

by John Mahoney, S.J.

Christians are accused of discounting human suffering. Catholics are charged with increasing people's sufferings in order to keep the rules of the Church, sometimes with regarding suffering as a just punishment, and even with considering it as something good and desirable in itself. In addition, your profession and mine are closely and continually connected with suffering in a variety of forms, and while on occasion we may be forgiven for seeing life in terms of little else, the possibility of this one-sided view at least prevents us from evading the fact that there is a great deal of suffering in ordinary life and that as both Christians and professionals we are compelled to think seriously of it.

Suppose we begin with this idea of suffering as a punishment, or a judgment, or a visitation of divine wrath. It is not uncommon to meet people who regard their sufferings as a judgment, and who gloomily go further and say that not only is God punishing them, but he is quite right to do so. We may see this attitude at times as part of a personality disorder needing therapy, and rightly. But it is also true that a number of passages in the Bible, notably in the Old Testament, do interpret suffering as part of a divine pedagogy, by which God is seen correcting his people and bringing them back to their senses and to him. We must agree, of course, that there is a pedagogy of pain in everyday life, where a painful sensation can be part of the body's early-warning system in a hazardous environment, or where ailment can sometimes be seen as directly linked with some form of self-indulgence. (One may think of lung cancer, or cirrhosis of the liver.) But to interpret suffering as simply punishment for sins is quite mistaken. Not only is it rejected in the Old Testament, in the profound meditation on human misery which we know as the Book of Job, but in the New Testament it is further repudiated by the life of Jesus, the innocent man of sorrows, and by his teaching. In St Luke's gospel, for instance, we are taught clearly that suffering is not proportionate to personal sins. 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No. . . . Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No.' (Luke 13, 2-5.) And in St John's Gospel this teaching is carried significantly further. 'As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him".' (John 9, 1-5.) And then Jesus healed him. In this passage it is significant that the disciples pre-

<sup>1</sup>A paper read to the Guild of Catholic Professional Social Workers at their recent Spode Conference on The Problem of Pain.

sumed that suffering was a punishment; but it is even more significant that Jesus regarded this view as quite mistaken.

Suffering, then, is not a judgment of an angry God, but somehow it is 'that the works of God might be made manifest'. The sufferer is not rejected by God. On the contrary, it is precisely when man is suffering that God is closest to him. As the Council expressed it in the closing address to the sick and the suffering, 'You are the preferred members of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of hope, happiness and life. You are the brothers of the suffering Christ, and with him, if you wish, you are saving the world,<sup>1</sup> and all who suffer are 'united with the suffering of Christ in a special way for the salvation of the world'.<sup>2</sup> This statement of the Church in Council on suffering only echoes the teaching of St Paul and sums up the Church's teaching concerning the positive value with which human suffering can be invested within a religious context: that union with our Lord in his suffering can contribute not only to sharing his glory and happiness after death but also to his continuing work of saving mankind. And it is in this context that we may consider another accusation I have mentioned, that Christians think suffering desirable or something good in itself.

It is a view with which we are all familiar, and it is certainly a valuable view, that suffering and pain have to be 'accepted', and that they can be transformed by inserting them into the suffering of Jesus for the salvation of the world. This is the Theology of the Cross; and it is a theology about which I should like to make two observations. The first is that it is the *theology* of the Cross. What precisely does that mean? Simply this, that it is an attempt to interpret experience in the light of God, a way of explaining the ordinary human experience of pain and suffering to which we are all subject in terms of our Christian faith. We do this by interpreting suffering, by giving it a meaning, by accepting it with faith and in union with Christ and so transforming it into something positive. The theology of the Cross, like all theology, is an attempt to interpret and make meaning of human experience. And my second remark is that this theology of the Cross owes a great deal to the Middle Ages. At that time Christian society was faced by so many sources of pain and suffering with which it was unable to cope naturally. Consider the great lack of public health facilities, the famines, the natural tragedies, the black death, the political exploitation and abuse of power, the wars, feuds and oppression, life expectancy and mortality rates, and so on. What could people do to bring these harsh facts of life and human helplessness into their faith? How could they make sense of these experiences as Christians, make them something intelligible and understandable, and even helpful, in their lives? Largely by a theology of the Cross. Since there is nothing we can do

<sup>1</sup>Closing Message of the Council to the Poor, the Sick, and the Suffering, *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Abbott, 1966, p. 734.

<sup>2</sup>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, No. 41 (Abbott, p. 70).

about it, we can at least accept it for the love of Christ, and 'offer it up'. And in so doing they developed a profound theological interpretation of human experience, and confirmed a deep and valuable element of Christian spirituality.

By contrast with that approach and the historical experience which stimulated it, man today is in a different situation. I do not mean to suggest that there is less suffering today, either physical or mental, or that what insurance companies are pleased to call 'acts of God' are not so frequent, far less that there has been a decline in man's inhumanity to man, whether at an individual or an institutional level. But man has stirred, and begun increasingly to take charge of his life and his environment. He is not, on the whole, so completely helpless and passive before human catastrophe, and if he is not entirely successful in preventing it he is at least much more resourceful in its relief. He is not so fatalistic in acceptance of suffering, and his social and political achievements and aspirations are witness to the growing determination that helplessness is not all. And in many areas of society there have been astonishing advances in coping with pain and suffering, in medicine and surgery, and in the development of increasingly refined techniques and procedures. Faced with such a dynamic reaction to situations of human misery, the Christian attitude is sometimes seen as a rather grudging one, expressive of an uneasy suspicion that life is being made too soft and easy, and that we are emptying out the meaning of Christian suffering in doing our best to dispel it. And yet what is also emerging today is not simply a programme of human progress, but also a new stress in theology to interpret our experience of such progress. Just as in former centuries man, helpless before pain, suffering and anxiety, interpreted this in terms of the Cross and the suffering of Jesus, today where human advancement is to be found it is being interpreted in terms, not of Christ's death, but of his resurrection. And one reason why the theology of the resurrection is so attractive and congenial to many people today is because it helps to explain and interpret the advancement of human culture, where the theology of the Cross and of suffering would not help to explain it.

There is nothing in the world which is outside the power of Christ's resurrection. It is a cosmic event, not affecting simply men's souls, but designed to pervade society and diminish suffering, pain, anxiety, worry and any lack of integrity in the human person. Just as Jesus himself in his ordinary everyday ministry of healing was anticipating his resurrection to heal the world, so our work today in society is to spread the strong healing power of his resurrection to all men and women. And it is against this background that we can best appreciate the vocation and challenge of the caring professions; for the healing power of Christ's resurrection is being communicated through such work as well as through the more-manifest sacramental life of the Church.

Here perhaps it is relevant to say something about the attitude of

the Christian to society in general. In the past a strong element of Catholic teaching has been concerned with avoiding the world and the secular, with concentrating on the sacred, on God as our final end, and on the salvation of our own souls. The stress on personal salvation and escape from the allurements and contamination of the world found expression in such movements as that of the Desert Fathers, and where the Christian had perforce to remain in the world, life on this earth was seen as a matter of sitting this one out, arms folded in tight-lipped hope, with the promise of being eventually happy 'for ever in the next', after the solitary ordeal of particular judgment at death. This picture is no doubt overdrawn, but it is not for all that entirely false or unrecognizable. Today, however, it is changing, for we have come to see more and more, particularly since the Council, that as Christians we are committed to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. We have come to realize that life is not simply a matter of saving my soul but is aimed at the transformation of man. It is no longer a question of avoiding society but of changing it. And the Christian vocation is not out of society in rejection of it, but of being involved in society in order to transform it, and so sharing in the work of God. The vocation we have is to take what is human, and make it more human by making it Christian. For we have come to perceive that God's grace is invisibly present in all men, in all situations; and we are commissioned to find that grace, to bring it to light and to refine it, in human life, in human values, culture, science, and in healing and caring. The Church is responsible to God for society, and this programme of positive responsibility for transforming society is expressed in the theology of the resurrection, as a mission to spread in society and to all men and women Christ's victory over sin and death, disease, misery, pain and suffering.

But what, then, has become of the Christian value of suffering? Is this approach not an emptying out of the Cross and of the value of sharing in Christ's suffering? No. Our whole life, and the life of society, is a tension between the Cross and the resurrection, between suffering and healing, between what has been won through Christ's victory over death, sickness and pain, and what is yet to be won. And the attitude of the Christian towards advances in medicine, surgery, care and healing should be one of gratitude and ungrudging, whole-hearted acceptance of this sharing in Jesus' own victory, coupled with a desire to communicate it 'to make the works of God manifest'. And so the really Christian attitude to suffering is to abolish it wherever possible, while knowing at the same time that however hard we work to eliminate it there will always be an inevitable residue of suffering in life. It is here that the theology of the Cross is still valid and helpful, where suffering cannot be dispelled; for it is here that Christ's work of healing and integrating is still in process and has not yet broken through to victory.

This reference to an unavoidable element of suffering brings me

to the other charge I mentioned as made against Catholics, that we increase people's sufferings through a rigid desire to keep the rules of the Church. No one would wish to claim that the Church's record here was unblemished and, indeed, the Council, referring uncompromisingly to 'the human failings of those to whom the gospel is entrusted', called for an energetic struggle against such defects 'lest they inflict harm on the spread of the Gospel'.<sup>1</sup> But even when that is said, there are many other considerations to be borne in mind in examining the suffering which religious and moral principles can entail. One such, for instance, is the whole question of the priorities we have in life, and where in our order of priorities we place the absence of suffering. At the top, near the bottom, or somewhere around the middle? I have said that the really Christian attitude to suffering is to abolish it wherever possible. But I suppose one should qualify that by adding 'and wherever desirable'; for it seems that some suffering is desirable or necessary in the human life. E. J. Yarnold observes that 'we mature by responding to pressures and challenges',<sup>2</sup> and, as John Hick concludes in his excellent study *Evil and the God of Love*, 'a soft, unchallenging world would be inhabited by a soft, unchallenged race of men'.<sup>3</sup> Human advancement, personal maturity, the expansion of the human spirit, can come about, it appears, only in reaction to adverse circumstances, and it seems not only humanly impossible but humanly undesirable to eliminate all suffering. And one of the strongest arguments against euthanasia, for instance, is that the spirit of man is challenged to control his environment rather than succumb to it, and that to opt against this is to be less than human.

This perhaps brings a deeper meaning to the phrase I have already used, 'the pedagogy of pain', in the sense that not all our desires can be satisfied or fulfilled, but that an acceptance of the unfulfilment of certain desires can lead eventually to a deeper and more satisfying fulfilment, not to be seen as an arbitrary reward for labour (like a new bicycle for passing examinations), but in the sense that *through* suffering one achieves a state of enrichment. I think this is part of the resurrection of Jesus to which we do not pay sufficient attention, that his experience of suffering, and his fidelity in the midst of suffering, matured him towards his resurrection, and that his resurrection is a transfiguration through suffering. And if morality is a matter of human living, and not just of keeping Church rules, another inevitable suffering in human life arises precisely from the conflict between desires and moral norms. The check of human moral norms entails suffering in most lives, whether in making a personal decision or in supporting another to make such a decision. And just as there is a peculiar character to the pain of witnessing and sharing

<sup>1</sup>Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 43 (Abbott, p. 245).

<sup>2</sup>"Grieving the Spirit"—On Sin', in R. Butterworth (ed.), *The Spirit in Action*, St Paul Publications, 1968, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup>John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, Fontana, 1968, p. 343.

the sufferings of others, which can make it a positive and healing suffering of compassion, so too, I believe, there can be some positive gain for both parties in the shared situation where we unwillingly, but unavoidably, find ourselves causing or increasing the sufferings of others, because of moral or other reasons.

When all this is said, however, it remains that the Christian attitude is to abolish unnecessary suffering. It is easy to opine that suffering purifies and matures; but it can also crush and destroy. Intense pain can dominate consciousness to the point of collapse; and while deep suffering *can* call forth resources of nobility and self-sacrifice, it can also find its culmination in bitterness, lethargy and despair. And it is a minimal desideratum to reduce suffering at least to the level at which it can become manageable, and so capable of being transformed by a Christian interpretation and invested with a Christian meaning. Pain must be made endurable, by prevention and alleviation where possible, and where impossible by interpretation. We are familiar with the ability of distractions to block pain; and in a total situation where pain can be subsumed into achievement it can also be made tolerable. 'The labour we delight in physics pain.' But it is not simply a matter of finding means of endurance, is it? And I should like to finish by offering some reflections on a particular Christian theme which seems to me to have a positive bearing on suffering, the theme of reconciliation.

The whole of Christ's life and activity can be summed up in the word reconciliation. As Paul writes: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself . . . and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.' 'Through Christ (God) reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5, 18f). This theme could be developed at some length but I must content myself with only two points. The first is that, of all suffering, none is perhaps so tragic as that of loneliness, of being alone. And loneliness can so easily become excruciating in suffering, where I am most aware of my being and of the dull weight of myself. 'I suffer, therefore I am, alone', might almost sum it up. And yet it is central to the Christian faith that man is reconciled to God and nevermore alone, least of all in suffering. As Jesus himself was to say in anticipation of his lonely death: 'He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone' (John 8, 29); and since his death no man is rejected or alone. As Tillich puts it, it is possible for the Christian to transform loneliness into solitude, for loneliness he sees as the pain of being quite alone, while solitude expresses the contentment of being alone with God. And 'the terror of ultimate loneliness' can, in the last analysis, be dispelled only by the reconciling presence of God.<sup>1</sup>

But we must not think of this presence of God to suffering man as only in the heart or mind of the believer, or pressing around the unbeliever unseen and ineffective. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation, and in our presence and care and support his presence

<sup>1</sup>Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, SCM, 1963, pp. 11f.



and care and support are extended to those who suffer, offering through our ministrations his reconciliation and peace with himself and all men. In this way God has called us to lead others through the shadows of life without fear, strong in our own belief that shadows betray another dimension to life, and conceal the quiet presence of God and his reconciling love.

And finally, the gift of God in Christ and through those who care is not only reconciliation with God and with man, but also, and radically, reconciliation with oneself. Such reconciliation is a deeply satisfying human experience, a healing of self-rejection, which enables one to accept clear-eyed one's weakness, impotence, achievements and failures, vulnerability, frailty, humanity and suffering. It is a coming to terms with oneself and one's life, not in the sense of surrender or passive resignation before life and its vicissitudes, nor in the sense of actively desiring to increase one's sufferings, far less regarding them as the vengeance of an angry god; but in the sense of an active personal acceptance that life has been and is in the making, and that God's work of loving creation is still in hand and being made manifest. Peter Abelard in his loveliest hymn, written for Good Friday, addresses our Lord as going forth 'alone to sacrifice' on our behalf, and prays that we in our suffering may accompany him, to share his glory and 'win the laughter of thine Easter Day'.<sup>1</sup> It is only in the tension between death and birth that we can really make sense of suffering. And it is only through the constriction of pain that we can come to the divine laughter of release, of relief, of contentment, and of rebirth. It is something of this, but little else, that can make meaning of pain in the Christian life.

<sup>1</sup>In Helen Waddell's sensitive translation, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, Penguin, p. 179.

## The Church in Haiti\*

The subject of this interview, which was given in Paris to Claudio Zanchettin just before the death of Duvalier earlier this year, is a citizen of Haiti. For obvious reasons he must remain anonymous.

*Can you tell me about the present social and economic situation in Haiti?*

To understand the present reality you must go back to the history of this country.

The state of the social classes in Haiti is even today not very different from that existing before independence was achieved in 1804. From the times of slavery—which lasted for three centuries—we have dragged along a structure based on three classes: the French

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