

I Will Draw Everyone to Myself

By Rev. Andrew Hofer, O.P.

March 21, 2021 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

Readings: Jeremiah 31.31-34; Hebrews 5.7-9; John 12.20-33

Suffering can make us ask all sorts of questions that we might not dare voice aloud: “Why is this happening? Who is the God who would allow such suffering? Does God even exist? Why? Why? *Why?*” Many turn away from God and his Church because of suffering—their own suffering and the suffering that they see around them. Their hearts are broken.

We can take the objection to God’s permission of suffering, which is traditionally called an evil, with utmost seriousness and compassion. In his *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, when St. Thomas Aquinas asks if God exists, the first objection given to God’s existence is the presence of evil. How can an infinitely good God exist when we know from our own pain that the evil of suffering exists? The question is of perennial concern. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #309 says:

If God the Father almighty, the Creator of the ordered and good world, cares for all his creatures, why does evil exist? To this question, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice. Only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer to this question: the goodness of creation, the drama of sin and the patient love of God who comes to meet man by his covenants, the redemptive Incarnation of his Son, his gift of the Spirit, his gathering of the Church, the power of the sacraments and his call to a blessed life to which free creatures are invited to consent in advance, but from which, by a terrible mystery, they can also turn away in advance. *There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil.*

No quick answer to suffering can be satisfactory. But there is indeed help from God in the midst of our suffering. This help is our salvation. The good news is this: Christ draws us through the love of his suffering to himself. We can celebrate on this Fifth Sunday of Lent what St. John Paul II calls “the Gospel of suffering” (*Salvifici Doloris* #25). The Fifth Sunday of Lent was long ago given the title of “Passion Sunday,” and still today the Lenten liturgy changes tone to concentrate on the Passion, that is, suffering. Christ proves his love for us through suffering.

Christ’s Suffering

The first reading from the prophet Jeremiah tells us of “a new covenant” to come (Jer 31.31). It will be written on the hearts of God’s people. This New Law is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. On the night before he died, he gave us the sacrament of his Body and Blood. In the words of institution at Mass, we hear Jeremiah’s prophecy fulfilled in “the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and everlasting covenant.” This blood is “poured out.” This means that Christ sheds his blood for our salvation. He dies for us.

The new covenant, written on our hearts, comes through the suffering of God made flesh for us sinners. God knows that we suffer in our hearts, and so that is where the new covenant is inscribed. The Apostle Paul says, “[T]he love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For Christ, while we

were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly” (Rom 5.5-6). From the divine end of the new covenant, Christ’s death shows the depths of God’s love and faithfulness.

We can also see Christ’s suffering from another perspective. From the human end of the new covenant, Christ’s death shows the depths of the human response in love and obedience. Our second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, tells us about Jesus: “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5.8-9). Christ’s human life was not perfect, not complete, until he was lifted up on the cross. There on the cross, Jesus says, “It is finished” (John 19.30).

St. John Paul II writes, “If, in fact, the Cross was to human eyes Christ’s *emptying of himself*, at the same time it was in the eyes of God *his being lifted up*. On the Cross, Christ attained and fully accomplished his mission: by fulfilling the will of the Father, he at the same time fully realized himself. In weakness he manifested his *power*, and in humiliation he manifested all *his messianic greatness*” (*Salvifici Doloris* #22). Only in suffering did Christ fully realize himself. He saves us by his blood: “by his wounds, we were healed” (Isa 53.5).

Our Suffering in Christ

Christ’s suffering makes all the difference for our suffering. Without Christ, there is so much useless suffering in the world. Think of the despair and emptiness that people feel without Christ.

In Christ, we have “the Gospel of suffering.” He bids us to pick up our cross and follow him. He speaks repeatedly in the Gospel of his own suffering and ours. Suffering is not simply something to be overcome; it is the means for new life. Without the cross, there is no resurrection. Without our suffering, we cannot have the new life that Christ wants to share with us. St. John Paul II writes:

Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that *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. A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of *his entire life and vocation*. This discovery is a particular confirmation of the spiritual greatness which in man surpasses the body in a way that is completely beyond compare. 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. (*Salvifici Doloris* #26)

The saints experience how we have only to obey Christ in order to experience him as “the source of eternal salvation” (Heb 5.9). Our life is not made perfect, not complete, except through that obedience of sharing in Christ’s suffering. “Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven,” says St. Rose of Lima (*CCC* #618).

Drawn by the Love of Christ Crucified

In our Gospel, Jesus proclaims, “[W]hen I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (John 12.32). *Drawing* is a powerful image. Christ does not compel us by violent force; he draws us. Commenting on this verse, St. Thomas Aquinas understands this drawing precisely in terms of God’s love. He quotes a passage from Jeremiah 31: “I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore, I have drawn you, having mercy” (Jer 31.3). Also, St. Thomas refers to the bride’s words to her bridegroom in the Song of Songs: “Draw me after you” (Song 1.3). Where is the bridegroom taking his bride? To paradise through suffering.

Can you see God’s love drawing you through suffering? Some cannot. The mystery of the cross is veiled. We can ask God for the grace to know the truthfulness and power of his love in suffering. In reply to the objection that an infinitely good God cannot exist because of evil existing, St. Thomas turns to the wisdom of St. Augustine: “Since God is the highest good, he would not allow any evil to exist in his works, unless his omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil” (*S.T.* I, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1; quoting St. Augustine, *Enchiridion* #11). Nothing was more evil than putting Christ to death. And yet, God allowed that most terrible suffering so that we might have Christ’s resurrection. This is the victory of love!

Yes, God's love is at work most powerfully on the cross. He wants us to experience that love when we suffer, and especially in the Sacrifice of the Mass. We are drawn by love to be in communion with Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ's broken heart is given for our own broken hearts. At the altar, we unite our suffering with his.

Christ draws us through the love of his suffering to himself.

*Fr. Andrew Hofer, O.P., is Associate Professor and Director of the Doctoral Program on the Pontifical Faculty of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. He is the author of **Christ in the Life and Teachings of Gregory of Nazianzus***

For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [##309–14 and 618](#)
- [St. John Paul II](#), *Salvifici Doloris*
- [St. Thomas Aquinas](#), *Commentary on the Gospel of John*
- [St. Thomas Aquinas](#), *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3

In Short . . .

- *Everybody experiences suffering, and many have their faith put to the test by suffering.*
- *None of our own words can adequately explain suffering, but Christ gives us “the Gospel of suffering.”*
- *Christ proves his love through his suffering.*
- *By God’s grace, we can unite our suffering in loving obedience with Christ.*
- *“I will draw everyone to myself” (John 12:32).*
- *“Draw me after you” (Song 1:3).*