

What is man that Thou art mindful of him, or the son of man, that Thou dost care for him?... Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, ...<sup>18</sup> For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.

**(Hebrews 2:6, 17f)**

## ***Human Personhood and the Value of Suffering***

Man is a great mystery. The human being is crowned with the glory and honor of being the very image of God. Every human being is an icon of God, a revelation of God, and filled with an infinite potential for growth in communion, for love.

God made man as the pinnacle of creation, and put all things in subjection to him. For man to bring all things into subjection, however, was a process. It was begun with Adam who named all creatures. Christ brought human nature and death under subjection by His Incarnation and Resurrection. That process is still under way, and will not be fulfilled until the Parousia, the Second Coming, when Christ will give over all things to the Father. What this means, however, is that all things are brought into synergy and communion, deified and fulfilled. Christ's incarnation is the fulfillment of human nature, which in Him sits at the right hand of the Father.

Man, human being, was created good by God. We bear the image of God as the defining element of our humanity. Part of that image is the potential to grow to likeness to God by our will and actions. Sin disrupts the fulfillment of that potential; but we affirm that the potential is always there, that God's image is indelible. We would thus reject the "total depravity" of man, held by some. Yet man's own being as the created image of God is not fulfilled until it is brought into union with the Uncreated Image of God, the Son. This is the essential process of creation itself: to move from potential to fulfillment. In Jesus the created image and uncreated image of God come together, and God becomes man. Yet this process is itself incomplete: not only does Christ have to die and be resurrected, but the whole creation is fulfilled in Him at the Second Coming—"which groans until the revelation of the sons of God." For us, the process of deification is the content of salvation, which begins now and is only ultimately fulfilled when we are resurrected from the dead. But in this world, as we grow into the likeness of God by our cooperation with His will, by love, we actualize that potential here and now and thus experience deification.

Jesus Christ is God become man. He is the revelation of the fulfillment of what it means to be a human being, both in his life by his words and deeds, and in his death by His Resurrection. He is the criterion of our knowledge of God, and of God's relationship to the world. Jesus did not simply come and teach about God, but rather, He revealed God by becoming a human being. He revealed God's love for us by his complete identification with us. He took on our humanity, "he emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of man" (Phil 2:7). Then he "humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross." (Phil 2:8). By taking on not only our humanity, but our suffering and death, Jesus, Who is the Incarnate Son and Word of God, shows God's love for man. He became what we are that he might make us what He is.

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.” (Hebr 2:9-10).

How can it be that Jesus needed “to be made perfect through suffering”? Jesus could not completely identify with us simply by assuming our humanity. He was not simply some kind of avatar, nor did he merely bear the semblance of a man. Rather, He had to become completely what we are, and share our life. He could not do that unless he shared also our suffering, and ultimately, our death. What a marvel that God would humble himself even to death, the most shameful death of the cross! Jesus suffered and died as we suffer and die. But He overcame death, and transformed it, so that we might no longer suffer from death. He assumed our whole life and death “that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”(Hebr 2:14f).

The fear of death is the power of the devil, the source of much suffering, which holds mankind in bondage. Because of the fear of death, we avoid suffering for the sake of the other, even when compassion demands it of us. This avoidance of suffering is the root of temptation. Jesus overcame the fear of death, and thus, overcame temptation because He accepted to suffer for the sake of salvation of others. “For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Hebr 2:18).

Jesus not only revealed God’s love for us by becoming man, and suffering and dying for us. As the Incarnate Son, He has become the human face of God who identifies with us in our suffering and temptations, having become like us in every respect. He revealed that God is not a simple abstract Being concealed in apophatic unapproachability. He became what we are, that He might make us what He is.

Christ has wrought salvation for us by identifying with us. We also have to work out our salvation by identifying with Him.

Our salvation, our deification, is not something that happens passively in this world. There is no such thing as instant salvation, no “eternal security” once we have made an affirmation that we accept Christ’s “atonement” for our sins. Salvation is a process of continually identifying with Christ, a dynamic process that is mutual and reciprocal. Jesus suffered that He might accompany us in our suffering. He was tempted that he might strengthen us when we are tempted. He overcame the fear of death that we might not longer be subject and in bondage to it. In this Jesus shows God’s love and respect for us, for our freedom, for the integrity of our lives. He does not live our life for us, but rather has enabled us to live our life in Him, insofar as we will it.

Jesus did not come to eliminate suffering. Rather, he transformed it. Jesus was tempted, but He did not fall and overcame the temptations, that He might strengthen us not to succumb to temptation. He showed that suffering does not mean abandonment by God, as even on the Cross he remained faithful to God, and was not left in the grave. He was faced with the temptation to reject his cross, and chose rather to suffer, that his own suffering might work salvation for the whole world. Jesus transformed suffering into communion, and overcame the power of temptation, so that we might have the strength to accept our suffering as our cross, and overcome temptation.

Jesus came and suffered out of His love and compassion for us, so that we may learn to bear suffering as He bore it—as an act of compassion. This is what gives suffering meaning and value—it breaks the bonds of our selfishness and isolation from one another, so that we may truly love one another in compassion. We co-suffer with those who are suffering, that their suffering might not lead them into despair and death.

Suffering is inescapable in this fallen world. We suffer because of our sins and those of others. We suffer because of death and grief, pain and separation, as victims and as perpetrators. We suffer as a result of our sinfulness because of our selfishness and because we don't get our own way. This latter kind, suffering as a result of our own selfishness, is the first thing of which we need to be purified.

Temptation can be seen in terms of our willingness to suffer for the sake of the other, or to give in to our passions and selfishness and refuse to suffer with or for the other. Do we accept to suffer for the sake of helping someone, or do we let them be hurt? Do we accept to inconvenience ourselves for the sake of the other, deny ourselves for the sake of the other? Will we accept to be reviled and persecuted and slandered and abused, and turn the other cheek; or will we curse our abuser and give in to our anger, and thus fall into sin? Will we accept the pain that one who is suffering inflicts upon us in their frustration and distress, or will we cast them off to alleviate our own discomfort, or use drugs or alcohol to numb our conscience? Will we accept the burden of caring for the other who is suffering, or cast off the cross of love and compassion for the sake of an easy solution: drug them up, send them to a nursing home (and let someone else worry about him/her), or simply kill them (“euthanasia”). Will we accept the suffering of the shame of being an unwed mother, as did the Virgin Mary, or simply abort the life of the infant before it shows?

Temptation, on the deeper levels, is not about gratification of our passions. It is the temptation to cast off the cross, to refuse to suffer for the sake of the other, and to refuse the responsibility that love of neighbor demands. Jesus Himself was tempted in the desert by the devil (cf. Lk 4). He accepted to suffer hunger rather than turn stones to bread. He was tempted to settle for earthly glory and a temporal kingdom. Finally the devil tempted him to simply show his power as Messiah, and cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple and be instantly declared king, and thus refuse the way of the Cross to the eternal Kingdom. In the garden he was also tempted, and asked if the cup of suffering could pass him by, but ultimately surrendered Himself to the will of God.

Jesus helps us in our temptations by showing us that, by accepting to suffer for the sake of doing the will of God, by accepting our cross, our suffering is unto salvation. He stands by us and empowers us, energizes us by grace, to bear whatever cross we have been given. Suffering voluntarily by refusing to give in to temptation thus becomes an act of communion, and we become like Him.

Our secular materialist and hedonistic culture lives in denial of suffering. It sees it as essentially meaningless, as something to be alleviated as quickly and thoroughly as possible, and at all costs. Thus our medical establishment has not only found cures for innumerable disease and maladies, but has developed medications to anesthetize all kinds of psychic pain as well. On one hand, there is nothing wrong with this. But, and this is very important, what this has led to is an inability to cope with any kind of pain and suffering. We look for a quick solution in a pill or bottle, and alleviate the symptoms while leaving the underlying causes in tact. Hence the rampant substance abuse in our

culture; hence the nursing homes and endless retirement facilities to which we banish our elders; hence abortion and euthanasia.

This inability to bear suffering only leads to greater suffering in the long run. We look for political solutions to social ills and injustices, and fail to exercise any kind of personal compassion. We would rather send a check. We justify our selfishness by claiming that our elders would be better cared for “by professionals.” We refuse to deal with the sufferings—age, disease, disability—of even our closest family members by institutionalizing them and forgetting their existence, while ignoring that the most important thing that they need is our love. Even death itself is vainly hidden in a grotesque masquerade by the commercial funeral industry, and denied.

The calling of Christians is to learn authentic love and compassion, literally “co-suffering.” We have to learn how to bear suffering so that we can identify ourselves with those who are suffering, and accompany them and raise them up. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” By learning to co-suffer, to have compassion, to truly lay down our life for the other, we thus identify ourselves with Christ, and actualize the likeness to God that is the very fulfillment of our personhood. In other words, we learn to love unselfishly and unconditionally as He does.

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Romans 5:3-5).

Suffering has meaning. It is the means by which we grow, by which we become authentically ourselves, by attaining likeness to Christ—Who suffered and died for us. By enduring suffering ourselves, we attain to perseverance, and character. We begin to understand our sins and temptations. We learn to take responsibility for our lives and our sins, neither blaming God nor our neighbor. We purify ourselves by refusing to give in to temptation, and strengthen our will so that we remain in communion with God. Suffering purifies us, if we let it, because it reveals our selfishness to us so that we can repent. We can either accept to suffer in compassion and bear our cross, or give in to our own selfishness. To suffer for the sake of compassion lets the energy of God’s grace and love be poured into our heart so that we enter into synergy with that grace through our actions. This kind of compassion is not simply human, but divine as well. This is the very process of deification. We are thus given the strength to raise up those who are suffering, because by our perseverance in co-suffering, we attain to hope.

When we allow our suffering to lead us into despair and desolation, we become so turned-in on ourselves that we reject God and reject the compassion of others. The Fathers of the Church see this as a kind of foretaste of hell. We torment ourselves by our rejection of our true self, which can only be fulfilled by communion in love with God and the Other. God’s love is not diminished, but we vainly refuse to accept it by refusing to forgive our self and other. Thus, the fire of the love of God burns us. Our self-torment feels like punishment, the wrath of God. But it is not God’s punishment, as we often think. Rather, it is the fruit of our own self-obsession, self-hatred, self-rejection. This kind of suffering is meaningless, leading nowhere. It is the essence of nihilism, of suicide.

Suffering, takes on meaning when we accept to endure it and allow ourselves to be transformed by it. This seems an enormous task, especially for one in the grips of pain and depression. But the only way through it is to come out of ourselves and accept the

compassion of others, who strengthen us by their co-suffering in love. First and foremost is the remembrance of Christ's own co-suffering with us, by His enduring the Cross for us. He endured His Cross so that we can endure ours. By the power of His Cross we have hope—that our suffering will lead us to salvation.