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Suffering in Christian experience

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Suffering in Christian experience

Religion is a phenomenon of human culture that each of us share. It is very non homogeneous aspect of human life. Therefore the attitude towards suffering is different in each religious system. Nevertheless it is globally common that religious individuals often understand suffering in a kind of positive aspect or other important meaning. For example priests and monks of various religions may embrace self-denial and the suffering that comes with it together with the virtues that such suffering encourages. According to Buddhism, suffering results from desire of craving -whether for wealth, sensual pleasure, or good ideas. All desire involves the idea of oneself as separate from other things. Extinguishing desire through meditation, right living and achievement nirvana leads one to eliminate suffering. The purpose of such an ascetics, *nirvana*, in which one abandons the notion of a separate self, is a state of peace and insight free from the pain that makes desire.

Affliction was always a permanent and important subject of religious reflection, which is internally connected to the issue of evil. The deliberation over the sense of suffering is an essential element of its experience. The answer the question depends on a definite religion. For the systems that assume the existence of an Absolute creating the world from the love and a correspondent concept of fundamental goodness of this, what exists, suffering is a reaction on evil as lack of goodness. Therefore human suffering brings in itself a task of the restoration the goodness by a man in affliction. Nevertheless, some kinds of suffering remain for a human reason a mystery and can give a sense only in theological perspective.

For the European world the most important is Christian perspective on this issue. As a catholic I will focus on this tradition which is the most familiar to me, but while I discuss the subject of the paper, I will refer rather to fundamental issues that are common to Christianity in general including to some extent non-catholic Christian believe.

The experience of suffering seems almost inexpressible and not transferable. This problem in the view of Christian commandment of

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love evokes respect and in the beginning of every explanation that gives us Christian faith human suffering remains an intangible mystery. At the same time the deepest need of Christian heart commands one to overcome intimidation and fear that might bring suffering and pain and to touch what appears in every man so intangible. The same need of heart encourages us to go beyond the sphere of description, since the experience of affliction demands understanding that requires accepting an appropriate attitude and action.

The Bible, which is the source of Christian revelation, appears as a great book of suffering. In the Old Testament there are many examples of situations marked by suffering in particular in its moral dimension. The encyclical of John Paul II „*Salvifici dolores*” makes a list of those situations¹. It is the danger of death (5), or the death of one's own children (13), the lack of offspring (8), nostalgia for the homeland (9), persecution and hostility of the human environment (10), mockery and scorn of the one who suffers (11), loneliness and abandonment (12), the remorse of conscience (13), the prosper of the wicked and the suffering of the just (14), the ingratitude and unfaithfulness of friends and neighbors (15), and the misfortune of one's own nation (16). In the Old Testament a human Being is treated as a „whole” in his/her psychological and physical sphere. Therefore psychological suffering has also a somatic element linked to the pain of a specific part of the body: the bones, heart, viscera, liver, kidneys.

In the Book of Job the question of the meaning of suffering has found in its most vivid expression. This is a story of a just man, who without any fault of his own underwent immeasurable suffering. Job lost all his possessions, his children, and eventually he himself was touched by a grave sickness. In this horrible situation his three friends try to convince him, each in his own way, that since he has been struck down by such terrible sufferings, he must have done something seriously wrong. They believe that just God could not cause the affliction of the just, so Job is not just, but his situation is a punishment for his sins.

Job however is aware that he has not deserved such punishment, because he is aware of the good things that he has done during his life. In the end, God admits that Job is not guilty and rebukes his friend for their accusation. Job suffers as someone innocent and it must be accepted as a mystery, which anyone is unable to explore completely by his own cognition. Suffering connected with a fault has a meaning as punishment, however it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment. The proof of this in the Old Testament is the just Job.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Salvifici dolores*, nr 6.

The ultimate answer to the question of „why“ one can find in the New Testament in the context of divine love incorporated in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the salvation of the people, though suffering will always remain a mystery. Jesus Christ accepted a human nature in its every dimension in particular by sharing the suffering with man. He experienced not only homelessness, misunderstanding, but, more than anything, he became more and more isolated and encircled by hostility and the preparations for putting him to death. The culmination of his affliction was his passion and the crucifixion. He explains his future passion, accepted voluntarily and innocently, as the work of salvation. This work, in the plan of eternal Love of God, has a redemptive character. His death is related to his Resurrection, through which Jesus has overcome the world definitely.

The teaching of Christ contains also the need for suffering of his disciples. In the gospel one can find the words of Jesus: „If any man would come after me... let him take up his cross daily“ (Lk 9,23). As John Paul II writes: „Before his disciples [of Jesus] he placed demands of a moral nature that can only be fulfilled on condition that they should „deny themselves“. The way that leads to the Kingdom of heaven is „hard and narrow“, and Christ contrasts it to the „wide and easy“ way that „leads to destruction“ (Mt 7,13-14). On various occasions Christ also said that his disciples and confessors would *meet with much persecution*, something which – as we know – happened not only in the first centuries of the Church’s life under the Roman Empire, but also came true in various historical periods and in other parts of the world, and still does even in our own time.”²

Jesus does not conceal the danger of suffering from his followers, which is firstly meant as for the sake of Christ. The sense of suffering in Christianity is not constrained to persecution only. Any situation of affliction draws a person close to Christ, even if he or she is like the good criminal crucified next to Jesus. Such an experience can result in discovering the salvific meaning of suffering by someone, who is touched by it, and can make him/her a new person. An afflicted person can find new dimensions of his/her entire life and vocation. Somebody, who is totally incapacitated because of grave illness, and is unable to act efficiently and even to live honestly, becomes much more mature spiritually, and often gives touching lesson of spiritual greatness to those, who are healthy and full of strength. This lesson passed many Christians recognized as saints such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius Loyola, and others, who experienced profoundly their conversion.

² Ibid., nr 25.

In Christianity suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil, but at the same time this experience is a basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation. Thus it can become no longer a weakness but the power of God, that comes through the Cross and ultimately the Resurrection of Christ. Nevertheless, it often takes time, even a long time, for this answer can be only interiorly perceived. The answer does not come directly and the answer to question about the meaning of suffering is not of the abstract character for the one, who suffers. It can bring internal peace and make possible to overcome unbearable pain and distress. What is more, recognizing the sense of the suffering gives internal power to positive action that is possible in affliction.

The pain and suffering that one encounters in the others is also an urgent Christian imperative expressed in the parable of merciful Samaritan. Regardless what life the suffered person has had, he/she has priceless dignity as a child of God and he/she is destined to eternal live with God by the cross and Resurrection of Christ. Therefore one of the best way of realization the commandment of love is service to a suffering neighbor in any unselfish way, freely undertaken to provide „Good Samaritan“ help, by devoting to this cause all the time and energy at someone’s disposal inside or even outside his/her professional work.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering. It is proofed by Christ himself, who was especially active in this field. All Christian tradition referred to him the words from the prophet Isaiah: „The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord“ (Iz 61,1-2 ; also Lk 4,18-19). Imitating this attitude of struggling for a relief pain and suffering by an effective cure and other kinds of help is one of the most important dimensions of the commandment of love.

However Christian cure of those, who suffer is not limited to the sphere of physical pain. Medicine, as the science and also the art of healing, discovers in the vast field of human sufferings the best known area, the one identified with greater precision and relatively more counterbalanced by the methods of „reaction“ (that is, the methods of therapy). Nevertheless, there are other areas of suffering. The notion human suffering is much wider, multi-dimensional, and more varied. Man suffers in different ways not always considered by medicine, not even in its most advanced specializations. Suffering is something which is still wider than sickness, more complex and at the same time still more deeply rooted in humanity itself.

Christian philosophical tradition knows the distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas differentiates between the feeling of external pain (lat. *dolor*) caused by sensory perception and internal pain (lat. *tristitia*) caused by a kind of internal perception. This distinction is based upon the double dimension of the human being and indicates the bodily and spiritual element as the immediate or direct subject of suffering. Insofar as the words „suffering” and „pain”, can, up to a certain degree, be used as synonyms, physical suffering is present when „the body is hurting” in some way, whereas moral suffering is „pain of the soul”. In fact, it is a question of pain of a spiritual nature, and not only of the „psychological” dimension of pain which accompanies both moral and physical suffering. The vastness and the many forms of moral suffering are certainly no less in number than the forms of physical suffering. But at the same time, moral suffering seems as it were less identified and less reachable by therapy.

In the present world one can find a tendency according to which suffering is identified with pain. Therefore any kind of suffering may be overcome just by curing illness. Pain occurs its only essential factor, so lack of any kind of pain becomes a desired style of life. This tendency goes along with the attitude of utilitarianism, which in principle questioned non-biological sense of suffering and accepted absurdity of the attitude of asceticism. In this philosophical system pleasure appears to be the highest value, therefore anything that is against pleasure is not worthwhile and should be eliminated from the life. This attitude can be evident in an unlimited use of any kind of widely understood anesthetic means. The style of life that tries to put out of consciousness any kind of distress or pain, or even the thought of death, is also the example of such an attitude. Undoubtedly, relief pain is necessary, but at the same time human suffering is more than pain and overcoming it requires from the afflicted person discovering the sense of his/her existence and the sense of his/her specific uncomfortable situation. The example of the existence of this spiritual dimension is religion not only Christianity. The dignity of a human Being demands respecting this sphere of human existence, which is a mystery and an urgent task to overcome it.