed above, suffering passively is not redemptive and in fact, validates oppression. Suffering is redemptive only when it serves the good. This must be active suffering, where the perpetrator is made to understand the impact of his or her actions. If the oppressor’s conscience is touched and he or she removes the oppressive action, then the formerly oppressed person gets the temporal benefits they desired along with the infinitely more valuable eternal ones. This is what Jesus calls for when he said in the Sermon on the Mount,

¹⁹⁹ Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167.

“love your enemies.”²⁰⁰ As discussed in chapter one, this attitude is charity in its purest form and is impossible for fallen man without the help from the grace of God.

Clarice Martin’s study of nineteenth-century African-American women’s spiritual autobiographies demonstrates how redemptive suffering can be effectively used in confronting women’s suffering in an even more hostile situation, actual slavery, than that experienced by Williams. She describes their works as theodicies: attempts to affirm divine justice despite suffering in the world.²⁰¹ Martin says that they have three functions: to attempt to provide a context in which evil can be integrated into a larger reality, to put the suffering in perspective that makes it endurable, and to maintain religious meaning.

Interestingly, the Autobiography of Maria Stewart, a freeborn black woman born in New England in 1803, reflects much of what has been discussed about redemptive suffering in this theology. Martin writes that “a praxis of active, oppositional engagement against racial suffering and evil was a fundamental aspect of her theodicy ideology. Resistance to oppression was for Stewart, the highest form of obedience to God.”²⁰² Stewart describes how this was made evident to her in a conversion experience:

From the moment I experienced the change, I felt a strong desire, with the help and assistance of God, to devote the remainder of my days to piety and virtue and now possess that spirit of independence that, were I called upon, I would willingly sacrifice my life for the cause of God and my brethren.

²⁰⁰ Matthew 5:44.

²⁰¹ Martin, Clarice J. “Biblical Theodicy and Black Women’s Spiritual Autobiography: ‘The Miry Bog, The Desolate Pit, a New Song in My Mouth.’” *In A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* edited by Emilie M. Townes, 13-36. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993. 14

²⁰² Martin, “Biblical Theodicy,” 22.

Stewart's approach toward God is to assume that God is near and acts on behalf of the powerless and the disenfranchised in the interests of divine justice.²⁰³ Martin says that it is a combination of "the mighty acts of God and 'human response' that reverses the suffering and evil of oppression that thwarts the purposes of God in the 'purposeful ordering of society as a sign of God's intention for creation.'"²⁰⁴ Maria Stewart's reflections on the effects of racial suffering appeal to conscience and contain a critique of the abuse of power, as would be expected in an effective application of redemptive suffering.²⁰⁵

M. Shawn Copeland's work on developing a theology of suffering in a womanist (black woman) perspective recognizes that suffering is universal and describes it as "the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence."²⁰⁶ She also understands that "evil is the negation and deprivation of good; suffering, while never identical with evil, is inseparable from it." These definitions are consistent with those presented by John Paul II in *Salvific doloris* so it is not surprising that she sees the same beneficial nature of suffering as he did, when she writes, "Thus, and quite paradoxically, the suffering caused by evil can result in interior development and perfection as well as in social and cultural good."²⁰⁷ She goes on to say:

²⁰³ Martin, "Biblical Theodicy," 23.

²⁰⁴ Martin, "Biblical Theodicy," 24.

²⁰⁵ Martin, "Biblical Theodicy," 25.

²⁰⁶ Copeland, M. Shawn. "Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective." *In A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* edited by Emilie M. Townes, 109-129. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 109.

²⁰⁷ Copeland, "Wading through Many Sorrows," 109.

African Americans have encountered monstrous evil in chattel slavery and its legacy of virulent institutionalized racism and have been subjected to unspeakable physical, psychological, social, moral and religious affliction and suffering. Yet, from the anguish of our people rose distinctive religious expression, exquisite music and song, powerful rhetoric and literature, practical invention and creative art. If slavery was the greatest evil, freedom was the greatest good and women and men struggled, suffered, sacrificed and endured much to attain it.²⁰⁸

Copeland states that “it is ironic that her womanist version of a theology of suffering is formed from resources of resistance.”²⁰⁹ In fact, as discussed throughout this section, resistance to social disorder is a critical part of the theology of suffering because that is how it gets resolved.

Suffering’s purpose in God’s providential plan is to highlight when critical goods are lacking and to motivate the person to attain them. Since black women have historically been denied many goods by social structures of sin, it would be appropriate for a specifically womanist theology of suffering to feature resistance to these structures,

Copeland says that “a theology of suffering in womanist perspective repels every tendency toward an *ersatz* spiritualization of evil and suffering, of pain and oppression.”²¹⁰ This too is appropriate, not just from a womanist perspective, but from all perspectives. Evil and oppression should never be spiritualized and the only suffering that should be glorified is that which is redemptive (i.e, borne for the love of God and the greater good). Copeland agrees with this, saying, “a theology of suffering in womanist perspective is redemptive. In their narratives,

²⁰⁸ Copeland, “Wading through Many Sorrows,” 109-110.

²⁰⁹ Copeland, “Wading through Many Sorrows,” 122.

²¹⁰ Copeland, “Wading through Many Sorrows,” 123.

Black women invite God to partner them in the redemption of the Black people. They make meaning of their suffering.”

Copeland’s essay is enlightening because it demonstrates the universality of the theology of suffering. Although she set out to describe a theology of suffering specific to the concerns of African American women, nothing in it was inconsistent with the universal theology of suffering proposed in this work. It should be noted that of all the works evaluated in this section, from the challenges to God’s existence, to the theodicies, to the alternative philosophies and theologies of suffering, only Copeland’s recognized that evil is the absence of good and that suffering is an indicator that good is missing. This enabled her to avoid the problems of perspective that plagued most of the other works and also allowed her to see that suffering is a blessing and not a curse.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to demonstrate that the proposed theology of suffering could answer the most significant questions that have been generated over the past two millennia concerning the nature and purpose of suffering as presented in the ongoing debates on the problem of evil and concerns about the impact of redemptive suffering on social justice.

As was demonstrated throughout this section, the proposed theology of suffering has incorporated many of the positive insights offered by the various theodicies discussed here, without limiting man or God in any way. In addition, it provides important insights from Sacred Scripture, the *Summa*, the *Catechism*, and *Salvific doloris* that the others did not. For instance,

only Copeland incorporates the concept of evil being the absence of good in her theology despite its presentation in the *Summa* (I:48.1), which is well known in both philosophical and theological circles. This alone should have changed the dynamics of the conversation since it would reframe the basic question from “Why does a good God allow evil?” to “Why does a good God withhold some goods from us?” Most people would agree that the restated question does not imply any existential contradictions.

The second significant insight that the theology of suffering offers that is not comprehended in any of the theodicies presented here is the true nature of suffering in God’s providential plan. Suffering, like pain, is an indicator of a problem that threatens a person’s existence and motivates the person to address the problem. While it is undoubtedly bad when people have a problem that causes them to suffer, the suffering itself is a great blessing because it lets the person know with great certainty they have a problem and will not end until the problem is resolved. The thought that God is warning a person of an existential problem is a much more accurate and positive way to understand the relationship than the alternative, which is God is inflicting the person with an existential problem.

In summary, this chapter brought out significant issues and concerns that need to be addressed in a valid theology and also ideas about how to address them from previous efforts in the discipline. It was the goal of this section to demonstrate that this proposal could incorporate much of the insight of previous commentators while also addressing concerns that their theologies could not, adding to the credibility of the project while simultaneously, making it easier to understand how its individual principles work in various contexts.

Chapter 4: Answering the Call

The final chapter of this dissertation argues that suffering is a religious calling and describes how we should answer that call in a way that will lead us to the joy of the beatific vision. As should be evident at this point, this religious calling is a calling that can only be fully understood and heeded through the Catholic Church. As evidenced by some of the discussions in the last chapter, many people might have a problem with this characterization but in fact, Christianity has always been considered a paradoxical call to the faithful that leads to joy. As Saint Paul explained to the Corinthians:

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.¹

In the first chapter of this dissertation, suffering is presented as the God-given ability in humans to sense evil, the privation of good that threatens our existence physically, socially, psychologically or spiritually. It is then shown how suffering has four tasks to accomplish to lead us to the joy of the beatific vision. The focus of chapter two is to show how God can utilize both evil and suffering as critical elements of his providential plan to bring his children home, where

¹ 1 Corinthians 1: 18, 21-24.

we will experience the joy that he always intended for us. All of this points to suffering as a religious calling.

Even among some of the criticism discussed in the previous chapter, we see other signs that suffering is a religious calling. In his 2018 book titled “Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering,” Scott Samuelson catalogues what he perceives are the benefits of suffering:

It is what inspires real music. It is what reveals our deepest humanity. It is what plugs us into the network of nature. *It is what brings us to God.* It sharpens the dignity of work, action, and thought. It increases our power. It stirs our moral sense and inspires political effort.²

Samuelson writes largely from a secular perspective but yet, buried right in the middle of his list is the essence of it all: *It is what brings us to God.* To think about it in any other way is to miss the point entirely.

This chapter will begin with a discussion that elaborates on the role of the Church in God’s call to us. This will explain how suffering leads us to God through his Church and why the Church is so instrumental in God’s plan for salvation. In doing so, this chapter will also cover the first and second tasks of suffering. The second subsegment of the chapter focuses on the sufferer’s calling as a messenger of God and the third subsegment will discuss our call to take action to help our neighbors to respond to their own suffering. Together, these two discussions address the third task of suffering: to unleash our love of neighbor. The chapter will then focus on dying a good death and the role of suffering in our redemption, the fourth task. The final topic

² Samuelson, Scott. *Seven Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering.* Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 2018. 226 (note:italics in quote are mine)

of chapter will complete the journey to joy, summarizing how suffering ultimately leads us to share in God's nature and his life, basking in the pure joy of union with Him.

Suffering as a Religious Calling

Any credible theology of suffering must provide a way to answer the key existential questions about life and death, good and evil, and suffering and joy in a self-consistent fashion. This theology has been developed based on the traditions of the Catholic Church and as was demonstrated in the earlier sections, is fully consistent with its teachings. For that reason, this theology is intrinsically linked to the Catholic faith and cannot be understood properly outside of its doctrines and traditions. Therefore, when it is said that suffering is a religious calling, it is calling us to be members of the Catholic Church. This does not mean that members of other faith traditions cannot benefit from its messages; they can, but as will be discussed throughout this chapter, suffering is used by God in such a way as to lead people to God through the Catholic Church.

Since the Enlightenment, men have been increasingly skeptical about the role of organized religion in human salvation, trusting more and more in their own ability to discern a path forward that leads to happiness. Many people today believe that the Church is not necessary for salvation, preferring to reach out to God in their own way while putting their hope in the continued political and technical progress of Man.³ This is simply an extension of original sin, to

³ Pew Forum. "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape" October 17, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> retrieved December 16, 2019. Pew reports that the religiously unaffiliated has grown from 12% of

value our will above that of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who established the church for the salvation of men, under the leadership of Saint Peter.⁴ As will be shown, this individualistic path deviates from God's plan and hence, causes its own brand of suffering as it denies the social nature of religion and the broader need for teachers and tradition..

Pope Benedict XVI identifies the modern tendency toward individualism and with it the idea that Jesus' message is aimed at only one person singly instead of as a community serving each other, as an outgrowth of science. Benedict explains that the enlightenment ideas that drive it are rendered with particular clarity by Francis Bacon, "who claimed that the new correlation between science and praxis would mean that the dominion over creation – given to man by God and lost through original sin- would be re-established."⁵ As Gerald McKenny points out, a significant part of improving the world in the Baconian project involves the improvement of the human body to resist suffering and to match societal ideals of bodily perfection. While illness and bodily imperfection has served the moral projects of Christians as an occasion for meditation on sin and the need for grace, Rene Descartes was separating himself as a subject from his body, prone to disease, decay, and death. McKenny asserts that this, coupled with "the quest to make the body perfect and perfectly subject to our choice, can only be understood as a denial of the moral and spiritual significance of the body."⁶ Benedict explains further that up to this time, the

those polled in 2009 to 17% in 2019, while atheist and agnostics have increased from 5% to 9% over the same time period.

⁴ Matthew 16: 16-19.

⁵ Benedict XVI. *Encyclical Letter Saved in Hope - Spe salvi*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008. #16.

⁶ McKenny, Gerard. "Bioethics, the Body, and the Legacy of Bacon" in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives on Medical Ethics*, edited by M. Therese Lysaught et al. Eerdmans, 2012.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cua/reader.action?docID=4859414#>. 682.

recovery of what man had lost through sin was expected from faith in Jesus Christ. Now, redemption, the restoration of the lost paradise would be made through the application of science. Faith in God has been replaced by faith in progress.⁷

Benedict then points out the modern view of progress is primarily associated with the growing dominion of reason and that the goal of progress is to overcome all forms of dependency, to become perfectly free.⁸ He explains that in 1792, Immanuel Kant applied these concepts to religion, claiming that “the gradual transition of ecclesial faith to the exclusive sovereignty of pure religious faith is the coming of the Kingdom of God.”⁹ But if the kingdom of God was to be the perfection of the earth by man, progress could no longer come only from science, but must also come from politics, which required a revolution. Karl Marx set this revolution in motion with his *Communist Manifesto*, and real revolution followed in Russia.¹⁰ With it followed real suffering, which is a reliable indicator that we have deviated from the path of righteousness. As Ilya Somin wrote in an article commemorating the centennial of communism, “Communist regimes killed as many as 100 million people in the last century, more than all other repressive regimes combined in the same time frame.... Even those fortunate enough to survive were subjected to severe repression, including violations of freedom, of

⁷ Benedict XVI. *Spe Salvi*. #17.

⁸ Benedict XVI. *Spe Salvi*. #18.

⁹ Benedict XVI. *Spe Salvi*. #19.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI. *Spe salvi*. #20.

speech, freedom of religion, loss of property rights and the criminalization of ordinary economic activity.”¹¹

It should be noted that the folly of the enlightenment was in essence a misreading of the state of man and the purpose of our life journey. The Baconian project is focused on the need for man to improve the world to make it more hospitable to our need and desires.¹² What it failed to recognize is that fallen man is too self-centered to manage the world effectively in his current state, a fact that has been demonstrated all too effectively by the wars, corruptions, environmental decay and mass genocides of the last few centuries. Granted, humanity has made huge technical strides over that timeframe, improving human comfort on many fronts, but it has also increased man’s danger to himself and his neighbors because the increased technical capability did not come with a corresponding increase in moral judgment.

In contrast to goals of the secular humanists to create a new paradise on earth , the Church, benefitting from the truth revealed by God to the Apostles, understands that the goal is not to perfect the world, but to perfect mankind, morally and spiritually.¹³ Suffering is not something to be overcome, but to be heeded as it points out how mankind needs to improve to become like God so we can truly share in His life. God uses temporal suffering to bring about moral growth, which is more lasting than our corporeal bodies. As is clearly evident from the

¹¹ Somin, Ilya. “Lessons from a Century of Communism.” *The Washington Post*. November 7, 2017 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/11/07/lessons-from-a-century-of-communism/>.

¹² Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, #16.

¹³ CCC, 358.

history of the last century, the improvement required of man is not the power of technology, which can be used for good or evil, but in the wisdom and charity needed to control it.

Benedict notes that in Enlightenment thinking, a kingdom based on reason and freedom would seem to guarantee, by virtue of their inherent goodness, a new and perfect human community. It was also viewed that the shackles of faith and of the Church inhibited reason and freedom.¹⁴ However, when people complain that the guidance of the Church is inhibiting their freedom, they fail to recognize the difference between freedom of indifference and freedom for excellence. As explained by the noted Dominican theologian Servais Pinckaers, “we can compare freedom for excellence with an acquired skill in an art or profession; it is the capacity to produce our acts when and how we wish, like high quality works that are perfect in their domain.”¹⁵ Freedom to excel, then involves having the capability to excel. Said another way, without the capability to excel, we are bound to something less. Saint Paul describes the situation to the Romans as being dominated by sin.¹⁶ Indeed, the true limitation on man is not the ability to choose but in the ability to bring to fruition what we choose.

As discussed in chapter two, the Church was tasked with teaching what Jesus taught the Apostles. What it teaches is that Man was designed in the image and likeness of God and that God became man so that man could share in His nature and His life.¹⁷ The Church, as the Body of Christ, provides not only the knowledge and understanding of what it takes to become like

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, #18.

¹⁵ Pinckaers, Servais. *Morality, The Catholic View*, translated by Michael Sherwin. South Bend IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2003. 69.

¹⁶ Romans 3:9.

¹⁷ CCC, 460.

God, but also the capability through the graces it is authorized to bestow through the sacraments. Thus, far from hindering freedom, the Church is essential to gaining the freedom for excellence that leads to true happiness.

The type of freedom sought by the Enlightenment philosophers, that of indifference, is meager in comparison. As Pinckaers describes it, this is the freedom to choose between contraries, with good and bad defined by whether or not the resulting acts conform to the applicable law. In principle, if the laws were completely oriented to God's will and people followed them perfectly, it could lead to the same excellence that the Church teaches. In practice, however, in moralities of obligations that are engendered by freedom of indifference, people do not pursue excellence as diligently as those that perceive excellence as providing happiness. This is demonstrated rather clearly by the fact that they complain that following the Church's guidance is a burden and impinges on their freedom. In a way, this is analogous to a person refusing to use the directions to assemble a complicated piece of Swedish furniture, assuming that they know better or at least as well as the designer on how things fit together.

Pinckaers despairs over the fact that a morality based on obligation to laws and freedom of indifference has lost its grounding and is no longer linked to God's plan and his goal of happiness for mankind. In his mind, "virtue loses its formative role and becomes nothing more than a habit."¹⁸ He goes on to say that "the human person was no longer inherently moral; he or

¹⁸ Pinckaers. *Morality, The Catholic View*. 75

she had to become moral artificially, through the constraint in the law, imposed by God, by society, or by pure reason.”¹⁹

Pinckaers reflects on the path to renewal and concludes that the key is to rediscover our spiritual nature in its spontaneous yearning for truth, goodness and happiness. He asserts that happiness goes beyond pleasure, which is an agreeable sensation that is caused by contact with some exterior good, to joy, “which is the direct effect of an excellent action, like the savor of a long task finally accomplished. It is also the effect in us of truth understood and goodness loved. Thus, we associate joy with virtue, regarding it as a sign of virtue’s authenticity.”²⁰

Pinckaers then contrasts pleasure and joy, noting:

Pleasure is opposed to pain as its contrary. The two are essentially incompatible. Joy, on the other hand, is born of trials, of pain endured, of sufferings accepted with courage and with love. Pleasure is brief, variable, and superficial, like the contact that causes it. Joy is lasting, like the excellence, the virtues that engender it. Sense pleasure is individual, like sensation itself. It decreases when the good that causes it is divided up and shared more widely; it ceases altogether when the good is absent. Joy is communicable; it grows by being shared and repays sacrifices freely embraced. Joy belongs to the purity and generosity of love.²¹

When Father Pinckaers describes joy as born of trials and pain and suffering, he perhaps is guilty of the conflation of the trials and sensations they engender. Pain and more broadly, suffering, are our abilities to detect danger and the absence of good in a situation, just as joy is our ability to detect spiritual gain. Joy and suffering can be thought of as co-equal tools that God uses to

¹⁹ Pinckaers. *Morality, The Catholic View*. 75

²⁰ Pinckaers. *Morality, The Catholic View*. 76

²¹ Pinckaers. *Morality, The Catholic View*. 76.

bring man to salvation, the divine equivalent of the “carrot and the stick” used to motivate horses. Suffering is the stick, used to redirect us when we stray from the path. Joy is the carrot, waiting for us when we successfully complete the journey. We all desire to be joyful, but in fact, it is by suffering that we are redeemed and therefore, the sensing ability for which we owe God the greater gratitude. Indeed, without suffering to redirect us, it is difficult to experience joy.

This is where the Church is valuable to mankind. Jesus established the visible Church to carry out his work on earth. The Church holds and teaches the deposit of faith left from the Apostles, who were witnesses to Christ’s teaching and actions and had access to the interpretations of the Holy Spirit. It also has the power to dispense the Lord’s grace through the sacraments, which is required to elevate fallen men to sons of God, partakers of the divine nature. Finally, in keeping with the theme of unity, the Church provides a community-oriented, social environment, in which each individual has something to offer and also has some need to be filled.²² Together, we can make each other better, just as is the case with a husband and a wife. To love charitably, as God loves, is to unite in goals with another, both seeking the best for the other.²³ This is the basis of the divine nature and it cannot be achieved alone.

These things are all necessary to provide the freedom for excellence that is needed to build virtue and that leads to joy and eternal happiness. To the extent that we follow Christ through the Church that he left for that purpose, we can avoid suffering, although it is true that sometimes, like Christ himself, we are asked to suffer for the benefit of others. When we do so

²² 1Corinthians 12: 12-30.

²³ ST II Q23.1

out of love for those who we help and for the love of God, who allows us to help in his plan, our suffering will be redemptive and turn to joy.

We need help to share in the divine nature because God alone can reveal and give himself. To share in the divine nature is supernatural, surpassing the power of human intellect and will, as it does every other creature.²⁴ God revealed himself most fully in the person of Jesus Christ and gives us the gift of his own life through the infusion of grace by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.²⁵ The *Catechism* points out that man, at once body and spirit, must express and perceive spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols, both in communicating with others and with God.²⁶ It was because of this that Christ instituted the sacraments of the new law. It is through reception of these sacraments that humans communicate their desire for God's grace and through which grace is bestowed.²⁷ The faithful are born anew by Baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of Confirmation, and receive in the Eucharist the food of eternal life. By partaking of these sacraments of Christian Initiation, Christians receive in increasing measure the treasures of the divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity.²⁸ In other words, they allow us to share in the divine nature to which suffering is driving us.

The Church also been given has two sacraments of healing to administer that are directly applicable to suffering. The *Catechism* explains that, "The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our

²⁴ CCC, 1998.

²⁵ CCC, 1999.

²⁶ CCC, 1146.

²⁷ CCC, 1210.

²⁸ CCC, 1212.

souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members.”²⁹ The first is The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, which reconciles the sinner with God and also, quite pointedly, with the Church. It results in the remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sin as well as, at least in part, the temporal punishments resulting from sin.³⁰ It also yields the peace and serenity of conscience, spiritual consolation and an increase of spiritual strength, which can at times resolve suffering and lead to joy. For those that have separated themselves from God after being initially joined through baptism, this is the sacrament that provides a way home.

The second is the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. “The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace, and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age.”³¹ Contrary to what many might think, the purpose of this sacrament is to heal the soul and will only provide the restoration of health if it is conducive to the salvation of the soul.³² It is the priest’s duty to instruct the faithful on the benefits of this sacrament but it is the duty of the faithful to encourage its use and to participate in the sacrament by surrounding the sick in a special way through their prayers and fraternal attention.³³ By the grace of the sacrament, the sick person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ’s Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin,

²⁹ CCC, 1421.

³⁰ CCC, 1496

³¹ CCC, 1520.

³² CCC, 1533.

³³ CCC, 1516.

acquires a new meaning: it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.³⁴ Done properly in charity, this has spiritual merit for both the sick and the attending community and as with the attainment of any spiritual good, will result in joy.

This final point is important. Therese Lysaught reminds us that “at all times, sacraments must be understood as actions whose fundamental purposes are Christological – the building up of the body of Christ, the Church, and the ongoing formation of those who worship as embodied images of Christ.”³⁵ Indeed, this is also true of suffering which, as will be shown, pushes us toward each other as an ecclesial community as it pushes us toward God. Our ultimate happiness depends on our decisions in life. When we are baptized, we become members of the body of Christ, united with God through the sacraments and the grace of Christ. The *Catechism* states that the “The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation.”³⁶ This is a precursor to the ultimate union with God, which becomes perfect after death but if we do not unite ourselves with God in this life, we will remain separated after death.

The Church is commonly described by four “marks”; One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.³⁷ “One, because of its founder, who restored the unity of all in one people and one body.”³⁸ Holy, because Jesus is Holy and has sanctified the Church as his bride.³⁹ Catholic,

³⁴ CCC, 1521.

³⁵ Lysaught, M. Therese. “Suffering in Communion with Christ” in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by John Swinton and Richard Payne. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009. 84.

³⁶ CCC, 1257. The *Catechism* quotes John 3:5: Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit” but notes that God is not bound by his sacraments.

³⁷ CCC, 811.

³⁸ CCC, 813.

³⁹ CCC, 823.

because it derives from Christ the fullness of the means of salvation and because it has a universal mission to the whole human race.⁴⁰ Apostolic, because it was founded on the apostles' witness, teaching and traditions.⁴¹

The Church declares that all men are called to this catholic unity of the people of God but are incorporated in different ways. Those who are joined in the visible structure of the Church through the pope are fully incorporated through the Holy Spirit and provided the full support of its power, though not the guarantee of salvation, which requires us to live according to the gospel, sharing in the divine nature.⁴² Outside the church, there is no salvation because salvation comes from Christ through his body.⁴³ To the extent that one is in communion with the Church, one is in communion with Christ. . For instance, with the Orthodox Churches, “the communion is so profound that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Lord’s Eucharist.”⁴⁴ People from other Christian churches which share a valid baptism but deviate from Church sacramental practice and doctrine in other ways will have those deficiencies to overcome to properly understand and heed the suffering they encounter; non-Christians even more so.

This is not to say that those who are not Christians suffer in vain. Indeed, God reaches out to all mankind through suffering to bring them to eternal life. The Risen Jesus charged the Apostles and through them, the Church to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,

⁴⁰ CCC, 830-831.

⁴¹ CCC, 857.

⁴² CCC, 836-837,

⁴³ CCC, 846.

⁴⁴ CCC, 838.

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁴⁵ Because Jesus asserted the necessity of baptism, which is entry to the Church, those who understand this and still refuse to enter or remain in the Church are denying Christ’s command and cannot be saved.⁴⁶ This is the reason the Church is so serious about its missionary mandate.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the Church also recognizes that “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - those too may achieve eternal salvation.”⁴⁸

Ultimately, we cannot hope to achieve our ultimate happiness without God because we were made specifically to share in his life by sharing in his nature and only by doing so will we be fulfilled.⁴⁹ Furthermore, we cannot share in his life without aligning our will with his.⁵⁰ For this it is highly advantageous to be part of the Church to learn how to share in his life, to receive the grace-dispensing sacraments, and to learn to live and love in a mutually supportive community in preparation for the ultimate union with God.

As discussed in chapter one, people come to the Church in different ways. Many are born into it based on decisions made by others, sometimes centuries earlier. Some will enter

⁴⁵ Matthew 28: 18-20.

⁴⁶ CCC, 846

⁴⁷ CCC, 849.

⁴⁸ CCC, 847.

⁴⁹ ST I-II Q3.8.

⁵⁰ ST I-II Q4.4.

based on the witness of others. Some will come to faith after a catastrophic life event leaves them nowhere else to turn. For others, it requires suffering from a series of problems that motivate a person to pursue goods and ultimately the greatest good.

Some may still object to the concept of suffering as being a distinctly religious calling, preferring an atheistic viewpoint. To be sure, at the early stages of the journey this will not be obvious. The first task of suffering is about self-love, responding to our own suffering in the most straight-forward way possible: to remove it at any cost. Without a second thought about God or the meaning of suffering, many people have taken positive steps in response to suffering right up to the present day. After all, it does not take belief in God for people to recognize that it is in their best interests to avoid suffering by coming in out of a storm or by avoiding dangerous places and situations. Some who are hungry, will steal from their neighbors to feed themselves, not mindful of the fact that they have transferred their own suffering to someone else.

But in reality, the first task of suffering goes beyond the kind of love that drives a selfish person to relieve his or her own suffering at the expense of another. Such a move does not remove suffering, it simply transfers it to someone else and inevitably, if they do this long enough, the suffering will be transferred back to them, either in the form of punishment from the authorities or by retaliation from those they steal from.

The first task of suffering is *proper* self-love, where a person actually attains the good he or she is lacking without taking it from someone else. Such self-love makes the world a better place because it makes us better people. Creating such a focus on increasing the good in the world prepares a person to pursue more good and ultimately to seek out the greatest good, which

is God. As John Paul II says in *Salvifici doloris*, “It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace that transforms human souls.”⁵¹ In this way, suffering can be understood as a beacon of joy, a source of divine revelation to those who contemplate its meaning.

It is important at this point to reflect upon the fact that the tasks of suffering do not end at self-love and that suffering will persist until we attain what Thomas showed is the goal of all mankind, to behold the beatific vision.⁵² However, we must heed our suffering to reach that goal and not everyone does. Some people, for a variety of reasons, never get beyond self-love. As was just described, some may fail to do even that properly, by transferring their suffering onto others. Jesus himself warned in the parable of the sower that in many cases, faith is not deep enough to withstand the trials that inevitably come.⁵³ In other cases, worldly desires and the lure of riches choke out the word and people turn away from the Church. God is no tyrant and respects his creation enough to let us choose our own paths, but there are ramifications. When we turn our backs on the Church, we turn our backs on God’s plan for us. Suffering will inevitably follow, not as punishment but as God warning his prodigal sons and daughters of the hollowness of life without Him. If we are lucky, it will be intense enough or we will be alert enough to take notice and amend our lives accordingly. However, in the absence of the Church’s guidance, it will be difficult for most people to discern the message of their sufferings. Some will contemplate this and return to God through the Church in search of answers. Others,

⁵¹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 27.

⁵² *ST I-II*, Q1.

⁵³ Matthew 13: 18-23.

however, will refuse to do so, many becoming increasingly bitter toward God, in effect, re-enacting the original sin of choosing their own way rather than follow God's plan for them, which ironically, would provide them with the happiness they desire. This is ultimately the result of desiring a freedom of indifference rather than pursuing a freedom for excellence.

Our Calling to be Messengers of God

If suffering provides Divine Revelation, then the sufferer can be thought of as a messenger of that revelation. This calling to serve God in communicating what he reveals to us through suffering is not unlike the angelic mission or that of the prophets. This role of the sufferer is important for the safety and the salvation of others and therefore, must be taken with the utmost diligence and sincerity. As a divine messenger, the one who suffers is actively building the Kingdom of God, his fate tied up with the fate of all those that hear his message. If the sufferer does not transmit the message of his or her suffering, whether out of spite, laziness, fear or some other reason, or fails to take some specific action associated with it, then the suffering he or she endured will have been pointless.

There are two distinct types of witness that the sufferer can give. First of all, the person who is actively suffering gives others the opportunity to love them. This can be actively soliciting help through lamentation or more passively suffering in public because either will engage the consciences and compassion of those who are charitable. This does not mean that the sufferer needs to understand why he or she suffers, nor does it mean that the sufferer fails in his or her role as a messenger of God if the person cannot articulate what has happened. In fact, sufferers act as witnesses in most cases, and merely are required to show the effects of suffering

on them. This message is not always delivered verbally. Indeed, the most powerful witness of evil and injustice is often through visual evidence: the scarred back of a pre-bellum slave, the protruding belly and skeletal features of a starving child, the dismembered remains of an aborted child, the bald head of a child cancer victim, the tears of a mother whose child was just gunned down by a street gang, the cries of an uncomfortable infant.... Often without words, the simple presence of the sufferer can ignite the consciences of others to aid those who suffer and right social injustices. For instance, the man who was left beaten and naked on the side of the road in the parable of the Good Samaritan did not ask for help, but “the Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight.”⁵⁴ If done in charity, this can lead to spiritual growth and result in joy for both the sufferer and those that are moved by their suffering to take action, including the people causing the suffering.

The human capacity for pity and compassion is great and unfortunately, people sometimes seek to exploit the charitable, by feigning suffering themselves to get handouts or by using images of the truly suffering to get donations, which are subsequently misused or stolen, or even used to support various political agendas.⁵⁵ Those that prey on the generous unrepentantly will eventually be punished in this life or the next, but the charitable will get their reward as well, even if they are the victims of fraud. For this reason, those that suffer must continue to be true

⁵⁴ Luke 10:29-37.

⁵⁵ Boltanski, Luc and Graham D. Burchell. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 1999. Boltanski recognizes the power of pity to drive human action and lays out a moral code for the use of pity in the media to mitigate its misuse by the unscrupulous. Butt, Leslie “The Suffering Stranger: Medical Anthropology and International Morality” *Medical Anthropology* V21 (2002), 1-24. Butt describes the suffering stranger “as those iconic figures whose experiences are presented in truncated first hand accounts of suffering in order to validate broader theoretical aims.” Her thesis is that the suffering stranger masks the real absence of the voices of the poor and their suffering on the world stage, and instead furthers the political aims of social justice advocates who assume their claims about justice and human rights are internationally held.

messengers of God and the charitable, while being vigilant against fraud and corruption, should not be dissuaded from helping those they judge to be in need.

Many people feel uncomfortable asking for help and indeed, a perceived lack of autonomy is the reason that most people give for requesting physician assisted suicide.⁵⁶ This is most unfortunate because in asking for help they would be announcing an opportunity for spiritual merit to those that would help them and if the sufferers embrace their role in the redemption of others, it can be redemptive for them as well.

All suffering has meaning unless the sufferer fails to act on it. This is why the sufferer must be a messenger, sharing his or her experience with those who can either cease activities that cause suffering or who can take action to relieve or resolve the suffering. If the sufferer fails to be a messenger, through cowardice, spite, or some other factor, then the suffering will have been in vain, producing no redemptive benefit for anyone. It is for this reason that Dorothee Soelle finds lament, the articulation of suffering, to be critical to its resolution and why she is so dismissive of any theological or philosophical theory that seeks to suppress it.⁵⁷ It is also the reason that Martin Luther King Jr. describes the mute non-resistance of the oppressed as “consummating the sin of the oppressor” in his funeral sermon in Birmingham.⁵⁸

Witnessing after one’s suffering has already been addressed is also important, particularly when it takes on the aspect of sharing the faith in God and in his holy Church. The *Catechism*

⁵⁶ Cahill, Lisa Sowle. *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, Change*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press: 2005. 94-95.

⁵⁷ Soelle, *Suffering*, 74.

⁵⁸ Commins, “Is Suffering Redemptive?”, 73.

asserts that “Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by Him.”⁵⁹ Quoting the *Summa*, it adds that “in faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace: ‘Believing is an act of the intellect consenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace.’”⁶⁰ As discussed in chapter one, it is John Paul II’s great insight that “in suffering is concealed a special grace to which many great saints owe their profound conversions.”⁶¹ Taken together with the *Catechism*’s own assertion that “very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to Him,”⁶² it becomes clear that suffering is a vehicle used by God to infuse faith into the sufferer, a faith that will provide the perspective to understand suffering. Suffering, particularly in the form of injury and illness, “can make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn to that which is.”⁶³ In other words, suffering can provide the focus and an environment conducive to faith and it must be granted that it makes sense that suffering would be best understood by one who suffers.

But as Saint Thomas taught in the *Summa* as quoted above, faith requires more than just the openness to God that results from suffering, it requires access to the divine truth to which the will and intellect must consent. This comes from divine revelation either directly or indirectly in the form of the accounts of credible witnesses of that revelation. Because God speaks to only a limited number of people directly, most people must rely on the accounts of those people who can credibly prove that what they teach is true. Often, the willingness to suffer plays a large role

⁵⁹ CCC, 153.

⁶⁰ CCC, 155, quoting *ST II-II Q2.9*.

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 26.

⁶² CCC, 1501.

⁶³ CCC, 1501.

in demonstrating that credibility, starting with Jesus himself, who had to rise from a horrific death to demonstrate his own credibility as the Son of God, a god “who so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”⁶⁴

The credibility of the willing sufferer extends far beyond Jesus, of course. It includes his apostles like St. Paul, who was given 39 lashes five times, beaten with rods three times, and stoned for the faith, yet persevered in the faith to provide the credibility that encourages others to believe.⁶⁵ Likewise, if the believer in the next hospital bed bears his or her suffering gracefully, it can lead the non-believer to faith and to the Church.

The act of relieving suffering can also increase the credibility of the message of faith. Indeed, many people came to believe in Jesus because of his ability to heal and his apostles also demonstrated credibility for the same reason.⁶⁶ In addition, there are multiple examples of conversions in scripture attributed to the testimony of the healed people themselves including the man born blind who Jesus healed and the crippled beggar who was healed by John and Peter, both of whom gave effective public testimony in service of the Gospel message.⁶⁷ In a similar way, the testimony of those who find joy in their suffering today has the power to bring others to faith.

We are all called to be honest witnesses to our suffering, passing on what is revealed through our own suffering to others for their benefit. This can range from warnings of physical

⁶⁴ John 3:16.

⁶⁵ 2 Corinthians 11: 24-25.

⁶⁶ The healing accounts of the Apostles in Acts include conversions of the witnesses as described in Acts 9:35; 42.

⁶⁷ John 9 (The man born blind) and Acts 3 (The lame man healed by John and Peter).

dangers, which serves to protect other people and their possessions to warnings against sinful action that can save their souls. The most important witness that the sufferers can give, however, is a description of how suffering was a catalyst for their conversion because suffering's ultimate purpose is to lead us back to God, through Christ and his body, the Church.

The Call to Relieve Our Neighbor's Suffering

As discussed in chapter one, the third task of suffering is to unleash love, teaching love of our neighbors who are suffering. One thing to remember is that when others suffer, it may well be for our benefit. Granted, this role of suffering for another's benefit is rarely recognized by those who are doing it according to God's plan, but it does not keep us from recognizing it. In doing so, it is important not to rob the person of his or her dignity by turning him or her into an object of our salvation rather than a person who is sacrificing something for our benefit and thus, deserving of our gratitude. This is particularly true of those who suffer under our oppression and are brave enough to show us the results of our sins. In other cases, where we are not directly responsible for their suffering, it may be solely for the purpose of giving us an opportunity to help them. When we fail to do so, not only do we miss a chance for our own spiritual merit, we cause them to suffer pointlessly.

No matter what the initial cause of the suffering is, the sufferer and the person who comes to his or her aid are both drawn into a relationship where each stands to have spiritual benefit when one willingly provides the opportunity and the other willingly provide the aid. It must be remembered also, that it is the sufferer who initiates the relationship by making the other

aware of his or her needs and the opportunity to help, even if it is done passively. This is the sufferer acting as a messenger of God.

Unfortunately, just because sufferers are called to be messengers, does not mean that others are motivated to listen to them. Indeed, there is often great resistance to it for a variety of reasons including discomfort with the topic of suffering and also with the responsibilities that it implies, like the need to care for those afflicted or to cease from activities that cause suffering in others. This can often lead to ostracism and social isolation for the sufferer, adding to their need to lament.

There are several reasons that bystanders should make the effort to hear what the sufferers have to say. The first is that the act of listening to the sufferers is an act of mercy in itself because as Dorothee Soelle notes below, this is what the sufferer needs to relieve their suffering. Soelle, borrowing liberally from Simone Weil's definition of *malheur* (affliction or suffering), asserts that suffering typically begins with physical pain and then, because people worry about the unknown impact of their new pain, psychological trauma follows, leading ultimately to social trauma when people who are suffering are ostracized by others.⁶⁸ Soelle believes that suffering is relieved by unwinding this process through the use of language.

"The first step towards overcoming suffering," according to Soelle, "is to find a language that leads one out of the uncomprehended suffering that makes one mute, a language of lament, of crying, of pain, a language that at least says what the situation is."⁶⁹ This brings the sufferer

⁶⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 62-69.

⁶⁹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 70.

out of social isolation and allows the person to begin to work on active solutions to the psychological trauma and ultimately, the physical ailments that were responsible for the suffering to begin with. To the extent that we do not hear the sufferer, we are adding more social trauma to their situation. We can thus be a help or a hindrance to those who are suffering.

The story of Job offers some valuable insight that applies to this situation. At the beginning of their engagement with Job, his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) “sat down with him for seven days and seven nights, but none of them spoke a word to him because they saw how much he was suffering.”⁷⁰ Their solidarity with him allowed Job to lament his condition.⁷¹ However, when Job wishes he was never born, his friends turn on him, each assuming that Job was suffering as punishment for some sin. Job denies this and is disturbed that they will not listen to his pleas of innocence, saying, “At least listen to my words and let that be the consolation you offer. Bear with me while I speak and after I have spoken, you can mock.”⁷² This scriptural exchange shows that when the witnesses to suffering listen in solidarity with the sufferer, it provides consolation but if the witness of the sufferer is ignored, no one benefits. The sufferer continues to suffer without redemption and the witnesses lose their opportunity to act in charity as is their calling.

“Hearing” the sufferer at times must extend beyond the verbal to interpreting body language because often that is the way suffering is most effectively expressed. Tears and anguished facial expressions are almost always more moving than words. Sometimes, as is the

⁷⁰ Job 2:13.

⁷¹ Job 3:1

⁷² Job 21:2-3.

case with both infants and dementia patients, there is no adequate way to express their suffering other than to simply cry out in pain and then frustration when their needs are not met. In the case of infants, good parents will run through a checklist of items (tired, hungry, wants to be held, needs a diaper change...) to stop the crying, but in the case of those with dementia, the approach may often be to sedate rather than using an approach of “hearing” the sufferer through non-verbal clues and evaluating whether they lack the universal human goods of love, food, rest, warmth and cleanliness.⁷³ It is no wonder that some people with dementia react violently when their care givers make no attempt to “hear” them, ignoring the non-verbal clues that are their only means of communicating, and thus, do not help them find the goods they lack.⁷⁴

We are all called to aid the suffering people we encounter. Indeed, as Luc Boltanski points out, our consciences call out strongly and persistently to us when we see others suffer to come to their aid, so he felt compelled to ascribe a moral framework around the use of suffering images in the media to keep the unscrupulous from exploiting the charitable.⁷⁵ Furthermore, John Paul II refers to two parables taught by Jesus to show the importance of providing aid is to the salvation of the bystanders. The first is the parable of the Good Samaritan, who stops and cares for a man left for dead by bandits while the respected priests and Levites of the community simply passed him by. As Jesus says, showing such compassion to the sufferer is to love your neighbor.⁷⁶ In the second parable, that of the Final Judgment, Jesus says that showing or not

⁷³ McLean. *The Person in Dementia*. 34-35.

⁷⁴ Swinton. *Dementia*, 108-109

⁷⁵ Boltanski, Luc and Graham D. Burchell. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 1999

⁷⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 28-29 quoting Luke 10:29-37.

showing mercy to the least of the brothers is to do the same to him. Those that showed mercy to their neighbors would be given entrance into God's kingdom while those that failed to do so would be condemned to hell.⁷⁷ John Paul II's commentary on these two parables is as follows:

One could certainly extend the list of the forms of suffering that 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 neighbor, to have some compassion for that suffering and to give some help. In the messianic program of Christ, which is at the same time the program 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 neighbor, 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.⁷⁸

John Paul II makes it clear, as does Jesus, that we are to aid the suffering in our midst when we encounter them, just as the Good Samaritan did. However as Butt, Boltanski, and our own experience with people who beg on the streets of most cities in the modern world show, not all the people who present themselves as suffering actually are in need.⁷⁹ This is not a new concern. Indeed, *The Didache* deals with the issue specifically in describing the "Way of Life" to the first generation of Christians:

Give to everyone that asks you, and ask it not back; for the Father wills that to all should be given of our own blessings (free gifts). Happy is he that gives according to the commandment; for he is guiltless. Woe to him that receives; for if one having need receives, he is guiltless; but he that receives not having need, shall pay the penalty, why he received and for what, and, coming into straits (confinement), he shall be examined concerning the things which he has done, and he shall not escape thence until he pay back

⁷⁷ Matthew 35:31-46

⁷⁸ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 30.

⁷⁹ Butt, *The Suffering Stranger*, 1, and Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, 1

the last farthing. But also now concerning this, it has been said, Let your alms sweat in your hands, until you know to whom you should give.⁸⁰

Said another way, we should take care in the giving of unsolicited alms to make sure we give to those who are truly suffering. However, we should give to those who ask us without question, knowing that God will hold them responsible for fraudulently receiving if they are not truly needy. Therefore, it is critical that we heed the laments of the suffering and tend to their needs as Jesus taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan and practiced through the many and varied healings that are recounted in the Gospel accounts.⁸¹ This too is sharing in the divine nature in a real and obvious way, as we copy the actions and follow the commandments of Christ to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and visit the lonely and imprisoned.

Suffering can bring people together in unique ways. As discussed above, when the oppressed deliver the message of their suffering to their oppressors for the good of their souls, it has the important effect of linking the salvific interests of both the sinner and the victim together. Similarly, when the sufferers come to understand that others, including those that care for them, benefit from their suffering and that this has salvific benefits to both parties, it drives them together in love. Witnessing the suffering of others activates the conscience and also compassion for them within the soul. Suffering can bring those that suffer in similar ways to commiserate,

⁸⁰ *The Didache*, Translated by M.B. Riddle. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm>>. Chapter 1.

⁸¹ There are at least sixteen accounts of healing in Matthew's gospel alone including 4:23-24, 8:3, 8:13, 8:15, 8:16, 8:28-34, 9: 1-7, 9:18-26, 9:27-31, 9:32-34, 9:35, 12:9-14, 15:21-28, 15:29-31, 17:14-20, and 20:29-34

creating a sense of community and support. Finally, because suffering can lead people back to God, people of all backgrounds become part of the body of Christ, his Church.

The message of suffering that our salvation is intertwined with that of others, is radically opposed to the human tendency toward selfishness that survives from the original sin. As John Paul II teaches about the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Following the parable (of the Good Samaritan), 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 action. The person who is a "neighbor" cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another: this in the name of fundamental human solidarity, still more in the name of love of neighbor. He must "stop", "sympathize", just like the Samaritan of the Gospel parable.⁸²

While as the Pope says, people, touched by the suffering of others, are moved to help as the Good Samaritan did, many are resistant to being helped, even to the point of committing suicide rather than be dependent on others. This is not primarily about being a burden on others since only 54% listed that as a reason for committing suicide versus the 92% that listed the lack of autonomy and independence as reported in the 2018 statistics published by the Public Health Division of the state of Oregon.⁸³ Instead it is more about a more self-centered goal of being able to control one's own destiny. Suffering militates against this view, making it abundantly

⁸² John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 29.

⁸³ Public Health Division, Center for Health Statistics Oregon Health Authority "Oregon Death with Dignity Act, 2018 Data Summary," revised April 25, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/PROVIDERPARTNERRESOURCES/EVALUATIONRESEARCH/DEATHWITHDIGNITYACT/Documents/year21.pdf>

clear to the afflicted that they are not in control of their own destiny. It also can render people incapable of caring for themselves, thus providing an opportunity for someone to show them love even if they are too prideful to accept it gracefully. However, over time, they may come to appreciate the love and to acknowledge that their suffering led to what is redemptive love on the part of the care giver. If the sufferer can embrace this and ties his suffering to that of the good of the care giver, the sufferer is sharing in the divine nature by completing the suffering of Christ and is also practicing redemptive love.

While it is important for us to act as “good Samaritans” to the suffering people we unexpectedly encounter, it is in our vocations and our hobbies that we expend most of our time and energy and in which we can bring our resources and talents most to bear for the love of God and our neighbors. As discussed in the second section, God created mankind with diverse skills, capabilities and interests. To repeat a critical insight from St Thomas:

God brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and at the same time, represented by them and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another.⁸⁴

This implies that every person was designed perfectly for the role God has in mind for him or her to supply goodness. However, at times people have difficulty in finding this role.

⁸⁴ *ST I-II Q47.1*

One of the reasons that modern man often feels lost is that since the Enlightenment, many have lost track of the true purpose in life, trading eternal joy for material comfort and short-term pleasure. As Germain Grisez describes it:

In affluent societies, (people's life plans) are all too likely to be self-centered, amounting to a set of egoistic goals – things to be owned, satisfactions to be enjoyed, positions and power to be obtained – together with a strategy for achieving them. Instead of shaping their lives in response to values and persons beyond themselves, many people merely aim at satisfying their desires, at trying to get what they want out of life.⁸⁵

Many have fallen into the trap of pursuing earthly wealth as a goal rather than a means to the eternal goal. In fact, there are strong currents in the industrialized world that foster this consumer culture as various companies, rather than developing products that meet customer's needs, are focused on developing customer's needs to use their products. We are bombarded with marketing messages aimed at all ages that seek to tell us what we "need." As an example, PBS Frontline's 2001 expose, "The Merchants of Cool", describes how five multinational media conglomerates try to take advantage of adolescents' quest for identity to tap into a \$1.5 billion market by relentlessly creating new images of "Cool."⁸⁶ The attitude of their leaders, and many more like them, is perhaps best summed up with the famous quote from Gordon Gekko, the lead character in the 1987 movie "Wall Street," who proclaimed that "greed is good."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Grisez, Germain, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, volume 2: *Living a Christian Life*. Quincy, Ill: Franciscan Press, 1993. 114.

⁸⁶ PBS Frontline. "Merchants of Cool." 2001. Retrieved January 8, 2015 from : <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view/>.

⁸⁷ Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko, "Wall Street." 20th Century Fox: 1987.

People were made to work together for the good of each other in society and when they fail to do so, suffering ensues. Not only is it not good for man to be alone but humans each have deficiencies, so that to be happy and to grow, we must rely on each other. St. Paul gives us an example of this in his description of the Church as the Body of Christ in his letters to the Corinthians and the Ephesians.⁸⁸ He describes how people have different gifts which were given to them individually for some role in God's plan. As he describes it, each part is necessary for the proper functioning of the body and all must work together for the body to grow and to build itself up in love.

All legitimate occupations serve to support the greater good and when carried out authentically, will avoid or alleviate suffering since they are attaining some real good. On the other hand, if they are carried out in a way that does not work toward the greater good but instead is exploitive or harmful in some way, it will result in suffering. To explore this dynamic more closely, three occupations or vocations that are particularly relevant to a theology of suffering will be discussed, not because they are the only ones, but because they provide good examples that are consistent with the needs of those most associated with suffering, the chronically and terminally ill. The first is that of the primary care giver to a patient, whether it be a relative, volunteer, or a professional. This will be followed by discussions on spiritual and medical care givers.

⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 12: 1-31; Ephesians 4:1-16

Suffering and the Primary Care Giver

Being the primary care giver for one who suffers can be many things, often all at once. While it is well beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss the infinite varieties of care-giving scenarios that are possible there are five points that are of particular relevance to the theology of suffering and of such universal applicability that they need to be mentioned. Suffering is felt physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually and each of these needs should be addressed by the primary care giver. The sufferer will probably feel them in the order given above, but the priority should be in the inverse order, starting with spiritual needs.

As in all human endeavors, the care giver's guiding principles will condition the way that the person will approach the role and carry out the responsibilities. To be a successful care giver, the person must be doing it for the love of the patient as a child of God. A person who is caring for someone who suffers out of sheer obligation or for pay will not have the same relationship with the sufferer as someone practicing charity authentically.

People who have chronic and particularly, terminal injuries or illnesses, will almost by definition experience their powerlessness, limitations and finitude, as the *Catechism* states.⁸⁹ While it can lead to anguish, self-absorption, and even revolt against God, it can also be a catalyst for conversion as they contemplate what is important in life and come to grips with the reality that there must be a better place than the earth. This can be a very difficult time for the sufferer spiritually and it is incumbent on the primary care giver to try to procure the necessary

⁸⁹ CCC, 1500.

catechetical and sacramental support to help the sufferer make their peace with God. Koenig and Weaver caution that care givers must bring God into the solution when (older) sufferers are going through crises because psychological principles and theories, while helpful, cannot replace the power of spiritual healing.⁹⁰ This should be the highest priority for the care giver, who should suggest the support but not push it on the sufferer. It will be ineffective and counterproductive to offer spiritual support before they are ready for it. Koenig and Weaver suggest that this begins with clergy addressing the meaning and purpose of suffering in sermons and meetings that the sufferers attend and to “allow them to progress at their own pace to lead them closer to God, closer to their fellow human beings, and closer to God’s purpose for their lives.”⁹¹

The next biggest need for all sufferers is for social acceptance. Suffering can be very isolating, particularly for the elderly, so it is exceptionally important for primary care givers to “be there” for the sufferer. This means more than being physically present, it means being emotionally attached in a way that the sufferer understands that he or she is important and is loved. It is heart-breaking and counterproductive when friends and family convey a sense of obligation but not desire to be with the sufferer. It is also good to help the sufferer keep a sense of normalcy about their social life, helping him or her maintain ties to existing groups and to engage with new groups conducive to his or her new situation.

The third thing that every person needs is a sense of purpose. Helping the sufferer find that purpose is a true work of mercy on the part of the care giver. One thing that the sufferer can

⁹⁰ Koenig, Harold and Andrew J. Weaver. *Pastoral Care of Older Adults*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. 23

⁹¹ Koenig and Weaver. *Pastoral Care for Older Adults*. 23

normally claim as a purpose is that their suffering is providing the potential to make the care giver a better person, more compassionate and loving than before. Sufferers can also make as their purpose to set a good example for others on how to bear their suffering. Koenig and Weaver point out that an extreme example might be an elderly woman who is completely disabled and dependent on the care giver because of a stroke can give the care giver a smile of appreciation as her service to others. They rightly conclude that “such a pleasant and considerate attitude in this woman’s situation is likely to have a real impact on her caretakers in many ways.”⁹² Although it may not be as apparent as a smile to her care givers, the woman could also pray for them. Of course, based on the sufferer’s malady and background, there could be a great many more ways that he or she can contribute to the community.

The fourth thing that suffering people are concerned about is the sense of uncertainty that clouds a suffering person’s existence. The first big question is whether the person will survive whatever ails them and for how long. Almost as disconcerting is the question of what type of capability will the person be left with if he survives. The care giver should be aware that this is a major concern for almost all who suffer and should try to help the sufferer get whatever answers are available. Pain is much more tolerable, if the person understands what drives it and what to expect.⁹³

The fifth concern is with physical comfort. Suffering is by definition, uncomfortable and finding a way to reduce or eliminate the discomfort, while often not the most important need of

⁹² Koenig and Weaver. *Pastoral Care for Older Adults*.61

⁹³ Casell, *The Nature of Suffering*, 34.

the individual, usually is the first that presents itself. The care giver should help the sufferer get treatment without neglecting the other tasks above. This includes not over-sedating the individual so that he or she is capable of carrying them out.

It is important to re-iterate the overwhelming importance of spiritual care at this point because good spiritual care can actually provide for all the other needs. Effective spiritual care will involve the community, providing social acceptance. It will also provide a sense of purpose for the person and will assure them that even in death, their existence as a child of God will continue. This will in turn, mitigate suffering and create an expectation of joy, if not joy itself as they progress spiritually.

A care giver that completes these five tasks will make the person's suffering significantly easier to bear. To do this willingly without expectations of return is highly charitable and is sharing in the divine nature, ultimately leading to beatitude and eternal life. To do this well, is a source of great joy both for the sufferer and the care giver.

Conversely, the care giver can also create additional suffering for their charge if the care giver is unresponsive to the person's discomfort. The care giver can cause actual despair if he or she makes the sufferer feel like a burden and /or devalues or does not acknowledge the person's ability to contribute. As discussed in chapter two, John Swinton argues that when dementia is treated as a malignant social pathology, then a person's positive Self 3 image cannot be maintained because the only persona now recognized by society is "dementia patient."⁹⁴ The

⁹⁴ Swinton. *Dementia*, 98

care giver also has it in his or her power to crush the sufferer's personal dignity by causing social isolation and inhibiting spiritual and religious activity. Ironically, professional care givers are among the lowest paid workers in Western society, yet they may have the most fundamental impact on the well-being of the people in their care. To do this well is a vocation and to have a good care giver, whether a relative or a professional, is a great blessing.

Suffering and Spiritual Care

As discussed throughout this dissertation, the reason suffering exists is to drive us from material to spiritual goods, with the ultimate goal being the joy associated with sharing in the life and nature of God. For this reason, it is the clergy, chaplains and catechists that provide spiritual care that have potentially the greatest impact on addressing human suffering. What is required is the revealed truth about God so that we know how to share in the divine nature. Because we cannot aspire to such complete self-giving on our own, particularly in our fallen state, we also need sacramental aid to attain the graces that are required to fully progress in the pathway of the Lord.

In the last half-century, many secular medical institutions including hospices and hospitals have begun to employ chaplains as part of their total care for the patient. Because these institutions serve a religiously-diverse clientele, these chaplains are restricted from espousing any particular religious beliefs so as not to offend any patients. Their role as part of the full medical team is generally to assess the spiritual needs of the patient and to provide comfort and counseling using generic humanist techniques. The major supporter of "generic" chaplaincy is the medical community itself, which has an interest in managing all aspects of patient care

including their spiritual needs. Jeffrey Bishop describes this as “totalizing” care.⁹⁵ Chaplains in the system have goals, measurements and improvement plans like all other members of the medical team and must produce tangible benefits in terms of patient outcomes, compliance, and satisfaction in order to stay employed.⁹⁶

Beyond the medical community, generic chaplaincy has some support from religious communities, particularly those with limited resources and personnel. Christopher Swift says that in England, secular institutions provide an outlet for the Church of England to place pastors who are not suitable for parish work at no cost to the Church.⁹⁷ Others believe that the opportunity to be with the sick and the dying, even under the constraints of “generic” chaplaincy, is beneficial.

Generic chaplaincy can be appealing to those patients who are hostile to religion but who will be comforted by generic counseling without the threat of proselytization. As Dorothee Soelle describes in *Suffering*, the first step necessary to resolve suffering is to talk about it.⁹⁸ Some people are content with having someone there to listen, which is the main role of a generic chaplain. As described previously, being there to listen is important because it recognizes the dignity and worth of the sufferer. However, it does not aid the person in attaining true salvation.

⁹⁵ Bishop, *Anticipatory Corpse*, 255

⁹⁶ Englehardt, H. Tristram, Jr. “The Dechristianization of Christian Hospital Chaplaincy: Some Bioethics Reflections on Professionalization, Ecumenization, and Secularization.” *Christian Bioethics* 9.1 (2003): 139-160

⁹⁷ Swift, Christopher. *Hospital Chaplaincy in the Twenty-first Century*, New York: Taylor and Francis, 2014. 171-172.

⁹⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 70-71.

The critics of generic chaplaincy, and there are many, start with the problem that secular institutions will allow no real religious content, limiting chaplains to psychology instead of theology. Allen Verhey describes a dying friend's experience with the Catholic chaplain in a secular hospital as an example.⁹⁹ The friend was looking for the priest to help him reconcile with God but all the priest would do, per his charter with his employer, was to discuss how the man was feeling. This is a devastating indictment of the generic chaplains and the institutions they serve because they fail to comprehend the reason that they are needed. The reason people suffer is to highlight that they are lacking the greatest good in their lives, God, and when they finally seek him in the waning moments of their lives, the generic chaplain lacks the charter and sacramental authority to help them. With their eternal souls in the balance, this failure is a tragedy and a travesty of the highest magnitude.

Beyond the fact that generic chaplains cannot meet the religious needs of their patients, commentators like Corrina Delkeskamp-Hayes and H. Tristan Englehart are concerned that they are also doing damage to their own souls.¹⁰⁰ This occurs in two ways. The first is that the generic chaplain can only give advice that is approved by the employing institution. In most cases, this means that the chaplain is propagating a religious view consistent with secular humanism as opposed to what he or she truly believes. This is not only a lie but an abdication of his or her missionary mandate. Secondly, the chaplain may be party to actions that are opposed

⁹⁹ Verhey, Allen. *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: 2011, 71-72.

¹⁰⁰ Englehart, H. Tristan, "Generic Chaplaincy: Providing Spiritual Care in a Post-Christian Age." *Christian Bioethics: Non-ecumenical Studies in Medical Morality*. 4.3 and Delkeskamp-Hayes, Corinna "The Price of Being Conciliatory: Remarks about Mellon's Model for Hospital Chaplaincy Work in Multi-Faith Settings." *Christian Bioethics* 9.1 (2003) 69-78

to his or her own religious beliefs. For instance, a Catholic chaplain employed by a secular hospital might be forced to advocate for terminal sedation if he wants to keep his job. This would put him in the position of cooperating with evil to maintain his employment.

Anthony Fisher points out that the Catholic Church's interest in hospitals is to heal both body and soul and to do that, the Church must resist secular influences in its hospitals.¹⁰¹ In much the same way, the Church must resist the temptation to place Catholic chaplains into the employment of secular institutions. Instead, it must negotiate guest privileges in these institutions that allows them to minister to Catholics as Catholics and to any others who are interested in their services. It should not accept any limitations in this mission because it would expose the chaplains by not allowing them to carry out their missionary mandate and more importantly, it would not allow them to adequately provide the spiritual resources that the terminal sufferers so desperately need. This means that the devout can get sacraments from their pastor and the agnostics who are searching for God, can talk to a Catholic priest rather than a "generic" chaplain provided by secular institutions, who can provide neither specific religious content nor any sacraments in their last chance to reconcile with God.

Ultimately, good spiritual care requires effective catechesis, the sacraments and an understanding of the theology of suffering. This will set people on the path to righteousness and will help them understand when suffering arises to put them back on the path when they start to

¹⁰¹ Fisher, Anthony. *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 275-301.

deviate from the divine nature. The Church must ensure that these tools are available to all, but it is the responsibility of the people to make use of these tools since they have free will.

Suffering and the Medical Professional

Because true suffering always has a physical component, many people incorrectly associate suffering solely with medical issues, ignoring the spiritual reasons that are its true basis. Therefore, the expectations to end suffering have often rested with the medical community. This view, however, is tantamount to equating suffering with physical and perhaps psychological pain, which it is not, as demonstrated in the first chapter. People suffer because they sense evil, the privation of some good, is threatening their existence. The purpose of suffering is to drive people to the good and ultimately to the greatest good, which is God. The good that has been lost or taken away could be spiritual, emotional, psychological, mental, social or physical but they all have some physical manifestation to alert the sufferer to the fact that some good is missing. Obviously, the medical profession cannot provide all of these goods to their patients. As Farr Curlin suggests, what they can do is provide enhanced function that will allow their patients a better opportunity to attain the spiritual goods they lack, and perhaps a longer life in which to do so.¹⁰² To those healed, their work can seem miraculous, relieving pain and sometimes impediments that handicap them.

¹⁰² Curlin, Farr A. "Hospice and Palliative Medicine's Attempt at an Art of Dying" in *Dying in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a New Ethical Framework for the Art of Dying Well*, edited by Lydia S. Dugdale. Boston: MIT Press, 2015, 60

Because the underlying reason for suffering is to drive spiritual growth, the expectation that the physician can eliminate all suffering is misplaced. As discussed above, the physician does not even have the most important healing role. According to the Fourth Lateran Council that belongs to the priest, who the physicians is to call to the bedside of the sick before starting treatment because “the soul is more precious than the body.”¹⁰³

This, however, is not how English philosopher Francis Bacon envisioned it. Bacon suggested in the early seventeenth century that medicine had a goal beyond healing and not doing harm: the preservation of life.¹⁰⁴ Bacon was emphatic that a cure could be found for all human diseases and that the scientific method be used for the advancement of learning. As discussed above, the resulting Baconian project was to eliminate human mortality and vulnerability to suffering by means of technology.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Schroeder, H. J. “The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*, (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937). Canon 22

SUMMARY. Physicians of the body called to the bedside of the sick shall before all advise them to call for the physician of souls, so that, spiritual health being restored, bodily health will follow.

Text: Since bodily infirmity is sometimes caused by sin, the Lord saying to the sick man whom he had healed: "Go and sin no more, lest some worse thing happen to thee" (John 5: 14), we declare in the present decree and strictly command that when physicians of the body are called to the bedside of the sick, before all else they admonish them to call for the physician of souls, so that after spiritual health has been restored to them, the application of bodily medicine may be of greater benefit, for the cause being removed the effect will pass away. We publish this decree for the reason that some, when they are sick and are advised by the physician in the course of the sickness to attend to the salvation of their soul, give up all hope and yield more easily to the danger of death. If any physician shall transgress this decree after it has been published by bishops, let him be cut off (arceatur) from the Church till he has made suitable satisfaction for his transgression. And since the soul is far more precious than the body, we forbid under penalty of anathema that a physician advises a patient to have recourse to sinful means for the recovery of bodily health.

¹⁰⁴ Verhey, Allen. *The Christian Art of Dying*,. 28-31.

¹⁰⁵ Verhey. *The Christian Art of Dying*. 31

This seems like a reasonable and worthwhile goal to many people given that God had given man the responsibility of subduing nature in the first chapter of Genesis and the Lord himself had stated that the caring for the ill was one of the works of mercy that distinguished the saved from the damned.¹⁰⁶ In much the same way, the human reaction to avoid death is consistent with self-love and the description of death as the last enemy to be destroyed.¹⁰⁷ Because of this, it is not surprising that Bacon saw medicine as a Christian vocation and a way to serve God in the world.

The problem is that the Baconian project fails to acknowledge that God is Lord over life and death, so it places too much faith in humanity's ability to conquer death through physical means.¹⁰⁸ This is, of course impossible, since man is made of nothing and his whole being is sustained by the breath of God.¹⁰⁹ This single-minded drive toward an unattainable goal resulted in distorted views of the role of humanity in God's providential plan and a loss of recognition of the eternal values and goals to which a good life is rightly ordered. Ironically, it is by rightly ordering one's life to God that death is actually conquered, and eternal life is achieved, according to God's providential plan.¹¹⁰

In fact, what the Baconian project offered was an alternative vision for immortality than the one presented by Christ through his Cross and Resurrection. The Christian version offers an eternity of bliss in heaven partaking of all that is good and true in the beatific vision for those

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 25: 31-46.

¹⁰⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:26.

¹⁰⁸ CCC, 2258.

¹⁰⁹ Genesis 2:7

¹¹⁰ CCC, 1010.

that choose to follow Christ, sharing in the divine nature. Bacon's project requires nothing more for immortality than submission to medical science but then it offers nothing more than extending the life of the body indefinitely, with no soul to drive it or goal to give it purpose. This type of life is its own version of hell, soulless, devoid of all goodness and separated from God. It has been dubbed "medicalized death."

Allen Verhey asserts that the medicalization of death became triumphant after World War II and into the third quarter of the 20th century as advanced technologies, laboratories and pharmacies consolidated into hospitals.¹¹¹ When people became seriously ill, they would go to the hospital in hope of a cure. Sometimes that happened, other times the patient died, sometimes with a lingering death in pain or in a coma. Verhey says that the first characterization of a medicalized death is that it occurs in a hospital. In 1945, 40 percent of the population died in a hospital. By 1995, 90 percent of all deaths occurred in hospitals.

Verhey notes that when dying moved to the hospital, there was a profound change in attitudes.¹¹² Where in an earlier time, the dying prepared for death, now the patient was merely sick and getting treatment. Often heroic measures would be taken and the battle against death would be fought right up until the patient died. Instead of priests and family accompanying the dying on their final journey with prayers and sacraments, the patient would instead spend his or her last moments with doctors and nurses scrambling to save his or her life. The salvation of the

¹¹¹Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying*, 13.

¹¹² Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying*, 14.

soul and any higher meaning of suffering was pushed aside in an all-encompassing effort to keep the physical body in motion.

Because the business of the hospital was to avoid death, an effort was made to stop mentioning it.¹¹³ In fact, many physicians refused to tell their patients they were dying so they would not give up hope. In doing so, they did their patients a huge disservice by not letting them prepare properly spiritually and emotionally for death. This was also true of their survivors, who not only were deprived of the chance to pray for the dying and to procure the sacraments, but whose mourning was suppressed by the climate of silence around death.

Jeffrey Bishop asserts that medicalized death is manifested most acutely in the intensive care unit (ICU), which is designed with the imperative to intervene in a failing physiology.¹¹⁴ It is a place for those that are dying where specially trained personnel make care decisions and family involvement is limited. In a highly impersonal way, patients move either toward health or depending on the patient's level of functioning, to intermediate level facilities where families are persuaded to allow their loved ones to die. Despite any efforts from the care givers to provide comfort, patient life is reduced to physiological function, for the sake of which both disease and patient effectively disappear. Furthermore, dead and dying organs are replaced by machinery, masking death, and because the machines are so hard to turn off, patients are left in a state where life is defined as non-living matter in motion with no hope of returning to human thriving.

¹¹³ Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying*, 15.

¹¹⁴ Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse*, 112-113.

The problem was not in Bacon's desire to make use of scientific knowledge to cure diseases, that in itself is commendable and as Verhey himself notes, humanity is in Bacon's debt for the advancements in medicine over the last 300 years that resulted from his insight and leadership.¹¹⁵ The problem was that Bacon's framing of his initiative focused exclusively on physical healing, disregarding the spiritual needs that are the basis for all suffering. As this framing became more incrementally ingrained in the medical community's thinking, concern for the soul became increasingly limited. Instead of being in the service of God, the medical establishment presented itself as a kind of alternative to God, capable of providing immortality to its patients through advanced tools and techniques. Over time, this created an environment in which dying in a way that reconciled one with God was first ignored and then forgotten.

As discussed in length in chapter two, God uses illness and injury to make humans aware of their mortality and to provide a catalyst for conversion. However, this second task of suffering is mitigated by what John Swinton calls "glorious medicine." Swinton explains that "glorious medicine" strives to use human power and reason to gain victory over death and to end suffering, tasks which theologically, of course, can only ever be achieved by God alone."¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, he points out that both practitioners and patients have come to expect that "if human beings use their powers well enough, all will be well." They have, as Benedict put it, "faith in progress."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Verhey. *The Christian Art of Dying*. 31

¹¹⁶ Swinton, "Why me, Lord?" in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by John Swinton and Richard Payne. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009," 121-122.

¹¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, #17.,

Unfortunately, such expectations can lead to tragic results. Swinton describes a situation in which a young mother with advanced cancer was planning to write stories for her young children to remember her by after she died. However, because both the patient and the doctor were too optimistic about the power of technological intervention to save her life, she put off doing it. Tragically, two weeks later she was dead, never having created her legacy stories.¹¹⁸ Swinton describes this as a clash between what the patient saw as a fundamentally important dying task, to leave her children a legacy, and what both saw as the goals of medicine, to resist death at all costs. Swinton suggests that the right course of action was to enable a good and meaningful death, focusing her remaining time and energy on creating the stories for her children, rather than what turned out to be a futile attempt to delay the inevitable.¹¹⁹

Swinton further describes this as a clash between a theology of glory, which denies death, and a theology of the cross, which understands that God's power is perfected in weakness and that death has meaning.¹²⁰ To maintain the theology of glory in a medical setting, the "glorious" doctor can never let on that a cure is not available and that death is inevitable. Indeed, death is seen by the "glorious doctor" as a failure of medicine to be resisted at all cost. Conversely, the theology of the cross is a theology of reconciliation and redemption. Swinton concludes that "the comfort and consolation of the theology of the cross comes not from naïve optimism or

¹¹⁸ Swinton, John "Why me, Lord" 112-113.

¹¹⁹ Swinton, "Why me, Lord?", 113.

¹²⁰ Swinton, "Why me, Lord?", 116-126.

malignant stoicism, but from the knowledge that where there is suffering, there is God. And where God is, there is the hope of redemption.”¹²¹

Swinton’s view is compatible with the theology of suffering offered here in that both recognize that suffering is linked to both God and redemption and that death is inevitable in God’s plan. In the theology of suffering, suffering motivates a return to God in part because it reminds humans of their mortality. The theology of glory that he describes militates against this because people are led to believe that medical technology can cure any problem, robbing suffering of its motivational power to drive people to God. Therefore, both physicians and patients must recognize that God is the master of life and death, who will ultimately decide when to call a person home. This forces medical practitioners to think of their role in a different way.

Farr Curlin notes that largely in reaction to and as an antidote for what Swinton calls “glorious medicine,” hospice and palliative medicine (HPM) has risen up as an alternative form of treating the dying.¹²² He notes however, that when HPM seeks to end rather than mitigate suffering, it frustrates and even circumvents the possibility of dying well by removing the capacities that make suffering possible.¹²³ In other words, rendering a person terminally unconscious through sedation, while it relieves the suffering, also precludes the patient from

¹²¹ Swinton, “Why me, Lord?”, 127.

¹²² Curlin, Farr A. .”Hospice and Palliative Medicine’s Attempt at an Art of Dying” in *Dying in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a New Ethical Framework for the Art of Dying Well*, edited by Lydia S. Dugdale. Boston: MIT Press, 2015, 47.

¹²³ Curlin, “Hospice and Palliative Medicine,” 60.

carrying out any of the activities associated with a good death. He advocates focusing HPM care on creating the conditions needed for patients to engage in the tasks of dying well.

To be sure, not all physicians view their role in this way. In contrast, Edmund Pellegrino and David Thomasma describe the role of the Christian physician as a special relationship with their patients that carries with it, significant moral obligations.

A Christian physician has the same vocation as all Christian persons: to fulfill oneself in giving oneself to others: to family, friends, neighbors, strangers. In addition, as a physician, the Christian person is called to a special way of love, of giving oneself in one's daily works of healing, helping, curing and caring. Physicians and patients are persons interacting in a specific existential situation in which one is vulnerable and suffering and seeks healing for another who offers to help and heal. By its nature, the healing relationship is unequal. The patient's personhood is exposed to and by the physician – bodily, spiritually and emotionally. The patient's need for affirmation as a person in the face of this exposure is intense and a source of moral obligation for the physician.¹²⁴

If these obligations are not met, physicians can inhibit spiritual growth when they promise more than they can medically deliver and take on spiritual roles they were unqualified to fill. They can also cause suffering when they use their knowledge to harm (for example, abortion, euthanasia, mutilation, terminal sedation) or to exploit their patients for their own purposes. Medical professionals can cause great distress in their patients when they are insensitive to their insecurity about what is happening to them, especially when they deliberately keep the patient in the dark about his or her condition. Medical professionals can also damage a person's sense of dignity when they fail to treat them in a dignified manner or inhibit social support mechanisms.

¹²⁴ Pellegrino, Edmund D. and David C. Thomasma. *The Christian Virtues in Medical Practice*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996. 144.

This of course puts considerable pressure on physicians to meet each patient's physical emotional and spiritual needs within a medical structure that is unsuited to support them.

All of this contributes to the suffering of the medical professional themselves. There is a crisis in the medical community today that is commonly referred to as physician burnout but some experts believe that a more accurate term is that they suffer from "moral injury," which "occurs when doctors feel they are impeded from doing what is best for their patients. Impediments can take a variety of forms, such as an insurer's unwillingness to pay for a medication or procedure, limits on appointment times set by the doctor's employer, or the need to score highly on patient satisfaction surveys."¹²⁵

It is clear from the pervasiveness of the physician burnout / moral injury crises, that substantive changes must be made in the way that both the public and the medical community sees the role of the physician. This is suffering carrying out its task of identifying that good is lacking and motivating the community to attain it. There are, of course, many people with theories to solve it. Part of the underlying problem that is not generally part of the discussion is the failure of the medical community to recognize that the reason for suffering is a lack of spiritual good and that the physical aspects are symptoms. The reason many physicians cannot find joy in their work is that joy is the result of spiritual attainment which they are not currently pursuing.

¹²⁵ Bendix, Jeffrey. "The Real Reason Docs Burn Out." *Medical Economics*, Volume 96, Issue 2, January 16, 2019. <https://www.medicaleconomics.com/business/real-reason-docs-burn-out>.

Indeed, it would help if the medical practitioners saw themselves as instruments of God's mercy who can mitigate symptoms and delay death to allow people the opportunity to meet their familial, ecclesial and societal obligations. If they behaved according to this principle, they would never use terminal sedation or euthanasia because they inhibit patients from fulfilling their obligations, nor would they simply keep their bodies alive in "medicalized death." Further, by offering nothing more than a mitigation of symptoms and a delay in death, the medical practitioner does not decouple illness and injury from the sense of finitude that they should impart to the patient, which is the source of its power to bring people to search for God. If instead of treating death as a failure of medicine, they instead took the opportunity of impending death to facilitate a good death for their patient, they would generate joy for themselves as well as for their patients and their loved ones.

Ultimately, the change that is required is for physicians to embrace the view that recognizes the person as the unity of body and soul and that healing must encompass both. This can be done most readily in the Catholic Health care system, which by directive is predisposed to this view, even if many of the people utilizing it are not. In fact, in the general introduction to the current (sixth) edition of *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, the USCCB notes that "the Church has always sought to embody our Savior's concern for the sick."¹²⁶ It goes on to remind us that:

Jesus' healing mission went further than caring only for physical affliction. He touched people at the deepest level of their existence; he sought their physical, mental, and

¹²⁶ USCCB, *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 6th edition. June 2018. <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/ethical-and-religious-directives/>. 6.

spiritual healing (Jn 6:35, 11:25-27). He “came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10).¹²⁷

And then says:

The health care professional has the knowledge and experience to pursue the goals of healing, the maintenance of health, and the compassionate care of the dying, taking into account the patient’s convictions and spiritual needs, and the moral responsibilities of all concerned. The person in need of health care depends on the skill of the health care provider to assist in preserving life and promoting health of body, mind, and spirit. The patient, in turn, has a responsibility to use these physical and mental resources in the service of moral and spiritual goals to the best of his or her ability.¹²⁸

This final point is important because it highlights the responsibility physicians have in healing the soul of the patient in a way that can be translated to other Christian vocations. As Pellegrino and Thomasma pointed out, all Christian vocations are fulfilled in the giving of one’s self to the other.¹²⁹ This service to the other is consistent with Jesus teaching the apostles to serve one another through the washing of their feet at the Last Supper.¹³⁰ Thus it is part of the divine nature to serve those in need and it can be done in any job or vocation that is aligned to God’s kingdom. This is true whether you are a doctor or a plumber or a farmer or any other profession which has the potential to alleviate suffering in others. As Paul said in First Corinthians, “There are many parts but only one body.”¹³¹ As the three examples showed, an increase of suffering, whether experienced by us or the people we serve, is an indication that we are not fulfilling our

¹²⁷ USCCB, *The Ethical and Religious Directives*, 6

¹²⁸ ¹²⁸ USCCB, *The Ethical and Religious Directives*, 13.

¹²⁹ Pellegrino and Thomasma, *Christian Virtues in Medical Practice*, 144

¹³⁰ John 13: 1-20.

¹³¹ 1Corinthians 13:12

purpose and should motivate us to either refine how we are doing the job or to find one that has meaning for us. When we find our role, whether it be what we do to make a living or some separate activity like coaching, teaching or working in a soup kitchen, it leaves us energized and happy. Look for that sense of joy, because that is the sign that God gives us when we are fulfilling his plan for us, just as we will suffer with an empty feeling and fatigue when we fail to carryout God's plan for us.

Dying Well.

As discussed in chapter two, natural evils exist in part to remind us of our mortality and to serve as catalysts for conversion, the second task of suffering. While this is clearly a consideration with chronic diseases, along with the potential need to refocus our lives, it takes on a sense of urgency when we are diagnosed with a terminal illness. Amy Plantinga Pauw writes that “death is a frightening prospect because it destroys any illusion that we are in full control of our lives and we are our own makers and keepers.”¹³² Yet, although there are a variety of opinions on the nature of death, there are times when death is considered by most people to be a blessing.

Some will judge a death by the status of the person at the time of death. Many judge death to be a good if the person is old and it relieves the person's suffering. The same people will see death as a tragedy if the person is young and full of potential. Others will judge a death based on how it comes about. Most people will judge a peaceful death in your sleep as far better

¹³² Pauw, Amy Plantinga. “Dying Well” in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by John Swinton and Richard Payne. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009. 17.

than a violent, painful death, whether inflicted by God or man. Some will judge the nature of a death by the witnesses: dying surrounded by loved ones is generally considered a good death, while dying alone is generally regarded as a sad way to die. A good death would be one where the person gets closure on all outstanding business and is able to reconcile and say good-bye to all that are dependent on the dying person. Leaving unfinished business and broken relationships is an undesirable way to die. Unfortunately, these circumstances are not under the control of the dying except in extreme cases like suicide, which is a sin against yourself, God and your neighbors and should never be considered a good death.¹³³

While all these things feel important, they are as nothing compared with a soul's final disposition after death. Even if all the circumstances above were good, a person would still have a very bad death if the person found him or herself separated from God in Hell. At the same time, even if a person dies a violent, painful death all alone and never gets to say good-bye to loved ones, that person will have a joyful death if he or she finds him or herself in the presence of God in heaven.

While we can and should always work on sharing in the divine nature, there are two dying situations that lend themselves to this purpose. The first is martyrdom, which is the greatest good a person can do since it requires the most to be given up.¹³⁴ The second is to be diagnosed with a terminal disease, which gives humans a sense of urgency to take action toward reconciling with God by warning us of our impending deaths. Such a diagnosis is of course,

¹³³ CCC, 1281.

¹³⁴ CCC, 2473-2473.

earth-shattering to most people, and it will take time to accept and embrace it. This is particularly true in a medical culture that views death as a medical failure, not to be accepted until it actually occurs.¹³⁵

Many will find it difficult to understand that there can be joy in having a terminal illness, but it is clearly a matter of perspective. As John Swinton and Richard Payne put it, “Suffering, death, and dying have meaning, and the shape of these meanings has a profound impact on how a person approaches these experiences.”¹³⁶ As discussed previously, death for a Christian is not an evil but in fact is understood as a transition to a better life, one with the beatific vision. It might be most properly seen as a graduation from the world of suffering to the world of joy. Like graduations on earth, there can be excitement in the undertaking of a new adventure coupled with anxiety of the unknown and some sadness for the world left behind. But there is also the exhilaration at having successfully completed an arduous task, that of living a good life in a world full of temptations.

The priority of the healing of the soul and the benefits of sacramental strengthening when suffering from a serious illness has long been a position of the Church. In fact, as discussed above, the Fourth Lateran Council stipulated in 1215 that physicians called to the bedside of the sick were to call for a priest before starting treatment because “the soul is more precious than the

¹³⁵ Swinton, John “Why me, Lord?” in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by John Swinton and Richard Payne. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009. 122-123.

¹³⁶ Swinton, John and Richard Payne “Christian Practices and the Art of Dying Faithfully” in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by John Swinton and Richard Payne. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009. xviii.

body.”¹³⁷ This was still the practice being taught by the Church in the *Ars Moriendi* literature in the late fifteenth century that was designed to advise the faithful on how to die a good or blessed death.¹³⁸

Self-help literature, or conduct literature, as it was called then, was popular in the late medieval period and not surprisingly in an age where death was rampant, the most popular topic was *Ars Moriendi*, the “art of dying.”¹³⁹ Based on a pastoral handbook, *Opusculum Tripartitum*, published early in the 15th century by Jean Gerson, the chancellor of the University of Paris, variations on the *Ars Moriendi* theme were soon published in every major European Language.¹⁴⁰ The most popular variant, the *Tractatus Artis Bene Moriendi*, contained six parts: a commendation of death, a warning of the temptations of the dying and advice on how to resist them, a short catechism concerning repentance, instructions and prayers focused on imitating the dying Christ, a call to both the dying and the care givers to prioritize these matters, and finally, the prayers for the anointing of the sick. The genre remained popular for three hundred years, lasting well into the 18th century.¹⁴¹

The emphasis of the *Ars Moriendi* is clearly on reconciling the dying with God. For Christians, this should be the highest priority of those dying as well as for their loved ones.

¹³⁷ Schroeder, “The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, “. Canon 22.

¹³⁸ Verhey, *Christian Art of Dying, 164-167*. The *Ars Moriendi* literature were pamphlets published by the Church throughout Europe in the late middle ages to advise people on how to die well.

¹³⁹ Verhey, *The Art of Dying*, 79.

¹⁴⁰ Verhey, *The Art of Dying*, 85-87.

¹⁴¹ Verhey, *The Art of Dying*, 87.

However, this is clearly only available to those who know in advance they are dying: those that are terminally ill. The warning that a terminal illness provides for both the dying and their friends and family to emotionally prepare for their separation can be invaluable. Most importantly, the terminally ill have an opportunity to partake of the sacraments and reconcile with God that is not available to those who die suddenly.

Granted, to be told that you are going to die soon is shocking and distressing for most people and few would initially see it as the blessing it is. Many would prefer not to face the prospect of dying at all, preferring to pass away peacefully in their sleep. That might work for people who are exceptionally well-prepared but most people would benefit from the warning to get their affairs, both spiritual and material, in order. Even for the most proactive people, having some warning is beneficial to allow them to reconcile their affairs and say their good-byes. It is thus, an act of love toward the patient when their doctor lets them know that death is imminent. Further, with the exception of suicide, which of course has a huge spiritual downside in that it is a sin against God, our neighbors, and ourselves, and terminal illness, you do not get the opportunity to choose the circumstances of your death. Many people die tragic deaths. Given that death is inevitable, being given a warning to get your affairs in order should be considered a blessing once the shock wears off.

Lysaught offers Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, the cardinal archbishop of Chicago, who died very publicly of pancreatic cancer in 1996, as an example of a person who died well in

communion with Christ.¹⁴² His story is at once unique, in that as a high ranking member of the Catholic clergy, he has access to abundant spiritual resources and the wherewithal to make his experience known to the public, and, at the same time, it is common to all men who face death. He, like all of us, is caught blind-sided by his cancer diagnosis and initially has trouble letting go, but eventually comes to grips with his mortality and as his life ends, he attests that “As I write these final words, my heart is filled with joy. I am at peace.”¹⁴³

Cardinal Bernardin’s book that explains his experience with terminal illness, *The Gift of Peace*, actually starts two years prior to his diagnosis with the cancer that would ultimately take his life, with a recounting of another very traumatic event: a false accusation of sexual abuse against him in November, 1993. The Cardinal suffered grievously over this charge, which caused him to empty himself so God the Father could work more fully through him, as Jesus had done on the cross. Cardinal Bernardin makes clear that Christians will, like all humans, know pain and suffering but that he argues “there is a decisive difference between our pain as disciples and that experienced by those who are not the Lord’s disciples. The difference stems from the fact that, as disciples, we suffer in communion with the Lord. And that makes all the difference in the world!”¹⁴⁴ He goes on to say :

Our participation in the paschal mystery- in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ- brings a certain freedom: the freedom to let go, to surrender ourselves to the living God. To place ourselves completely in his hands, knowing that ultimately, we will

¹⁴² Lysaught, M. Therese. “Suffering in Communion with Christ” in *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care*, edited by John Swinton and Richard Payne. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009. 84.

¹⁴³ Bernardin, Joseph. *The Gift of Peace*. New York: Doubleday, 1997. 151

¹⁴⁴ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 46-47.

win out.... It's in the act of abandonment that we experience redemption, that we find life, peace and joy in the midst of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering.¹⁴⁵

Over the next year, the Cardinal was exonerated and reconciled with his accuser so in his own words, he entered 1995 as a "liberated man."¹⁴⁶

That feeling of euphoria all came crashing down in June, 1995 when he noticed discoloration in his urine and within a week, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Because his father died from cancer, he professed to always being afraid of it, making the situation all the more difficult and scary.¹⁴⁷ However, he was also able to draw inspiration from his father, who he admired because "he was able to transcend his own illness and share in the joy of his family and friends."¹⁴⁸

Cardinal Bernardin's cancer treatment began with major surgery to remove the cancerous growths and a prognosis that he only had a 20% chance of surviving for five years.¹⁴⁹ Having survived the surgery, the Cardinal began a ministry to his fellow Cancer patients in the hospital. He also came to appreciate that those who suffer from cancer and other serious diseases see life differently and that it "becomes much easier to separate the essential from the peripheral."¹⁵⁰ He adds:

As a man of faith, I can really speak of pain and suffering only in terms of their redemptive, salvific qualities. This does not mean I have not prayed, as Jesus did, that it

¹⁴⁵ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 48-49.

¹⁴⁶ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 51.

¹⁴⁷ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 55-60.

¹⁴⁸ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 62.

¹⁴⁹ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 64

¹⁵⁰ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 93.

might be God's will that "this cup pass me by," but by embracing the pain, by looking into it and beyond it, I have come to see God's presence in even the worst situations.¹⁵¹

Cardinal Bernardin attests that God's special gift to him has been inward peace and he says that his gift to others is to share God's peace when they have to deal with illnesses or troubled times as well as to share the power of prayer.¹⁵²

The Cardinal went through chemotherapy and radiation treatments, which left him fatigued but the cancer went into remission. However, he also began to have debilitating back problems. On Tuesday, August 27, 1995, the Cardinal reported that blood tests showed no signs of cancer and that he was going to have back surgery to relieve the pain he was experiencing. The very next day, an MRI showed inoperable cancerous growths in his liver and he was told he had less than a year to live.¹⁵³ This was a terrible shock but the Cardinal quickly regained his perspective, cancelled future treatments and prepared to die.

Cardinal Bernardin's preparation for death, like anyone else's, focused on passing on his responsibilities in this life while also working to insure his spiritual well-being in the next. Unlike most people, this included meeting with the President and the Pope. He finalized his will, made arrangements for the continued care of his mother, and finalized his work records, which for him meant sending archdiocesan records to the archives.¹⁵⁴ He arranged for people to take over his responsibilities at work, as any responsible person would do, and he wrote *The Gift of Peace* to help other people cope with impending death. In this way, he serves as a messenger of

¹⁵¹ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 95.

¹⁵² Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 96.

¹⁵³ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 130-136.

¹⁵⁴ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 136-141

God. While he has greater reach than most people as the Archbishop of Chicago, everyone can play this role by simply witnessing to those around them by words and actions what they are experiencing. The Cardinal completed the book less than two weeks before his death, reporting that he was both exhausted by the effort and exhilarated in having completed it.¹⁵⁵

The Cardinal's spiritual arrangements involved three communal Anointings of the Sick, which he described as being a deeply spiritual experience.¹⁵⁶ He prayed often and solicited the prayers of those who knew him. Most importantly, he looked on death as a friend to embrace rather than an enemy to be avoided on the advice of Father Henri Nouwen, who further explained that "People of faith, who believe that death is the transition from life to life eternal, should see it as a friend."¹⁵⁷

These are all things that are available to the dying if they choose to pursue them. Granted, Cardinal Bernardin had certain advantages as a prelate to create an environment that had access to the sacraments and could create a community of believers around himself. Unfortunately, in order to die well in the 21st century medical environment, still largely dominated by "glorious medicine," some conscious decisions need to be made by the patient and/or the care giver who are not members of the clergy themselves. First, we must pick an environment in which the patient's spiritual needs are respected. Dying well must be consistent with life's goals of knowing, loving, and serving God in this life and being with him in the next, and that means that

¹⁵⁵ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 151..

¹⁵⁶ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 137.

¹⁵⁷ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 127-128.

religion must play the primary role in the ministry to the dying.¹⁵⁸ To be sure, this does happen at times. Lisa Sowle Cahill applauds the Catholic Health Association for their work with the dying. She also notes the work of the Sisters of Charity who have established homes around the world for those dying in abject poverty and that of religiously led hospice centers who help people die well.¹⁵⁹ But this is often not the case without putting forth the effort to find a suitable environment from which the dying can reconcile with God.

The Joy in Finding Meaning in Suffering.

In the very first chapter of *Salvifici doloris*, John Paul II declares that when St. Paul declared to the Colossians, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake,” his joy came from the discovery of the meaning of suffering.¹⁶⁰ In a very real way, this is the basis for the entire Apostolic letter, a work that the Pope completed shortly after his recovery from an assassination attempt. Later in the document, perhaps speaking of his own personal experience, John Paul II writes:

It is when the salvific meaning of suffering descends to man’s level and becomes the individual’s personal response that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy.¹⁶¹

Nor is John Paul II the only one to recognize that understanding the meaning of suffering can relieve it. Simone Weil, writing a half century earlier declared that “Only through contemplating

¹⁵⁸ *Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 79.

¹⁵⁹ Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 125-127.

¹⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 1, quoting Colossians 1:24.

¹⁶¹ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 26.

Jesus on the cross in affliction and recognizing our solidarity with him in denying ourselves can affliction be relieved.”¹⁶² Speaking from a medical perspective, Eric Cassell notes that “Transcendence brings relief to the pain and deprivation- to the suffering itself- by giving it a meaning larger than the person.”¹⁶³ More recently, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin reported that as he approached death, he came to understand it as a friend to be embraced and he felt the inner peace and spiritual joy that the John Paul II refers to above.¹⁶⁴

There are actually two reasons that there is joy in finding the meaning in suffering. The first, unmentioned by any of the commentators, is to recognize that God wants us to share in his life every bit as much as the Father desired to share his life with the Prodigal Son in Jesus’ parable.¹⁶⁵ The realization that God has provided humans with the ability to sense whenever they stray from the path he set out for their happiness and fulfillment is a huge cause for joy, particularly when the alternative understanding is that suffering is a sign of God’s wrath against his ungrateful progeny. There should be great joy in the realization that suffering is God leading us home like a divine beacon, highlighting all obstacles that would keep us from his love, rather than an act of spite as sometimes projected by society.

As described by John Paul II and other commentators, the second reason for joy is that our suffering has purpose when it is united to that of Christ, and that it can lead to eternal life in the blissful presence of God for both the sufferer and the person who aids them. In fact, it is

¹⁶² Weil, Simone. *The Love of God and Affliction*. 464.

¹⁶³ Cassell, Eric. *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, 44.

¹⁶⁴ Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace*, 151.

¹⁶⁵ Luke 15: 11-32.

joyful that our God deemed us worthy of emptying himself and coming as the man Jesus to demonstrate how humans can share in the divine nature, even dying on the cross to show the unlimited nature of his love.¹⁶⁶ We should also rejoice in our ability to follow his example when we suffer for the benefit of others. And we should most assuredly rejoice when we understand that those that share in his suffering will also share in his glory.¹⁶⁷

Understood properly, suffering gives us both hope for the beatific vision and the motivation to attain it. This perspective leads to joy and is consistent with the rest of the Christian message based on the love and mercy of God and thus, is credible. The alternative view of suffering as the wrathful action of a vengeful God is so inconsistent with the rest of what God has revealed to us and the logical actions of a rational being, that it must be dismissed as an unfortunate interpretation of the facts based on a perspective limited to the physical world.

The Ultimate message of the theology of suffering is one that provides the perspective that God loves us as only the Creator of the universe could. He made us from nothing and sustains us with every breath we take. He knows what is best for us but respects us enough to let us make our own choices. However, he does not leave us unaided or unattended. He sent Jesus to show us how to fulfill our destiny and he gave us suffering to warn us when we leave the path that leads us to true happiness in his presence. He builds us up as an ecclesial community, providing the grace of the sacraments while calling on us to share our experiences with each other and to act in love to alleviate the suffering of our neighbors as the Good Samaritan did in

¹⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 22

¹⁶⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 22

Jesus' parable. In this way, the unity of the Church prefigures our ultimate union with God. The fact that suffering is uncomfortable and relentless when we deviate from the good is a sign of his mercy and love because it needs to be that way to motivate us to turn away from our vices because we are creatures of habit.

Final Thoughts

It is the goal of this dissertation to develop a credible theology of suffering that is consistent with Catholic teaching on the nature of God, the purpose of life, the realities of evil and death and the promises of eternal salvation for those who share in the divine nature. It is based on a general thesis that God, as portrayed by Jesus as the patient and forgiving father of the Prodigal Son, anxious to have his son back despite his sins, would have instituted suffering for purposes consistent with his nature and not for the punitive purposes that many people attribute to it. Indeed, this negative view of suffering so prevalent in the culture undermines Catholic teaching on the nature of God in a way that causes many to lose faith. Just as troubling is the fact that despite the obvious importance of the question of suffering to everyone, it just is not dealt with in any systematic way in the most comprehensive Church documents, like the *Catechism* or the *Summa*. This too, makes the faith less accessible to those internal and external to the Tradition.

It is hoped that this dissertation will in some way instigate further study on the problem of suffering, emphasizing its ability to redirect people from vice to virtue, to serve as a catalyst for conversion and ultimately to lead people to fulfill their purpose in union with a God that loves them unconditionally, just like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is also

hoped that people will explore the role of those who suffer in society, recognizing their contributions as messengers of God and advocates for social justice rather than ostracizing them as sinners and complainers. Finally, it is hoped that this work provides solace and understanding to those who suffer and that others can extrapolate from this meager baseline to show how suffering works in various situations to direct people to the development of virtue, love, a sense of community, and ultimately happiness with God. Trust in God and heed his message when you encounter suffering – he’s leading you home where you will find joy.

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