

Theological Reflection

Suffering, death, and eternal life

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I was asked to give a series of four talks to the doctors and staff of the Oncology Department at St. Luke's Medical Center, Quezon City, Manila, during July and August 2015. The theme of the talks was "Suffering, death, and eternal life." In this summary article, I would like to share some of the insights I gained. The first part focusses on suffering and the second part on death and eternal life.

PART I — SUFFERING

Doctors, their patients, and indeed every human person have, at some time or other, to confront the meaning of suffering. As Pope Saint John Paul II noted, suffering is "almost inseparable from man's earthly existence" (John Paul II 1984, n. 3). Why do we suffer? Is there a deeper meaning? What light does Christian faith shed on the mystery of suffering?

From a faith point of view we can say that in the initial state, in the Garden of Eden, there was no suffering. Suffering came in with sin and the fall. The *Catechism* explains "as a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering, and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called 'concupiscence')" (*Catechism* 1997, n. 418).

In the Light of Christ

Pope Saint John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter called *Salvifici doloris* on the Christian meaning of human suffering. In number fifteen it states:

And even though the victory over sin and death achieved by Christ in his Cross and Resurrection does not abolish temporal suffering from human life, nor free from suffering the whole historical dimension of human existence, it nevertheless throws a new light upon this dimension and upon every suffering: the light of salvation. (John Paul II 1984, n. 15)

The *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* poses a much-asked question "If God is 'Father' and 'Almighty,' why does He allow so much evil and suffering?" (*Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines* 1997, n. 309). The answers, given by the same *Catechism*, are both comforting and enlightening:

First, much evil in the world, especially *physical* evil, results from the kind of *limited* universe in which we live.

Second, moral evil and much of human suffering come from man's abuse of his freedom in sin.

Third, much courage, generosity, forgiveness, hope, and sacrifice arise from the world's sufferings and evils.

Finally, Christ's Paschal Mystery shows how God draws out of the depths of evil the victory of the Risen Christ and his transforming love.

Suffering and Sickness

Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, man experiences his powerlessness, his limitations, and his finitude. Every illness can make us glimpse death.

Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him. (Catechism 1997, nn. 1500–1501)

Suffering as Sharing in His Redemption

Pope Saint John Paul II explained how suffering can be understood as a sharing in the redemption of Christ.

The Redeemer suffered in place of man and for man. Every man has his own share in the Redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the Redemption was accomplished. He is called to share in that suffering through which all human suffering has also been redeemed. In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ. (John Paul II 1984, n. 19)

St. Paul and the Meaning of Suffering

The letters and understanding of Paul reveal some interesting details of the

meaning of Christian suffering. Perhaps three key words can summarize a triple perspective he gives to the meaning of suffering — struggle, strength, and hope:

- *Struggle*. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:8–10).
- *Strength*. "That I may know him [Christ] and the power of his Resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10–11). Paul draws his strength in suffering from the Risen Christ.
- *Hope*. "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that 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" (Rom 5:3–5). In various moments Paul alludes to the virtue of hope as being a necessary requisite to endure the challenges.

To Personalize Our Suffering

What can make suffering more acute is when it is perceived that there is no meaning to it. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, spent three years in various concentration camps during World War II. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, a book based on his experience of imprisonment at Auschwitz and various subsidiary camps of Dachau, he writes,

when a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have accepted his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He

will have to acknowledge the fact that even in his suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden. (Frankl 2006, 77–78)

The apostle Peter had to personalize his call to pick up the cross and follow Christ. When Jesus first passes by the Sea of Galilee, he invites Peter, and his brother Andrew, “Come, follow me” (see Matt 4:18–19). Later, after the death and resurrection of Christ, the risen Lord again invites Peter to “Follow me” (John 21:19). It is very interesting what happens next. Peter turns and sees the disciple Jesus loved and asks Jesus “What about him?” Jesus tells Peter, “Never you mind about him. You follow me” (see John 21:20–22). Peter is easily distracted. Perhaps it can be a sign of the challenge to personalize our own calling. What is the Lord asking me, not others? Like Peter, we can become distracted and too busy looking at others instead of answering his call to us. His brother, Andrew, is attested by tradition to have been crucified diagonally. The “St. Andrew’s cross” can be seen on the flag of Scotland. It reminds us of the need to personalize our own cross because it comes in many shapes and sizes. What is a cross for one may not be so for another. Holy Spirit, help us to pick up our cross, to personalize it, and make it our own.

The Good Samaritan

In confronting suffering the question to ask is not merely “why?” but also “what can we do about it?” I remember once talking with a lady who was very moved with many tears about suffering children in Africa. But behind the tears and strong feelings there was no action at all. The impression I got was one of a form of selfishness. Our compassion needs to move

us! The Good Samaritan was moved by compassion. He did something! Not only were his feelings moved but also his will — he was moved to action, to responding, to doing something to alleviate the suffering of another. It is good to examine if my concern, my feelings, my compassion actually move me to respond.

Salvifici doloris beautifully highlights some aspects of our needed response in front of suffering. Selected insights are quoted in full below:

- “We are not allowed to ‘pass by on the other side’ indifferently; we must ‘stop’ beside him. The name ‘Good Samaritan’ fits *every individual who is sensitive to the sufferings of others*, who ‘is moved’ by the misfortune of another” (John Paul II 1984, n. 28).
- “Therefore one must cultivate this sensitivity of heart, which bears witness to *compassion* towards a suffering person. Nevertheless, the Good Samaritan of Christ’s parable does not stop at sympathy and compassion alone” (John Paul II 1984, n. 28).
- “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*” (John Paul II 1984, n. 29).
- “How much there is of ‘the Good Samaritan’ in the profession of the doctor, or the nurse, or others similar! Considering its ‘evangelical’ content, we are inclined to think here of a vocation rather than simply a profession” (John Paul II 1984, n. 29).
- “This parable witnesses to the fact that Christ’s revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering *is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity*. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering” (John Paul II 1984, n. 30).

Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

In a sacramental way, Christ, the Good Doctor¹ and Good Samaritan, is able to approach the patient through the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The special grace of this sacrament has as its effects (Catechism 1997, n. 1532):

- the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church;
- the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age;
- the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance;
- the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul;
- the preparation for passing over to eternal life.

PART II — DEATH AND ETERNAL LIFE

Death

I share an anecdote, partly humorous perhaps, to begin our reflection on the meaning of death. Once while doing a stint in the emergency room, I reviewed a teenage girl who was admitted with tachycardia (a raised heart rate.) I recognized her from a previous visit two weeks earlier when she had presented to the emergency room having dropped a ten-pin bowling ball on her head. She had chosen a ball with finger holes that were too small. After a hefty swing the ball had failed to release because her fingers were stuck in the holes. Her swing continued until the ball struck her on the head. This time, her tachycardia had been caused by taking an excess of asthma inhaler “for fun” as she put it. She was really trying to impress her accompanying friends as I attempted to

make her realize how serious a tachycardia could be. “Young lady, your normal heart rate should be around eighty beats per minute. The sound you hear now is the heart rate monitor going at 185 beats per minute.” Still she made light of events even joking that she should have taken more of her inhaler. I reassured her that this might not have been a good idea. “Young lady, if that was the case the sound of the heart monitor would be different. It would be a continuous beep, but anyway you would not have heard it because you would be dead.” With that she burst into tears, and I left the room feeling a little guilty. Suddenly, outside the room, I heard the flat line trace. “Oh no,” I thought, as I raced back into the room. On entering she sat bolt upright in bed, wide-eyed and screamed out “Doctor, am I dead? Am I dead?” To much relief, mine and hers, I reassured that she was not dead but simply that the lead for the heart-rate monitor had fallen off from her chest.

What Is Death?

Pope Saint John Paul II, addressing the Eighteenth International Congress of the Transplantation Society, said: “This gives rise to one of the most debated issues in contemporary bioethics, as well as to serious concerns in the minds of ordinary people. I refer to the problem of *ascertaining the fact of death*. When can a person be considered dead with complete certainty?” (John Paul II 2000, n. 4). From a theological point of view, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that human death is “the separation of the soul from the body” (Catechism 1997, n. 997). John Haas writes,

The reason no scientific technique can directly identify the moment of death is quite simple: the soul is a non-corporeal, spiritual life-principle which cannot be

observed or measured or weighed using the tools of empirical science. The presence or absence of the soul can be ascertained only by observing certain biological signs that *indirectly* attest to its presence or its absence. (Haas 2011, 285)

Pope Saint John Paul II explains well the connection between death, the separation of the soul from the body, and the accompanying medical signs:

the death of the person is a single event, consisting in the total disintegration of that unitary and integrated whole that is the personal self. It results from the separation of the life-principle (or soul) from the corporal reality of the person. The death of the person, understood in this primary sense, is an event which no scientific technique or empirical method can identify directly. Yet human experience shows that once death occurs certain biological signs inevitably follow, which medicine has learnt to recognize with increasing precision. In this sense, the "criteria" for ascertaining death used by medicine today should not be understood as the technical-scientific determination of the exact moment of a person's death, but as a scientifically secure means of identifying the biological signs that a person has indeed died. (John Paul II 2000, n. 4)

What Happens Spiritually at the Moment of Death?

One day, during my residency training in plastics and reconstruction, a patient with eighty percent burns asked me outright "What do you think happens after we die?" This young man was seriously ill with an infection and in danger of death. It had been long day for me, and I just wanted to finish my shift on the burns unit and go home. He repeated his question, this time with more intensity and followed up by asking "How would you feel if you were in my situation?" I told

him I could not imagine that. He persisted in his line of questioning and I felt obliged at least to try and respond truthfully. Perhaps for the first time ever as a doctor, I explicitly shared my faith in the hospital. I said "Well one thing that comforts me in front of death is my faith in eternal life." He inquired further what this meant. I explained that I believed that life does not end with death but instead death marks a new beginning, a life in God which will last forever. I even remembered a line Jesus said: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will live forever." I left for home feeling peaceful seeing how intently our young friend had listened to what I shared.

The next day, coming to work early, I was surprised to notice that the patient's name was no longer on his door. His mother came out of his room, looking tired and teary eyed. "My son died last night. Thank you." I was taken aback to find out that her son had passed away. I was also slightly confused as to why she was thanking me, after all her son had died despite our best medical efforts. She continued "My son knew the end was near, and for that he was so restless. He could not find peace. But last night I came to see him. For the first time in months I found him at peace. He told me you had spoken to him. Thank you for what you shared." Perhaps for the first time I realized the power of our faith. Not only to look at life and death through a medical perspective but also a spiritual one.

It is beautiful that we can have recourse to our faith to help us explain things which medical science cannot explain. No medical textbook, staying strictly in the realms of medical science, can give any answer to this young man. Medicine remains silent and in ignorance in front of such questions. It simply has, and will never have — despite all the

advances in technology — anything more to add. The *Catechism* however can tell us “Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven through a purification or immediately — or immediate and everlasting damnation” (*Catechism* 1997, n. 1022).

Death in Different Cultures

The cultural context of death is vitally important. Death can be seen through varying optics and different hues depending on the cultural perspective. I remember when I first arrived in the Philippines and was invited by a family to visit the cemetery on the evening of the feast of All Souls. Getting near the cemetery I was surprised to hear loud music and wondered where the party was. To my shock it was coming from among the tombstones! As we entered I was invited to sit down ... on a tomb. I nearly jumped when I felt a hand on my shoulder — not someone coming back from the dead but rather the family who had invited me offering a burger and fries to eat. Even celebrating the memory of the faithful departed is fun in the Philippines. It is quite different to how we remember our dead in Scotland! As doctors we are influenced by cultural perspectives, with all their richness and, at times, some bias.

Eternal Life

Death is an event we will all, one day (and not too soon we hope!) have to personally face. At the moment of death, our body and soul are separated. Our soul does not fly around for forty days despite rumors to the contrary. Instead the soul goes to experience the judgment of God. If in a

state of perfect friendship, then heaven awaits; if imperfect, then purgatory; and somewhere hot down below if we have definitively rejected God (hard to imagine but hell is a constant teaching of our Lord and the Church). And what happens to our body? It goes to dust but does not just stay there. We will get it back, albeit in a glorified way, at the resurrection of the dead (see 1 Cor 15:42ff).

So this life after death is not something only to look forward to later on. This eternal life has actually already begun. We received the life of God in our baptism which means we can begin this life with God in the here and now. As I often repeat in homilies on the topic, “Don’t wait until after death to start living your eternal life, as it may be too late.” The life of God grows in us when we pray and when we love others.

How to Live Our Eternal Life in the Here and Now?

I wrap up with some practical ways to start living our eternal in the here and now.

Eternal life as relationship

Jesus told us what this life is: “Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ” (John 17:3). If eternal life is a relationship, then it can be lived today. This is the gift of prayer, even on a busy day, the chance to share the daily happenings with God. We can enter into this knowledge of God, this knowing him, by sharing what we live with him each day.

Eternal life as new birth

On her deathbed St. Thérèse of Lisieux wrote, “I am not dying. I am entering life.” In the Mass preface often used at funerals we hear the words “life is

changed, not ended.” The newness of what is eternal can be experienced each day and reminds us to not get stuck in routine and monotony. St. Paul invited the Corinthians to experience this newness when he wrote “What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

Eternal life as love

Eternal life, being a life that never ends, is also understood as love, because love is eternal. St. Paul explains,

Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:8–13).

We do not need to wait for heaven to experience a life in God and a life in love. Each loving option allows us already to become sharers in the divine nature (see 2 Pet 1:4), the divine nature of a God who is love (1 Pet 4:8).

Eternal life as good choices

Choices and options can be made so that we live our eternal life here and now. The Word of God tells us: “I set before you life and death... choose life” (see Deut 30:19). When we choose to love in the small moments of our daily lives, we are choosing to invest in eternity. We should

be wise investors—do not invest only in passing things—instead invest in what will last forever.

NOTE

- 1 In the tradition of the Church, Jesus is recognized as the “Divine Physician” and “Good Doctor.” See, for example, the letter of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Church of Ephesus. St. Augustine cries “O my inner Physician” (*Confessions*, bk 10, ch. 3), and “Woe is me! Behold, I do not hide my wounds. Thou art the Physician, I am the sick man” (*Confessions*, bk 10, ch. 28).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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