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False Gospels, Poor Solutions

The problem of suffering is the problem that every human movement is trying to resolve. It is at the heart of the deepest questions that man can ask and with which man can struggle. St. Thomas Aquinas identifies this as one of the only arguments that can be made against the existence of God:

> "Objection: It seems that God does not exist; because if there are two contrary things and one is infinite, the other would be totally destroyed. But the word 'God' means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would not be any evil to be found; but there is evil in the world. Therefore, God does not exist."[1]

Man encounters suffering and must find a way to resolve this tension that he feels between the way things are, the way they make him feel, and the way he thinks they ought to be. In his despair, he may turn to Agnosticism or Atheism, or he may embrace various false gospels.

Buddhists proclaim their false gospel of *nirvana*, or nothingness, in which all suffering is absent because there is nothing. Mohammedans proclaim their false gospel of submission to a false god and his false prophet. This god is too transcendent to be a Father or a God of love, and thus suffering is ultimately what their false god wills. But these false gospels ultimately flee from the problem of suffering by trying to ignore the painful issue, hoping it will go away.

The currently dominant false gospel of psychology (first popularized in the 1960s during the Human Potential Movement and Sexual Revolution) proclaims the errors of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich. They say that suffering is a result of failing to let your emotions out, or repressing your inner desires. The false gospel of psychology, in particular, is the one that has overtaken the Conciliar Church, as they have stripped the Sacred Liturgy of everything that does not make people "feel good," and many clergy are more concerned with making people "feel good" than preaching the hard truths of the Gospel and repentance.[2] Even worse, many men have identified the charity and mercy of Jesus Christ particularly with this false "niceness" and "feelings." But this, again, simply buries the problem of suffering in a

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distraction of positive emotions. The problem of suffering will always return, no matter how effective a false gospel may be in causing a prolonged distraction.

The True Gospel of Christ Crucified

None of these false gospels will ever answer the problem of suffering because they fail to give the answer revealed by God Himself. No man can resolve this problem without God's help. St. Thomas gives the answer to the objection given above:

> "As Augustine says (Enchiridion xi): '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.' This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good."[3]

God demonstrates His infinite goodness and omnipotence in that He produces good even out of evil and suffering. Against the raucous din of the false gospels trying in vain to overcome the problem of suffering, the Church solemnly proclaims the good news of truth to every creature under heaven:

> *Ecce lignum Crucis, in quo salus mundi pepéndit. Veníte, adorémus.*
>
> Behold, the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world. Come, let us adore.[4]

It is in Christ Crucified that the problem of suffering is forever answered. This is the true Gospel, which enters into the heart of man and the darkness of his evil and suffering:

> "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews indeed a stumblingblock, and unto the Gentiles foolishness: But unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Cor. 1:23-25)

This is the infinite goodness of God in that "He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good." There is no greater good for man than the eternal salvation of souls. And this was accomplished out of the gravest evil imaginable: the brutal crucifixion and

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ignominious death of the sinless Son of God—in a word, the Cross. Every Christian venerates this symbol of salvation, which has been transformed from a symbol of evil. Before the Cross of Christ, this instrument of torture and death stood for fear and domination to all who saw it. Now, this symbol is lifted before the faithful, kindling charity in their hearts. It is lifted before the pagans, preaching the Gospel of their salvation from idols. It is lifted before the Jews and Mohammadans, calling them to baptism and eternal life. Who cannot marvel at the infinite goodness of God, bringing His greatest good for man out of such a horrific evil?

The Cross of Suffering for Every Christian

Therefore, the Church rejoices in the suffering of Jesus Christ her Savior:

> "We adore Thy Cross, O Lord: and we praise and glorify Thy holy resurrection: for behold by the wood of the Cross joy came into the whole world."[5]

The Cross is venerated as the means of our salvation. It is honored as the instrument of suffering by which the world is saved from eternal damnation. This is the infinite goodness of God in bringing the greatest good out of the evil of crucifixion.

But this is not the false gospel of Luther and the Protestants, wherein this Cross is celebrated, yet our lives are not truly impacted. The true Gospel of Jesus Christ makes the Cross penetrate the very soul of the Christian, so that his sufferings too are united to the Cross of Christ. As the Apostle declares: "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for His body, which is the Church" (Col. 1:24).

The Protestant cannot understand this verse because it runs contrary to their false gospel. But Augustine explains:

> "He did not say 'of the sufferings of me' but 'of Christ,' because he was a member of Christ and in His persecutions, such as it was necessary for Christ to suffer in His whole body, even Paul was filling up Christ's affliction in Paul's own portion."[6]

Christ, Who has ascended to heaven, "dieth no more" (Rom. 6:9), yet the Christian can say with St. Paul, "I die daily" (I Cor. 15:31) and again, "Always bearing about in our body the

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mortification of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:10). Christ as Head of the Church, does not suffer any more in Heaven. And yet the Church as His Body and each of us as His members indeed suffer here on earth, and these sufferings are not our own, but also Christ's. This is the reason that Our Lord could say to St. Paul before His conversion: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me? "(Acts 9:4). Christ, says Augustine in another place, speaks and identifies Himself with His Body no less than He does with His Head—Christ is not divided, but one person.[7] Each of us has our "own portion" of Christ's sufferings to bear here on earth.

Understand then, O Christian, how noble, true and good can be your sufferings. Christ Himself will deign to make these sufferings His own, if only you, through His grace, unite yourself to Him. Do not scorn your sufferings as so many discomforts and annoyances, but as you venerate the Cross of Christ so offer your own sufferings in imitation of and union with Him. Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. (1877-1964), one of the greatest theologians and spiritual masters of the 20th century, wrote concerning this subject:

> "This spirit of detachment through imitation of Jesus crucified…is the condition of a close union with God, whence supernatural life overflows in a manner ever new, and at times stupendous, for the eternal welfare of souls. This is evidenced by the lives of all the saints without exception, and we ought to nourish our souls daily with the examples of these great servants of God. The world is not so much in need of philosophers and sociologists, as of saints who are the living image of the Savior among us."[8]

Thus, we see that the Cross not only saves us from eternal damnation but also becomes the means by which we enter into "a close union with God," by accepting our share in the sufferings of His Son. This is where salutary suffering begins to transform the individual soul.

Christ Commands the Christian to Suffer with Him

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis (d. 1471) speaks profoundly on this point:

> "To many the saying, *Deny thyself, take up thy cross and follow Me* (Matt. 16:24), seems hard, but it will be much harder to hear that final word: *Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire* (Matt. 25:41). Those who hear the word of the cross and follow it willingly now, need not fear that they will hear of eternal

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> damnation on the day of judgment. This sign of the cross will be in the heavens when the Lord comes to judge. Then all the servants of the cross, who during life made themselves one with the Crucified, will draw near with great trust to Christ, the Judge[.]
>
> …How is it that you look for another way than this, the royal way of the holy cross? The whole life of Christ was a cross and a martyrdom, and do you seek rest and enjoyment for yourself? You deceive yourself, you are mistaken if you seek anything but to suffer, for this mortal life is full of miseries and marked with crosses on all sides. Indeed, the more spiritual progress a person makes, so much heavier will he frequently find the cross, because as his love increases, the pain of his exile also increases.
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> Yet such a man, though afflicted in many ways, is not without hope of consolation, because he knows that great reward is coming to him for bearing his cross. And when he carries it willingly, every pang of tribulation is changed into hope of solace from God. Besides, the more the flesh is distressed by affliction, so much the more is the spirit strengthened by inward grace. Not infrequently a man is so strengthened by his love of trials and hardship in his desire to conform to the cross of Christ, that he does not wish to be without sorrow or pain, since he believes he will be the more acceptable to God if he is able to endure more and more grievous things for His sake. It is the grace of Christ, and not the virtue of man, which can and does bring it about that through fervor of spirit frail flesh learns to love and to gain what it naturally hates and shuns."[9]

The pious soul will long to be united to Jesus Christ in His Passion, for as the charity of a soul increases, so does the love of suffering which conforms a soul to Christ. But this starts with the very command of Christ to partake of His cross with Him. Fr. Ignatius of the Side of Jesus contemplates this reality in the person of Simon of Cyrene:

> "[Jesus'] consent that another should relieve Him of His Cross arises from no desire of unburdening His sacred shoulders, but is a mystery intended to teach us that He is pleased to share His sufferings with all His elect. On the other hand, Jesus is, at the same time, ready to bear His Cross so long as to fall several times beneath its weight, and even finally to expire upon it. And with what degree of constancy do you bear your Cross? Do you persevere in virtue? Are you firm and constant in your resolution to follow Jesus Christ, and to suffer with Him and for Him? Remember that whoever does not take up his Cross and follow Jesus is not

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> worthy of Him. Whoever has not partaken of His sufferings will not partake of His glory. Jesus desires to associate us with Himself in His eternal happiness, and for that reason it is His will that we, in the person of Simon of Cyrene, should assist Him to carry His Cross."[10]

Therefore, we must be assured that Our Lord not only procures our salvation with His Holy Cross, but also commands us to partake of this suffering with Him, in order that our sufferings too will be transformed by the infinite goodness of God. Herein we will find union with our Savior.

Original Sin and Attachment

But how does God transform our sufferings into union with Him? We must understand our condition to understand the salutary good in suffering. We are afflicted with the effects of Original Sin: a darkened intellect and weakened will. In particular, this is seen in our attachments to creatures. An attachment may be defined as a strong or even overwhelming inclination toward something which pulls your intellect and will like gravity. In modern usage, we might also use the word "addiction." These can be unlawful pleasures, such as sins against the Sixth Commandment, but they can also be lawful pleasures, like food and drink, entertainment, or social media. Even more, the saints tell us, we can become attached to very good things like consolations and joys, whether natural or supernatural. All of these excessive attachments, however, incline our hearts away from the only place where attachment should be: God alone. As Thomas à Kempis teaches in *The Imitation of Christ*:

> "Unless a man be disengaged from all things created, he cannot freely attend to things divine[.]…And unless a man be elevated in spirit, and free from attachment to all creatures, and wholly united to God, whatever he knows and whatever he has is of no great importance."[11]

Sufferings must be embraced because they break the cycle of attachment that we have to creatures, giving us an occasion to unite ourselves to God more closely. Here we can begin to develop the spirit of detachment from creatures, in order to attach ourselves to the Uncreated. Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange elaborates:

> "We should detach ourselves from exterior goods, riches and honors. *If riches abound, set not your heart upon them* (Ps. 61:11). St. Paul says: *The time is short*

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> *… and they that rejoice, as if they rejoiced not; … and they that use this world, as if they used it not* (I Cor. 7:29-31). Even those who do not effectively practice the counsel of evangelical poverty ought to have its spirit if they wish to tend to perfection.
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> We must detach ourselves from the goods of the body, from beauty, from health itself; it would be an aberration to cling to them more than to union with God. And we cling to health far more than we think; if it were irremediably taken from us, it would be a true sacrifice for us, and one that may be asked of us. All these things will pass away like a flower that withers.
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> We must avoid all complacency in the virtues we may have. To entertain any complacency would be vanity and perhaps amount to scorn of our neighbor. The Christian ought to esteem the virtues, not inasmuch as they are in him like a personal possession, but inasmuch as they lead the soul to God.
>
> When we receive consolations in prayer, we must not dwell on them with satisfaction; to do so would be to make of this means of drawing near to God an obstacle that would hinder us from reaching Him. It would be the equivalent of pausing in a selfish fashion over something created and making an end of the means. By so doing, we would set out on the road of spiritual pride and illusion. All that glitters is not gold; and we must be careful not to confound an imitation diamond with a real one. We should remind ourselves of our Savior's words: *Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God and His justice; and all these things* (all that is useful to your soul and even to your body) *shall be added unto you* (Matt. 6:33).
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> Therefore, we understand that adversity is good for us in order to deliver us from illusion and make us find the true road again."[12]

Suffering is like a wake-up call by which God tells us that this or that thing to which we are attached is in fact created, changeable, and passing away. Instead, in these times we must lift our hearts to Christ Crucified Who is uncreated, unchangeable, and will never pass away. In this way, we can thank God for sufferings because they give us this salutary occasion for detachment and union with Christ Crucified.

Virtue Lies in the Mean

In our daily quest to embrace suffering for love of God, we must also remember that virtue

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is found in the moderation between excess and defect.[13] Consequently, we must guard against an immoderate zeal by which a pious soul is often tricked by the devil into seeking out and embracing more suffering than lies in their capacity.[14] This leads to burn-out, exhaustion, and is really a fruit of pride and presumption.

Instead, St. Thomas observes that there is a virtue of "right recreation" (*eutrapelia*) which uses pleasures in a moderated way in order that the soul may rest and be rejuvenated.[15] This is necessary for pious souls and, hence, after the austerities of Lent the Church bids all men rejoice and feast for fifty days of Paschaltide. But here, too, we must be careful to not indulge to excess during our feasting at Easter, lest we squander whatever progress we might have made during Lent. Dom Lorenzo Scupoli (d. 1610), in praising the love of suffering, also discusses the need for rest in his classic work *The Spiritual Combat*:

> "No one, however, is forbidden to exercise a proper prudence and diligence in providing for necessities, according to his position. For this is according to the Will of God, and is no impediment to peace or genuine spiritual progress. Let your purpose be in all things to do your duty according to your ability, and be indifferent and resigned as to all results, which are beyond you. There is one thing always in your power, and that is to offer to God your will, and desire no longer to will anything of yourself; for as soon as you have this freedom, and are detached on all sides (which you can be always and everywhere, when occupied or not), you will enjoy tranquility and peace."[16]

In short, we must adhere to the will of God and understand that while we need suffering in order to achieve detachment, we also need rest to moderate our toil. St. Paul exemplifies this moderation and detachment when he says:

> "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content therewith. I know both how to be brought low, and I know how to abound (everywhere and in all things I am instructed): both to be full and to be hungry: both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me." (Philip. 4:11-13)

Here we may observe the fundamental lesson of humility: we need sufferings because we are attached to created things, and we need restful pleasures also since we are beginners in the spiritual life and cannot endure the great sufferings of the saints. Humility is conformity with the truth, and thus the pious soul uses these things properly in conformity with the

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truth.[17] Thus, as the Apostle says, "in all things I am instructed".

The Will of God

But even more than this, we see in the sufferings of Our Lord that we are instructed about the glory to come. In the Resurrection, we see that the true value of suffering is *conformity to the will of God*, which will overcome even death itself. It is the will of God that we venerate in the Cross. Whether we suffer or we rest from sufferings, we must conform to the will of God. And here we find hope for our current crisis, wherein we must submit to the inscrutable Providence of God: "For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Therefore, whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8). Let us embrace the will of God, especially in sufferings, in order to be conformed to Jesus Christ and inherit eternal life.

> "Learn, O my soul, in what manner thou shouldst accept whatever God sends thee. It may be a heavy Cross that he sends thee, but remember that it is imposed upon thee by God Himself. Thou wilt never be called upon to suffer as much as Jesus, and unless thou bearest thy Cross after Him, thou wilt never partake of His glory."[18]

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[1] *Summa Theologiae* (ST) I, q. 2, a. 3, arg. 1 (translation my own). *Videtur quod Deus non sit. Quia si unum contrariorum fuerit infinitum, totaliter destruetur aliud. Sed hoc intelligitur in hoc nomine Deus, scilicet quod sit quoddam bonum infinitum. Si ergo Deus esset, nullum malum inveniretur. Invenitur autem malum in mundo. Ergo Deus non est.*

[2] This was Bugnini's famous justification for gutting the liturgy of our fathers so that Protestants would feel welcome: "We must strip from our liturgies everything that would be a shadow of a stumbling block to Protestants" (March 19, 1965 edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*). In the same way, the post-conciliar Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office) specifically justifies their censoring of certain Psalm verses and entire Psalms for

"psychological" reasons (*General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, 131). Finally, in the new lectionary, "texts that present real difficulties are avoided for pastoral reasons" (*General Introduction to the Lectionary*,76).

[3] ST I, q. 2, a. 3, ad. 1.

[4] Antiphon at the Elevation of the Cross, Good Friday Liturgy.

[5] Antiphon before the *Crux Fidelis*, Good Friday Liturgy.

[6] St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John: 55-111* (CUA Press: 1994), p. 282.

[7] St. Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms, Ps. 37*.

[8] Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life* Vol. I (Herder: 1947), p. 297.

[9] Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book II, ch. 12.

[10] Fr. Ignatius of the Side of Jesus, *The School of Jesus Crucified* (1866), Day 23.

[11] *The Imitation of Christ*, Book III, ch. 31.

[12] Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. 375-376.

[13] ST I-II, q. 64, a. 1.

[14] Cf. St. John Cassian, *Conferences* I, ch. 17.

[15] ST II-II, q. 168, a. 2.

[16] Dom Lorenzo Scupoli, *Of Interior Peace or the Path to Paradise* contained within *The Spiritual Combat* (Scriptoria Books: 2012), pp. 173, 174.

[17] ST II-II, q. 161.

[18] Fr. Ignatius, *op. cit.*, Day 20.

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