Grounds for a Christian Statement on Suffering in the Thought of Pope John Paul II

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The article seeks to address the problem of suffering in the world by offering a Christian statement on this great issue which has affected and perplexed humanity throughout the ages. The content of the statement is obtained by a presentation of the theme in a wide spectrum of writings and pronouncements made by Pope John Paul II who led the Catholic Church from 1978 to 2005, and who is considered to be one of the most prominent voices regarding human dignity and existential issues in contemporary times. Contemplating the crucified and risen Christ enables Christians to talk about a new meaning to suffering as well as of a “Gospel of suffering”. The article enters into themes such as the human predicament when faced with suffering, the mission of those who suffer and solidarity with the suffering.

Keywords: Pope John Paul II, suffering, Jesus Christ, the Cross, love, dignity, solidarity

Introduction

Nearly twenty-two hundred years ago, the Greek philosopher Epicurus (342-270 BCE) affirmed one of the most irreconcilable enigmas facing the speculative intellect and moral consciousness—the problem of suffering and evil. He stated:

The gods can either take away suffering from the world and will not, or, being willing to do so, cannot; or they neither can nor will, or lastly, they are both able and willing. If they have the will to remove suffering and cannot, then they are not omnipotent. If they can, but will not, then they are not benevolent. If they are neither able nor willing, then they are neither omnipotent nor benevolent. Lastly, if they are both willing and able to annihilate suffering, then how does it exist? (Evans, 1968, p. 209)

The genesis of the problem of suffering lies in the apparent incompatibility in jointly asserting the following statements:

1. God exists.
2. God is good.
3. God is omnipotent.
4. God is omniscient.
5. Suffering exists in the world.

For several thinkers throughout the ages, the presence of suffering in the world has provided strong and perhaps decisive evidence against belief in God. Furthermore, “the words of the Evangelist: ‘he began to be
sorrowful and troubled” (Mt 26:37), and the whole development of the prayer in Gethsemane, seem to indicate not only fear in the face of suffering, but also the dread which is characteristic of mankind” (John Paul II, 1987a).

Moreover, in his Apostolic Letter on suffering, *Salvifici Doloris* (11 February, 1984), Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) considers the problem which inevitably confronts any human being undergoing suffering. In the third section of this Letter, he asks: “Why suffering?” and relates it to other questions: “Why does evil exist? Why is there evil in the world?”. In examining the ways which lead to some sort of answer, the Polish Pope commences with the biblical narrative of Job and studies the Old Testament view of suffering as a “punishment for transgression” (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 10). He recalls that this was the interpretation offered by Job’s friends, and comments that although “it is true that suffering has a meaning in punishment, when it is connected with a fault, it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault” (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 10).

In his ground-breaking pastoral visit to Cuba, in 1998, Pope John Paul II paid a visit to the Shrine of St Lazarus where he met the sick and the suffering. On that occasion, he dwelt upon the mystery of suffering and the Christian response to it:

> In one form or another all human beings experience pain and suffering in their lives and this cannot but lead them to pose a question. *Pain is a mystery*, often inscrutable to reason. *It forms part of the mystery of the human person*, which alone comes clear in Jesus Christ who reveals to man man’s true identity. Christ alone enables us to know the meaning of all that is human. (John Paul II, 1998)

The scope of this article is a humble attempt in reflecting on the attitude of Christianity towards suffering. The meaning of suffering is what Jesus Christ himself invites the individual to meditate upon in the light of the Paschal Mystery. Subsequent to every trial and every cross, human beings often walk the road of despair which the disciples of Emmaus journeyed, sadness clouding their faces, conversing and discussing, broken, disillusioned, annihilated. Failing to recognize their Lord, the disciples complained to him about himself: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened…” (Lk 24:21). And then follows the affectionate rebuke: “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Lk 24:25). This is indeed a central meditation in a Christian reflection upon suffering.

A synoptic presentation of the Christian attitude towards suffering is available in the thought of Pope John Paul II during the exercise of his long pastoral ministry. A comprehensive research on a number of his messages and speeches to the suffering and the sick in Rome and during his countless pastoral visits all over the globe provides us with a plethora of useful reflections on the theme. Delving deeply into the main tenets of John Paul II’s face-to-face encounters with humanity helps in the exploration of a Christian statement on suffering.

From the very beginning of his long pontificate, John Paul II was especially close to the sick and the suffering. During his Wednesday General Audiences, he always reserved one of his greetings to the sick and the suffering. In one of his first general audiences, he stated:

> The Pope wishes to give special attention to the sick, to bring them an affectionate greeting and a word of comfort and encouragement. You, dear sick people, have an important place in the Church, if you can interpret your difficult situation in the light of faith and if, in this light, you are able to live your illness with a generous and strong heart. Each of you can then affirm with St Paul: “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). (John Paul II, 1978)
In May 1992, John Paul II instituted the World Day of the Sick, to be celebrated annually on the 11 February. In his message for the First World Day of the Sick (1993), he sums up the Christian attitude towards suffering:

The Christian community has always paid particular attention to the sick and the world of suffering in its multiple manifestations. In the wake of such a long tradition, the universal Church, with a renewed spirit of service, is preparing to celebrate the first World Day of the Sick as a special occasion for growth, with an attitude of listening, reflection, and effective commitment in the face of the great mystery of pain and illness. This day, which, beginning in February 1993, will be celebrated every year on the commemoration of Our Lady of Lourdes, for all believers seeks to be "a special time of prayer and sharing, of offering one’s suffering for the good of the Church and of reminding everyone to see in his sick brother or sister the face of Christ who, by suffering, dying and rising, achieved the salvation of mankind". (Letter Instituting the World Day of the Sick, 13 May 1992, para. 3).

The day seeks, moreover, to involve all people of good will. Indeed, the basic questions posed by the reality of suffering and the appeal to bring both physical and spiritual relief to the sick do not concern believers alone, but challenge all mankind, marked by the limitations of the mortal condition. (John Paul II, 1992c, para. 1)

In order to facilitate the flow of this article, it is being subdivided into five parts, whose sub-headings are: (1) The Predilection of the Church for those who suffer; (2) A New Meaning to Suffering; (3) Faced with Suffering; (4) The Mission of those who Suffer—a Call to Love; (5) Solidarity and the Suffering.

The Predilection of the Church for Those Who Suffer

Concern for the sick and suffering is part of the Church’s life and mission. From its birth, the Church has always understood itself to be charged by Christ with the care of the poor, the weak, the defenceless, the suffering and those who mourn (John Paul II, 1987b). In his Apostolic Letter Dolentium Hominum, by which he established, in 1985, the Pontifical Council for the Apostolate of Health Care Workers, Pope John Paul II asserted that the deep interest which the Church has always shown for the world of suffering is well known. In this, for that matter, she has done nothing more than follow the very eloquent example of her Founder and Master. In fact, over the course of the centuries the Church has strongly felt that the service to the sick and suffering is an integral part of her mission (John Paul II, 1985a).

At the start of his first pastoral trip outside Italy after his election, John Paul II reserved a special thought for the suffering and the marginalized. This is a marking feature of the Church’s option for those who are burdened with suffering. In greeting the poor people of the district of Los Minas in Santo Domingo—this being one of his first encounters on his arrival in Latin America—the Pope stated:

And I wanted to come here just because it is a poor area, in order that you might have the opportunity—I would say to which you have the best claim—of being with the Pope. He sees in you a more living presence of the Lord, who suffers in our neediest brothers, who continues to proclaim blessed the poor in spirit, those who suffer for justice… (John Paul II, 1979a)

The Gospels teem with narratives where our Lord shows his particular love and concern for the sick and those in pain. In his pastoral visit to Ireland in 1979, John Paul II expressed the Church’s love for the suffering person as an extension and actualization of the ministry of Jesus. Addressing the sick and the other faithful at the Shrine of Knock, he reminded them that during his public mission, Jesus loved those who were suffering, and this attitude has been transmitted to the Church. Loving the sick is an important gesture that the Church as learned from Jesus Christ (John Paul II, 1979e).
The authentic Christian is urged to seek and show a special love for the marginalized because of their condition. Such a situation aggravates the suffering they experience. During a visit to a leprosarium, the “Raoul Follereau National Institute” at Adzopé in Ivory Coast, John Paul II stated: “Christ Jesus, the Son of God, whom I serve and represent among you, stopped with predilection before human suffering, disease, infirmity and, above all, infirmity which sets one somewhat apart from others” (John Paul II, 1980c).

The Church bows down with a motherly look when faced with the suffering of men and women (John Paul II, 1985b). Suffering, etched in the body and spirit of every person, allows us to understand the value and the merit of those undergoing difficult trials. This enables us to understand why the Church, born of the mystery of Christ’s passion is aware that the first way to encounter the individual is the path of suffering. During the journey of their life, all men and women experience the reality of suffering in one way or another. While accompanying the suffering individual, the Church transmits the consolation which comes from God (John Paul II, 1992b).

The Church’s predilection for the suffering individual is closely related to the latter’s proximity to the crucified Lord who draws all to himself when uplifted on the cross (see Jn 12:32). Pope John Paul II offers a christological focus. He once stated:

In expressing my affectionate solidarity to those who are suffering, I invite them to contemplate with faith the mystery of Christ crucified and risen, in order to discover God’s loving plan in their own experience of pain. Only by looking at Jesus, “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Is 53:3), is it possible to find serenity and trust. (John Paul II, 2000, para. 1)

Addressing the sick gathered in St Peter’s Square, John Paul II affirmed that their suffering places them in the very heart of the mystery of Redemption, and consequently, in the heart of the world because they are very near to Christ crucified (John Paul II, 1983). The Christian community’s support of the suffering is concretized by the solidarity, the care and the concern shown by its members. Addressing the participants at an International Conference, organized by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, on AIDS, John Paul II stated:

Do not feel that you are alone. The Church is with you as the sacrament of salvation, to sustain you in your difficult path. She receives much when you live your suffering with faith; she is beside you with the comfort of active solidarity of her members so that you never lose hope. (John Paul II, 1989)

This leads Christians to affirm with John Paul II that “suffering also has a special value in the eyes of the Church. It is something … before which the Church bows down in reverence with all the depth of her faith in the Redemption” (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 24).

A New Meaning to Suffering

Pope John Paul II contemplates the special salvific meaning of suffering “in the light of Christ’s death on the Cross and his Resurrection” (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 3). The question of physical and spiritual suffering on the part of the innocent requires an explanation that only the Incarnate Word can give. And in order to give it as effectively as possible, he gave it from the Cross (John Paul II, 1988a). The Polish Pope stresses that Christ presents us with an answer to the enigma of suffering and the meaning of suffering “not only by his teaching, that is by the Good News, but most of all by his own suffering, which is integrated with this teaching in an organic and indissoluble way” (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 18). This, then, he writes is the definitive
understanding of suffering.

Christ gave universal redemptive value to his own suffering which appeared to be imposed on him from without. He accepted it out of obedience towards his Father and out of love for humanity in order to free it from sin, the ultimate cause of suffering and death. And if we agree to do so, we can also participate in this redemption. John Paul II asserts: “This agreement is neither fatality no resignation to suffering, which remains an evil against which we must continue to struggle. But God shows us how to draw good from evil by offering up our suffering with the cross of Christ” (John Paul II, 1984c).

Jesus who exhorts the suffering man “Come and follow me” is identical to the same Jesus who suffers: the Christ of Gethsemane, the scourged Christ, Christ crowned with thorns, Christ on the way of the cross, Christ on the cross. This is the same Christ who drained the cup of human suffering “which the Father gave him” (see Jn 18:11). If he says to the suffering person “Come and follow me”, he is inviting the person to take part in the same transformation, in the same transmutation of the evil or suffering into salvific good: that of the redemption, of grace, purification, and conversion … for oneself and for others … I wish you this transformation, which is “an interior miracle”, even greater than the miracle of healing … (John Paul II, 1979c)

By his suffering and death, Jesus took upon himself all human suffering, and endowed it with dignity. As a matter of fact, he calls upon the sick, upon all who suffer, to collaborate with him in the salvation of the world. Though the hard reality of suffering is tangibly experienced by the suffering person, pain and sorrow are not endured alone or in vain. Although it remains difficult to understand suffering, Jesus has made it clear that its value is linked to his own suffering and death, to his own sacrifice. In other words, by your suffering you help Christ in his work of salvation. (John Paul II, 1979e)

Every suffering person bears the Cross. Christ took upon himself the whole harsh reality of human suffering and radically transformed it through the Paschal Mystery. In this sense, suffering can be seen as an offering to God on behalf of humanity. Those who suffer “present to the Lord the silent offering of … their physical or moral sufferings, their fiat to divine will … With Christ, they save the world” (John Paul II, 1980a). Human suffering is hence essentially transformed. This dimension, this reality, is the cross of Christ. On his cross, the Son of God accomplished the redemption of the world. It is through this mystery that every cross placed on someone’s shoulders acquires a dignity that is humanly inconceivable and becomes a sign of salvation for the person who carries it, as well as for others. Addressing the sick outside the monastery of Jasna Gora, in his native Poland, John Paul II urged them:

I beg you to make use of the cross that has become part of each of you for salvation. I pray for you to have light and spiritual strength in your suffering, that you may not lose courage but may discover for yourselves the meaning of suffering and may be able to relieve others by prayer and sacrifice. (John Paul II, 1979d)

Suffering entails a co-pilgrimage with the Lord on his ascent towards Calvary. It is an experience of union with the suffering Lord, a means of sanctification:

He [Jesus] is the companion of your pain and you are his companions on his way of the cross. There is no tear you have to shed alone, and none you shed in vain (see Ps 5:9). By this suffering he has redeemed suffering, and through your suffering you cooperate in his salvation (see Col 1:24). Accept your suffering as his embrace and turn it into a blessing by accepting it from the hand of the Father who in his inscrutable, yet unquestionable wisdom and love is using just this to bring about your perfection. It is in the furnace that metal turns into gold (see 1 Pt 1:7); it is in the press that the grape becomes wine. (John Paul II, 1980d)
In fact, a spiritual richness is achieved. During his address after the recitation of the Way of the Cross at the Colosseum in Rome, on Good Friday 1984, Pope John Paul affirmed that “all the brethren who are suffering for their faith have a singular ‘part’ in the Cross of Christ … They draw from it and at the same time create its salvific spiritual richness in union with the Lord Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen” (John Paul II, 1984b). Uniting one’s suffering with the Lord’s brings about an internal transformation which, in turn, is instrumental in transforming the world. At the Cathedral of Manzini, in Swaziland, in Africa, the pilgrim Pope stated:

You participate in a special way in the redemptive mission of Christ … Lovingly uniting your sufferings with his, you are helping to transform the world spiritually from within. You are bringing about a large opening in the heart of humanity so that the redemptive love of God may enter. (John Paul II, 1988b)

This transformation is a new light which breaks the darkness and the misery which, at times, seem to prevail in the world: “Through love, Jesus offered up that suffering. And it is in this way that he won the victory over evil. Suffering, faced up to, accepted little by little, offered in union with Christ, can be a way of light, a spiritual ascension” (John Paul II, 1985c). Seen in the light of the cross, suffering bathed in the Redeemer’s royal blood (as devotedly sung in the Holy Week Vespers hymn Vexilla Regis), is “a fountain of salvation for every Christian” (John Paul II, 1992b). In fact, faith in the risen Christ sheds great light on the condition of human suffering. Sustained by faith, we know that Christ is with humanity, and that he is the resurrection and the life, and that therefore, whoever believes in him, even if he dies, shall live; and whoever lives and believes in him shall have eternal life (see Jn 6:47).

In the important address he delivered in Cuba at the shrine of St Lazarus, during an encounter with sick and suffering persons, John Paul II elaborated upon the theme studied in this section of the article. In what seems paradoxical and counter to human logic, he talks about the Good News of Suffering, a theme which is treated elsewhere in this article, and subsequently about the redeeming Cross of Christ:

This is the true meaning and value of suffering, of the pain which is physical, moral and spiritual. This is the Good News which I wish to pass on to you. To our human questioning, the Lord responds with a call, with a special vocation which is grounded in love. Christ comes to us not with explanations and reasons which might either anaesthetize or alienate us. Instead, he comes to us saying: “Come with me. Follow me on the way of the Cross. The Cross is suffering”. “Whoever wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me” (Lk 9:29). Jesus Christ has taken the lead on the way of the Cross. He has suffered first. He does not drive us towards suffering but shares it with us, wanting us to have life and to have it in abundance (see Jn 10:10). (John Paul II, 1998)

With his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ gifts humanity with a new birth unto a living hope, assuring men and women of an imperishable inheritance. Consequently, affliction becomes “a trial permitted by God in view of a greater good. It is the source of merit, and a brief parenthesis which opens onto the perspective of definitive salvation, which makes us “rejoice with inexpressible joy touched with glory” (see 1 Pt 1:3-9)” (John Paul II, 1983). All of us, as St Paul affirms, “continually carry about in our bodies the dying of Christ” (2 Cor 4:10). That is to say, none of the members of humanity is exempt from suffering and death, any more than Christ was. But St Paul goes on to say that we suffer “so that in our bodies the life of Christ may also be revealed” (John Paul II, 1983). Here, one discovers in awe the mystery of redemption. By accepting the cross with perfect love, Christ has overcome once and for all the power that sin, suffering, weakness and death had over humanity, and he has gifted all people with an abundance of life (John Paul II, 1986b).
Jesus Christ began his ministry by “evangelizing” suffering “to fulfil what had been said by Isaiah the prophet: ‘He took away our infirmities and bore our diseases’” (Mt 8:17; see Is 53:4). As humanity’s Good Samaritan, he made himself the “neighbour” of the suffering whom he met on the road, bending low over their infirmities, soothing their pain with the balm of his words, and often curing their illness. As Peter said, he “went about doing good, and healing all” (Acts 10:38). Christians are encouraged to “trust in the God-Man who wants to draw all things to himself on the cross, sanctifying suffering and transforming it into a redeeming force” (John Paul II, 1992a). Addressing an International Conference on AIDS, organized by the Pastoral Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, in 1989, Pope John Paul II encouraged humanity to see suffering as a call and a vocation: “The effort to give meaning to your suffering is a precious call to the highest of life’s values which touches all people, and a particular help which may even be definitive for those who are tempted to despair” (John Paul II, 1989). The call becomes a mission among humanity by making ever more evident the redemptive energy contained in the Cross.

Addressing the sick in Malta, Pope John Paul affirmed that the Church “knows that God’s grace is made perfect in weakness, and that in suffering members the saving power of Christ’s cross is mysteriously present and effective”. (John Paul II, 1990a). This enables one to grasp that every person has a share in the Redemption. Every suffering person is called to participate and share in that suffering through which the redemption of humanity was carried out. John Paul II asserts that

in bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of Redemption. Thus, each individual, in his/her suffering, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ … Those who share in the sufferings of Christ are also called, through their own sufferings, to share in glory. (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 24)

The personal experience of giving a new meaning to suffering entails a radical transformation. In his Apostolic Letter Salvifici Doloris, the Polish Pope asserts that:

suffering cannot be transformed and changed by a grace from outside, but from within. And 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. (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 26)

**Faced With Suffering**

In front of suffering, in front of suffering humanity, we are urged to stop and testify to him and, as far as possible, together with him, all the dignity of suffering. We must “bow our heads before brothers and sisters who are weak and helpless, deprived just of what has been granted to us to enjoy every day” (John Paul II, 1979b). In address to lepers, Pope John Paul II encouraged them to look at suffering differently and with a renewed vision:

Do not look upon it [your suffering] as a fatality. Look upon it just as a trial. The Christ we worship himself underwent a trial, that of the cross, a trial that disfigured him, and that without any fault of his own. He put himself in the hands of God, his Father. He turned towards him to ask for deliverance too. But he accepted; he offered. And his suffering became for countless people, for you, for me, a cause of salvation, forgiveness, grace and life. (John Paul II, 1980c)

The sixth section of the document, already mentioned above, Salvifici Doloris, considers “the Gospel of Suffering” (John Paul II, 1998). Pope John Paul II interprets the Gospel as a record of Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection, as well as of his teachings, and examines it specifically as a “Gospel of Suffering”, a narrative
which reveals the redemptive nature of Christ’s own suffering and brings believers thereby to a Christian understanding of their own travails. Indeed, in February 1992, John Paul II addressed the sick, gathered in St Peter’s Basilica, by stating:

Those who suffer are the image of Gospel poverty: a poverty which, enlightened by Christ’s cross and suffering, is transformed into richness and gift. In fact, it is precisely in the extreme “poverty” of Calvary that Jesus revealed himself as the Father’s “Servant” and the Redeemer-Servant of every person. (John Paul II, 1992b)

**The Mission of Those Who Suffer—A Call to Love**

The path of suffering can be transformed by the grace of God into a gift which of itself is full of redeeming love. This is the way of the Beatitudes. In his meeting with the sick at the Marian Shrine at Knock, in Ireland, Pope John Paul affirmed that “your call to suffering requires strong faith and patience, Yes, it means you are called to love with a special intensity” (John Paul II, 1979e). The mission of those who suffer is indeed precious. In serving the suffering, the Church can receive from them most effective support for her missionary activity (John Paul II, 1990b, para. 78) because, standing with Mary at the foot of the cross (see Jn 19:25), they have “a first-hand participation in Christ’s redemptive sacrifice” (John Paul II, 1992a).

Suffering opens the person who endures it to love, and helps those around to offer themselves. Such a heart bears witness to faith and hope. Addressing disabled persons in Canada, the Polish Pope encouraged them by stating that “many of you are having or have had an experience of faith. The pain remains. But the heart is serene and peaceful. It overcomes the feeling of the uselessness of suffering” (John Paul II, 1984c). This call to love was the underlying theme in John Paul II’s address to the sick at the Italian city of Catanzaro:

I intend to encourage you to make of your present experience a sacrifice of praise and of expiation, by following the example of our Saviour, in offering your suffering an answer full of love, of that love which succeeds in creating good out of evil … You are therefore adding your own page that Gospel of suffering which reveals the strength and the salvific meaning of suffering in the mission of Christ and the Church. (John Paul II, 1984d)

This experience is moreover strengthened by a spiritual union with Jesus Christ at a profound level. Suffering as a call to love can therefore be understood as an imitation of Christ, and in *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II also stresses that it is an experience which draws a person closer to the Lord (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 26; 1998).

**Solidarity and the Suffering**

During his pastoral journey to Colombia in July 1986, Pope John Paul II paid a visit to Chinchinà, where he met several survivors after the tragic eruption of the volcano Nevada del Ruiz of 14 November 1985. The massive eruption had caused the death of over 20,000 people, and made many more homeless. In the course of a heartfelt prayer to God, the Pope stated: “We thank you, Father, because in faith, suffering brings us closer to you, and increases the brotherhood and solidarity of all who open their hearts to their needy neighbour” (John Paul II, 1986a). The suffering of one’s neighbour, the suffering of another person, the same as oneself in everything, causes an undeniable uneasiness, almost a sense of embarrassment in those who are not suffering. A question instinctively arises: Why he or she, and not I? This is a question which cannot be avoided. It is a question of elementary human solidarity.

Jesus, who is present in our suffering neighbour, wishes to be present in every act of charity and service of ours, which is expressed also in every glass of water we give “in his name” (see Mk 9:41). This is so because
Jesus desires love, the solidarity of love, to grow from suffering and around suffering. He is desirous, that is, of the sum of that good which is possible in among the members of the human race, a good that never passes away (John Paul II, 1979c). Addressing people who had been struck by natural calamities, in appeal he made for the Sahel, Pope John Paul II stated: “It is also a question of charity for all those who consider that every man and woman is a brother and a sister whose sufferings must be borne and alleviated by everyone. Solidarity, in justice and charity, must know no frontiers or limits” (John Paul II, 1980b). This solidarity in suffering is a great mystery. It lies at the heart of Christianity. This solidarity, moreover, becomes a source of grace: “Those who are Christians understand my language. Your suffering, accepted, borne with patience and love of others, offered to God, becomes a source of grace” (John Paul II, 1980c). Together with Christ, Christians too can bring comfort to those who suffer, if they are moved by the Spirit. Would not perhaps a merely human world be enough to rekindle the light of hope in a heart which risks being swallowed by the darkness of despair? When faced with this question, the Pope quickly exclaimed:

No, brothers and sisters! It is only the Spirit of the Lord … which sends all of us to co-mfort those who are afflicted. Our word of “poor men” certainly would be altogether insufficient and inadequate if it were not interiorly strengthened by the breath of the Spirit. (John Paul II, 1983)

Pope John Paul exhorts “the Church community to renew its commitment to transforming human society into a ‘house of hope’, in collaboration with all believers and man of good will” (John Paul II, 1997b, para. 5). In so doing, he extends the Christian attitude to suffering to all persons of good will, and offers the Church’s collaboration in the alleviation of suffering. In the seventh chapter of Salvifici Doloris, Pope John Paul II reflects on solidarity and the significance of the parable of the merciful Samaritan. He states that this parable belongs to the Gospel of Suffering, because it clearly points out one’s duties in responding to the sufferings of others:

We are not allowed to “pass by on the other side” indifferently; we must “stop” beside him. Everyone who stops besides the suffering of another person, whatever form it may take, is a Good Samaritan. This stopping does not mean curiosity but availability. It is like the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart (John Paul II, 1984a, para. 28)

and a sensitivity to the sufferings of others. It involves a self-offering—a sincere gift of oneself—to help in all possible ways the suffering person.

With growing zeal, the Christian is urged to spread the Gospel of suffering, with the certainty that the generous help given to the person who suffers is a factor contributing to unity in charity and a premise for a new solidarity among people (John Paul II, 1992a). Addressing the people of the Maltese Islands, at Rabat, John Paul II again underlines the necessity of a new approach to suffering by the afflicted person. The latter can share in the creation of solidarity in the community:

When people are sick, or burdened by troubles, they are often tempted to think only of their own problems. But faith invites us to look deeper, and to see the immense good that we can do for our neighbour by offering our suffering in union with Jesus as a pleasing sacrifice to God our Father for the needs of all mankind. (John Paul II, 1990a)

During one of his pastoral visits to his native homeland, the Polish Pope greeted and encouraged the sick. His message was more effective on account of the fact that he spoke out of personal experience:

Every day I try to be close to your sufferings. I can say this because I am familiar with the experience of a hospital bed. Precisely because of this, with greater insistence in my daily prayer I beseech God for you, asking him to give you
strength and health; I pray that in your suffering and sickness you will not lose hope; I pray that you will be able to place your pain at the foot of Christ’s Cross. From a human point of view the situation of a sick person is difficult, painful and sometimes even humiliating. But it is precisely because of this that you are in a special way close to Christ, and in a certain sense share physically in his sacrifice. Try to remember this. The Passion and Resurrection of our Saviour will help you to grasp the mystery of your suffering. (John Paul II, 1997a)

In the latter message, John Paul II offers a reflection wherein many themes which have been treated in this article do in fact converge. Towards the end of his life, during one of his last journeys outside Rome, while on a pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Lourdes, John Paul II used very poignant words when he described himself as a suffering person due to old age and other ailments. Very concisely, he said: “I make my own your prayers and your hopes. With you I share a time of life marked by physical suffering, yet not for that reason any less fruitful in God’s wondrous plan” (John Paul II, 2004).

Conclusion

A Christian statement on suffering has enabled us to delve into a wide selection of the myriad pronouncements made by Pope John Paul II during his long pontificate, spanning nearly twenty-seven years. October 2018 will mark the fortieth anniversary of the election of Karol Wojtyła from Kraków as Bishop of Rome and Pastor of the Universal Church. It has been very appropriate to focus upon his contribution to the theme of human suffering. The Church is a community of salvation and a healing-saving sacrament of reconciliation. In order for it to be a healing force, the Christian community is constantly called to be always deeply rooted in the Lord. A reconciled and reconciling community is to be ever attentive to maintain a spirit of committed solidarity for the healing of its suffering members and for loving care.

A community that has a deep understanding of the salvific value of redeemed suffering can not only assist its suffering members more effectively, but will also benefit from the example and prayer of those who have accepted the challenge of suffering. In Salvifici Doloris, Pope John Paul II treats equally the two directions in which authentic believers approach various forms of suffering. There are those who become followers of the merciful Samaritan, Christ himself, by healing and caring, combating injustice and healing individual and collective wounds. And there are those who are suffering and, in their own understanding way, become merciful Samaritans by sharing in Christ’s suffering with the same kind of loving solidarity with which Christ accepted his own suffering.

The model for Christians is Jesus Christ. He did not seek suffering as such, or unnecessary suffering, but he accepted all the suffering needed for him to accomplish the redemption of humanity, indeed bearing the burden of all. So, too, in the therapeutic activity and service of the Church and in her compassion and shared suffering for the sake of healing and salvation, there is a privileged place for encouraging in ourselves and in others a patient and meaningful acceptance of suffering. Indeed, suffering and death are a part of human existence, and it is futile, not to say misleading, to try to hide them or ignore them. On the contrary, people must be helped to understand their profound mystery in all its harsh reality. Even pain and suffering have meaning and value when they are experienced in close connection with love received and given. (John Paul II, 1995, para. 97)

References


