

# "Suffering Unleashes Love"

For the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 14, here are some excerpts from John Paul II's apostolic letter "Salvifici Doloris" on the deep human and divine meaning of suffering.

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**From John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris***

*Dated 11 February 1984 (Feast of our Lady of Lourdes)*

5. Man suffers in different ways, ways not always considered by medicine, not even in its most advanced specializations. Suffering is something which is *still wider* than sickness, more complex and at the same time still more deeply rooted in humanity itself. A certain idea of this problem comes to us from the distinction between physical suffering and moral suffering. This distinction is based upon the double dimension of the human being and indicates the bodily and spiritual element as the immediate or direct subject of suffering. Insofar as the words “suffering” and “pain,” can, up to a certain degree, be used as synonyms, *physical suffering* is present when “the body is hurting” in some way, whereas *moral suffering* is “pain of the soul.” In fact, it is a question of pain of a spiritual nature, and not only of the “psychological” dimension of pain which accompanies both moral and

physical suffering The vastness and the many forms of moral suffering are certainly no less in number than the forms of physical suffering . . . .

## **Christ Conquered Suffering through Love**

18. *Christ suffers voluntarily and suffers innocently.* With his suffering he accepts that question which—posed by people many times—has been expressed, in a certain sense, in a radical way by the Book of Job. Christ, however, not only carries with himself the same question (and this in an even more radical way, for he is not only a man like Job but the only-begotten Son of God), but he also carries *the greatest possible answer to this question . . .* This “word of the Cross” completes with a definitive reality the image of the ancient prophecy. Many episodes, many discourses during Christ’s public teaching bear witness to the

way in which from the beginning he accepts this suffering which is the will of the Father for the salvation of the world. However, *the prayer in Gethsemane* becomes a definitive point here. The words: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt,” and later: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done,” have a manifold eloquence. They prove the truth of that love which the only-begotten Son gives to the Father in his obedience. At the same time, they attest to the truth of his suffering. The words of that prayer of Christ in Gethsemane prove *the truth of love through the truth of suffering*. Christ’s words confirm with all simplicity this human truth of suffering, to its very depths: suffering is the undergoing of evil before which man shudders. He says: “let it pass from me,” just as Christ says in Gethsemane . . . .

After the words in Gethsemane come the words uttered on Golgotha, words which bear witness to this depth—unique in the history of the world—of the evil of the suffering experienced. When Christ says: “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?”, his words are not only an expression of that abandonment which many times found expression in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and in particular in that Psalm 22 [21] from which come the words quoted. One can say that these words on abandonment are born at the level of that inseparable union of the Son with the Father, and are born because the Father “laid on him the iniquity of us all.” They also foreshadow the words of Saint Paul: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.” Together with this horrible weight, *encompassing the “entire” evil of the turning away from God* which is contained in sin, Christ,

through the divine depth of his filial union with the Father, perceives in a humanly inexpressible way *this suffering which is the separation*, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God. But precisely through this suffering he accomplishes the Redemption, and can say as he breathes his last: “It is finished.” . . .

24. Does this mean that the Redemption achieved by Christ is not complete? No. It only means that the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, *remains always open to all love* expressed in *human suffering*. In this dimension—the dimension of love—the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished. Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limits but at the same time he did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive

suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part of *the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering* that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed.

Thus, with this openness to every human suffering, Christ has accomplished the world's Redemption through his own suffering. For, at the same time, this Redemption, even though it was completely achieved by Christ's suffering, lives on and in its own special way develops in the history of man. It lives and develops as the body of Christ, the Church, and in this dimension every human suffering, by reason of the loving union with Christ, completes the suffering of Christ. It completes that

*suffering just as the Church completes the redemptive work of Christ.*

## **The Gospel of Suffering**

25. The witnesses of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ have handed on to the Church and to mankind a specific Gospel of suffering. The Redeemer himself wrote this Gospel, above all by his own suffering accepted in love, so that man “should not perish but have eternal life.” This suffering, together with the living word of his teaching, became a rich source for all those who shared in Jesus’ sufferings among the first generation of his disciples and confessors and among those who have come after them down the centuries.

It is especially consoling to note—and also accurate in accordance with the Gospel and history—that at the side of Christ, in the first and most exalted place, there is always his

Mother through the exemplary testimony that she bears *by her whole life* to this particular Gospel of suffering. In her, the many and intense sufferings were amassed in such an interconnected way that they were not only a proof of her unshakeable faith but also a contribution to the redemption of all. In reality, from the time of her secret conversation with the angel, she began to see in her mission as a mother her “destiny” to share, in a singular and unrepeatable way, in the very mission of her Son. And she very soon received a confirmation of this in the events that accompanied the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and in the solemn words of the aged Simeon, when he spoke of a sharp sword that would pierce her heart. Yet a further confirmation was in the anxieties and privations of the hurried flight into Egypt, caused by the cruel decision of Herod.

And again, after the events of her Son's hidden and public life, events which she must have shared with acute sensitivity, it was on Calvary that Mary's suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view but which was mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world. Her ascent of Calvary and her standing at the foot of the Cross together with the Beloved Disciple were a special sort of sharing in the redeeming death of her Son. And the words which she heard from his lips were a kind of solemn handing-over of this Gospel of suffering so that it could be proclaimed to the whole community of believers.

As a witness *to* her Son's Passion by her *presence*, and as a sharer in it by her *compassion*, Mary offered a unique contribution to the Gospel of

suffering, by embodying in anticipation the expression of Saint Paul which was quoted at the beginning. She truly has a special title to be able to claim that she “completes in her flesh”—as already in her heart—“what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”

In the light of the unmatchable example of Christ, reflected with singular clarity in the life of his Mother, the Gospel of suffering, through the experience and words of the Apostles, becomes *an inexhaustible source for the ever new generations* that succeed one another in the history of the Church. The Gospel of suffering signifies not only the presence of suffering in the Gospel, as one of the themes of the Good News, but also the revelation of *the salvific power and salvific significance* of suffering in Christ’s messianic mission and, subsequently,

in the mission and vocation of the Church.

26. While the first great chapter of the Gospel of suffering is written down, as the generations pass, by those who suffer persecutions for Christ's sake, simultaneously another great chapter of this Gospel unfolds through the course of history. This chapter is written by all those *who suffer together with Christ*, uniting their human sufferings to his salvific suffering. In these people there is fulfilled what the first witnesses of the Passion and Resurrection said and wrote about sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Therefore in those people there is fulfilled the Gospel of suffering, and, at the same time, each of them continues in a certain sense to write it: they write it and proclaim it to the world, they announce it to the world in which they live and to the people of their time.

Down through the centuries and generations it has been seen that *in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ*, a special grace. To this grace many saints, such as Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Ignatius of Loyola and others, owe their profound conversion. A result of such a conversion is not only that the individual discovers the salvific meaning of suffering but above all that he becomes a completely new person. He discovers a new dimension, as it were, of *his entire life and vocation*. This discovery is a particular confirmation of the spiritual greatness which in man surpasses the body in a way that is completely beyond compare. When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior *maturity and spiritual greatness* become evident,

constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal.

This interior maturity and spiritual greatness in suffering are certainly the *result* of a particular *conversion* and cooperation with the grace of the Crucified Redeemer. It is he himself who acts at the heart of human sufferings through his Spirit of truth, through the consoling Spirit. It is he who transforms, in a certain sense, the very substance of the spiritual life, indicating for the person who suffers a place close to himself. *It is he*—as the interior Master and Guide—*who reveals* to the suffering brother and sister this *wonderful interchange*, situated at the very heart of the mystery of the Redemption. Suffering is, in itself, an experience of evil. But Christ has made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation. By his suffering on the Cross, Christ reached the very

roots of evil, of sin and death. He conquered the author of evil, Satan, and his permanent rebellion against the Creator . . . Christ through his own salvific suffering is very much present in every human suffering, and can act from within that suffering by the powers of his Spirit of truth, his consoling Spirit.

This is not all: the Divine Redeemer wishes to penetrate the soul of every sufferer through the heart of his holy Mother, the first and the most exalted of all the redeemed. As though by a continuation of that motherhood which by the power of the Holy Spirit had given him life, the dying Christ conferred upon the ever Virgin Mary a *new kind of motherhood*— spiritual and universal—towards all human beings, so that every individual, during the pilgrimage of faith, might remain, together with her, closely united to him unto the Cross, and so that every

form of suffering, given fresh life by the power of this Cross, should become no longer the weakness of man but the power of God . . . .

Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else he says: “Follow me!” Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! Through my Cross. Gradually, *as the individual takes up his cross*, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him. He does not discover this meaning at his own human level, but at the level of the suffering of Christ. At the same time, however, from this level of Christ the salvific meaning of suffering *descends to man’s level* and becomes, in a sense, the individual’s personal response. It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy . . . .

## Suffering Unleashes Love

29. Following the parable of the Gospel, we could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order *to unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one's "I" on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for, so to speak, another world: the world of human love; and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions. The person who is a "neighbor" cannot indifferently pass by the suffering of another: this in the name of fundamental human solidarity, still more in the name of love of neighbor. He must "stop," "sympathize," just like the Samaritan of the Gospel parable.

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