

Finding Value in Suffering

Fr. Jeffrey S. Tunncliff

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We live in a world that wants to **end** all suffering. This desire in and of itself can be good. We see “world hunger” as suffering and we should seek to end it. Yet, we must think about what it means to end hunger. To end hunger, we need to do more than simply give those who do not have enough food, enough to eat for the present day. This fulfills the Corporal Work of Mercy to feed the hungry ([Matthew 25:35](#)) today but what about tomorrow? We need to help them find a way to feed their families for a lifetime.

We can also think of the Corporal Work of Mercy to care for the sick ([Matthew 25:36](#)). This begins with helping people deal with the immediate physical symptoms of their illnesses today, but it also means looking to find a cure for all diseases. This is not a license to use any and all means possible to find a cure. Using sinful ways that do not respect life as God has given it may lead to a cure that cures the body but kills the soul.

When a cure cannot be found and the suffering **seems** pointless, it is very unfortunate that some people think the best thing to do is to end the person’s life through assisted suicide as misguided compassion sugarcoated by calling it aid-in-dying. We are not the author of life. God is our creator. It is not for us to decide when life begins or ends. We can provide **palliative care** so the person does not suffer in pain.

Our Christian faith calls us to be people of **hope**. Hope is very much needed in the world. Pope Francis knew this when he made **hope** the theme of our present jubilee year in the Catholic Church. However, if we seek to end suffering by prematurely ending a person’s life, we are not looking for hope. It is **control** and/or to be **pain-free** that we are seeking. It is not necessarily bad to desire either control or to be pain-free. They only become bad when we use immoral means to achieve them.

Hope is not about being in control or being pain-free. Hope is concerned with our attitude towards suffering. In fact, if one is in control **and** pain-free, one does not need hope.

The world needs a renewed understanding of suffering. With this in mind, I recently reread Pope St. John Paul II’s apostolic letter, *Salvifici Doloris: On the Christian Meaning of Suffering* (February 11, 1984. Boston: Pauline Books & Media. 1984. Or available online at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html).

The reality is that there is suffering in the world. Looking at yesterday’s reading for [Monday of the Seventh Week of Easter](#), Jesus’ disciples thought they are beginning to understand everything. Yet, as soon as there is trouble, they scatter in fear. We can be fearful of suffering. It is not pleasant. We want to avoid trouble but when there is trouble, we must remember Jesus’ words at the end of this gospel, “*Take courage, I have conquered the world.*” He does not say that He has **ended** all suffering. He says He has **conquered** it. He conquers it by bringing new light to it.

So, now let us take a look at what Pope St. John Paul II has to say about suffering in [Salvific Doloris](#).

He begins, “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”* (Colossians 1:24, [Salvific Doloris](#), 1). We might wonder how anything could have been lacking in “*Christ's afflictions*” and how we could possibly make up for what is lacking. To answer these questions we need to understand suffering as “part of the history of man and which is illuminated by the Word of God” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 1). We need to “understand *the salvific meaning of suffering*” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 1).

Suffering seems to follow humanity wherever we go. It seems “*essential to the nature of man.*” It is part of “man’s transcendence” and points beyond ourselves ([Salvific Doloris](#), 2). “Suffering seems to be, and is, almost *inseparable from man’s earthly existence*” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 3). Again, Jesus did not conquer suffering by ending it. Rather, He conquered it by bringing meaning to it.

Pope St. John Paul II writes, “Human suffering evokes *compassion*,” as it should. “It evokes *respect*,” as it should, calling us to see respect for those who suffer. It also, “in its own way *it intimidates*” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 4). Suffering scares us.

I invite you to take a moment to ponder who suffers the most when one is facing a grave illness. I wrote in my reflection on last Sunday’s readings, “I think of those who, when they are dying, are thinking of others. They are praying for their children who are on their way to see them before their passing. They are praying for their own death to not be too difficult for their family and friends. Who do you think you will be praying for at the time of your death?” ([7th Sunday of Easter, Year C](#)). When we fear the suffering, we see a loved one face that seems can only be ended in death, rather than rush to end their life through assisted suicide, we show the greatest compassion **by accompanying them**, being present with them in their suffering.

Pope St. John Paul II next begins to move us beyond **physical** suffering when “the body is hurting” to **moral** suffering that is the “pain of the soul” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 5). Moral suffering involves both psychological pain and spiritual pain.

Where are we to turn for guidance on our understanding of suffering? The same place we turn to for answers on other matters, **the Bible**, for, as Pope St. John Paul II writes, “Sacred Scripture is a *great book about suffering*” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 6). As he later writes, “In the vocabulary of the Old Testament, suffering and evil are identified with each other. In fact, that vocabulary did not have a specific word to indicate “suffering.” Thus it defined as ‘evil’ everything that was suffering” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 7). Thus, if one suffers, one must have sinned for their suffering is punishment for the sin. This is the assumption made by Job’s friends when he suffers.

When suffering is seen as punishment, one might be tempted to avoid a person who is suffering. One might avoid sharing in their suffering as they caused it themselves. Why should anyone else suffer with them? God calls us to something different. In suffering, God calls us to solidarity with one another. Our common suffering can bind us together ([Salvific Doloris](#), 8). For example, is

there not something about the destruction from natural disasters that can bind people together ([Salvific Doloris](#), 8)?

Our experience of suffering leads us to one of the greatest questions one might ask, “**Why Does Evil Exist**” (see [Salvific Doloris](#), 9). Where do we go for the answer? Pope St. John Paul II writes, “For man does not put this question to the world, even though it is from the world that suffering comes to him, but he puts to God as the Creator and Lord of the world” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 9). The world cannot provide a definite answer for why evil exists.

The Book of Job in the Old Testament is the place that addresses this question. Pope St. John Paul II writes of Job, “His suffering is the suffering of someone who is *innocent*; it must be accepted as a *mystery*, which the individual is unable to penetrate *completely by his own intelligence*” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 11, emphasis added). The fact is that, viewed within the limits of our humanity, we cannot completely understand suffering. Why would we ever think we could? We are not all-knowing. It is not for us to be in control of everything to have things the way we want them.

Job’s friends assume he must have sinned. To them, the suffering he faces is proof of his sin. However, Job knows he has not sinned. So, he looks for an answer to why he is suffering. When one reads the Book of Job, one finds that Job comes to realize in the final chapters that he is not the Creator and he is not going to understand everything, but he can trust in God who is the Creator. His response to his suffering demonstrates his faith (see [Salvific Doloris](#), 11).

With this in mind, Pope St. John Paul II writes, “Love is also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the cross of Jesus Christ” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 13). Jesus is without sin. Yet He suffered greatly. Why? ***Because He loves us*** (see [John 15:13](#)).

From here, Pope St. John Paul II writes

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). These words, spoken by Christ in his conversation with Nicodemus, introduce us into the very heart of *God's salvific work*. They also express the very essence of Christian soteriology, that is, of the theology of salvation. Salvation means liberation from evil, and for this reason it is closely bound up with the problem of suffering (14).

Jesus Christ suffered to save us.

His suffering has a purpose. Jesus gained nothing for himself through his suffering. ***The gain of his suffering is our salvation.***

Jesus was without sin so his suffering could not be punishment for something He did. This is a gamechanger. No longer is suffering solely punishment for sin. The suffering of an innocent person can serve for the salvation of others. The saying “offer it up” can actually have meaning when properly understood.

Death can be “awaited even as a liberation from the suffering of this life” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 15). Those who mistakenly see assisted suicide as compassion see death as this liberation. Yet, death without faith in God, is destruction. Death with faith in God is different. Pope St. John Paul II writes, “By his salvific work the only-begotten Son liberates man from sin and death. First of all He *blots us* from human history *the dominion of sin*...and then He gives man the possibility of living in sanctifying grace...As a result of Christ’s salvific work, man exists on earth *with the hope of eternal life and holiness*” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 15).

The problem is, if we hasten death through assisted suicide, we are saying we know better than God when the hour of our death should be. We close ourselves off from God’s plan for our salvation.

It is true that God did not end temporal suffering in Christ’s death and Resurrection. What God did do is shed new light (the Light of Christ) upon temporal suffering. Jesus’ suffering points us to something greater. In his suffering, we find *hope*.

In fact, Jesus became human so that He could suffer (see [Salvific Doloris](#), 16). Only in suffering himself, could He take his suffering upon himself. I invite you at this moment to [read the first reading from the Good Friday service](#). All that Jesus did, He did for you.

In [Salvific Doloris](#) (18), Pope St. John Paul II reminds us that Jesus’ suffering was so extreme that even He cried out, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” ([Matthew 27:46](#)).

Suffering is not easy.

Pope St. John Paul II follows this with, “Human suffering has reached its culmination in the passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: *it has been linked to love*” ([Salvific Doloris](#), 18).

Why? Why did Jesus suffer in this way? He suffered to save us. How can we possibly say then that there is no value in suffering? How can we claim a right to use any and all means to end suffering? Jesus Christ did not *end* suffering. ***He used it to redeem us.***

Again, Jesus’ suffering for us is a gamechanger. Pope St. John Paul II writes, “One can say that with the passion of Christ all human suffering has found itself in a new situation ([Salvific Doloris](#), 19). He continues

Each one is also *called to share in that suffering* through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ *has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption*. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ ([Salvific Doloris](#), 19).

Remember what we talked about at the beginning of this article, how we complete what was lacking in Jesus' afflictions. When we accept our sufferings, we complete what was lacking in the suffering of Jesus Christ, *our participation*.

Pope St. John Paul II continues

The texts of the New Testament express this concept in many places. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle writes: "*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for **Jesus'** sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus*" (2 Corinthians 4:8-11,14).

United in Suffering

Yes, we suffer, but we do not suffer alone, and we do not suffer without purpose. We present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Here, I think of the words spoken by the priest in the offertory, "Pray brothers and sisters, *that my sacrifice and yours* may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father." We offer the sacrifice of our sufferings to God. Here I think of [Romans 8:17b](#), "*if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*" (see also [Salvific Doloris](#), 22).

Pope St. John Paul II later turns to the Blessed Virgin Mary's participation in the sufferings of her son, our Lord Jesus Christ. She was the one present at his side as He was suffering. She shared in his suffering from the moment Simeon foretold of them ([see Luke 2:34-35](#)).

Jesus himself tells us that we should expect to suffer when He says, "*If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*" ([Luke 9:23](#)). Hearing these words from Jesus, why would anyone think we can eliminate *all* suffering? Yes, we should do what we can to eliminate suffering from hunger and seek to cure diseases by moral means, but we will never eliminate all suffering. We are not meant to. We are not supposed to. *The way we respond to suffering is our testimony to what we really believe* (see [Salvific Doloris](#), 25 and [Luke 21:12-19](#)).

Our suffering can bring us closer to Christ. In our acceptance of suffering we demonstrate "*interior maturity and spiritual greatness*" ([Salvific Doloris](#), 26). Pope St. John Paul II writes, "Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation" ([Salvific Doloris](#), 26).

Jesus Christ does not provide the reasons for suffering but He does call us to follow him as He reveals the "salvific meaning of suffering" ([Salvific Doloris](#), 26).

Speaking of the ill who suffer, Pope St. John Paul II writes, "The person feels condemned to receive help and assistance from others, and at the same time seems useless to himself. The discovery of the salvific meaning of suffering in union with Christ *transforms* this depressing *feeling*...It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls" ([Salvific Doloris](#), 27).

We need the grace that God offers. Let the suffering be at work in you to remove all that stands in the way of God's transforming grace.

I conclude with these words from Pope St. John Paul II

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