

FAITH, SUFFERING, AND THE PROLIFE MOVEMENT

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MANY OF THE CURRENT ethical conflicts in the prolife movement turn on the question of suffering. Must one be a religious believer in order to see that some forms of suffering, whether in problem pregnancies or in death and dying are preferable to extinguishing human life? Can we convince our fellow citizens of moral truths by moral reasoning which is not based upon revelation? I think this effort at moral consensus can be successful but its success rests on confronting and arguing certain basic questions. Believers and nonbelievers must ask themselves: (1) Is Christian ethics distinctive? (2) Do Christians have a special and distinct ethical perspective on suffering? and (3) Can Christians and others share a perspective on morally necessary suffering?

IS CHRISTIAN ETHICS DISTINCTIVE?

If we hold with certain Christian ethicists that Christian believers must live by a morality and ethics completely distinct from nonbelievers and 'secular bioethics,' then a pluralistic society must remain divided on questions of abortion and death and dying.ⁱ Believers can hardly impose their morality and ethical attitudes toward suffering and dying upon others who do not share their faith commitments. Nor can they expect religious conversion. The best that the faithful can hope for is to segregate themselves from a secularized culture and concentrate on creating their own enclaves and exemplary religious institutions. At the very least believers who are facing problem pregnancies or are ill or dying in mainstream medical settings should be able to have access to caregivers and spiritual counselors who share the unique moral and ethical convictions.ⁱⁱ

Christians who affirm that a great moral and ethical divide exists between those who stand beneath the cross of Christ and those who do not make claims of uniqueness because they view their morality and ethics as directly founded and uniquely shaped by Divine revelation in Scripture and the tradition of their Church. They may even go so far as to describe

nonbelievers without their own faith-commitments as “moral strangers.”ⁱⁱⁱ Since such believers have little hope of persuading their fellow citizens to adopt their moral and ethical convictions, they can only ask that a pluralistic society allow religious persons to follow their conscience and practise their faith in separate communities. Yes, believers can state their faith perspectives in the public square, but without much hope for reaching moral consensus and affecting public policy. The divide between believers and unbelievers will be seen as most unbridgeable when life and death issues are at stake; in these questions of humankind’s ultimate destiny believers will affirm that it is crucial to take into account the fact that human beings will have a future with a Divine Creator beyond the limits of this life.

Happily, other Christian ethicists with whom I take my stand do not argue for a separatist strategy based upon unbridgeable ethical and moral divisions. Instead, the claim is made that in morality and ethics there can never be a conflict between what can be discerned and accepted by all persons of good will as authentically human and the Christian faith.^{iv} This humanistic view has been the position of many prominent Roman Catholic ethicists who further affirm that believers and unbelievers of good will can morally reason together to reach moral consensus on basic ethical requirements of society.^v This hopeful affirmation of “integral humanism” rests on the belief that all human beings everywhere are created in the image of God and are endowed by God with reason and conscience. Even those who have never heard the Gospel good news can have God’s moral law written in their hearts. Therefore there can never be any moral strangers; there may be evildoers but not strangers. Even Cain did not have his conscience destroyed nor did God allow him to be killed after his transgression. All humankind and every society, even those without explicit Christian faith-commitments, can possess the moral resources to seek and respond to the good and thereby accept essential moral truths.

Pope John Paul II voices this universality when he does not hesitate to address and instruct the whole world on disputed moral and ethical matters concerning life and death or justice and peace. While specific religious and Church obligations will be required only of those committed to faith in Christ and the Church, moral truths about good and evil can be known by

all persons of good will through the gift of human reasoning; and universal moral truths impose moral obligations upon all competent persons and all societies. Statements of universal human rights, for instance, can justifiably be articulated by the United Nations and must be respected always and everywhere.

When such a universalist moral position, based upon an affirmation of the rational moral nature of humankind made in the image of God, is taken as a foundation for ethics, then it follows that Christians in American society should never withdraw from mainstream civic and ethical debate. Believers need never give up their hopes of rationally persuading others of basic moral truths. Whether it is a matter of war, welfare, sexuality, or any other challenging bioethical question of life and death, the claim is made that persons who share a common human nature can reach a moral consensus.

In an optimistic Christian approach to ethics, God's role as Creator of a good creation is emphasized as well as God's self-revelation in Scripture and unique saving action in the Incarnation. Christ's redemptive work is viewed as restoring the creation and fulfilling the original blessing.^{vi} As it was in the beginning, is now in the present, and ever shall be, God's Spirit moves the world, constantly urging human hearts and minds Godward. In Christ the Author of creation becomes Incarnate as a human being, Divine and one of us, and through the Spirit initiates the final birthing of the new creation.^{vii} Truth, love, and justice are one; truth is great and will prevail. These faith-assumptions about God, the creation, and the goodness of rational human nature lead to beliefs that, despite setbacks and regressions, all of humankind can hope for moral progress in history. After all, while evil behavior still exists, no one today would morally defend the institution of slavery, witch trials, genocide, or torture of heretics.

The acknowledgment of dynamic historical processes of change within the world and also within the Church is an important new insight in Roman Catholic moral theology recognized since the Second Vatican Council. Change is no longer considered to be "synonymous with dissolution." As moral theologian John Mahoney, S.J. puts it in a chapter devoted to patterns in church renewal, "There cannot be any doubt that the Roman Catholic Church's teaching over the centuries and in recent decades has

changed markedly in many respects....”^{viii} In Mahoney’s assessment the process of reform in moral theology has been marked by an openness to new forms of social science such as anthropology and psychology, a drive to totality (especially interpersonal totality), a recognition of diversity and pluralism, and a recovery of mystery. When God is known as the God of love, then moral theology like all theology is an effort to make sense of divine reality. Human experience constantly questions the mystery of God and the meaning of the world.

Of course, when one focuses upon the mystery of God’s love for the world, a believer must also confront the mysterious presence and power of evil. The woundedness and fallen, flawed condition of the world challenges the affirmation of a good creation filled with good human beings made in the image of God. Can moral progress really be affirmed?

What of the terrible outbreaks of depravity and atrocities witnessed in our own century? It is the presence of so much cruelty and horror in history which convince Christian pessimists and separatists that human beings suffer from pervasive depravity. And with the power of sin over humankind acknowledged, they deduce that Christian ethics must be distinct from worldly wisdom. In the face of so much moral rejection of God and the good, so much deviousness in the innermost uses of the mind, moral truths can only be trusted that come from within the unique community created by God’s unique revelation in the Word.

Pessimists doubt the power of human reasoning to discover truth and can also question the universality of moral striving for good conscience. They focus upon the negative evidence of human self-deception, selfishness, greed, lust, anger, cruelty and general sinfulness. Surely, they conclude, one can only take refuge in the new, unique, and saving effects of Christ’s Incarnation as lived in the community of the Church as the body of Christ; only here can you find the final criteria of moral insight and truth. The role of Christian faith must be accorded its unique power to transform the mind and heart which will then “see” truths of morality. After all, even traditionally optimistic Catholic moral theology claims that human reason must be informed by faith. If persons without faith can through moral reasoning arrive at central moral and ethical truths, then what role is left for the Incarnation, for Divine revelation, for Scripture, for Church teaching?

My answer to this ancient tendency to doubt human rational capacities, to separate faith and reason, to oppose Jerusalem and Athens, is to affirm once again that the core *content* of ethical and moral truths always can be agreed upon by all competent persons of good will. Yet at the same time we can acknowledge that there can be some differences between Christians and others in the *ways* or *processes* which Christians use to go about the discovery and practice of moral truths. Ideally there should be a unique character to the lifestyle of Christians.^{ix} Moral discernment engaged in by Christians will employ more inclusive and extensive processes of truth seeking than unbelievers use in their search.

Christians who believe that the God of ethics is the God they worship in church will use their reasoning powers to reflect on their own experience and on the findings of secular inquiries. But at the same time they will seek moral insight through experiences of prayer, Scripture, liturgy, their Church's teaching tradition, and the study of theology. The range of human experience they will take into account will include their own and others' religious experiences of faith and revelation. The reasoned journey toward moral and ethical truth is thereby "informed by faith" because attention is explicitly focused upon God's Truth and Goodness as revealed within the faith. For instance, while all persons of good will can reasonably reach an understanding of the moral truth embodied in the golden rule, this command to treat others as one would wish to be treated has also been revealed in Scripture as God's word. A Christian believer, then, can have a double foundation for core moral and ethical insights into truths, one from reasoning about common human experience and one from focusing upon and reflecting upon God's revelation. And since the ground of both foundations is God, there can be no ultimate conflict.

By attending to revelation, Christians have often been the first to use reason to articulate moral insights which later become accepted as universal moral truths. Listening to the good news, Christians turned the world upside down when they affirmed the equality of all persons male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free as members of one family. Today equal respect for all persons is the cornerstone of our ethics and concepts of justice. Unfortunately it must also be admitted that there have been instances when Christian communities have been blind or denied universal

moral truths articulated by secular thinkers, or even occasionally, moral truths that once were part of an earlier Christian tradition but later became forgotten or ignored. A Church of sinners must be ever reforming, and moral progress in and out of the Church is not without its temporary regressions. Having learned humility, today's Christians can recognize that since the Spirit of God is always at work in the world inspiring other seekers of truth, the Church must read the signs of the times in order to benefit from other sources of truth in science and secular knowledge as well as in other religious communities.

Because of the double foundation of their moral insights and moral commitments, Christians may also speak in secular society with more assurance when they affirm the essential moral truths that they share with others. Perhaps a parable will help here. All human beings on earth find themselves taking part in an engrossing drama in which the plot-line seems unclear. But Christians in the play believe in a benevolent Author of the play who has even come to join the cast. And the good news brought from the Author to the participants in the drama is that the plot will move toward a superb finale with a triumphant happy ending; all will be well. In the meantime all members of the cast must struggle and help one another to construct and play their parts as well as they can—no matter how many more acts there will be.

When called upon to make decisions about challenging new problems, believers will join with their fellows in reasoned moral reflection using all common sources of knowledge. But Christians within their communities will also focus upon Christ the Word, through whom the universe is made, as a concrete norm and fulfillment of the moral life. As Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses this principle of moral guidance, Christ is both personal and universal, "This norm, therefore, embraces all men in their different ethical situations and unites all persons (with their uniqueness and freedom) in his Person. As the Holy Spirit of Freedom it also hovers over all men in order to bring them to the kingdom of the Father."^x

As the fulfillment of creation, Christ assures humankind of God's presence and investment in human life. Christians do not have to wonder why to be moral. They are assured that God is on the side of morality; there is a reality to the universal call of conscience to pursue good and

avoid evil. Our reasoning powers have not been given to us in vain. A sense of love and trust in God inspires and strengthens the rational moral quest. Reason is informed by faith, but faith in the Word as Logos makes us believe in reason and reasoning. Faith confirms reason and helps us trust in the moral meaningfulness of meaning and moral truth. God is the explanation of explanation who has given us the gift of reason in a wonder-filled good creation. Our experience with experience has been good. God grounds all moral seeking. Such a faith inspires moral reasoning and hope that we can cope with new challenges and reach moral consensus.

With the above foundation of integral humanism, it is possible to seek a moral consensus on the challenge of suffering. Here I will focus in particular on the ethical questions arising at the end of life.

WHAT IS A MORALLY GOOD APPROACH TO SUFFERING?

Developments in medicine and medical technology have produced new moral dilemmas and ethical complexities in decisions about the beginning and the end of life. Yet the very old question of suffering remains a part of the recent deliberations and conflicts over dying and a good death. What is the nature and meaning of suffering and what is an adequate response to it?

Many in our society now claim that much suffering can be avoided by instituting and approving the practices of physician assisted suicide and euthanasia.^{xi} A traditional (and the currently held Roman Catholic) position is that it is morally wrong to approve of self-determined death or any form of mercy-killing for those who suffer. If this moral affirmation is valid and true, then it should be seen as the most authentically human position by all rational persons of good will. Christians should be able to mount convincing arguments that persuade the rest of society. I think that in order to succeed in this project of persuasion, believers first need to explore and articulate a more fully adequate perspective on suffering.

To try and articulate a Christian understanding of human suffering is a monumental task because many Christians, like the Jews before them, have struggled over the problem of the existence of human suffering in a world created and sustained by a good, loving, and omnipotent God. Indeed, all reflective human beings in every culture and in every religious tradition have had to confront the insistent and primordial challenge of the meaning

of pain, suffering, and death.

Several points seem central to an adequate approach to suffering, for human suffering is a complex multidimensional phenomena. First, there can be suffering that comes from freely choosing wrongdoing and sin; this suffering is seen as incurring blame because it is voluntarily inflicted upon one's self.^{xii} Bad things happen to bad people. These bad things may include a host of physical losses as well as negative psychological experiences of guilt, shame, anger, self-contempt, disgust, sorrow, and remorse. In many cases suffering from negative emotions of self-blame may encourage repentance and reform. These instances have given rise to the ancient concept of suffering as leading to purification and moral growth.

The idea that suffering can lead to the growth of a better moral character has appeared in Jewish and Christian scriptures under the rubric of God's disciplining of His beloved children and chosen people. To accept this interpretation of suffering, however, you have to accede to the idea that God actively and directly visits suffering upon human beings. This idea is very similar to the idea that God intentionally sends suffering to test the innocent, as in the story of Job. Just as God is seen directly to send suffering to punish wrongdoers, so God disciplines and tests those whom He loves best. Today most theologians recoil at the view of a Loving God who would directly inflict suffering upon humankind.^{xiii}

The explanation of suffering as directly sent by God appears to ignore secondary causes in the world and the independent integrity of creation. I think that theologians make more sense who affirm that the bad things that cause human suffering occur in our world as a consequence of the working out of the freely operating secondary causes of God's creation. Suffering that naturally arises from a human being's choosing evil is not ascribed to God's direct actions. Nor are acts of nature that inflict disasters upon persons to be viewed as sent by God to purify, test, or punish people. Evil in the world may be permitted but not actively inflicted by God. In other words God's omnipotence is somehow limited in our temporal world in order to give freely acting human beings in an independent creation the potentiality to develop and shape a new creation.

Unfortunately, no one can deny that human beings use their freedom to

inflict suffering of all kinds upon other innocent victims. When the innocent suffer undeservedly, or disproportionately, blaming them is inappropriate. Blaming the victim may be a temptation, but lament is the only appropriate response when bad things happen to good people.^{xiv} Other forms of innocent suffering are also found in our world. This misery does not arise from an individual's direct intention to inflict harm upon another individual or group. Today we understand that oppressive social structures and bureaucratic institutions can be built up over time and take on a life of their own, larger by far than any individual. These entrenched powers and institutions, such as forms of racial discrimination, caste systems, wars, or massive forces of poverty, can harm individuals caught up in the system. Some have described these unjust structural evils as "social sin."^{xv} Perhaps today we could see the forces that encourage abortion or the structures that work against the use of palliative medicine as entrenched structural evils.

Beyond social sin and large systemic forces there can be other suffering arising from random occurrences of disease, plague, drought, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and genetic mutations and malfunctions. Here again no individual wrongdoer is to blame for the harm done to human life. These natural occurrences of suffering must also be responded to with lament rather than blame. We do not blame volcanos or viruses for the devastation they produce, nor do we blame the victims of these disasters. Among the natural processes which cause great suffering I would include the impairments of aging, illness, and dying. Everyone (good, bad, or in between) will eventually die. Becoming ill and impaired and dying is built into the human organism. Even when pain is absent or controlled by the good gifts of medicine, dying is almost always an occasion of suffering. A self-conscious person, even one who believes that they will rise again, must suffer loss. In dying there is an inevitable decline and loss of one's physical capacities to help others; usually there is also a sense of loss in leaving the world and those who remain behind. Then too the losses and grief of those one is leaving can become one's own.

Christian believers have always seen the jaws of death as the dread punishment of sin from which all have needed redemption; it is the ultimate affront to a living being created in the image of the living God to

enjoy eternal life. We are made for life, love, and joy in the company of our beloved ones. Jesus joined his friends in their grief over the death of Lazarus, even though he would raise him again to life. Suffering is a natural and appropriate response to death, decline, and the losses that accompany dying.

Considering the reality of death's losses, I think it misguided to speak of "a good death" or "a natural death." What we mean is that some process of dying is a less awful process where there is no blame and less lament. Suffering may be lessened in certain deaths, but I do not think it can ever be removed. Perhaps to make this point more clearly we must delve more deeply into what suffering means.

There can be a distinction between experiences of pain and suffering, although pain usually produces suffering. This distinction is made by the physician Eric Cassell in his work on suffering. He says that "suffering can be defined as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of a person."^{xvi} This definition means that sometimes pain will not be felt as suffering because it does not threaten the intactness of the self. For instance, pain accompanying superior athletic performance or pain felt in certain forms of medical therapies might not be experienced as suffering but as a welcome signal of success in the effort towards a desired goal. All too often, however, pain does attack and threaten the sense of personal integration and intactness, especially severe unremitting pain, or worse, pain inflicted as deliberate torture by hostile human beings.^{xvii}

But there are also other dimensions of suffering. There can be vicarious empathetic suffering where one suffers for and with another's pain, sorrow, loss, or experiences of threat to their intactness as a person. Also important in the distress of suffering is the deep sense that such experiences of suffering should not be happening in a good world. Surely a Christian affirmation regarding suffering is that suffering may be undeserved and a mark of deep disorder in the world. This truth is several times made by Christ in the Gospel accounts. No one sinned and caused the blindness of the man born blind. The good and the innocent may experience undeserved suffering. Undeserved suffering is demonstrated by Christ's own suffering and death on the cross.

The Roman Catholic theologian Schillebeeckx has spoken of suffering as a “contrast experience.”^{xviii} Suffering affronts us as being basically horrible because of its contrast with our experiences of life’s goodness, joy, justice, and loving kindness. Because of our human experiences of goodness, justice, love, and joy in a good world, we expect good things and become distressed by our experiences of pain, frustration, and the grievous wrongs and unjust inequalities oppressing human beings. The more we can be aware or conscious of the good that could be, the worse it is when we suffer. Therefore human beings with their developed and expanded awareness of self and others can suffer more than animals. The more experience of joy, goodness, and justice that one has known, the more one may suffer the contrasting condition.

Those who love others will vicariously suffer their sorrows as well. If it is true that those with the greatest experiences of joy and goodness and the greatest love for others will suffer more, then Christians can conclude that Christ on the cross suffered more intensely than any other human being. He as the sinless one who loved others most fully and absolutely also had the greatest experiences of joy and goodness in his intimacy with God to contrast with the experience of sin and disorder. Jesus would be a man of sorrows because he could suffer so intensely his own and other’s distress. For Jesus there would be the greatest of contrasts, and therefore the greatest of sufferings in his experience of undeserved rejection, betrayal, disappointment, persecution, torture, and the pain of a shameful death on a cross between criminals. Yet Christians affirm that within and through this suffering of defeat and death on the cross, Christ wins for us the ultimate victory over death and the power of evil. The triumph of Christ’s resurrection leads to the joy and triumph of the Kingdom now and to come.

But how is Christ’s resurrection after suffering on the cross related to our suffering? While Christians have always looked upon our human suffering in the light of the Cross, the meaning of this relationship and the question of redemptive suffering has been interpreted differently. What do we make of the fact that human beings still suffer and die? Too often in the past there has been in Christianity what M. Shawn Copeland, a Black woman theologian, has called a “vulgar misuse” of the cross.^{xix} By this she means that the suffering of the poor, the enslaved, and those who are oppressed

has been too much tolerated and dismissed. Sufferers have been seen as privileged to participate in the suffering of Christ and thereby gain salvation in the next world.

Following this logic, those who suffer unjust oppression, or any other illness or pain, have been counseled to be resigned, passive, and patient, to accept without question their share in the suffering of Christ. Those who suffer in this world should seek comfort in the opiate thought of their redemption in the next world, or pie in the sky when you die. Such advice to sufferers serves to co-opt the cross and human suffering; it can only confirm apathy and a detachment from the imperative to change this world.

Such interpretations of Christian suffering excuse and thereby further the unjust *status quo* of a fallen and oppressed world. The poor you have with you always.

Yes, but in the total message of Christianity a different mandate is given: Love others, show mercy, relieve suffering, and eradicate injustice. Christians can never forget that Christ spent his life actively relieving physical and psychological suffering as he preached the kingdom, healed mental and physiological ills, raised the dead, and comforted the brokenhearted. He tenderly loved and relieved the suffering of fallen human beings and commanded his disciples to imitate his own works of love and mercy. Nor is apathy toward the *status quo* approved in the Gospel, because the new order of God's kingdom must come on earth. The active nonviolent stance of forgiving and turning the other cheek, along with the paradoxical twists of so many of Christ's parables are today interpreted as challenging the *status quo* and the powers that be.^{xx} Today Christ's revolutionary view of God's world as entailing a loving and healing ministry can hardly be used to counsel resignation in the face of pain and suffering. Love of neighbor means relief of his suffering.

But what of unavoidable suffering which we cannot relieve? We still must age, become ill, and die even if the sting of death is removed by a belief in the entrance into a new life with God. We may be like Christ in praying that the cup of suffering will pass from us, but unfortunately it does not. Christ's victory over death and his restoration and redemption of all creation does not keep us from pain. Ultimate despair and hopelessness is overcome by our faith that the victory of the Kingdom is

already won, but we still live in an interim time of not yet. Much work remains to be done before the birthpangs of the new creation's childbirth is completely accomplished and every tear is wiped away. While we wait in joyful hope for the marriage of the lamb and the consummation of the Kingdom's coming, the final gladness has not yet come in its fullness.

In addition to unavoidable suffering, there can also be suffering which might be avoided but is freely inflicted upon others. Evil persons and oppressive unjust structures continue to do harm to persons. While Christians must struggle against these powers, they cannot do so violently or by doing evil themselves. Christ's disciples are enjoined to love God and neighbor and to do no evil. In following Christ his disciples must be ready to suffer for the sake of doing good and helping the kingdom to come. Christians must be prepared like their master for persecutions and other sacrifices that come upon them because they choose to obey God's will. Taking up one's cross will be necessary for all followers of God. Losing the old self in order to do God's work can exact a price. St. Paul speaks of disciples filling up the sufferings of Christ as they carry out the work of loving and redeeming the world.

An important Christian belief appears to be that suffering, even unjust dreadful lamentable suffering, can be used in the struggle for the new creation. Christ promised that his disciples would do greater work than he, even as they take up their cross to follow him. This union of effort and sharing in the work of love and creation can only be the case if all humankind is bound together into one body, one communion, one family. The crucial belief here is that the whole human race must be seen as interconnected with each member joined to all the others. The sense that the human species is one family and joined in a unity that transcends space and time is implicit in the Christian message that as all fall in Adam, so all are saved in Christ's redeeming act. Thus in the Kingdom the good actions and prayers and offerings of any one person affects many others. The life and death of each of us affects all. The belief in the communion of saints and the intercessions of the saints is a development of these beliefs in the intercommunion and uniting of effort possible to human beings.

In sum, for Christians part of the good news is that individual suffering need never be wasted. Time and space can be transcended so that

suffering borne and offered up for the good of those not even present is seen to be effective in the work of redeeming the creation. Every kind of suffering can be offered as a part of the collective effort to bring a new creation to birth. Even blameworthy suffering can be offered up in repentance along with the more direct suffering that arises from loving others and doing good but painful actions for the sake of others. Even following the Christian mandate to relieve suffering may entail its own kinds of morally necessary sacrifice. Public witness and struggles for justice in the world almost always bring persecution from those with power and privilege who do not wish the *status quo* to change. As the old cynical saying has it, no good deed goes unpunished.

Some suffering, therefore, must (like Christ's) not be sought but be freely accepted, undertaken, and endured in order to do good, love others, and avoid evil. The more power at a person's disposal, the more temptation there can be to avoid suffering and the sacrifices necessary for loving others. When certain kinds of suffering are refused, harm can be done to the self, harm can be done to others directly, and harm can be done to the common good. The common good includes all the community, members of a family, a neighborhood, a society, a culture, or an ecological community. Increasingly, individual acts are recognized, just as many small effects, even microevents in a system change the course of the whole larger process. The "butterfly effect" that can operate to change physical systems of weather have their counterparts in the moral and psychosocial realm.

Christians therefore have to make prudential acts of judgment when it comes to suffering. Relieving suffering is part of love's mandate, but some suffering must be endured, even if avoidable, for the sake of the good of others. Redemptive suffering is morally necessary suffering. How can one know when suffering is morally necessary and serving love and the common good? There may be many forms of redemptive suffering, but it may be difficult to discern them. Perhaps a first guiding principle to be proposed is that any suffering which, if we were to avoid it, would do significant harm to others must be endured and not avoided. Another mark of morally worthwhile suffering will be that the particular suffering accepted can be seen to serve the greater intactness of the self in the long

run, usually by serving the good of others. If suffering is partly defined as a threat to the intactness of the self, there may be occasions when present suffering can be borne for the self's ultimate, whole, long-lasting well-being. Through love and empathy our well-being is intimately connected with the well-being of those we love; so we may choose avoidable threats and pain to our own self's integrity if it benefits the integrity of others. Redemptive morally necessary suffering can be discerned as that suffering which will be looked back upon as worthwhile and not regretted, because it increases one's history of loving and creating—even at times to one's store of ultimate joy. Integrity and wholeness of the person will be served by the enduring of the present pain, the present threat, even the present psychological anxiety and agony. When the child is born, any suffering in the birth process will be forgotten in the joy of producing a new life.

This guideline for morally necessary suffering implies that some dimension of the larger personal self can transcend intense suffering while at the same time experiencing the deepest distress. In a self-conscious being some witnessing "I" can stand apart and observe one's own suffering, even annihilation, and take up an ongoing stance to it—courageous acceptance, or enduring for the good of others, or in the cause of one's moral integrity. So in the history of humankind we have seen persons who have been willing to suffer, and grievously suffer, to avoid doing harm, to demonstrate their love of others, or to serve the common good. The joy in effecting their larger purpose and goal can co-exist with dreadful agony and distress. Joy and suffering may have different well-springs that may co-exist. We remember that the agonizing cry, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me," still calling upon God present in absence and followed by a more triumphant, "It is finished." A Trinitarian view of the mystery of God would also affirm that while "the cross is at the heart of things,"^{xxi} and God suffers with us and for us, there co-exists some greater encompassing Divine reality existing as triumphant Love and Joy.

CAN A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON SUFFERING AND REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING BE RATIONALLY ACCEPTED BY NON BELIEVERS?

I think that the essentials of the Christian faith perspective on suffering presented above can be rationally accepted as resonating with what can be

recognized as morally and authentically human. Persons would first have to accept the new understandings of human reason that affirm that reason includes more than just abstract logical thought processes. Emotional, imaginative, and social intelligence must be included as part of the moral resources of reasoning human beings as well as the ability to make deductive and inductive inferences about reality.

Surely then all moral persons can accept that human life cannot be lived without suffering in all of its many different dimensions. Unavoidable suffering is a characteristic of the human condition. It is clear too that much of the world's human suffering is blameworthy and also that much suffering is undeserved and an occasion for lament and sorrow. It is an unjust world and bad things happen to good people. I also think it makes moral sense to rational persons of good will that human beings are morally obligated to relieve human suffering. Following the golden rule or the categorical imperative or the moral principle of beneficence, persons of good will can come to accept that humans have a moral obligation to relieve each other's suffering, to heal, to reduce pain, and to make efforts to end injustice and oppression for all.

Rational persons of good will can also agree that we all belong to the human family and because of our common human membership, we owe each other care and concern for the common good and the moral well-being of the common social world we share. Communal consciousness and the sense of the human community as one family has been furthered by the environmental movement and increasing globalization. Moral concerns and ethical mandates have become evermore recognized as central to our common human flourishing in interconnected systems of influence.

I think it also rationally clear that in order to do no harm and to further good, it is necessary for those committed to the good to endure some suffering and even to behave in ways that will incur suffering that might otherwise be avoidable. For individuals to develop morally and for human communities to flourish in justice, moral persons have to be willing to suffer to maintain their moral integrity and the good of their families and communities. And the behavior of each individual will have an effect on many others.

In sum, in an imperfect world, full of evil human acts, oppressive social

structures, and destructive natural forces, human suffering is inevitable. Suffering has many dimensions but we are morally obligated to relieve suffering and to try to counter and prevent blameworthy suffering that occurs from evil actions. We must also attempt to mitigate suffering that arises from unjust social structures, illnesses, and natural disasters. At the same time in order to do no harm, to refrain from killing, and to pursue the common good and the greater integrity of the moral self, human beings must sometimes courageously endure morally necessary suffering.

The success of the prolife movement will be dependent upon how well we can apply these truths about suffering and the interdependent human condition to questions of killing in abortion, assisted suicide, and euthanasia. If we in the prolife movement make every effort to prevent and relieve unnecessary suffering of women, children, the ill, and the dying, our insights about the need for morally necessary suffering can be persuasive—eventually. As a believer I trust humankind’s moral resources of reason and conscience to effect moral progress. If it is morally true that human beings should not relieve suffering by killing the unborn or those suffering at the end of life, then it will be eventually be recognized to be true by all those of good will. After moral reflection, reasoned dialogue, and argument within our society, believers and unbelievers can hope to reach a moral consensus on the ethics of life and death.

NOTES

i. For a statement of this position see H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., “Suffering, Meaning, and Bioethics” in *Suffering: Christian Bioethics: Non-Ecumenical Studies in Medical Morality 2* (1996) pp. 129-53; see also Stanley Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), esp. ch.2, “Theology, Theodicy, and Medicine,” pp. 39-95.

ii. Engelhardt, section 4: “The Non-Ecumenical Alternative: Religion Has to Do with the Truth about Suffering,” pp. 137-43.

iii. Engelhardt, p. 143.

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- iv. Joseph Fuchs, S.J., "Is There a Specifically Christian Morality?" in *Readings in Moral Theology No.2: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J., pp. 3-19. A nuanced discussion of the history and state of the question which essentially agrees with Fuchs but also elaborates upon his position can also be seen in the same volume in Charles Curran, "Is There a Catholic/Christian Ethic?" pp. 60-76.
- v. Fuchs quotes Thomas Aquinas in support of his point, p. 11.
- vi. See David Burrell, C.S.C., and Elena Malits, C.S.C., *Original Peace: Restoring God's Creation* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1997).
- vii. *Ibid.* See also Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance," *Theological Studies* 57/1 (1996) pp. 3-18; and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).
- viii. John Mahoney, S.J., *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) p. 325.
- ix. James M. Gustafson, "Can Ethics Be Christian? Some Conclusions" in Curran and McCormick, pp. 146-55. In the same volume see Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "Does Religious Faith Add to Ethical Perception?" pp. 156-73.
- x. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Nine Theses in Christian Ethics" in Curran and McCormick, p. 193.
- xi. See Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life: Living with Mortality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).
- xii. Paul Ricoeur, "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology" in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).
- xiii. Again, see the discussion in Johnson (n.7 above). The same point against a punitive view of suffering can be found in John Paul II's work on suffering. See John F. Crosby, "The Teaching of John Paul II on the Christian Meaning of Suffering" in *Christian Bioethics*, pp. 154-71.
- xiv. See Ricoeur (n.12 above).
- xv. Roger Haight, "The Social Dimension of Sin" in "Sin and Grace" in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 2, ed. Frances Schussler

Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991) pp. 101-06. See also Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

xvi. Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991) p. 33. See also the emphasis upon suffering as “the experience of finitude” in Daniel P. Sulmasy, O.F.M., M.D., *The Healer’s Calling*, esp. ch. 6, “Suffering, Spirituality, and Health Care,” pp. 93-108.

xvii. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press).

xviii. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

xix. M. Shawn Copeland, “Wading through Many Sorrows” in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. (Mahwah: Paulist Press) p. 156.

xx. Walter Wink, “Jesus’s Third Way: Nonviolent Engagement” in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992) pp. 175-93. See also James W. Douglass, *The Nonviolent Coming of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

xxi. Bruce G. Epperly and Robert L. Kinast, *Can Suffering Be Redemptive?* (Claremont: Process and Faith, 1995) p. 17.