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**THE “HOUR” OF JESUS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF
SUFFERING IN ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS**

Moderator

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DEDICATION

To the suffering
and those who help them to grow out of their pain and hurt.

EPIGRAPH

What greatly grieves me is that one who is not at fault is blamed. It is not
people who do these things, but God, who knows what is suitable
for us and arranges things for our own good. Think nothing
else but that God ordains all, where there is no love,
put love, and you will draw out love

St. John of the Cross

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Studying the gospel of John exposed me to the fact that the author of that gospel does not mention the agony, sorrows and suffering of Jesus on his triumphal march to his throne, that is, the Cross; because his focus is the glorification of Jesus. We know that through his whole life: incarnation, humanity, ministry (words and deeds), Jesus reveals the Father. But he does this in a particular way in his “hour”: that is his death; where he meets his enemies with serenity, tranquillity, dignity, inner joy and majesty; in his resurrection; and in his ascension to the Father. The “hour” of Jesus then is the heart of Jesus’ revelation and glorification of the Father.

In the Johannine language, Christ’s cross is the culmination of everything that happened before and after his death. Though the idea of the Johannine Jesus welcoming and embracing his suffering with dignity and serenity is in view of the “glory” that lies ahead, yet it also gives hope and courage to any one suffering. This, therefore, “enticed” me to Jesus’ approach and understanding of suffering, and hence the choice of this topic. The purpose of this work is to help any one plagued by suffering to, like a “believer,” see the substance or the inner reality of life, not behave like an “ordinary spectator” who focuses only on the appearances and externals of things. But before this, it is to help me, first and foremost, to reflect on my own suffering and see how Jesus and John of the Cross can help me accept, transform and integrate it into my life for my own good and the good of my

ministry. It is also a scientific research in fulfilment of Tangaza College requirements for the ecclesiastical degree of Baccalaureate in Theology (STB) and a theological reflection on suffering.

John of the Cross, in his life and works, considers discipleship¹ as basic to the understanding of the meaning of Christians existence, and the central role of Christ in his theology and spirituality. The life of a disciple, for John of the Cross is patterned on that of Christ because it is in him² that God is fully revealed (cf. A. 2, 22, 2-8). So, when John of the Cross talks about discipleship, he actually means living a life patterned on Christ and sharing in his basic attitude: his faith, hope, and the generosity and freedom with which he sacrifices everything to it.³ Hence, John of the Cross' teaching that one can only progress by imitating Christ who is the truth, the way and the life (cf. A.2. 7,8). It is in the light of discipleship that we understand John of the Cross' experience of sufferings.

This long essay will be divided into three chapters. The first one will deal with the Johannine understanding of the *hora* or "hour" of Jesus. We will talk about the death of Jesus and its nature, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit. These are the ultimate moments of Jesus glorification by the Father.

Chapter two will see how John of the Cross imitated and followed Christ in suffering. This is because he did not only teach people how to be a follower and an

¹ It is not suffering that is the core of the teaching of John of the Cross as people think. For him, suffering has nothing to do with sanctity. Therefore, John of the Cross accepts and endures his sufferings not because he loves them but only in the following and imitation of Christ, who saved the world by suffering.

² St. John of the Cross does not believe in apparitions, visions, new revelations since Jesus, who is the fullness of God's revelation, has been revealed already. Vatican II reiterates this when it says that Christ is the Lord in whom the entire revelation of the Most High God is summed up (cf. DV 7).

³ J. M. LOZANO, *A Radical Reinterpretation of Discipleship* http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6_11.htm, 6

imitator of Christ. He was one himself in suffering. To facilitate this, we will look briefly at his life history and at what he called “dark night”. We will look at how he suffered both in his father’s family and in his religious family. We will also take a look at the three classes of people John of the Cross has for people depending on their encounter with the cross. What is of crucial importance here is to see how he managed suffering and integrated it into his life. Equally important is to see how he influences and consoles those plagued by suffering.

Chapter three will deal with the challenges suffering poses to today’s Christians. It seeks to know in what areas we see John of the Cross behaving as Christ’s disciple in his life and deeds. There will be a message, first and foremost to the preacher of the gospel of suffering and then to the Christians plagued by suffering.

It is good to note that in this work, by suffering, we mean those trials and tribulations, which life imposes on a person and which he has no control of. An example of this is the imprisonment of John of the Cross by the Calced Carmelites because of his involvement in the work of the reform of Carmel. Other examples include mistreatments, persecutions and acts of injustice one experiences in one’s chosen way of life or ministry. The general conclusion will give a summary, implications as well as some final statements about the research conducted.

Chapter 1

The Concept of the “Hour”

1. Introduction

This chapter lays the foundation for the whole work. It explains the meaning of the concept of “hour” as used in John’s gospel. We shall see that John focuses on the majesty and the glory that Christ’s suffering reveals. This first chapter would, therefore, cover the following: John’s idea of the “hour”, the “hour” as the “lifting up” of Jesus, origin of the Theme, the theme in the Fourth Gospel, and the “hour” as Glorification. The conclusion gives a summary of the chapter and provides a link to the second chapter.

2. John’s Idea of the “Hour”

The concept of the “hour” of Jesus is typically Johannine. According to this Johannine view, it is not the unit of time into which the day or night is divided.⁴ It has different meanings in each biblical text. For instance, in Daniel (11:40-45), the prophet, foretells the fall of Antiochus Epiphanes, who wanted to exterminate the Jewish people. He describes this as “the hour of fulfilment”.

Also in the Synoptics, it refers to the dark aspects of Christ’s passion.

In the fourth gospel,

John does not speak of the Son of man who is going to a passion and death which would be a “humiliation” as do the Synoptics; for John, the Pauline “scandal” of the cross is not overcome only by the subsequent resurrection, but by the majesty and saving power of the cross itself. The “hour” fixed by the Father for his death (7:30; 8:20) on which his gaze is fixed (12:23; 13:1; 17:7) is now – in contrast to the Synoptics (Matt 14:41; Luke 22:53)—only superficially the hour of darkness (13:3)

⁴While the Jews divide the night into three watches of four hours, the Romans into four of three hours each.

and of disturbance (12:27). In reality, it is the hour of his passing from this world to the Father (13:1) and the hour of his glorification (12:23; 17:1).⁵

So, for John, the “hour” is a time of conflict with the world. The climax of this conflict is Jesus’ death. As seen from the above, the “hour” is also the definitive revelation and glorification of Jesus. It’s the moment of his return to the Father through crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. In other words, it is “the cross, upon which the church will be definitively founded, and which will administer the sacrament, thereby dispensing the new wine of the messianic era”.⁶ The “hour” is the will and command of the Father. That is why the Jews could not lay hands on him because “his hour had not yet come” (7:30; 8:20). This death is the final and real “sign” of Jesus. It is what fully glorifies him. It takes place when the hour has come (71:1). Of course, for John, Jesus’ death is also the moment of his resurrection and ascension. That is why Donald Senior refers to it (that is, Jesus’ death) as a moment of exaltation in returning to the Father.⁷ However, Bruce Vawter says that the “hour” has two phases. Jesus’ suffering and death form one phase, the other phase being his resurrection and ascension to the Father.⁸

Amazingly, John speaks of the “hour” from the beginning of his gospel and includes in it every aspect of Jesus’ life – his person, words and works, existence, mission etc –. As a concept, it points towards the completed *telos*, and reaches its culmination on the cross as the highest expression of love. It is in this “hour” that Jesus reveals all that the Father is. Jesus now becomes the “sacrament” of the Father:

⁵ R. SCHNAKENBURG, *The Gospel According to John*: I, 396.

⁶ A. FEUILLET, *Johannine Studies*, 31.

⁷ D. SENIOR, *The Passion of Jesus in the gospel of John*, 115.

⁸ V. Bruce, “Johannine Theology”, *JBC*, 834.

“He who sees me sees the Father” (13:9) and “the revealer of the true character of the biblical God”.⁹ The second Vatican Council re-echoes this when it says that Christ is the Lord in whom the entire revelation of the Most High God is summed up.¹⁰ Hence, we can say that the “hour” is the moment at which Jesus definitively accomplished the work he was assigned by the Father to do. It is, therefore, a theological and not a temporal concept.

3. The “Hour” As the “Lifting Up” of Jesus

“Lifting up” (3:14; 8:38) or “elevation” in Johannine terminology refers to the crucifixion and enthronement of Jesus. In other words, it is the manner, nature and the kind of death Jesus underwent (cf. 18:32). It is the sign (σημεῖον) of the crucifixion because John identifies “elevation from the earth” with crucifixion¹¹ (18:32), which, to the Romans, is not only the severest form of punishment for slaves and rebels (Phil. 2:8), but is also a symbol of ridicule and a mark of degradation. But for Christ, the crucifixion did not only lift him up, but more importantly, outstretched his arms to embrace and draw everything to himself in a death that was part of the glorious realisation of God’s plan. This is to say that the lifting up of Jesus does not only mean the actual, real, physical act of crucifixion, but more importantly, it is the reality of Jesus’ glorification by his Father.

⁹ SENIOR, 146.

¹⁰ DV, 662.

¹¹ The Romans also believed that crucifixion was for unruly people sentenced for committing heinous crimes like treason, murder, robbery etc. Also, the mere mention of the cross was intolerable for any respectable Roman Citizen. This helps us understand why the pagans and Jews saw an irreconcilable contradiction in the Christians’ belief that God died a reprehensible, appalling death on the Cross.

The miracle of the raising of Lazarus to life (11:4.40), one of the signs of Jesus, is said to have a link with the death of Jesus. The event reveals two things: the glory of God, which was the purpose of the miracle: "This illness [...] is for the glory of God", and then the further glorification of the Son¹² (cf. 11:4). But there is more to the fact that the power of God in the Lazarus' event is the glory of God. This miracle leads to the decision that Jesus must die for the nation and gather into one all the scattered and dispersed children of God (11:51-52).¹³

Now, the cross of Jesus is where the glory of God shines forth. It is where he brings to perfection or consummation the work the Father asked him to do, and thus, "gathering" of all the people around the "dead Jesus". Thus, the cross connects the hour, glory and the death of Jesus.

In his death on the cross, Jesus reveals love, but also brings life and judgement (*crisis*). But more importantly he "claims that he is the Son of God and that because of his Sonship, he has authority to reveal what he has seen with the Father and thus bring eternal life to those who believe in him".¹⁴

3.1 Origin of the Theme

Nuances of the theme of elevation is found in the fourth song of the servant of the Lord. In Isaiah 53:13, we read: "See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be raised high and greatly exalted". This "raising high" or elevation of the sinless servant is in the tradition of the Church interpreted as a prefiguring of Jesus, and it points to his death and glorification. The seed that "must die" in order to germinate

¹² According to Francis Maloney, the glory spoken of in 11:4 is the glory that the Son will have when he returns to the presence of the Father (14:13), but it would be the event of the cross.

¹³ F. MALONEY, "Johannine Theology", *NJBC*, 1421.

¹⁴ MALONEY, 1422

and produce fruit (12:24) is seen in the light of Jesus' death, as a result of which he would draw all to himself.

This idea is also found in Acts 2:33, where Christ is "exalted at the right hand of God" and in the letter to the Philippians, where "God greatly exalted him" (2:9). In the former, the exaltation at the right hand of God leads to the sending of the Holy Spirit. In the latter, God bestowed the "name which is above every name" upon Jesus, after having been lifted up on the cross.

3.2 The Theme in John's Gospel

The mission of Jesus was summed up, finalised and indeed culminated in his being lifted up to the Father. And this shows how much he loved his own in this world to the end (John 13:1), which is the cross. While it is the journey of ascending (back) to the Father, it is also the apex of this ascension as he is being lifted up or elevated.

The theme of the "lifting up" of Jesus occurs three times in John's gospel (3:14-15; 8:28; 12:32,34), and are analogous to the three predictions in the Synoptics. The first reference to the elevation of Jesus presents the theology of Jesus' crucifixion as exaltation. In 3:14-15, Jesus foretells his death and crucifixion on the cross. He says "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up, so that every one who believes in him may have eternal life". So, as the bronze serpent (Num 21:4-9), a symbol of salvation and forgiveness, was fixed to a stake for the Israelites to look at, Jesus would be lifted up on the cross. This bronze serpent in the desert now becomes a prefiguration of Christ on the cross. In other words, Jesus uses this Old Testament event as a New Testament figure of his being raised upon the cross, a symbol pregnant with meaning for the

“believing beholders”. It follows that like the ailing Israelites looked at the elevated serpent and became well, any one who acknowledges that the elevated Jesus is God and believes in him would be healed and made well¹⁵ as well. In fact, he would have eternal life. And Jesus’ reconciling and healing ministry reaches its peak as he is lifted up. On the cross, he does much more than he did during his public ministry.

Though Jesus compares himself with the serpent, he accomplishes a lot more than the serpent, giving life to people because he possesses the life-giving power of the Father. The main thing Jesus wanted to show in this comparison was the manner of the death he would undergo, namely crucifixion. That is why Moloney concludes that this “being lifted up” refers to the physical lifting up on the cross.¹⁶

In the second reference, (8:28), Jesus is “lifted up” because he was hated and rejected by the Jews. Consequently, they are responsible both for the penalty of Christ’s crucifixion (18:31-32) and the guilt that is shared (19:11). The most important thing in this second “lifting up” statement is that Jesus is revealed as God: “I AM” (cf. Is. 43:10). The cross reveals Jesus’ oneness with the Father, “when you lift up the Son of man, then you will realise that I AM”. And even as God and revealer of the divine truth, he is obedient to the Father and doing what the Father taught him (8:28b). St. Paul explains this very beautifully and clearly when he says that Jesus did not claim equality with God (Phil. 2:6), though he continued to be God (being in the form of God) when he “emptied himself” at the incarnation. The Jews simply did God’s will by crucifying Christ. They could not destroy and annihilate

¹⁵ I do not mean just healing from bodily infirmities and illnesses but a total state of well being, order and harmony with God, fellow human beings, self and of course the cosmos. I mean Shalom as the Hebrew people understand it: a sum total of all divine blessings, material and spiritual

¹⁶ F. MOLONEY, *The Gospel of John*, 713

him as they thought. But, on the contrary, they made his glorification a reality. This means that what is failure in the sight of human beings is success for God. Not knowing what they do (Luke 23:34), they elevated Christ to the cross, the place where he becomes, and is proclaimed “king of the Jews” (19:19-20) in the three official languages of Palestine –Hebrew, Latin and Greek-. And as a king, Jesus acts and rules from the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The divine irony and paradox, revealed by this Johannine passive narrative, indicates that the cross is really a place of glorification and the beginning of Jesus’ saving power of “I AM-ness”.

In the third reference (12:32,34), Jesus uses the passive again “when I am lifted up from the earth”, as in the second reference. Jesus’ exaltation on the cross is like a divine magnet,¹⁷ drawing, attracting and reconciling all people, including the Greeks and the Jews, and the whole creation to himself. In other words, Jesus performs his mission of universal salvation only when he is elevated on the cross. By his blood, he makes his grace (a pure gift from the goodness of God), or rather, God’s righteousness as justification (Rom 3:21), available to all. Here, the “all” includes prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16) and even those who condemned and killed him.

Jesus fulfils this work of universal mission not just by “judging”, that is, dispossessing the prince of this world of its power; but also by giving to the Father all the people he has drawn to himself. So, Jesus reconciles people and draws them to himself so that he would hand them over to the Father; who is the foundation and source and consequently, owner of everything.

¹⁷ F.B. MEYER, *Biblical commentary*, 1005

There is a link between the “lifting up” of Jesus on the cross (V.34) and his lifting up to heaven on the day of the resurrection. The two events are two aspects of the same mystery. When Jesus is raised to the Father’s right hand, he would send the Holy Spirit through whom his reign would spread over the world. Ignace connects the lifting up with the ascension. Jesus’ physical elevation, christologically speaking, is his first step in his ascent towards his heavenly Father.

4. The “Hour” as Glorification

Firstly, the notion of glory is intrinsically connected to John’s interpretation of Jesus as the revelation of God. Secondly, the “hour” falls under the concept of “glorification” (7:39; 8:54; 13:31-31; 15:8; 21:19). Rudolf puts it very beautifully: “the real, full glorification of Jesus takes place in Jesus’ hour (12:23).¹⁸ This shows that the death of Jesus is also the ultimate revelation of God’s glory. By implication, God’s glory carries both an external meaning (going to death) and a spiritual meaning.

This concept of glory (δοξα) draws on the Old Testament idea of *kabod*. It is the external manifestation of God’s loving and saving presence and power among his people. God is the bearer of glory, but in John’s gospel, this glory is immersed and suffused in Jesus. This glory, once present in the Jerusalem Temple, dwells even in a greater level in Jesus. He possesses it from eternity (17:5), reveals it symbolically in his life and signs (like the miracle at Cana manifested his glory) and truly manifests it in his greatest sign: his death on the cross. Having been made manifest, Vawter says that this glory of Jesus is something that has been seen, something that has been a visible manifestation of God even though it has remained

¹⁸ R. SCHNAKENBURG, II, 402

perceptible by faith. Thus the importance of faith in experiencing and seeing the glory of God being manifested is established.

As noted before, the revelation of the glory of God in Jesus, which for John began its manifestation right from his incarnation, continued in his entire life and work, and blossomed at the hour. In all this, we see a mutual glorification: “I glorify you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do (17:4). God, in turn, glorifies Jesus by giving him victory over death: “Father, glorify me with the glory I had with you since the foundation of the world” (17:5). First, we see a mutual glorification between the Father and the Son. Second, John wants to show that Jesus did not have this glory only when he became a human being but right from the creation of the world, since it was through him, in him and for him that the Father created the world. We can, then, say that Jesus was behind the creation of the world in the sense that God had him in mind when he started his work of creation.

The glorification is also seen from the context of ‘salvation history’:

After Jesus’ earthly work, which was devoted to glorifying his Father and revealing the divine δοξα among men, and culminated in his sacrifice of his life, it is the Father’s role to install him in his position of heavenly power and to enable him make his saving work bear fruit for mankind (17:2). At the same time, this action of the heavenly Christ is also a new glorification of the Father. Therefore, when Jesus asks for his glorification, it is in fact, a prayer for the men whom the Father has brought to him and given him (17:6-10), and at the same time a wish that the Father in this way be further glorified by him. In these people to whom Jesus gives divine life, he himself is glorified (17:10) and the Father is also being glorified in that they reach and realise the goal of saving initiative, which comes from God (15:8).¹⁹

The hour, therefore, sets in motion his salvific Lordship. He revealed this glory his Apostles through his resurrection, ascension and the sending of the Spirit. His ascension or the return to the Father (cf. 6:62) is a proof that Jesus’ resurrection was not a coming back to life under the present human conditions

¹⁹ SCHNAKENBURG, II, 403

5. The “Hour” As Resurrection

The resurrection is a crucial moment in the whole life of Jesus. It reveals the cross for what it was and shows the Father’s victory over death. It is the breaking down of the power of evil once and for all (12:31), and the prevailing of the forces of love, truth and faith. Since the revelation of God in Christ is basically the revelation of love, resurrection then is the fullest form of the love of God.

If Jesus died without being raised by the Father, his enemies would have been the ones to have the last say. That would be a proof that they were right and that Jesus was really a criminal, a thief and a (cf. Mark 2:16); using magic and the power of Beelzebul (cf. Matt 12: 26) for his cures, exorcisms and miracles. Evil would have had the power to control truth and goodness. As N. Fogliacco says, it is the resurrection as vindication by the Father that makes the salvific value of the cross believable. Only the resurrection of Christ proves that God has the last say and that Jesus was right all along, using the power of the Holy Spirit for his ministry (Mark 3:28) and that his enemies were unjust.²⁰ Christians’ hope of their own resurrection is anchored on the redeeming effect of the resurrection of Christ. If Christ was not raised, not only that they would not be raised, but their life and preaching are unfounded and baseless because they have put their faith in an “empty” God (cf. 1 Cor 15:12-19).

It is clear that in the resurrection God justifies, exalts and glorifies Christ. He does this not just because Christ is His Son but because of his faithful obedience to Him despite all the oppositions from the world. So, in glorifying Christ, God also glorifies righteousness, truth, fidelity and love. This is a clear evidence that God is

²⁰ N. FOGLIACCO, “Christian Eschatology”, Class notes, Tangaza College – Catholic University of Eastern Africa, November, 2004.

alive. He has allowed His glory to shine forth in the very person of Jesus. Resurrection then, shows the power of God, of love, and goodness that prevails over darkness, condemning sin and drawing the sinner to God. It places him in a new life where he sits at the right hand of the Father as our intercessor (Rom 8:34). This new life comes from the Father who is the source of all life.²¹

6. The “Hour” As Ascension

The resurrection of Jesus was not a coming back or a return to his previous life, but an exaltation as Lord to eternal glory. In his glorified body, Jesus ascends to his Father in heaven. The risen One, in his glorified Body, enters the heavenly intimacy of God, still revealing who the Father is. This is signified by “the cloud” (cf. Acts 1:9), a biblical sign of the divine presence. The Ascension is included in the mystery of the Incarnation as its concluding moment. As in the Incarnation, he laid aside his glory as eternal Son, so in the Ascension he now receives back divine glory, which has its impact on his human nature and ours. Jesus spoke several times about his having to be lifted up on the cross so that believers might have eternal life (cf. John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32). The lifting up on the cross is the special sign and definitive foretelling of this other “lifting up” by his ascending into heaven.

After his ascension, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit by the power of his glorification as his messenger. Holy Spirit, the principle of new life, comes as the first gift of the Father through Jesus. Jesus Christ now becomes the spirit-sender. The Spirit carries out the revelatory works of Jesus, becoming the life-giving principle, a universal principle and the power of the future. He is the one to explicate the teaching of Jesus (Cf. John 14:25-26; 16:13-15).

²¹ DB, 733. (DB stands for J. L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, New York 1965)

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have, primarily, looked at John's understanding of the "hour" as the death and glorification of Jesus. We have seen how Christ is glorified in death. That means that the death of Jesus is not an extermination or a demolition that brought hopelessness. Rather, it was a death-blow to evil. It glorified the Father and manifested His saving power. Glory and the cross form an irreducible paradox. The cross reveals Jesus' divinity and *kabod*, and reconciles all people. It is also the throne where he reigns as king. This shows that something good and positive can come from suffering when accepted with love. That is why in the second chapter, we are going to see how the Carmelite Spirituality, and particularly that of John of the Cross, only accepts suffering only with love. Other wise, for John of the Cross suffering, itself, has no value and is nothing before God.

Chapter II

Suffering in St. John of the Cross

1. Introduction

In this second chapter, I will take John of the Cross as a particular and practical example of how Carmelite spirituality looks at suffering as having a great value not only in the spiritual life or Christian spirituality but also in the total transformation of an individual. John of the Cross, in his work and life teaches mainly one thing, namely, the following and imitation of Christ, that is discipleship. He not only teaches people how to be a disciple of Christ, he himself was a disciple of Christ in different ways. But here, we shall only see how he was Christ's disciple in suffering.

We shall see that though John of the Cross experienced a lot of suffering in his life, he was not a lover of suffering as some people think. His suffering became his own "dark night" or the journey through which he reaches union with God. This union with God does not exclude, but embodies and leads to, the holistic development and maturity of the whole person.

I will take a look at suffering as "dark night", followed by a look at suffering in John Of the Cross' life then, I will look at how he managed his pains and suffering in order to draw something meaningful out of it.

2. Suffering As "Dark Night"

According to the anthropology of John of the Cross, the human being is created for union with God. God initiates this search for the divination of the human person. And the journey of man to this union is a dark night. John of the Cross offers

three reasons for calling this journey night. The first has to do with one's point of departure. The denial and deprivation, which an individual imposes on himself as he sets out for the journey of union, is like a night to him. It spells darkness to normal sense-pleasures and thus induces the state that is rightly called the dark night of the senses.

The second reason is that the road through which this person makes the journey, that is, faith, is a dark night for the intellect. The darkness increases with each step towards a purer and more naked faith; eventually, the darkness becomes "midnight", the night of faith properly so called.²² The third reason is the point of arrival, that is, God Himself, who is also a dark night to us in this life.²³ This third night, the "night of God", unlike the other two nights, is not painful. It is delightful, calm, serene and tranquil.

John of the Cross establishes a relationship between faith and God, saying "[...] faith and God is so close that no other difference exists than that between believing in God and seeing him."²⁴ He elaborates: "just as God is infinite, faith proposes him to us as infinite. Just as there are three persons in one God, it presents him to us in this way. And just as God is darkness to our intellect, so faith dazzles and blinds us [...]. The greater one's faith, the closer is one's union with God".²⁵ What John of the Cross teaches is that faith is the means to union with God even in the midst of darkness and suffering.

²² THE WAY, "Contemporary Christian Spirituality", 14.

²³ K. KAVANAUGH – O. RODRIGUEZ, trans., *The collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 120.

²⁴ KAVANAUGH – RODRIGUEZ, 177.

²⁵ KAVANAUGH – RODRIGUEZ, 177.

For John of the Cross, the term “dark night”, which he coined, is not an actual night that passes. It is a metaphor. It is a symbol of an event, which affects one’s whole being physically, psychologically, emotionally and even spiritually. The dark night, therefore, is not a series of tests or obstacles God uses to prove the strength of his followers. It is neither an experience of prayer nor suffering as such. It is none of them but contains some aspects of each.

The Carmelites saints, and John of the Cross in particular, see suffering as something that leads to union with God. They embrace it not because they are masochists but because they see a value in it. They know that everything works for good for those who love God (Rom 8: 28). In other words, they see suffering as playing the role of “dark night”; that is, as something that has a transforming effect leading to union with God. It is in the light of this that I interpret suffering as “dark night”, that is, as a means to divine union with God through love.²⁶

3. John of the Cross and Suffering

John lived between 1542 and 1591 and was known for his work in the spiritual life and of the reform of the Carmelite friars in Spain under the direction of St. Teresa of Avila. He experienced suffering, both physical and mental, right from his childhood. This came in different forms: ill health, poverty, hunger, rejection, hatred and so on.

John, the third son of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez was born into a poor family. Gonzalo’s family disowned him for marrying Catalina, a poor orphaned girl from a family of a lower status. Gonzalo came from a rich family of silk merchants.

²⁶ KAVANAUGH – RODRIGUEZ, 144.

Just one year after his birth (on the 24th June, 1542) John's father died after a prolonged, painful illness, leaving the widowed mother with no financial and material support to bring up three children, coupled with the fact that she was rejected by her husband's family before he died. The family fell into extreme poverty and Catalina resorted to begging and moving from one place to another. John, the youngest of the children, had to help his mother to work and support the family²⁷. He also suffered the effects of such hardship.

John was adopted by a *college of doctrines*, where children received "basic education" or were taught unskilled labour. From there, he served as a nurse in the *Hospital de las bubas*, where ulcers, rashes and venereal diseases were treated. According to Hardy, "the physical, psychological and social suffering of the patients impressed John in the adolescent, formative years during which he lived and worked there."²⁸ John who decided to work there because of his failure to learn a trade at the doctrine school²⁹ saw his work as a chance to help others. His care for the sick (begging for alms for their support and nursing them) was one thing he took to the Carmelite Order. He had earlier worked as a carpenter, tailor and painter, but failed.

Being a founder of monasteries and a reformer of the Carmelite Order, he aroused jealousy, rejection, and hatred. The Teresian reform sparked clashes and conflicts between the Calced and the discalced Carmelites, and among Roman, Imperial and Carmelite authorities. The Carmelite prior then, Father Rubeo, endorsed and gave permission in 1567 for St. Teresa to establish foundations. The

²⁷ J. MCGOWAN, *A Fresh Approach to St. John of the Cross: Growth through Sexuality*, 128.

²⁸ R. P. HARDY, *The Life of St. John of the Cross: Search for nothing*, 14

²⁹ HARDY, 13.

same year, Philip II obtained the brief, *Superioribus Mensibus*, entrusting the reform of the Carmelite to the local Bishops. When this approach failed, the then Pope, Gregory XIII, appointed two Dominicans as visitators to salvage the situation.

John of the Cross' religious brothers accused him of being disobedient, rebellious and contumacious. John had to endure imprisonment in Toledo³⁰ for nine months, from December 1577 to August 1578. His captors made him travel blindfolded and took him a roundabout way till they reached the Carmelite Monastery in Toledo. "There, he was incarcerated first into a jail then, into a tiny closet, with little or no light and left".³¹ On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, he was given bread and water. And on Wednesdays, community members would join together in a communal public lashing of John of the Cross as they sang the *misericordiae*. One of his worst sufferings was in the prison.

Malnutrition, torture, squalor threatened his physical survival. Emotionally drained, his captivity induced in him a fear of death, a threatening sense of failure.³² The fact that John's imprisonment was executed by his brother-friars could have added to the loneliness, affliction, misery and isolation he felt while in the prison. Though weak and hungry, he prudently planned his escape when the opportunity came.

His daring escape reads like a spy-thriller. Lowering himself from a window in the corridor outside his cell, he made his way through the unfamiliar city of Toledo by night and hid in the cloister of the discalced Carmelite nuns' convent and

³⁰ A. CUGNO, *St. John of the Cross: the life and thought of a Christian Mystics*, 9.

³¹ I. MATTHEW, *The Impact of God: soundings from John of the Cross*, 9.

³² J. MCGOWAN, 141

was later transferred secretly to the private quarters of Pedro Gonzalez de Mendoza, administrator of the Hospital of Santa Cruz.³³

John of the Cross was greatly misunderstood by his brothers. This also was another form of suffering. In April 1571, he became the rector of the discalced house of studies in Alcala de Hemanes. His work included the spiritual growth and development of the students. However, in carrying out this work, some people accused him of encouraging excessive penance and mortification. This became such a big case that the Apostolic Commissioner, another Dominican, was invited to resolve it. He gave a strong support to John of the Cross because of the overall quality of formation he (John of the Cross) gave to the students. The Apostolic Commisioner stressed that penance was only a means and not the end of spiritual growth.

Shortly before his death his right leg was inflamed and he was in severe pains. When the illness did not allow him to go to the refectory, his prior summoned him and rebuked him for his disobedience.³⁴ Even when the sickness got worse and it became evident that John had *erysipelas*, the prior still did not allow him to receive any special treatment. On the 14th of December 1591, the first friar of the reform, the prisoner of Toledo, the first definitor, the lover of Christ and the Cross, died at Ubeda. John of the Cross was a man persecuted by his own brothers during his lifetime, ignored even after his death and characterised as a very difficult, inhuman person.

³³ L. DOOHAN, *The Contemporary Challenge of John of the Cross: An Introduction to his life and Teaching*, 17

³⁴ MCGOWAN, 107.

4. John of the Cross and Management of Suffering

John of the cross was not a masochist or sadist. He did not love suffering for its sake. He did not embrace suffering as an end in itself but as a means to transformation and union with God. He experienced God's love and mercy as his sufferings became alleviated.

Through suffering, John of the Cross learnt great values and virtues in life. He described three classes of people depending on their (respective) encounter with sufferings. The first class, he says, are the "fortunates".³⁵ They are the ones who encounter and embrace the cross, and are consequently, blessed by the same cross. John of the Cross refers to the second class of people as the "less fortunates", while the third class are the "unfortunates", who lack the experience of pain and suffering.

According to John of the Cross, those who encounter the cross are "the fortunates", because the suffering they experience has given them the opportunity to learn. The "less fortunates" are those whose lifestyle is pain free. The "unfortunates" are those who are born unable to feel pain. Their 'joints' become fixed and deformed because they lack the kind of pain that lubricates them. These "unfortunates", deprived of pain, live a half-life and die before their time. The cause of their death is loss of ability to feel pain. Sequel to this, they are not in touch with reality as it is. They are like animals, which, according to Richard Gilmartin,³⁶ only experience pain, but not suffering, because they are not capable of self-transcendence or self-reflection.

³⁵ MCGOWAN, 128.

³⁶ R. J. GILMATIN, *Suffering: Issues of Emotional Lining in an age of Stress for Clergy and Religious*, 78.

According to John of the Cross, suffering is privilege of the few, the fortunate ones. Secondly, those who have not passed through suffering and pain (whether emotional, psychological, physical and even spiritual) can not feel wounded, hurt and upset and therefore, cannot empathise with others or feel other people's wounds and hurts. They are really unfortunate. "They are mass murderers – the criminals who hardly understand the meaning of crime".³⁷ Even when John describes those who suffer as the "fortunates", he knows very well that not all those who experience suffering are shaped, sharpened, transformed and blessed by it. They are the ones who become crushed, inundated, immersed, beleaguered and debilitated by it, because they do not see it as an instrument and a means of growth. As they pass through the bitter valley, they do not know how to make it a place of spring (cf. Ps. 84:7). They do not know that suffering draws those who face it outward and beyond themselves. This does not, however, mean that it is in itself creative. It is not transcendental in nature, but can transcend those who are positive about it. That is why John of the cross stresses the need for people to transform and change suffering into something good in their lives, or rather to allow suffering to transform them and make them maturer, whole and holy. In the light of this, Ian Matthew gives three ways of coping with pain.³⁸ First, one needs to move from the source of suffering; second, to endure it and third, to accept it.

When John of the Cross had the chance to escape from the prison, he grabbed and utilised it. He did not want to remain in prison to continue languishing in the pains and suffering he could have avoided. This type of suffering, like self-

³⁷ MCGOWAN, 128.

³⁸ MCGOWAN, 131.

inflicted suffering, cannot lead to human maturity or union with God. He only embraced the suffering in as much as he could not avoid it.

When it is not possible to escape suffering, the next option is to endure it. “The experience of enduring is that of awaiting change and expecting that change to come from outside”.³⁹ The danger here is that in enduring, we may see suffering as God’s punishment for our sins or as something we should not suffer from and consequently, fight. That is why the third alternative, acceptance is very important. “Accepting means that instead of that pain being seen as evil to be fought against, dreaded or feared in tension and despair, it is seen as an inevitable part of life itself.”⁴⁰ Accepting suffering does not mean that it is beneficial in itself. It is not the direct goal of our life. It can hinder and frustrate people. But when seen as an unavoidable consequence of life, it can keep us from the pain that is destructive and “incurable”. John’s life and experience shows absolute confidence and trust in God.

John of the Cross integrated and accepted and made good use of his suffering in the prison. It was there he composed the first thirty-one stanzas of the *Canticle*, and the *Romances*. For John of the Cross, suffering of whatever form, brings about a change in us provided we are positive about it. That is why I see it as a dark night, that is, “as a purifying passage that an individual undergoes which transforms one kind of life into another [...] natural life becomes eternal life and life which draws its support from natural gratification becomes that which draws its support from the motivation of it”.⁴¹

³⁹ MCGOWAN, 131.

⁴⁰ MCGOWAN, 131.

⁴¹ MCGOWAN, 33

John of the Cross' life shows that he managed his sufferings well. He coped well with the enemies of the reform and with the spite of some, the envy of others and the dishonest slander of still others. Through all his struggles, he maintains right priorities and proves that contemplative union is possible under any circumstances. In fact, John's suffering was his dark night.

5. John of the Cross' Suffering As a Participation in the "Lifting Up" of Jesus

We have seen already that for the Jewish people, death was a total alienation or separation from God. Death, which was a curse, a result of sin and evil, a punishment from God, now became, in and through Jesus' death, a blessing and a transition to eternal happiness and communion with God. Hence, in death, life is not ended but changed. Jesus transformed the meaning and reality of death as he was lifted up. Hence, the real meaning of death is found in the Cross. When he was lifted up, he was not there alone. He was lifted up together with creation:⁴² the whole church, the whole person, the whole world and the whole humanity; but humanity first before creation because humanity is the "sacrament" of creation.⁴³ That was why he could draw and pull them to himself.

Sequel to this, we see the suffering and pain of John of the Cross as a participation in the suffering and pain of the cross of Jesus. Hence, the suffering of John of the Cross is his being "lifted up" with Jesus on the cross. In other words, just as Jesus' suffering culminated in his being "lifted up" on the cross, the whole

⁴² Creation was Con-crucified (that is, crucified with Christ). Therefore, the life and death of Christ becomes that of creation.

⁴³ According to St. Paul, creation waits with eager longing to achieve its complete freedom and liberation from corruption and slavery, but only when human beings fully achieve their complete glorification and status as children of God through Christ's resurrection. As we yearn for our own redemption and communion with God in the resurrection of our bodies, creation is in labour pains until we, as children of God, cooperate with the creator in preserving creation and making it a befitting place for humanity to live. Then, it would share in our glorious freedom as children of God.

life of John of the Cross, including his suffering, is seen similarly, as a “lifting up” experience, that is his “resurrection” or “glorification” experience. Just as the cross became a definitive step towards Jesus’ ascension to the Father, John of the Cross’ suffering is similarly a step leading to the Father.

Jesus, in his death, draws all to himself. In his own death, John of the Cross makes his greatest act of love and surrenders himself as an act of obedience to God. Accordingly, his death becomes a precious moment when God “glorified” him by granting him union with Himself and those who preceded him in faith and prepared the way for other people to benefit from his experience of suffering.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at suffering in the life St. John of the Cross. We started by seeing suffering as “dark night”, that is, as having the effect of a dark night in the sense of leading one to union with God. After that, we looked at how John of the Cross suffered in his life and how well he managed his suffering and drew something from it. John of the cross has posed a challenge to us. We will look at that in detail in the next chapter. We will also see how this message of suffering can be applied to people’s lives.

Chapter III

The Challenge of Suffering to Today's Christians

1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the pastoral application of the message of suffering to today's Christians, and indeed, to everybody besieged by pain, evil and suffering. The chapter tries to see some common points between Jesus and John of the cross, or rather, how John of the Cross imitates Jesus concerning suffering. It will bring out areas and ways in which the two men have challenged us and how we can embrace the sufferings that come our way. Lastly, there will be some message both to the preacher on suffering and to the suffering people. The conclusion winds up this chapter.

2. Where John of the Cross Imitates Jesus

John of the Cross learns from Jesus that "it is from the cross that the light of God's love shines forth upon the world in its fullest splendour".⁴⁴ That is why he advised one of his former novices, Lius de San Angelo, not to seek Christ without the cross (L.24). Following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, John of the Cross learnt obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8). Jesus was rejected, hated and persecuted by his own people, the scribes, the Pharisees the Sadducees (Matt 12:24.22:23–33), Herod (Luke 13:31), Jewish religious authorities (Matt 21: 23–27), and one of his own disciples, Judas (Matt 26:20–25). In fact, Jesus was hated by the world (John 15:18) to the point that he did not pray for it, (John 17:9), but only for those entrusted to his care. In the footstep and spirit of Jesus, John of the Cross

⁴⁴ W. TEMPLE, *Reading in St. John's Gospel: first and second series*, 188.

endured hatred and rejection by his own brothers, the Carmelite friars. The superior of the community, where John of the Cross stayed shortly before his death, treated him with disdain and severity. When he was sick, this superior denied him access to a medical doctor's prescriptions. As Jesus' follower, John of the Cross chose "a narrow path of darkness and self-emptying and made a love-directed choice of the union with God".⁴⁵

As Jesus suffered hatred and rejection innocently so did John of the Cross. Jesus met his enemies while he was carrying out the work of salvation in peoples' lives: proclaiming the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15), curing the sick, feeding the hungry and casting out demons (Matt 8:1-34), bringing hope to the sinners (Mark 2:15-16), bringing good news to the heart-broken and poor, giving sight to the blind, and freeing the oppressed (Luke 4:18) and those in the bondage of the law and sin. John of the Cross, a faithful follower of Christ, met his enemies as he chose and opted for the reform movement within the Carmelite Order. In other words, he suffered while being committed to the reform movement as Jesus suffered because he was committed to the establishment of the kingdom of God here on earth. This is to say that one's commitment to a project can bring untold rejection and suffering from those who do not like it.

From Jesus, John of the Cross learns through his own suffering to identify with or be in solidarity with those suffering. From his own experience of suffering, John of the Cross knew what it meant suffer, to be ostracised, abandoned, reviled and despised. Therefore, he could identify with the suffering people, including the very people who caused the suffering and pain he underwent. As they hated and

⁴⁵ DOOHAN, 80.

maltreated him, John of the Cross was able to understand that they were also suffering deep down in their hearts. Be that as it may, John of the Cross' solidarity was not a universal one like that of Jesus, whose suffering brought about unity among the whole of humanity. Jesus' lifting up from the earth does not only disclose the Father's love for humanity (John 12: 32) and creation, but also reconciles, attracts and draws them to the Father.

Jesus' death makes enemies speak to one another. Hebrews 5: 8-10 explains that Christ is made perfect through his suffering and, therefore, becomes the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. He bridges the gap between humanity and his father. He becomes the Father's "Yes" to humanity, and humanity's "Yes" to the Father. Following Christ, John of the Cross did not allow his suffering to make him antagonistic to people. It rather brought him close to people. For instance, the poverty of his family made him learn that mere accumulation and hoarding of properties does not guarantee love and happiness. The pain he experienced from his poverty rather sensitised him to the needs of others. Consequently, he was always ready to help, sharing the little he had with those who were less fortunate than he was.

John of the Cross imitated Christ saw his suffering not as an end in itself but as a means to a great end. The gospel of John looks at the earthly life of Jesus from the standpoint of glorification. Of course, it does not make any reference to the suffering of Jesus, but presents his death as the apogee and climax of the revelation of God's glory. In other words, Jesus makes his suffering and death the highest possible manifestation of his love for the Father, dying in obedience to Him. John of the Cross treaded the way of the cross in imitation of Christ, whose suffering led to

death on the cross. That is why he sees discipleship of Christ as “a death,” but a death that a person carries in his life. It is a death that is experienced through sufferings and tribulations of all kinds. Above all, he saw this death as a means leading him to Christ.

Nevertheless, John of the Cross does not mean that it is the endured crosses or sufferings that save us. Our salvation comes, not from our crosses, sufferings and human works, but faith in the person of Jesus Christ. This faith in Jesus is in itself God’s gift or grace to us. In Karl Barth’s words, this

Grace is God’s being and attitude which characterise the action whereby God seeks and creates a communion determined solely by his own inclination and good will, an inclination and good will which do not depend in any way on the power of their object, just as they are not in the least limited by any unworthiness or resistance by the same object, but are powerful enough to overcome every unworthiness and resistance.⁴⁶

This is to say that the life of grace⁴⁷ or salvation is the work of *Deus solus*, God alone. If God is the only actor in the salvation event, then all our sufferings have their meaning only in Jesus Christ. Dorothy Enang⁴⁸ stresses that our sufferings have meaning in Jesus because he, as God, is not only aware of them but is also present, active and alive in them and even in the most painful events of our life. Suffering neither signifies the absence of God nor comes to us as a curse or a punishment from God for our infidelity. The view that the good or evil deed produces of itself a good or evil consequence (Pro26: 27; Ps 7:6; the speeches of Job’s three friends) does not provide an answer to the problem of suffering. This

⁴⁶ K. BARTH, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatic*, II, I, 100.

⁴⁷ Mark Lienhard explains that grace is not a physical entity in man or a third reality between God and man, but God’s attitude, which could be qualified by the term benevolence. Therefore, for him, grace is not something I possess but my being possessed by God through his love.

⁴⁸ Dorothy Enang belongs to the School Sisters of Notre Dame and studies at Christ the Teacher Institute for Education, St. Mary’s University of Minnesota, Nairobi Campus. September 2004.

“deed-consequence” mentality leads to mechanical correspondence and seems to separate God from direct actions.

3. Challenges to Today’s Christians

The meaning we give to sufferings and our attitudes towards them reveal whether we are Christians or not. John of the Cross challenges us to put up a Christian attitude and behaviour in the midst of suffering. He knows quite well that suffering in itself is negative and when viewed solely in that negative sense, it does not lead to sanctity or even personal growth. Although he did not like it himself, he accepted it in the spirit of discipleship, taking up his cross and following Jesus. John of the Cross is inviting Christians to develop this spirit of discipleship, the spirit of taking up their crosses when they come. God allows suffering in His plan of salvation for human beings. He does this for the sake of sharing His power and majesty in the lives of those who suffer as He revealed His glory in curing the man born blind (John 9:1-7), and in manifesting himself to people as the God of history

A positive attitude to suffering can help Christians to grow in love and to break ranks with selfishness. This attitude turns hurts into an opportunity and helps them to get in touch with the weaknesses of human beings. John of the Cross, as a human being, was able to do this in his life and, therefore, stands as a model to all Christians. Since sadness can help us to understand deep joy, weariness to appreciate rest, illness to value good health, then the suffering we experience can help us enjoy and appreciate love more. One can learn how to love from suffering. Helen Oju,⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The author’s conversation with Helen Oju, DC, on the subject of suffering. Oju is a sister of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul, and student of Christ the Teacher Institute for Education, St. Mary’s University of Minnesota, Nairobi Campus. August 2004.

says that it is only the person who has suffered,⁵⁰ who has the right and authority, from his or her own experience and encounter with suffering, to speak to someone about suffering. We may find it difficult to share and understand the respective suffering of others if we have not experienced suffering in any form at one time or another in our life. One can learn how to love from suffering since one appreciates and loves more what one has suffered for than what one does not suffer for. We can imply that one's love for a people or things increases depending on how much one suffers for them. It is in the light of this that Oju asserts that "suffering, like love, is God's greatest gift and blessing in disguise to us. It is always a way to life".

A big obstacle to a positive attitude to suffering is the Old Testament's negative understanding and approach to suffering. Unfortunately, this understanding permeates not only our cultural setting, but also our mentality, our way of thinking, acting, believing and living. The deuteronomistic doctrine on retribution maintaining that God rewards the good and punishes evils seems to be strong in people's attitudes and actions today. That is why they, on the one hand, still perceive suffering (and also misfortune, premature deaths, famine, disasters, childlessness, incurable diseases like AIDS, etc) as a punishment from God for their sins and unfaithfulness to the law, their commitment and even their vows. On the other hand, they see life: longevity, many children, prosperity, reputation and a personal communion with God as God's greatest blessing and reward for their fidelity and righteousness. When we see a just person suffer, we conclude that God has forsaken him or her. Can a good, honest, righteous person not suffer and even die? Would

⁵⁰ Helen's insight can help us understand that we listen to John of the Cross' story of suffering because he has something to teach us from his experience and he does that with authority. This authority comes more from how he handled suffering in his life than what he writes in books.

God who raised Jesus from the dead not justify and vindicate him or her by raising him or her to eternal life? Nicholas Fogliacco explains: "If God is just and if he cannot remunerate a martyr in this present life, there must be another life *a more glorious and fulfilled one*, in which faithfulness to covenant is rewarded".⁵¹

Here, the solution of the wisdom books to the suffering of the just person is very important. The Book of Wisdom teaches the doctrine of immortality as its solution to the suffering of the just, innocent person. This immortality of the just is not presented as an inherent quality but as a result of a positive divine judgement over one's decisions and actions (Wis 5:15-16). In other words, immortality is the result of the covenantal faithfulness of God. According to Michael Kolarcik, the notion of immortality is associated with the notion of the bodily resurrection⁵²

God people are often rewarded with good things like happiness, good health and joy, while wicked ones are afflicted with punishment, in this present life and even in the next. But as experience of life teaches, that is not always the case. The reverse is more often the case. That is why we, today's Christians, are challenged by the life and deeds of Jesus. We need to understand whether God's fidelity to us depends on our fidelity to Him or our observance of the law. We also examine very critically whether God does not give us long life, many blessings and prosperity even as wicked and sinful as we are. Did Jesus not die for us even when we were still sinners? (Rom. 5:8). Because of human perception of suffering as punishment, those suffering are often neglected because we do not want to share in their "punishment". Here, Jesus comes to challenge us. By embracing death on the cross,

⁵¹ N. FOGLIACCO, (emphasis mine).

⁵² M. KOLARCIK, *The Book of Wisdom: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections in The New The New Interpreters' Bible: Commentary in Twelve Volumes V*, 446

he teaches us that suffering is not a punishment from God; it is not necessarily the result of sin. That is why Jesus explains in John 9:1-7 that it was not the sin of the man born blind or that of his parents that made him blind from birth.⁵³ The man had to suffer blindness from birth so that God's power, righteousness and love would be made manifest and revealed in his cure. If suffering is not necessarily the result of sin, there are situations where good people suffer innocently. This is what happened to Jesus, who was innocently condemned by Pilate.

In healing this blind man and revealing the glory of God, Jesus moves away from the ancient notion of associating sicknesses with sins or the idea that the cause of suffering lies "in the inherent causality of an evil deed".⁵⁴ After all, on the cross, Jesus judges and condemns sin in order to reconcile and reunite the sinner with the Father. In other words, Jesus neither interprets suffering from the point of view of its cause nor dwells on the reason why it comes, but from the point of view of its purpose: revelation of God's glory. As a primary example of this, like his death on the cross is the maximum revelation of the Father's love. This truth should make us focus on the purpose of our sufferings. God does not banish our earthly suffering but rather eternal death. He gives us hope and makes us see something good in suffering. Hence Proverb 12:1 and 13:1 refer to its educational value: the improving of one's character. Those considering suffering as redemptive become mature enough to enter the kingdom of God. Hence suffering has a "creative character".

John of the Cross gives us another challenge to the understanding of suffering. For him, suffering is not just a test of faith (as in the case of Abraham) but

⁵³ It was thought that children were damaged from birth because of the sins of their parents. That is why some Rabbis read into the story of Esau and Jacob the idea of sin before birth.

⁵⁴ NIDNT, III, 720

a purification. Suffering, when taken in good spirit, purifies us. Like love, it is what unites the beloved (human beings) with the lover (God). If John of the Cross' imprisonment could lead him to his "resurrection" then suffering is a "sheer grace" and a blessing in disguise. This does not mean that it would not come with all its pain and misery.

One more ultimate challenge is to realise and be conscious that nothing happens to us by chance or accident. Our sufferings are not by accident: they have a purpose. "No tear falls from the eye without making it purer and cleaner".⁵⁵ If the death of Christ was not in vain, if it inaugurated the kingdom of love, then the catastrophes of war, tribal and boundary clashes, religious and political wars and killings, famine and poverty and all our sufferings have a meaning provided we do not lose our focus. Therefore, in our pains, miseries, rejection and distress, we are invited to be positive and unite them with Christ's death and make the best out of them. The sufferings we undergo should inspire our confidence in the Divine Providence, who cares for us. By his solidarity with humanity, Jesus offers us to God and brings us to full communion with Him

This is the challenge Jesus poses to us. As a human being, he attains full personal growth through death, because personal growth is identical with growth in love and he grew in love by giving himself totally to God and humanity on the cross. The cross gave Jesus the "material" out of which true, disinterested, total love is made.⁵⁶ As Jesus, in suffering, inaugurates the kingdom of love not only in his person, but also in each person, so, people are encouraged to see their sufferings as a

⁵⁵ C. CARRETTO, *Why O Lord? The meaning of suffering*, 86.

⁵⁶ FOGLIACCO.

way for them to grow in love for God and one another. John of the Cross grew in love in this way.

We can conclude that what changed the meaning of death from a curse to a blessing, from a pure negativity to the most positive and creative reality, from eternal separation from God to communion with him was Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit working in him.⁵⁷ Because Jesus died, death now becomes a “being-with” and not what a person experiences and encounters individualistically and in isolation from the rest of humanity. Therefore, in their death, Christians are in communion and solidarity with Christ and all those who are united in and with him. These Christological, ecclesiological and anthropological foundations of Christian death, arising from the death of Christ, should challenge Christians to accept suffering even if it would lead them to death. They should realise that death is the supreme encounter with Jesus. It is a Christian’s highest moment of self-realisation and fulfilment. The death of a believer is not only precious in the sight of God, but also is a salvific event for himself, first and foremost, and then, for the living.

4. Message to Both the Preachers of the Message of Suffering and to the People Who are Suffering

4.1 To the Preachers⁵⁸ of the Message of Suffering

Since the proclamation of the message of suffering is essentially the proclamation of the Person (Jesus Christ) who suffered and died, the preachers are to proclaim, first of all, Jesus Christ to the world. This challenges them to reveal the suffering Christ by their lives in order to make the content of their message effective

⁵⁷ FOGLIACCO.

⁵⁸ A preacher is one who, in the name of Jesus Christ, introduces non-Christians into the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and reminds Christians of their participation in it (cf. foot notes, page 1907 of the African Bible).

and credible.⁵⁹ Preachers should not preach so much with words, but with their lives. Therefore, they are to become the message they proclaim.

The proclaimers of suffering should not only tell people about the suffering Jesus, but also be to people the proclaimed suffering Jesus. In this way, the lives of the proclaimers would not only be sermons to people, but also prayers to God for them. Therefore,

- i. In proclaiming the gospel,⁶⁰ preachers should always keep in mind that they are sent to proclaim a Person not a doctrine
- ii. This Person (Christ) once suffered, was crucified and died, but he rose from the dead. As a consequence, he is alive among the people to whom preachers preach, especially those who are undergoing suffering. *The preacher is to give hope to the people, not seeing suffering as an end itself but as a means to encounter the divine.*
- iii. Christ is identified with poor people; they are actually the embodiment of him. Therefore, if preachers are to be effective, they must identify themselves with the poor and marginalized.
- iv. The proclamation of this Person should be geared at uplifting and liberating the poor and the marginalized.

⁵⁹ I do not mean that one has to suffer before preaching suffering. Christian life itself is a baptism into the suffering and death of Christ. St. Paul calls it a liturgy, a participation in the paschal mystery of Christ, a union with his one sacrifice on the cross. In fact, it is a daily sacrifice to God

⁶⁰ St. Paul sees the gospel as the power of God for the salvation and redemption of all who believe (Rom 1:6). To preach is to offer God's salvation to people as well as unite them to the one sacrifice of Christ. Therefore, as a vehicle of salvation, preaching can revive, redeem, heal, revitalise and convert people and mend their lives.

- v. The content of the message should always be one that aims at making Christ Crucified present among the poor and the suffering.⁶¹

In preachers, there should be a concord between the message and the messenger, and between saying, doing⁶² and being.⁶³ They should preach the suffering Jesus not only by what they say or do; but, more importantly and primarily, by who they are: witnesses to the suffering of Jesus, rather than teachers, who behave like atheists who can be excellent theology teachers or biblical scholars without being believers. They should correct in their lives any behaviours and attitudes that are contrary to the gospel of Christ

Preachers should keep in mind that it would make sense to the people if they knew how God shares and participates in their suffering. Knowing that their God suffers with them would encourage them to take up their crosses with ease. It is in this way they would know that Jesus is alive for ever in their life. In fact, they would believe very easily in such a God rather than in a God who stays somewhere in the “sky” and only comes in his mighty power to alleviate their suffering. By doing this, preachers would help the people to find some appropriate solution to their crises. Instead of visiting witchdoctors or diviners, they would look at Jesus as “the ultimate witchdoctor.”

⁶¹ EPHRAIM KUFANKUMODZI, “Proclaiming ‘Christ Crucified’”: A study I Corinthians 1: 17- - 25 in view of Evangelising the Chewa People of Malawi”, STB Thesis, Tangaza College – Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, 2003, 33. (emphasis mine)

⁶² This is on the moral level or a superficial level of doing things.

⁶³ This is on an even deeper level. Here, we go beyond what a person does, to what he is ontologically and essentially, realizing that actions flow from being.

4.2 To the Suffering People

Christians and other people who experience suffering find in Jesus Christ a person to turn to and emulate. His positive disposition to suffering is something to emulate. John of the Cross' encounter with God in his suffering, and the fact that God, in Jesus Christ, had to suffer should give hope and courage to those plagued by suffering. While they need to turn to these two figures, especially to Jesus, who is God, they also need to exhibit good attitudes and behaviours in the way they face suffering. The following points are, therefore, necessary:

4.2.1 A "Believing" Faith in God

An ability to expound theological doctrines is not enough and is not a proof of our faith in God. Even an atheist can do this. What we need is a faith in God that springs from a personal, experiential knowledge of who God is and the conviction that Jesus is Lord.

A "believing" faith is not necessarily a "seeing" faith that comes from what we "see" God doing. For example, the Israelites, who saw Pharaoh's horses and horsemen perish in the sea (cf. Exo 15:1) and believed in God. A "believing" faith is a faith that comes from what we hear God has done and knowing that He would do more or even greater things for us. It is this kind of faith that makes us to

[...] discover that God in his almighty providence can bring a good from the consequences of an evil, even a moral evil; caused by his creatures. [...] From the greatest moral evil ever committed – the rejection and murder of God's only Son, caused by the sin of all men – God, by his grace that "abounded all the more" brought the greatest goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ CCC 312.

This faith in God should remind us that all things work for good for those who believe in God (cf. Rom 8:28). That is why St. Catherine of Siena said that all is ordained for the salvation of man, and that God does nothing without this goal in mind.⁶⁵ Since God has our good in mind, He cannot allow suffering to come our way if it would not lead to our good. This conviction in the goodness of God should increase our faith in him and also make us face our sufferings with courage.

It is this faith that would make the suffering people fix their eyes on God in times of suffering. In fact, the life they live should be the faith they have in Jesus. This faith should be positively expressed in the fundamental option they make to love God and their neighbour. Their love for God and neighbour not only makes them authentic but also makes them capable of self-transcendence. Thus, they can transcend the negative aspects of their suffering.

4.2.2 *Love As the Best Response to Suffering*

Love is the best response to suffering. John of the Cross' life is a practical case. Among his brothers and in the communities where he was not loved, he planted love and reaped it. What he lived and experienced matched his saying: "where there is no love, put love and you will reap love". Love makes our suffering acquire a new meaning: a participation in the saving work of Christ.⁶⁶ This is where our suffering becomes a little like pure love, which is more precious to God, to others, and the Church than all other works put together.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ CATHERINE OF SIENA, *Dialogue on Divine Providence*, 138. G. CAVALLINI, ed, 441

⁶⁶ Cf CCC, 1521.

⁶⁷ PATRICIA OF THE RESURRECTION, *A song in the night: Selections from The Spiritual Canticle of Saint John of the Cross*, 30.

Knowing that love is the root of the good we are, have and do, we are challenged to realise that there is nothing that love cannot face, especially as it endures all things (1 Cor. 13:7). The love, which helps us endure the suffering we meet, is the very thing, according to John of the Cross, that we will be judged with in the evening of our life. In fact, without love, one cannot be a Christian,⁶⁸ since without it we cannot please God. That is why its exercise constitutes right attitude before God.

Love leads to humility. Humility, according to St. Teresa of Avila, is walking in the truth. This truth, according to the Scripture, is not just our recognition and awareness that it is God who saves and justifies us, but actually allowing him to do so. It is an exercise of humility. That was why the publican was able to say “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). In other words, with humility, we allow God to take control of our life and those things that trouble us, including our sufferings.

In justifying him because of his humility, God did not, however, mean that the Publican should remain in his sins. God, rather, wants to teach that, with humility, sinners are forgiven and sinners are reconciled to God.

4.2.3 *The Practice of Virtues.*

Virtues like patience, endurance, gentleness, meekness and acceptance are helpful in the midst of suffering. Patience helps us to smile at suffering. A spirit of acceptance helps us know that pain cures us of ourselves and also detaches us from ourselves. It puts us on our knees and makes us abandon everything to the Father.

⁶⁸ A. ROBERTSON – A. PLUMNER, “The first Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians”, in *The International Critical Commentary*, 300.

Acceptance also helps those, who have embraced their suffering, with hope to realise and reap God's goodness and providence. This goodness of the Lord, is first and foremost for the enjoyment of those who reap it, but they also share it with others. As it is being shared, it becomes a proof to the recipients that God loves them and can transform their lives.

The cultivation of these and other virtues help the suffering people to derive some good from it. These virtues can help to transform the bitter experience of suffering. They can accompany the suffering people to reach the climax of St. Paul's experience: "when ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we respond gently (1 Cor 4:12 – 13); we are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4: 8-9).

4.2.4 *A Life of Prayer*

In the midst of suffering and confusion, prayer is a vital necessity. St. John Chrysostom's caution that nothing is equal to prayer, as it makes possible and easy what is impossible, is important to those undergoing suffering of any type. It is prayer, understood by St. Teresa of Avila as "an intimate sharing between friends",⁶⁹ that would help them to understand what God wills for them. The love and true friendship that result from this intimate sharing, or the time spent frequently "with Him who we know loves us",⁷⁰ certainly bring the will of the friends to be in harmony. Prayer can help one in pain to understand God's will for him and at the same time, enter into that which God wills for him. If prayer and Christian life are

⁶⁹ K. KAVANAUGH, – O. RODRIGUEZ, trans., *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, I, 96.

⁷⁰ K. KAVANAUGH, – O. RODRIGUEZ, trans., *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, I, 96.

inseparable⁷¹ and suffering is part of the life of a Christian, then suffering can form part of his prayer and life. Those who experience suffering should then not exclude prayer from their life.

According to St Teresa of Avila, the fruits of prayer include humility, generosity, a feeling of being a “sinner”, absence of self-interest and selfishness, inner peace and tranquillity, experiencing the tremendous power of God, etc. When suffering forms part of a Christian’s prayer life, it means that a suffering person can experience those fruits of prayer. It means that his or her suffering has become a prayer acceptable and pleasing to God, and thus bears fruits. It is in that light that we can understand what St. Paul means when he says that a Christian’s life is a liturgy.

4.2.5 Suffering: a Means to ‘Resurrection’

Christ’s resurrection is not just the New Testament fulfilment of the Old Testament eschatological expectations, but also is a crucial event in the lives of Christians. His death paved a way for the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is neither a self-raising from the dead nor is it a coming back to the earthly life, but a being raised by the Father. The resurrection is our primary object of faith. Primarily, it is the only ground and hope of our own resurrection from death. And if God, through Christ’s resurrection, raises us from death, then we should be hopeful that our sufferings and pains will also be taken care of.

If our suffering is grounded in the knowledge of God, it also leads to our resurrection. Our suffering then is an avenue through which God enters into our brokenness and transforms it into wholeness. John of the Cross’ Toledo imprisonment gave rise to his ‘resurrection.’ Though the cross is distinct from the

⁷¹ Cf CCC, 2745, 575.

resurrection, yet according to Johannine understanding, they are inseparable. Hence, the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus being one reality (the paschal mystery), means that there is no cross without resurrection and glorification.

This then is a big challenge to Christians who are better disposed to be sorrowful with Christ than to rejoice in his resurrection, to share his suffering than his joy.⁷² If Easter is a season of great joy, endless alleluias and jubilations, people should be ready to be happy and joyful even in sufferings and pains. This joy is a sign of hope in God and it distinguishes Christians from the “world”. Christian hearts should rejoice as no one can take away their joy from them (cf. John 16:23).

In spite of this, suffering should not be a lifestyle chosen deliberately. John of the Cross explains that God does not need our suffering and trials because in themselves they are nothing in His sight (C. 28.1) and some of those who suffer have become more like devils than saints. John of the Cross stresses that the only thing God desires is the exaltation of the human being. By this he means making the human person equal to God.⁷³ This is the work of love and in it the joy or wound of one becomes the joy or wound of the other. The two of them have but one feeling.⁷⁴ Suffering can, indirectly, help one to achieve this exaltation of the human being if the suffering person accepts it with love. In fact, it is love that gives meaning to suffering.

While stressing the good that comes from suffering, people should not glory in it. At times of pessimism, anxiety, retaliation, poverty, people should not get attached to suffering and the Lenten season, only to go on vacation during Easter.

⁷² L. EVELY, *Suffering*, 156.

⁷³ Not in the sense of equality with God but in terms of participating in God's grace.

⁷⁴ PATRICIA OF THE RESURRECTION, 17.

Those suffering should believe in the resurrection of Jesus and rejoice because he has conquered the world (cf. John 16:33) and all their sufferings. Our resurrection is based on the fact that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead. Our joy, much more than being a virtue, is a sign of our faith in the Father's faithfulness to us and of our belief that God is with us (cf. Matt 28: 20). The suffering we encounter is like love uniting us with our Beloved (Christ). To experience resurrection and happiness from God means experiencing God's immeasurable love and goodness in our life, the love that not even the Bible and spiritual books can describe for us (though these may help).

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen the challenges that the cross poses. Really, no one likes suffering as there is nothing attractive in it. Failures, frustration, hatred and all sorts of ills come the way of Christians. When this happens, they are encouraged and challenged to imitate Jesus as John of the Cross did. Having been through with the third chapter, we shall now come up with the general conclusion.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Having gone this far, its time to wrap up. In chapter one, we saw that Jesus' death was the peak of his revelation of his Father. He died the cruellest kind of death, or rather, he died like a criminal hanging on the cross. This kind of death was a symbol of rejection and a curse from God (Deut. 21:23). But it was this very death that revealed Jesus as God, and through which he attracted all humanity to God. His resurrection also revealed God or rather, the power and benevolence of God. Additionally, it was a proof that all the promises Jesus has been making to people and all his words and signs were genuine and would be fulfilled. In fact, his resurrection was an evidence that we shall also be raised. And this would be the glory we would receive from the Father after we have left this world.

In chapter two, we saw John of the Cross' understanding of suffering. For him, suffering does not lead to sanctity. At the same time, he does not mean that we should reject the sufferings life (our chosen way of life or vocation) imposes on us. In fact, he wants us to embrace them, but with love. From his life experience, this leads to the exaltation of the human being⁷⁵ to God. By accepting and managing them effectively, they became for him a spiritual weapon and tool for his apostolate

⁷⁵ According to John of the Cross, this is the only thing God desires.

and ministry and for himself. Those who undergo sufferings can find in John of the Cross some help. This is to say that he is a source of encouragement and strength to the people frustrated in the community, those who are estranged from the homelands and have lost their loved ones, those mistreated by the superior, those suffering from malnutrition and poverty, and abuses. John of the Cross experienced all of them.

In chapter three, we talked about the challenges Christians would face as a result of the cross. In examining the common points found between John of the Cross and Jesus, we showed that these two men suffered humanly speaking, despite the fact that Jesus is God and John of the Cross, Jesus' disciple. In the message to the preacher of the gospel of suffering, we insisted that the preacher should preach the Person of Christ and live out the reality of this Person. That means that he should preach what he believes, believe what he reads and practice what he preaches. That is what would make his ministry effective.

This was followed by another message but to the Christians. In imitation of Jesus and John of the Cross, they are challenged and invited to believe in the power of transforming even the biggest cross in their life and making it something that would help them attain certain level of charity towards God and human beings.

APPENDIX I: BIBLICAL ABBREVIATION (FROM THE AFRICAN BIBLE)

Exo	Exodus
Num	Numbers
Wis	Wisdom
Prov	Proverbs
Matt	Matthew
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Rom	Romans
Cor	Corinthians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
Heb	Hebrews

APPENDIX 2: OTHER ABBREVIATIONS

Cf	confer or compare
A	Ascent of Mount Carmel of John of the Cross
L	The letters of John of the Cross
DB	J. L. MCKENZIE, <i>Dictionary of the Bible</i> , New York 1965.
NIBNT	C. BROWN, ed., <i>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , III, Grand Rapids, 1978, 1986.
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
al	alli, other persons
JBC	VAWTER, BRUCE, "Johannine Theology" in <i>The Jerome Biblical Commentary</i> , eds. R. E. BROWN, – J. A. FITZMYER, – R. E. MURPHY, New Jersey 1968.
DV	FLANNERY ed., "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" in <i>Vatican II. The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents</i>
NJBC	F. Maloney, "Johannine Theology" in <i>The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary</i> , ed. R. E. BROWN, – J. A. FITZMYER, – R. E. MURPHY, New Jersey 1967, 1990 ² .

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