



ANNA SCHULTEN
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THESIS

God reveals (in scripture and tradition) that he is neither passive nor powerless: in his incarnation, God becomes one of us. Jesus redeems suffering by his death and resurrection so that, when we unite ourselves with Christ, we become co-redeemers and participate in life in eternity.

The invitation to co-redemption is itself God's mercy in action. Our suffering - united with Christ - is made holy, and is used for good: to save our souls and the whole world.

WHO GOD ISN'T: THEOLOGICALLY MISLEADING EXPRESSIONS OF SYMPATHY

"God needed another angel in heaven." "God must be trying to get your attention and bring you back to him." "We will only understand in heaven."

AN APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

1. God does not directly send pain, suffering, and disease. God does not punish us.
2. God does not send accidents to teach us things, though we can learn from them.
3. God does not will earthquakes, floods, droughts, or other natural disasters. Prayer asks God to change us to change the world.
4. God's will is more in the big picture than in the small.
5. God did not need the blood of Jesus. Jesus did not just come "to die," but God used his death to announce the end of death.
6. God has created a world that is less than perfect, and in which suffering, disease, and pain are realities; otherwise it would be heaven. Some of these problems we now create for ourselves and blame God.
7. God does not kill us off."

- Fr. Richard Leonard, S.J., *Where the Hell is God?*

A PROMISE OF PRESENCE:

GOD INVITES US TO CO-REDEMPTION BY OFFERING UP OUR SUFFERING

*If God is all-powerful and merciful, why does he allow suffering?
If not vindictive, God seems at best passive and at worst powerless in
times of great personal and societal suffering. Is God active in suffering
today? And what can one person do about it?*

AN ANSWER ABOUT THE CROSS, FROM THE CROSS

When a person turns to God in the face of excruciating - often innocent - suffering, he "cannot help noticing that the one to whom he puts the question is himself suffering and wishes to answer him from the Cross, from the heart of his own suffering."

- John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*

WHO IS GOD?

God is Love.

God's overflowing love is unaffected by our merits or our sinfulness, and does not give up in the face of evil and pain. God is whole and complete as Trinity without us, but still, he seeks relationship with us. "Self-giving love is not something God does; it is who he is. We cannot separate God from selfless love that suffers."

- Jeff Cavins, *When You Suffer*

God is Mercy.

God's relentless compassion embraces all who seek and return to him. "God's mercy does not entail bypassing human freedom. God recommends, but he does not force; he presses us, but does not overpower or subdue us. [...] With its wooing, mercy demands a decision; indeed, it first makes the decision possible."

- Walter Kasper, *Mercy*

God is Communal.

God's love and mercy demonstrate his communal nature and his desire for relationship. He "holds the possibility of salvation open for every human being who is fundamentally willing to be converted and who is sorry for his or her guilt."

- Walter Kasper, *Mercy*

WHAT IS GOD DOING ABOUT SUFFERING?

Job shows us God the Father's response to suffering.

Lament brings us closer to God. "The first step to grief and healing is to move from overwhelmed silence to the bold speech of lament. [...] Lament also allows us to stay in conversation with God, deepening the relationship and gradually moving to a new trust."

- Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J., *Into the Abyss of Suffering*

Effective consolation begins with listening. "The Lord listens": sometimes in prayer it is enough to know this. [...] if we are listened to, everything becomes more bearable."

- Pope Francis, *Catechesis 10*

God's consolation is active, not static. "He does not make evil disappear magically, but he endures the suffering; he makes it his own and transforms it; he abides it."

- Pope Francis, *Fifth Sunday of Lent 2017*

"Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy."

- Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*

God's desire for relationship with us is demonstrated by his personal participation. From his incarnation and birth into poverty, to his difficult mission life and his ultimate death on a cross, "Christ gives the answer to the question about 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."

- John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*

Discipleship does not guarantee earthly relief or comfort - as demonstrated in Christ's passion and in the lived witness of the martyrs - but God does promise eternal consolation: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."

- Matthew 11:28

Christ's suffering continues its influence even beyond death: "Christ retains in his risen body the marks of the wounds of the Cross in his hands, feet, and side. Through the Resurrection, he manifests the victorious power of suffering."

- John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*

The Holy Spirit continues working in the Church and in us.

Christ's redemption "lives and develops" throughout history in the Church. Baptism configures us to Christ, and through the Eucharist, "Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way he is united with those who suffer."

- John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*

"CO-REDEMPTION?"

Colossians 1:24

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings
for your sake, and in my flesh
I complete what is lacking
in Christ's afflictions
for the sake of his body,
that is, the Church."

Complete & Ongoing

"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."

- John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*

Our Participation

To clarify, the prefix "co" in this sense indicates participation *with* Christ, not equality to Him. "All the grace and power of redemption must come from Christ, for He is the only one who really merits our redemption, [...] But we also believe that Christ chose to use men and women on this earth who freely unite themselves with Him and offer their work, prayer, and suffering for others."

- Michael Giesler, *How Christ Saves Souls*

Mary: An Exemplar Disciple

The Blessed Mother's prayers and actions brought God's love and mercy to the world in the form of Jesus, the Word made flesh. As the perfect example of Christian discipleship, Mary is the most faithful and effective co-redeemer, and she is worth imitating on our journey.

The Church is God's redemption at work in the world.

The Church is "a living sign of the Father's love in the world. [...] All her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love."

- Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*

We are the body of Christ. The body of Christ is the Church on a global scale, and the body of Christ is *also* each individual member. We work in union with Christ, the Head, to save souls. "Not only is the relationship of suffering and glory never separated, but neither is the head (Christ) and the body (Church). The head and the body work in union."

- Jeff Cavins, *When You Suffer*

The Church's work is carried out by us through the universal call to holiness. "We might be very happy to let Jesus take the suffering and let us participate in the glory, but we will see that these two are never separated."

- Jeff Cavins, *When You Suffer*

HOW WE PARTICIPATE IN CO-REDEMPTION

Act.

First, we are the hands and feet of Christ; if you can alleviate suffering, you must act! "Mercy is not only an action of the Father but a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us."

- Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*

Reconcile.

We seek forgiveness for the suffering we have caused.

"Reconciliation requires the pain of saying you're sorry for the evil you've done and the suffering you've caused. It requires repentance, in actually turning from that which within you is evil and causes others harm."

- Charles Erlandson, *Take This Cup*

Listen.

A listening heart provides the comfort of presence, and guards against theologizing, which "does not take account of concrete situations, of the sufferings and hopes of human beings. [...] it forgets the gratuitous love and unbounded compassion of God."

-Gustavo Gutiérrez and Matthew O'Connell: *On Job*

Witness.

"We are the presence of Christ in the world today. Jesus redeems suffering in and through us: our lives, our difficulty, and our perseverance. "If the world does not see us suffer, and suffer with patience, faith, and even joy, then it may be denied the opportunity to see the suffering Jesus who came to save them."

- Charles Erlandson, *Take This Cup*

Worship.

Both gifts and suffering become bread – Christ's very self – for others. "The Mass, therefore, is the closest we can come in this life to the mystery of redemption. Every time the priest celebrates it, every time the faithful unite themselves with it through their priestly souls, they are sharing in Christ's saving power and, in some way, redeeming the world."

- Michael Giesler, *How Christ Saves Souls*

Pray.

Devotional practices such as the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and the Seven Sorrows of Mary help us reflect more deeply on suffering. Jesus said to St. Faustina, "You will save more souls through prayer and suffering than will a missionary through his teachings and sermons alone."

- St. Faustina, *Diary: Divine Mercy in my Soul*

"Participation," in all its forms, means choosing to embrace our crosses.

Actively alleviating suffering and intercessory prayer are complementary: both have redemptive power, and both must be *chosen*: "No one but you can offer yourself up to the Father through the Son."

- Charles Erlandson, *Take This Cup*

