

**A Promise of Presence:**  
God's Merciful Invitation  
to Co-Redemption through Suffering

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If God is both all-powerful and merciful, why does he allow suffering? Who is this God who, if not vindictive, 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? When humanity turns to God in the face of excruciating (and often innocent) suffering, one “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.*”<sup>1</sup> An intellectual question of the existence of God is insufficient here; the pastoral question of God’s love and mercy is of greater personal importance.<sup>2</sup> God’s self-revelation demonstrates that he is neither passive nor powerless. In his love and mercy, God empties himself to become one with humanity, redeeming suffering so that we, united with Christ, may become co-redeemers toward life with him in eternity.

When someone is suffering, human compassion impels a comforting response. However, many common phrases of sympathy are theologically misleading and can do more harm than good. While God’s nature is beyond human comprehension, people still seek meaning – seek God – in difficult situations. Father Richard Leonard’s book *Where the Hell is God?* provides an apophatic theology of what God is *not*<sup>3</sup> through examples of popular platitudes:

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris: On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (Apostolic Letter, Vatican website, 1984), sec. 26, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1984/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_11021984\\_salvifici-doloris.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html). Italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Leonard, S.J., *Where the Hell is God?* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2010), xvii. Leonard includes these 7 truths:

- “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.”

*“God needed another angel in heaven.”* This comment leads to the false notion that God “takes” people away from their loved ones, or that God doesn’t care about human needs or relationships. First, angels and humans are distinct kinds of beings; second, God does not “need” anyone, in heaven or on earth. God is whole and complete as Trinity without humanity, but he *wants* relationship with his creation.<sup>4</sup>

*“We will only understand when we get to heaven.”* Or, Isaiah 55 without context: “My ways are not your ways.”<sup>5</sup> While both true on the surface, these portray the fallacy that God is far away, and totally beyond understanding. These statements push God to the peripheries, painting him as either a disinterested spectator or an impersonal being. This also cannot be further from the truth.

*“God must be trying to get your attention and bring you back to him.”* Translation: this suffering is *your* fault, and God is punishing you. Sometimes, suffering stems from negative consequences of sinful actions or choices, and is an opportunity for conversion, but “there is a huge difference between God permitting evil and God perpetrating such acts on us.”<sup>6</sup> God does not wish harm or wreak havoc, and *“it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of a punishment.”*<sup>7</sup> Fr. Leonard clarifies it well: “we grow through pain, but it is not sent to make us grow.”<sup>8</sup>

If God does *not* fit into these false statements, then what *can* be said about God in light of suffering? First, God is love.<sup>9</sup> “Self-giving love is not something God does; it is who he is. We cannot separate God from selfless love that suffers.”<sup>10</sup> God’s nature of overflowing love is

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, xvi. See also Isaiah 55:8, a psalm of comfort and reunion, not aloofness.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 11, italics in original. Jesus himself debunks this notion in John 9:1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard, *Where the Hell is God*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:16b: God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.”

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Cavins, *When You Suffer: Biblical Keys for Hope and Understanding* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2015), 70.

unaffected by an individual's merits *or* sinfulness, and is unrelenting in the face of evil and pain. God is manifested as Love through his presence: "In all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering *with* us; hence *consolation* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God's compassionate love – and so the star of hope rises."<sup>11</sup>

Second, God is merciful. God's relentless compassion embraces all who seek and return to him. This "is concretely demonstrated in his many actions throughout the history of salvation where his goodness prevails over punishment and destruction."<sup>12</sup> God is all-powerful, but he also takes human free will seriously. God is not "a fool, who, with liberal leniency, overlooks our mistakes and malice and lets them simply run wild in us."<sup>13</sup> God is Mercy, and God is Justice: these two attributes are not mutually exclusive. "In his mercy, God rather holds back his justified wrath [...] He does this in order to provide people the opportunity for conversion."<sup>14</sup>

Third, God's love and mercy witness to his communal nature and his desire for relationship. "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."<sup>15</sup> God is so committed to relationships that 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."<sup>16</sup>

These three key attributes of God are found throughout the Old and New Testament and continue to reign today on both personal and global scales. Through the Book of Job, God allows

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi: On Christian Hope* (Encyclical Letter, Vatican website, 2007), sec. 39, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html)

<sup>12</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus: Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* (Bull of Indiction, Vatican website, 2015), sec. 6, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html).

<sup>13</sup> Kasper, *Mercy*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 108-109.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

– perhaps even encourages – humanity to lament in the face of suffering. “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.”<sup>17</sup> Job rails against his friends, his own birth, and especially God, who seems to have changed his nature.<sup>18</sup> Job is asking the same question: who is God, in light of suffering?

Notice that God does not condemn Job for his lament. Instead, he affirms Job as a righteous and powerful intercessor: “God tells [Job’s friends] that only the intercession of the upright Job can save them [...]; they are to offer their sacrifices while Job prays for them.”<sup>19</sup> Where Job’s friends failed to console him, God demonstrates his omnipresence, and this brings Job relief. ““The Lord listens”: sometimes in prayer it is enough to know this. [...] if we are listened to, everything becomes more bearable.”<sup>20</sup> God’s response includes no platitudes, and is instead founded on deep listening. “If the sufferer is given the opportunity to lament and sensitize others to the evil he is experiencing, it begins to normalize the situation and removes the social stigma.”<sup>21</sup> But God is more than a passive listener: with mercy and love, he acts. “He does not make evil disappear magically, but he endures the suffering; he makes it his own and transforms it; he abides it.”<sup>22</sup> God does not supersede human freedom, and “he doesn’t simply do battle; rather, in his mercy God repeatedly creates new space for life and for blessing.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J., *Into the Abyss of Suffering: A Catholic View* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), 104-105.

<sup>18</sup> Gutiérrez and O’Connell, *On Job*, 52: “On the basis of this experience, and motivated by the faith he has received from his forebears, he is trying to understand the action of God.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Francis, *Catechesis: 10. The prayer of the Psalms. 1* (General Audience, Vatican website, 2020), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201014\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201014_udienza-generale.html).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Chaloux, Ph.D., *Why All People Suffer: How a Loving God Uses Suffering to Perfect Us* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2021), 35, Kindle.

<sup>22</sup> Francis, *Fifth Sunday of Lent* (Homily, Vatican website, 2017), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170402\\_homelia-visitapastorale-carpi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170402_homelia-visitapastorale-carpi.html)

<sup>23</sup> Kasper, *Mercy*, 45.

God's nature is most radically embodied in Christ's incarnation, mission, and paschal mystery. "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. [...] Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him."<sup>24</sup> In the incarnation, God shows his love and commitment to the human race by his kenosis, or self-emptying.<sup>25</sup> "The compassionate suffering of God is not an expression of his imperfection, his weakness, or his powerlessness; but, on the contrary, it is an expression of his omnipotence. Because of his sovereign love, God got himself involved, so to speak, in the incarnation and lowered himself to the status of a slave."<sup>26</sup>

God is especially close to people who are poor, vulnerable, and suffering. This is realized by his personal participation in their very nature: "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."<sup>27</sup> Christ walks the path before his disciples, and "we can be confident that Jesus would not participate in and share with us something that was void of meaning."<sup>28</sup> Christ knows his disciples will bear daily crosses,<sup>29</sup> and he entrusts himself to the Father's will and goodness by embracing his cross.<sup>30</sup> As demonstrated in Christ's passion and the subsequent witness of the martyrs, discipleship does not guarantee earthly relief or comfort, but it does promise eternal consolation: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, sec. 1.

<sup>25</sup> The idea of *kenosis* is from the early Christian hymn in Philippians 2:6-11.

<sup>26</sup> Kasper, *Mercy*, 119. See also Erlandson, *Take This Cup*, 179: "Far from being a sign of God's nonexistence, apathy, or impotence, human suffering is transformed by Christ's incarnation into a sign of God's presence, love, and power."

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Cavins, *When You Suffer*, 74.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 9:23: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." See also Luke 14:27, Matthew 10:38-39 and 16:24-27, and Mark 8:34b-35.

<sup>30</sup> See Matthew 26: 39, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 11:28

Because of Christ's paschal mystery, death does not have the final word. "Human suffering has reached its culmination in the Passion of Christ: [...] *it has been linked to love.*"<sup>32</sup> Once again, God's love and mercy – faithful even to the point of death – is a sign of strength, not weakness: "In Jesus' death, God has not relinquished omnipotence, but rather has acted in an all-powerful way. [...] In his mercy, God allows himself [...] to be affected by pain and suffering. In his mercy, God is shown to be masterfully free."<sup>33</sup> In his resurrection, the marks of Christ's suffering remain, and these continue to be an occasion of redemption and conversion,<sup>34</sup> manifesting "the victorious power of suffering."<sup>35</sup>

How does God's redemptive work continue today? Pope St. John Paul II explains that "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."<sup>36</sup> By the working of the Holy Spirit, Christ's redemption "lives and develops as the body of Christ, the Church."<sup>37</sup> The Church is God's love, mercy and relationality, "a living sign of the Father's love in the world."<sup>38</sup> This is why "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. 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."<sup>39</sup>

St. Paul witnessed this truth of ongoing redemption to the early church by his lived example of perseverance in persecution: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in

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<sup>32</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Kasper, *Mercy*, 119.

<sup>34</sup> The wounds of Christ, marks of his suffering, are used to bring the apostle Thomas to faith (see John 20:24-29).

<sup>35</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 25.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, sec. 24.

<sup>37</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, sec. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, sec. 10.

my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church."<sup>40</sup> A prayer by St. Faustina flips this concept upside down with equal veracity: "Accept, most merciful Jesus, this, my inadequate sacrifice [...] May Your Most Sacred Heart, so full of mercy, complete what is lacking in my offering, and offer it to Your Father for the conversion of sinners."<sup>41</sup> Notice in both of these writings that an individual's suffering sanctifies the body of Christ: globally as the Church, and personally among individual members. The Church's work – including evangelization, redemptive suffering, and joyful consolation – is carried out by individual members through the universal call to holiness.<sup>42</sup> "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."<sup>43</sup>

Members of the body, then, have the blessed opportunity to become "co-redeemers" with Christ, the head. To clarify, in this context, the prefix "co" 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, as a divine Person in unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. [...] 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."<sup>44</sup> The Blessed Mother's prayers and actions brought God's love and mercy to the world in the form of the Word made flesh. As the perfect example of Christian discipleship, Mary is the primary co-redeemer worth emulating on the journey of faith.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Colossians 1:24.

<sup>41</sup> Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in my Soul* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 1987), sec. 1680.

<sup>42</sup> The universal call to holiness is explored in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 5.

<sup>43</sup> Cavins, *When You Suffer*, 75. See also 84: "If the body of Christ is busy avoiding a sacrificial life, the work of God in the world will be divided. As part of Christ's body, our mission [...] requires us to live in harmony with God's will and conform every aspect of our lives to Christ."

<sup>44</sup> Michael Giesler, *How Christ Saves Souls – with Us: The Mystery of Co-Redemption* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2022), Theological Introduction, xix-xx.

<sup>45</sup> Although not part of the scope of this project, Robert Fastiggi wrote an interesting commentary on Pope Francis's recent (2019) statements on Mary's role as disciple of Christ (not "co-Redemptrix"):



The invitation to co-redemption that Christ extends to humanity is *itself* a merciful action of God. Christ “*raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption*,”<sup>46</sup> so human suffering is no longer meaningless: when united with Christ, it is sanctified, gaining both salvific meaning and meritorious value. Co-redemption is a foretaste, an early participation, in the divine life of the Trinity, for “in the love of the Trinity we participate in that dynamo of love by offering up our own crosses. We share in the very inner life of God when we participate with our suffering.”<sup>47</sup>

One question remains, then: to be a co-redeemer with Christ, precisely *how* can one cooperate with God on this mission of love, mercy, and relationality? Suffering is a part of every person’s life, and “receiving the cross with open arms is a laudable aspiration for any Christian. We are not trying to persuade all Christians to go out [...] in search of more and heavier crosses.”<sup>48</sup> But when crosses do come, St. Faustina’s diary provides a comprehensive and practical three-step response to suffering: “The first: the act of mercy, of whatever kind. The second: the word of mercy – if I cannot carry out a work of mercy, I will assist by my words. The third: prayer – if I cannot show mercy by deeds or words, I can always do so by prayer.”<sup>49</sup> God’s loving mercy is actualized by a person’s concrete deeds, words, and prayer in everyday life.<sup>50</sup>

First, as the hands and feet of Christ, each person must work to alleviate suffering.<sup>51</sup> “Mercy is not only an action of the Father but a criterion for ascertaining who his true children

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<https://wherepeteris.com/pope-francis-and-mary-co-redemptrix/>

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 19. Italics in original.

<sup>47</sup> Cavins, *When You Suffer*, 115.

<sup>48</sup> Hubert van Zeller, O.S.B., *The Mystery of Suffering: A Spiritual Classic on Trust in Divine Providence* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1964, 2015.), 88.

<sup>49</sup> Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska*, sec. 163.

<sup>50</sup> Kasper, *Mercy*, 82: “Love, which is proven in mercy, can and must become the foundation of a new culture for our lives, the church, and for society.”

<sup>51</sup> In sec. 15 of his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II notes that modern society “considers suffering to be the epitome of evil, to be eliminated at all costs,” which is true; but because it lacks Christ as its foundation, it cannot perceive any “positive understanding of the mystery of suffering.”

are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us.”<sup>52</sup> We must also acknowledge the occasions when *we* have been complicit in relational and societal suffering. “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. It is, therefore, a profound act of self-emptying and self-humiliation which requires the giving of self and is, therefore, sacrificial.”<sup>53</sup> A common question arises: ““What if it is their fault that they suffer?” It makes no difference. The fact that they suffer is claim upon our compassion. We shall not be asked, “Did they deserve it?” but “Did they need it?””<sup>54</sup>

What about suffering that can’t be immediately alleviated? Return to Job and *listen*. “Many people are simply so unnerved by suffering that they avoid any contact with it, which isolates the sufferers, adding to their problems.”<sup>55</sup> 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.”<sup>56</sup> Even the smallest sufferings have merit when freely united to Christ on

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<sup>52</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, sec. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Erlandson, *Take This Cup*, 121.

<sup>54</sup> Hubert van Zeller, O.S.B., *Suffering: The Cross of Christ and its Meaning for You* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Chaloux, Ph.D., *Why All People Suffer: How a Loving God Uses Suffering to Perfect Us* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2021), 36, Kindle. In Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, sec. 14: “To refrain from judgment and condemnation means, in a positive sense, to know how to accept the good in every person and to spare him any suffering that might be caused by our partial judgment and our presumption to know everything about him. But this is still not sufficient to express mercy. Jesus asks us also to forgive and to give.”

<sup>56</sup> Gutiérrez and O’Connell, *On Job*, 53.

the cross.<sup>57</sup> Jesus said to St. Faustina, “You will save more souls through prayer and suffering than will a missionary through his teachings and sermons alone.”<sup>58</sup>

Suffering is a call, a vocation, of every Christian.<sup>59</sup> It needs no special training or knowledge, requiring only a humble heart ready to witness God’s love and mercy through courage and companionship. “We are the presence of Christ in the world today, by the indwelling of his Spirit, and in and through us, Jesus continues his redemptive ministry of suffering for the world. 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.”<sup>60</sup> Sometimes Christians sanctify the world, and sometimes the world gives Christians the opportunity to live what is preached. “Don’t say: ‘That person gets on my nerves.’ Think: ‘That person sanctifies me.’”<sup>61</sup>

The Christian life is reflected in Christian worship: specifically, in the liturgy, suffering is re-presented in union with Christ. “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

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<sup>57</sup> Escriva, Josemaria, “Friends of God.” EscrivaWorks, sec. 9, [https://www.escrivaworks.org/book/friends\\_of\\_god-chapter-1.htm](https://www.escrivaworks.org/book/friends_of_god-chapter-1.htm): “You and I must therefore seek to make use of even the most trifling opportunities that come our way, to sanctify them, to sanctify ourselves and to sanctify those who share with us the same daily cares, sensing in our lives the sweet and inspiring burden of the work of co-redemption.”

<sup>58</sup> Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in my Soul* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 1987), sec. 1767. John Paul II echoes this sentiment in *Salvifici Doloris* sec. 27: “It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for grace which transforms human souls.”

<sup>59</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 26: Suffering “is above all a call. It is a vocation. 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!”

<sup>60</sup> Erlandson, *Take This Cup*, 137-138.

<sup>61</sup> Josemaria Escriva, “The Way,” EscrivaWorks, sec. 174, [https://www.escrivaworks.org/book/the\\_way-chapter-6.htm](https://www.escrivaworks.org/book/the_way-chapter-6.htm). sec. 173 is like it: “That joke, that witty remark held on the tip of your tongue; the cheerful smile for those who annoy you; that silence when you’re unjustly accused; your friendly conversation with people whom you find boring and tactless; the daily effort to overlook one irritating detail or another in the persons who live with you... this, with perseverance, is indeed solid interior mortification.”

some way, redeeming the world.”<sup>62</sup> During the presentation of the gifts, the Church offers bread and wine – material goods – along with the spiritual gifts of its members. During the epiclesis, the Holy Spirit descends upon these gifts, and during consecration, the Eucharist is both the Real Presence and a moment of participatory co-redemption for loved ones: “by ‘putting a person on the paten’ next to Christ we gain the greatest amount of grace for him or her.”<sup>63</sup> Both gifts and suffering become bread – Christ’s very self – for others. “At Mass the priest raises the chalice in offering to God, and with it the lives, the work, the joys and pains, of his people: and similarly in every moment of trouble there is the material [...] of self-offering as a part of Christ’s offering.”<sup>64</sup> Ordinary food, when eaten, is converted into bodily substance; by consuming the Eucharist, believers are converted into Christ.<sup>65</sup>

Devotional practices such as the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and the Seven Sorrows of Mary facilitate a deeper meditation on suffering. “Christian spiritualities have been characterized by an active mode, often perceived as ascetical, and a more receptive mode, often considered as contemplative. [...] In suffering, we meet a third dimension wherein passivity meets and merges with its active opposite. Suffering affords a dialectical approach to activity and passivity: not one or the other but both.”<sup>66</sup> While active alleviation and intercessory prayer both have redemptive power, both must be *chosen* by the sufferer: ““No one but you can offer yourself up to the Father through the Son. Each of you has a noble and unique part to play in Jesus’s redemption of the world. Through you, he is redeeming your suffering, your life, and the suffering and lives of others.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Giesler, *How Christ Saves Souls – with Us*, 109.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>64</sup> Gerald Vann, O.P., *The Seven Swords* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 1953), 51.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Giesler, *How Christ Saves Souls – with Us*, 119, attributes this idea to Augustine’s *Confessions*, bk 7, §10.

<sup>66</sup> Lucien Richard, “What Really Matters: Suffering and Spirituality,” in *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers, Volume 2: Perspectives for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Robert J. Wicks (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), 74.

<sup>67</sup> Erlandson, *Take This Cup*, 169.

Finally, a word of warning: suffering may be sacramentalized, but it can also be over-spiritualized. One often encounters discouragement when attempts to “offer it up” feel less than successful. “Even though I fall bearing my own cross, I needn’t fret; even Jesus fell thrice under the weight of his cross striding toward Calvary.”<sup>68</sup> Humility shows utter dependence on God, returning again and again with childlike faith. “Disappointment does not waste suffering. Weakness does not waste suffering. The only thing that wastes suffering is unwillingness to suffer.”<sup>69</sup> The practice of offering suffering is a grace, but it will not change the world’s most difficult, systemic issues overnight. “But surely if there is any truth at all in the doctrine of vicarious suffering, vicarious merit, prayer offered to God altruistically for mankind, there is bound to be an effect. Otherwise why bother? But we are *meant* to bother. And if we bother enough, and if enough people bother, good will inevitably triumph over evil.”<sup>70</sup>

A great joy and consolation of the Catholic faith is God’s ability to use even the worst suffering to bring about good<sup>71</sup> – and all individuals bear a vocational call to participate in the process. Personal suffering, when united with Christ, becomes redemptive and sanctifying for the sufferer and the world. God’s self-revelation demonstrates that he is neither passive nor powerless: in his love and mercy, God empties himself to become one with humanity, redeeming suffering so that we, united with Christ, may become co-redeemers toward life with him in eternity. Those who suffer in great or small ways “become *a source of strength* for the Church and humanity. In the terrible battle between the forces of good and evil, revealed to our eyes by our modern world, may your suffering in union with the Cross of Christ be victorious!”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Quoting Al Kresta, in the Introduction of van Zeller, *The Mystery of Suffering*, xv.

<sup>69</sup> Van Zeller, *The Mystery of Suffering*, 28.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 69. Italics in original.

<sup>71</sup> Romans 8:28a: “We know that all things work for good for those who love God.” See also Genesis 50:20, where Joseph makes a similar claim.

<sup>72</sup> John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, sec. 31.

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