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CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EAST AFRICA

GOD IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING:

JOB,

THE GURUNSI

AND CHRIST.



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CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

**GOD IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING:
JOB,**

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AND CHRIST.

BY: BATIONO RAPHAEL

Reg. No. 9403

**LONG ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR
THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ARTS, (RELIGIOUS STUDIES).**

FEBRUARY, 1998.

NAIROBI

CERTIFICATION.

I hereby certify that the long essay entitled, *God in the midst of suffering: Job, the Gurunsi and Christ*, submitted to Tangaza College, for the award of the degree of bachelor of arts in Religious Studies of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, is an original research carried out by BATIONO RAPHAEL.

Date: 16-02-98

Bationo Raphael

Signed

Bationo Raphael

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FOOTPRINTS

One night, a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonged to him and the other to the LORD.

When the Last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it: *LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.*

The LORD replied: *My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.*

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INTRODUCTION.

Throughout the centuries many people have thought and written all kinds of reflections on the problem of evil and therefore on suffering. There has also been a particular attention given to the suffering of the innocent. The Jewish wisdom also tackled the problem.

My aim in this paper is far from suggesting concrete solutions to eradicate the problem of evil. It is neither an explanation on why the innocent suffer nor a remedy to all evils in the world. I am also part of this struggle. I am an actor not a spectator. The main purpose of my reflection is to help people cope with suffering. My goal is to show them that despite all the situations they go through, God is still at their side like a loving mother suffering with them. It is to help each one of us find hope and keep the Faith in the same ever loving God. We can lose everything, except hope.

As we shall see, suffering has both a disciplinary, didactic and redemptive value in human existence. Whoever suffers and assumes his situation will always find wisdom and life at the end of it.

My reflection will be based on three characters: Job, the Gurunsi(my people) and Christ. My main tool for the study of Job will be the New Jerusalem Bible except when indicated otherwise.

The book of Job is the expression of revolt against the Jewish sages who thought that one suffers because one has sinned or because one's parents or the community have sinned. The author of Job brings about the question of the suffering of the innocent. The book brings us to face such an existential question. It is far from being an answer to the question as many of us

thought. What is interesting is that in the end Job discovers that God has no debt to pay to any creature. God is the Totally Other as the philosophers may say. Therefore, the only attitude Job is called to adopt is that of acknowledgement both of God's greatness and human frailty and of Thanksgiving.

The Gurunsi go further to see in suffering a source of growth. For them suffering is the best teacher and to be really wise, one must suffer first or experience difficult situations. A few stories and proverbs will help us understand their view.

Despite all this, both Job and the Gurunsi are yet to receive the light of Christ which will reveal to them that suffering has a redemptive value as well. Such a value was brought out by Christ. Through his cross, death and resurrection, Christ took upon himself the extreme dimension of suffering and won a victory for us all: the victory over evil and death. Christ reconciles us to the Father and shows us that God is a loving Creator. Christ's suffering becomes a source of redemption and therefore re-establishes the broken relationship between God and His creation.

Nevertheless, this does not eradicate our own day to day sufferings because suffering is as old as humanity itself. Christ gives us a different view on suffering through his own concrete experience of it. By taking actively part in our suffering, He presents God as our fellow sufferer. God is compassionate indeed!

Today, suffering still goes on around us and things seem worse than they were at the time of Job and Jesus. There are many "Jobs" in our world: the street children, the refugees, the victims of Aids, the Gurunsi and so on. As disciples of Christ what can we offer to all these? Christ gave us the Cross, a concrete example to follow. What can others expect from us? Are we ready to give them the light and hope they need in their various situations?

The attention to those who suffer is both a pastoral and missionary task. Gone are the days when missionaries went out to save “souls” only. The entire human person is in need of salvation. It is our responsibility as disciples to make of “the miracle of the loaves” a reality for all today. In other words, Humanity is crying for the word and the bread as well.

My humble aim in this paper is to bring us all to this awareness that we ought to be signs of hope for all those who are in need.

Part One:

JOB

The people of the ancient Near East thought that everything, including the gods, emerged from a primordial womb. All beings and forces had their origin in this primordial realm. These are sometimes called fate, and they had to obey its decrees. With this system the manipulation of this domain behind the gods made possible the control of someone's destiny or the determination of an outcome. Since this realm was impersonal, it could be addressed only by magic rituals. This primordial womb was also the basic material out of which the gods created the world; thus, to be effective, rituals, incantations and spells were permeated with the language of birth and creation. Potent incantations were believed to tap this mysterious power. Rites for healing unbind the powers of nature to achieve their purpose. Spells of doom, made by inverting the language of creation, brought chaos and death.

This type of spell served as a model for the structure of Job's curse on the day of his birth. Job pronounces a counter-cosmic incantation designed to reverse the stages of the creation of the day of his birth. These stages were thought to be essentially the same as the stages of the seven-day creation of the world.¹ To undo the creation of a specific day, each stage of its ordering had to be negated. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the exactness of the language of the spell guaranteed the result.

The book of Job penetrates deeply the issue of human suffering. It is a reaction to the theology of retribution according to which the good are rewarded and the wicked are punished

¹.M., Fishbane, *Jeremiah iv: 23-26 and Job iii: 3-13*, op. Cit., pp.151-167.

here on earth. The book of Job tries to put into question such simplistic thinking. How can we explain the suffering of the innocent? The basic tension is between one's belief in God and one's personal experience. This book presents the two dimensions of human existence:

- Man fears God and God blesses Man.
- Man fears God yet he is sorely afflicted.

1.1 The theology of retribution

This teaching sees sin behind suffering and virtue behind happiness in a nearly automatic or necessary relationship. The sages (like the three friends of Job) shared the Deuteronomic point of view²: God rewards the good and punishes the evil. By means of it Yahweh was recognized as a just God governing the world with rewards and sanctions. These had to operate during man's life since there was no balancing of the scales of Justice in Sheol or in any meaningful existence after death. The passion with which the sages followed their law of retribution is truly remarkable. From the tenth century proverbs, down through exile to the author of Proverbs 1-9 and Ben Sira in the second century, the emphasis is on the good life promised to the wise and virtuous people.

The values of the good life are this earthly long life: a large family, riches and prestige. Yet the material benefits are viewed as blessings from God, as signs of his Providence (Sir 33: 12-15). The natural followup of such blessings are renewed fidelity and trust on man's part (Sir 34: 13-17). Therefore, it is quite erroneous to characterize them as materialistic. An essential part of the happiness as envisioned by the sages, is a sense of personal union with God (Ps 72: 23-28).

² The Deuteronomic school held the idea that temporal reward or punishment is brought about by keeping the laws. Such an idea influenced the historical Books in the Old Testament (cf. Dt. 30, 15-17).

Life is a very complex reality. It can mean mere existence (Pr. 10:27). But it nearly always stands for deeper meaning. As J. Guillet has recognized, there is a profound moral conviction involved in the OT view: Sin undermines man and it is a symbol of death and corruption³. Virtue brings the vitality that alone is associated with the living God. As Guillet remarks: "religious hope does not mean hope in survival but the hope of finding God"⁴

With few exceptions, the sages refused to allow the facts of experience to shake their belief in the good life as a reward for wisdom and virtue. When they were confronted by contrary facts, they advanced various answers. The boldest and most courageous stances are given in Proverbs 3:12: *-Adversity is a sign of God's love, He chastises the son he favours*. It was also thought that suffering was due to one's hidden sins; perhaps one was not virtuous enough to be exempt from suffering.

The sages were convinced that sin must be and would be punished despite appearances. The friends of Job exemplify a fierce rationalism that is put at the service of the law of retribution. They go so far as to accuse Job of specific sins that would explain his suffering:

Without due cause you take a brother in a pledge, you strip men of their clothes and leave them naked. When a man is weary, you give him no water to drink and you refuse bread to the hungry. Is the earth, then, the preserve of the strong and a domain for the favoured few? Widows you have sent empty-handed, orphans you have struck defenseless. No wonder that there are pitfalls in your path, that the snares are set to fill you with

³ . Jacques Guillet, *Themes of the Bible*, op. cit., pp.96-130.

⁴.Ibid p.184

*sudden fear. The light is turned into darkness, and cannot see; the flood-waters cover you.*⁵

On the whole, the retribution trend does not believe in the suffering of the innocent. Every suffering has its cause and it is mainly sin. Although it is a very easy way of doing away with the problem of evil, the question remains unanswered.

The failure of the traditional optimism to provide a credible answer was hastened by the works of two men who were themselves sages. The unknown author of the book of Job is one of them. The other will be Qohelet.

In the next section, we shall closely see how Job challenges the traditional view on suffering by way of a brief exegetical reading of Job's complaint.

“How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore, do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no harm shall touch you.” (Job 5:17-19)

In these verses Eliphaz tells Job the other purpose of suffering: God disciplines his creature. He warns him in letting him experience difficult situations.

Also in Elihu's speeches (32:6-37:24), the author of Job shows us that the doctrine of retribution does not content itself only with reward and punishment. Suffering has also a disciplinary purpose. Elihu helps Job look at his affliction (36:5-25) in a new way. Instead of insisting on the human frailty as the three friends did, Elihu stresses God's persistent love and mercy towards His followers. God does not let those who serve him go astray without any warning of the danger they are facing nor does he allow them to hasten to the grave unaware. He

⁵.Job 22: 6-11 in *the New English Bible*.

employs dreams and painful tragedies both to warn and to discipline them. Moreover, He provides the ransom to restore those who trust in Him and have proved their faithfulness to Him. Elihu tells Job that God has not been silent. He has been speaking to him in many ways through his dreams and his pains, ways that Job has not expected. He hopes that Job will listen to God's speaking through his misfortune. Then he will turn his attention away from his complaints against God's cruel enmity to focus on God's gracious ways towards him. Elihu is delivering a message of hope to Job; for he wants to help Job find acquittal and full restoration with God.

In a way, Elihu reshapes the whole doctrine of retribution. His understanding of the dynamic of the interaction between God and human beings is far more complex and realistic. He accepts the possibility that righteous people suffer. Whereas the friends of Job believe that a person suffers either because of an inherent human weakness or as the direct consequence of some sinful deed.

They also believe that a person can suffer because of the sins his parents have committed (Cf. Gen 3). They also think that the sin of the community can fall on the individual and that may lead to his suffering(Cf. Jer 9:8-10; Ez4:6).

Elihu develops the thesis that God freely uses suffering and dreams to instruct a person (Job 33:12-22). Suffering can serve a didactic purpose. Through these means God mercifully reaches out to correct a person likely to commit some wrong. Elihu is saying to Job that his terrifying nightmares and his pains are God's merciful, disciplinary blows designed to rescue him from a worse fate. Job needs to believe that God can and is prepared to rescue him from the power of death and restore his health and fortune. With this teaching, Elihu focuses more on Job's present plight than on his past life. He avoids a futile search like that of the three friends for some

tremble, leaving one powerless. If this incantation is effective, that day would never rise again from the sterile blackness of chaos.

V.6-7: Job addresses next the night of his conception. It was a night when life was conceived, life that challenged the disordered lifelessness of darkness. That is, each birth participates in the victory of cosmos over the forces of chaos. In celebration of that victory a joyful shout breaks the stillness of the night, proclaiming that a new life has been conceived and darkness has been defeated (v.7). But the hopeful expectation of that moment has ended up in the bitter pain of Job's suffering. Therefore, Job orders the gloom of primeval thick darkness to seize or abduct that night. He asks that it be sterile like rocky soil that fails to yield crops no matter how carefully it is tended. If such were the case, no ecstatic shout of joy would enter or disrupt that night.

V.8-10: *Those prepared to stir up Leviathan*: to ensure the vitality of his curse Job importunes the most skilled sorcerers in the ancient world to perform the curse against the day of his birth. Leviathan is the monster that inhabits the sea and that is the personification of all forces that resist God's rule. Job is hereby seeking to involve the most clandestine powers to accomplish his own annihilation.(Job 38:8). V.9: Job continues to curse the first ray of dawn and the stars of its twilight. V.10: Job gives the reason for cursing the day of his birth: *because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, or hide trouble from my sight*. The metaphor of shutting the doors of a womb is used both for preventing conception (Gen. 29: 31) and for keeping an embryo from coming forth.

V..11-13: *Why did I not die at birth?* In agony Job regrets his survival at birth. He wishes that he had been discarded, left to die unattended. V. 13: *For now I would be lying down and quiet; I would be asleep and at rest.* Job expresses the intent of his curse: he wants to be at rest. That recalls the ideal rest of God on the seventh day. Perfect rest is the goal of Job's curse lament, for V. 13 is reiterated in v.26.

1.2.2.Chapter 3: 14-26: A lament

V..14-16: Turning from the curse of the day of his birth (v.13), Job laments his agony. This shift is noted by a dash at the beginning of v.14. He begins his lament by longing for the rest that Sheol offers. Job idealizes the existence of those great men who have already passed away. In Sheol he would join kings, counsellors and princes of the earth.

V..16-19: Job wishes that he would have fallen out of his mother's womb and been cast aside. V..17-18: Job returns to his theme that there is complete rest for the weary in Sheol. Job believes that there all those who were accustomed to stirring up trouble are quiet. Everybody is in the same powerless, limp condition.

V. 19: the same restful conditions are for both small and great: the small ones, wicked and good, the great, kings and princes. There is a touch of irony here.

V..20-22: *Why is light given to the wretched, and life to the bitter of soul?* These unfortunate creatures are characterized as wretched or miserable and bitter of soul. The light of a beautiful day only makes them more aware of their sorrows and increases their longing for death. When they end badly, they find relief from their suffering. Job's question is a strong complaint

against God. Since it is God who gives them life and allows them to suffer so, he should recognize their sad state and let them die, if he has any compassion at all.

V.23-26: Job applies his general complaint to his situation. That is, the why of V. 20 is implied here: *Why are light and life given . . . to a man whose way is hid?* The word *way* refers to his destiny. That it is *hid* means that in his present plight his life has no purpose. *Fenced in:* Job imagines that God has surrounded him with a fence so that he cannot find any way of escape from him (Cf. Lam 3: 7; Hos. 2: 8). To Job it appears that God has locked him into turmoil and thrown away the key.

V.24: *Shrieks* is often translated *sighs*, but that word is far too gentle in meaning. The Hebrew root refers to the loud moans or wails that arise from those doing oppressive, slave labour or from a people devastated by a tragedy (Ex 2:23; Lam 1: 4, 8, 11, 21, 22). GROANING is often used figuratively for mighty sounds: Yahweh's thundering (Jer. 25: 30; Amos 1: 2). V.25: *What I most dreaded has come on me.* This statement reveals that before his trial Job had dreaded that some ill might befall his household. His apprehensive nature was evident in his offering sacrifices periodically on behalf of his sons in case they had cursed God in their hearts. *What I feared befalls me:* He had also feared that some tragedy might end his prosperity. Hebrew *yagar* refers to the apprehension aroused by the hostility of a mighty enemy, either earthly or divine (Jer. 22:25; Job 9:28). Job's fear has turned into a terrifying reality.

V.26: Job concludes his lament with the assertion *I have no ease*(note that v.26 parallels v.13). Job uses the negation of three different verbs to describe his lack of repose and a fourth verb that states what has happened. One can distinguish the words *at ease* for mental rest, *quiet* for physical rest, and *rest* for rest in general. But the rest that Job is asking for is that of

tranquillity and calm. A person with a deep sense of serenity may enjoy life to its fullest. One lacking repose is filled with deep agitation, which encompasses physical torment, agony of mind, and social discomfort. This is Job's case. He exclaims, *turmoil comes!* The word for turmoil(*rogez*) describes the agitated state that results from a complete lack of peace.

1.3. Job's suffering: an existential question

This passage shows us how complicated and mysterious human existence is. Yet it is through such a tough way(like the one of Job) that it pleases the Spirit of God to guide the human spirit towards a solution of the mystery that disturbs us more. In Job, we see another Jeremiah if not more⁸. Here the sufficiency of the personal retribution is undermined. Why do the innocent suffer?

The complaint of Job should remain a source of consolation and hope for all those who suffer unjustly. It shows us also how suffering can lead to a deep awareness of God.

If this God is ever present in the midst of suffering. curse were effective, Job would have ceased to exist. It would be as though he had never been born, never existed. Then it would be impossible for him to have been ravaged by such a painful fate . He would never have experienced such agony. Job takes this approach as the only immediate way out of his misery. Since he has done no wrong, he has no need to repent. There is no sacrifice that he could offer to relieve his sufferings. To take his own life would be inconceivable in view of his faith in God. Therefore, as the last resort he recites this spell. But this curse is surely an illusion. Rather it shows the degree of his suffering.

⁸.M., Fishbane, *Jeremiah 4:23-26 and Job 3:3-13*, op. cit., pp. 151-167.

Did Job sin in uttering a curse on his own life? Since life is God's greatest gift to a human being, a curse on it would not only deny that gift but would also speak against God himself. But if Job had sinned in his first speech, there would be no debate. His frequent claims of innocence would be sheer mockeries. Though Job approaches the brink of cursing God, he does not. Instead he vents the venom of his anguish by wishing that he were dead. He survives his darkest hour, since he neither curses God nor takes his fate into his hands.

These are the harshest words Job utters against himself in the entire book. They startle us. The friends too are shocked. They fear that his faith in God has melted into distrust (Job 4: 5-6). Why would one who refused to curse God be so hostile toward his own life? The contrast between the Job of the prologue and the Job of the poems could not be sharper. The former Job *did not sin or charge God with wrong*(1: 22), but this Job verbalizes his bitterest feelings. But how does God answer Job?

The book of Job was not written as an answer to the question: *Why did God not create a world free of suffering?* After thirty-seven chapters of debate, God answers Job *out of the whirlwind* with a strong argument. Over and against the infinite power and wisdom of God so evident in the material universe, Job recognizes his insignificance and humbly submits(Job 40:4-5; 42:3,5). In chapter 40:4-5, Job is completely overwhelmed by the greatness and wisdom of God. He will complain no more and from now on will hold himself in humble, respectful silence. God has designed to speak to him⁹. Job humbly bows down before Yahweh's powerful presence in the world. He admits the fact of Yahweh's wisdom. He admits that he has spoken out of turn and in ignorance. Job admits that he had never really known Yahweh before, and finally becomes

⁹.Marcian Strange, *Job and Qohelet*, op. cit., p. 26

conscious of something over which he can *repent in dust and ashes*. He now is conscious of God's mysterious government of his life. He does not admit to a sin committed before the suffering started, but only to his new vision. *Now my eye has seen you*(Job 42:5). So to the end he maintains the same basic claim that he has been making throughout the book- that his sufferings are not connected with some unacknowledged sin of his¹⁰.

What God wants of the just man who suffers is docile acceptance of the providential orders of things: humility not proud rebellion, docility not murmuring.

The book of Job is a challenge to the image of God that is often presented by the theology of retribution. This book lets us discover that the simple teaching based on observation is too simple to answer all the existential questions of the human person.

Man is too weak and ignorant to comprehend the awesomeness of God. Man is speechless in the presence of God's omnipotence and omniscience. God wants man's humility not his pride and wisdom.

Also in Isaiah 53:4-11, the innocent suffers the sorrows of the wicked. The wicked are saved because by faith they recognise their own sorrows in the affliction of the innocent and so are led to repent for their sins. The passage describes the suffering servant as the one taking upon himself the sins of the whole community. He suffers extreme rejection. We recognize in such a description the image of Christ who accepted death on a cross for our sake. Suffering has an atoning value.

¹⁰.Ibid, p.27

Nevertheless, no better answer to the problem of suffering has ever been given-except the Cross. We simply do not know the ultimate reason for the existence of suffering.

Humble acceptance of a difficult but ultimate friendly divine providence is the positive element in the book's struggle with the problem of the suffering of the just man.

One must see God(Job 42:5), encounter God as Job did, in order to live with suffering. Moreover the vision of God is accompanied by a shattering sense of one's own nothingness before Him, such as the author conveys it in the Yahweh speeches (Job 38-41). These are not logical arguments that answer the problem of evil, rather they make it possible for Job to encounter God in the right spirit. Job does not *understand* his suffering, but he is able to bear it in a deeper and personal union with God.

In all this, the supremacy and freedom of God and of human beings is being maintained and the mystery of this God who has mercy on whom he pleases(Ex 33:19) remains intact.

1.4. God's response: God's justice is salvific.

In the Yahweh speeches(Jb 38-41), God shows clearly that He is the master of all things: He is the Creator who made everything out of pure love. He is even the master of the evil forces (Cf. Job 40:6-26). In fact God has no equal. He is the only Other and Unique Creator. God's aim is only to save not to condemn. Even when Job curses the day of his conception, God does not condemn him. Rather He brings him to realize his nothingness in front of the omnipotence and omniscience of God. Who is man to claim anything in front of God? Does he deserve existence? Was he not created for the purpose of his Creator?

This is the answer Job gave to Yahweh:

I know that you are all-powerful:

What you conceive, you can perform.

I was the man who misrepresented your intentions with my ignorant words.

You have told me about great works that I cannot understand,

about marvels which are beyond me, of which I know nothing.

Before, I knew you only by hearsay but now, having seen you with my own eyes,

I retreat what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.(Job 42:1-6)

In this quotation, Job, our spokesman, shows that he had a wrong idea of God before his trial. In his suffering, he meets God face to face and discovers that he has nothing to claim from God. What can he claim if his very being belongs to God. The only answer is silence. The only attitude is that of acknowledgement and Thanksgiving.

In fact, the whole poetical part of the book of Job shows that God's justice is not remunerative. The justice of God is a salvific one. God does not treat us according to our merits. He does everything out of pure love. As we are told in Psalm 8: *What is Man that you should care for him.* (Ps 8:4). In other words, Man does not deserve anything from God. Even when Man was given everything, he still disobeyed God. But since God cannot deny his own nature which is pure love, He always remained faithful to humanity.

Job, in his suffering, fails to recognize himself as a pure gift from God. He forgot that God does not owe him anything. His suffering led him to find the real God. Job's story is presented as a journey towards God. At the end, Job is united with God. God's justice is not remunerative, it is

always salvific. Human suffering leads to growth and complete discovery and union with God.

Hope through suffering is a way to find God.

1.5. Conclusion

We can see that the book of Job is somehow a revolt against the old wisdom. The author protests against the idea that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. How then do we explain the suffering of the innocent? The book is not an answer to the question of suffering. Rather, it is a spiritual journey to show us that God has no debt to pay us. If God were to be just according to our human thinking no one would survive. The only attitude is acknowledgement and thanksgiving. Next to Job, there is another group who tried to reflect on the same question in their own way. This group are called the Gurunsi from Burkina-Faso. Like Job, they struggle with the whole concept of evil in the world. Why do we suffer? On one hand, they partly agree with the Jewish sages who believe that God rewards the good and punishes the bad. On the other, they see just like the author of Job, the didactic purpose of suffering. At the same time, they believe that suffering can lead to real happiness.

With the help of a few stories, we shall try and elaborate such a view on suffering. The Gurunsi being good story tellers did not put their ideas down in writing as the author of Job did. Nevertheless, it does not decrease the value of their thought!

Part Two:

THE GURUNSI

2.1. The Country

Called Upper Volta by the French, Burkina-Faso is situated inland western Africa, surrounded by six nations: Mali, Niger, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire. It consists chiefly of the Mossi Empire lands where France established a protectorate over the Kingdom of Ouagadougou in 1897. Upper Volta became a separate colony in 1919, was partitioned among Niger, the Sudan and the Ivory Coast in 1932 and was reconstituted in 1947. An autonomous republic within the French Community, it became independent on August 5th 1960. Since independence the country has lived several military coups: Col Lamizana 1966, Col. Saye Zerbo 1980, Major Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo 1982. The latter was deposed by Capt. Thomas Sankara whose government changed the country's name to Burkina Faso (*the land of upright men*). Blaise Compaore overthrew Sankara in 1987. The country covers an area of 274,200 sq km and a population of 10,400,000 made up of eight main ethnic groups. French and tribal languages are spoken. The capital is Ouagadougou.

2.2. The people

The Gurunsi people to whom I belong are a group who live in the South and the West of BURKINA-FASO(West Africa). Out of the forty-five provinces that constitute Burkina-Faso, they occupy five. It is the sixth biggest ethnic group. History tells us that the Gurunsi never migrated

from anywhere else. They are the indigenous people of Burkina-Faso whom the Mossi tried to conquer when they came from the Gold Coast but they failed(cf. J., Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique Noire p.324*).

The Gurunsi are divided into three smaller groups: The Kasena, the Nuni and the Lyela(to whom I belong). All speak basically the same language with a few nuances. They have the same history, customs and way of life. The Gurunsi are traditionally good fighters and wrestlers. Their main activity is farming and gardening. As far as grain and fruits are concerned, they are self-reliant. The Gurunsi, like any other African tribe, are very proud of their identity. Their key value remains the family ties and that is why they strongly believe that blood is thicker than water¹¹. The Gurunsi are also good storytellers. They know how to deal with hardships and profit from them.

In this second section, my reflection on suffering will be based on this group, my own people. I was born and grew up among them, therefore, I have experienced their way of life and shared in their beliefs. I have come in touch with their sufferings too. I have seen their attitude towards suffering. My approach will be based on some myths, stories and proverbs of my people. I will try to find the meaning behind them.

¹¹. This proverb was given by Maurice Bazie an leder in the village.

2.3. Myth

In the beginning, God, human beings and other living beings were living together.

One day, *Nececolo*¹² organized a *zezwa*¹³ and invited everybody to help him cultivate his farm. All answered positively and farmed the whole day.

When evening came, *Nececolo* invited them for a big meal. The sharing of the meal was done per village. But surprisingly, *Nececolo* was not being fair in the distribution: to a village of ten people, he would offer five plates of food, to another of thirty people, he would give only three plates. Some people began complaining about his unjust behaviour. They asked him for more justice and equity but he would not listen. Both men and animals then took him to *Yi*¹⁴ to pass his judgment. *Yi* said to *Nececolo*: "Your behaviour is unfair. You should have to all the same quantity of food." *Nececolo* replied: "Truly, you, yourself that I am supposed to imitate are not just. You take away the only child of the family and spare those who have many children. You do the same with riches and wives. Who am I then to differ from you?"

Hearing this, *Yi* felt so ashamed that he flew far away in the skies leaving the earth to men who rule over it. Since that day, *Yi* does not involve himself in earthly affairs anymore.¹⁵

¹².*Nececolo* is a cunning bird known for its intelligence.

¹³.*Zezwa* is *helping association* among the Gurunsi.

¹⁴.*Yi* is the name given to God in Lyele. The same name is given to the sun.

¹⁵.This myth was narrated by Jacques Bationo, Catechist in Reo-Burkina-faso.

2.4. Meaning and origin of suffering

A careful analysis of this myth shows us the whole mentality of the Gurunsi on suffering. Here *Yi* is presented as a master and a judge of everything from the beginning. To some extent, God is the author of injustice in the world, they believe. He is seen as the one sharing goods unequally. He is the source of both well-being and suffering.

Such a myth reveals the belief of the Gurunsi that every calamity has a cause that is from God. Also such mentality is reflected in the traditional practices of the Gurunsi in particular and the Africans in general. They see in God the master of all that exists and he has the power of doing and undoing things according to his will. In fact, to cut the long story short, God is viewed as the author of suffering.

For the Gurunsi, suffering is seen as a punishment from God, just like the Jewish sages in the early wisdom literature. The Gurunsi also believe that God punishes whoever has offended him either through nature or through one's neighbour. Here is a popular legend from REO to elaborate that:

Once upon a time, a man had two wives. One day, the first wife passed away leaving a very young boy behind. The second wife also had a child of the same age. She began to mistreat the orphan. At such a young age, he was doing all the hard jobs. Every evening, the orphan was going to his mother's grave invoking God to relieve him from such pains.

One day, the step-mother saw a snake entering a hole. She then thought that she would do away with the poor boy by asking him to put his hand into the hole so that the deadly serpent bite him.

She called him saying: "Come here and put your hand in the hole and remove my silver coin which has fallen into it. The orphan did reluctantly as he was told. He put his tiny hand in the hole and instead of a snake bite, he removed a hand full of gold. He did the same with the other hand.

Having seen that the step-mother became jealous; she then chased him away and called her own son to get the gold. When he came and put his hand into the hole, unfortunately, he was bitten by the snake and died on the spot.

That is why, one should never mistreat the helpless and the poor because God is their parent and protector.¹⁶

With such a legend, we can say that the Gurunsi believe that suffering is the result of people's wickedness. They believe strongly that one suffers because one has offended God through his creation. That also explains the many sacrifices performed in case of calamity. God rules the universe with sanctions. For instance, when someone is struck by thunder, they believe that it is because he/she has offended the god of iron. They therefore need the help of the blacksmiths who are supposed to be the worshippers of the god of iron to calm him so that the same fate does not fall on any other member of the victim's family.

Yet the Gurunsi have still another view of suffering. They see suffering as a school of growth. For that they have a proverb saying that *if the heat penetrates the grain of millet it becomes either soft or hard*. This means that suffering can either lead to growth or to self-destruction.

¹⁶. This legend was narrated by Bazie Maxime, an elder from Reo.

Also, the narrator of the myth omits intentionally one important element: *Nececolo* does not give any term of contract to those he invites (it reminds us somehow the parable of the labourer of the eleventh hour). He invites people to help him. He never said he would pay them afterwards. They all volunteered to help him. Out of his generosity and sense of gratitude, he offers them a meal. They all begin to complain of his unjust attitude as if they had a right to claim . Is he not free to give any quantity to anyone he wishes?

People forgot and they turned his act of charity into a salary. This is exactly the human attitude towards God in times of trial and challenge or misfortune. We often blame God for what he has not done. We blame him for taking back what he has given us freely.

If God were just in the human sense, no one would survive(Ps 130:3). Each one should be contented with what he/she has been given. At this point we discover that there is a difference with the Jewish mentality. The Gurunsi recognize the mercy and goodness of God. Do they not say that we are often sad because we always compare ourselves to others instead of being content with what we have or are? God knows what he is doing. He knows what is best for each one of us. Let God be God!

Whatever happens, one should always be thankful to God for whom he/she is. God is the only and real source of our being. This is the second teaching of the myth.

The teaching of the other story is that God is the Father of the helpless, the poor. Harming such a category would be hurting God Himself who will in one way or another punish the wicked one. It is an invitation to respect and take care of the poor ones (which is a way of contributing in the alleviation of suffering).

With such a view, we can see that the Gurunsi do not consider suffering as the action of a wicked God but as the attention and care of a loving God through His intermediaries, the divinities and the ancestors. God will never let his subjects go astray.

2.5. The value of suffering in human life

In my tradition, there is a saying that *if the fire does not penetrate the grain it does not burst*. In other words, if one does not suffer at some point in one's life, there is no growth or wisdom. Suffering brings about understanding. The more we suffer, the more we grow in compassion and tenderness towards others.

According to the Gurunsi, solidarity and unity are the daughters of suffering. In times of misfortune people forget all their conflicts and differences and fight against the single enemy.

Suffering also helps one appreciate whatever God has given him or her. The Gurunsi believe that nothing in this world should be taken for granted. Nothing is out of place. Nothing is accidental. Everything has its purpose and should be given its proper place. This is called harmony. Suffering comes whenever this harmony is no more. Suffering serves as a glue for harmony. Suffering is the mother of humanity¹⁷.

In other words, suffering brings us back to reality. Whenever things are going smoothly, we hang too high in the air. Suffering helps us look at our human frailty and rely on the power of the Supreme Being.¹⁸

¹⁷. Bassole Pierre, elder in Reo.

¹⁸. Bazie Paul, Catechist in Reo

Suffering is also a teacher of humility. The Gurunsi believe that Suffering is meant to keep us away from the temptation of considering ourselves as small gods or perfect beings. Suffering can bring about humiliation which leads to real humility and stability (this has been the case of Job).

2.6. Is there any end to suffering?

The Gurunsi believe that suffering has been and will always be Man's companion.

*Suffering is to man what a tale is to a cow.*¹⁹ Suffering has a deep and positive role to play in human growth. Did we not say earlier that the one who has never suffered can never grow? Life is like a beautiful garden and suffering like the machine to cut the grass nicely! The Gurunsi believe that God can never let us suffer beyond our limits. They have always a good way of teaching children about dangers: *let the child touch the fire and he/she will know that it burns* they like saying.

In other words, only those who suffer are careful with the gift of life and make use of it well. The Gurunsi also believe that suffering is as old as the world itself. It would be useless to try and remove all sufferings from our lives. It would be an utopia. Suffering comes and goes but it is always at our side.

¹⁹.Bamouni Cyprien, a Catechist in Reo.

2.7. Conclusion

We see that both the author of Job and the Gurunsi try to find an answer to the meaning and the origin of suffering. Yet none of them was able to give a satisfactory explanation on how suffering comes into the world. They spoke as *spectators*. The book of Job is a revolt against the Jewish sages who believed that if one suffers it is automatically because one has sinned. The Gurunsi seem to go beyond revolt. They see in suffering a certain value that leads to growth and understanding. For them suffering is the best teacher.

In the next section, we shall discover one who did not give an intellectual answer to the question but suffered himself and that person is Christ. Right from his incarnation passing through his cross up to his resurrection, Christ expresses what was foreshadowed by the suffering servant in Isaiah 52-53. He shows that suffering has not only a didactic role to play in human life as both Job and the Gurunsi believe but it has also a redemptive value too. Both Job and the Gurunsi are still waiting for such a revelation. They are expecting the light of Jesus' victory over evil to shine on them.

Part Three:

CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SUFFERING

3.1. The meaning of suffering

Dying when one should not be dying is always a bitter and difficult test: what happens when life does not work? What happens when it is not enough to wave our hands at a prayer meeting or kneel at a Mass? How do we believe then? That is the question of the book of Job.

The question of Job prepares people for the shining mystery of the cross. Paul explained that the crucifixion of Christ could not be expressed in philosophical terms. Not philosophy ~~but~~ experience.

~~In the~~ suffering of Christ, we recognize a true man. In that recognition, we realize that it is foolish to dream of ever being completely free from suffering, from our own weakness. I believe that this acceptance is good, for our weaknesses, our fears, even our sins can be the very stuff out of which holiness is made. What is the raw material of the dark night of the soul but our sins and our failures?

We have to learn to use our weaknesses as Christ did by accepting them freely as God's will for us. Our affirmation must be after the manner of Christ. Christ did not redeem us by dying, but by accepting. So we must accept and help others accept too.

3.1.1. The mystery of incarnation

If we consider the birth and infancy narratives in Luke (Lk 2), we see how the Evangelist depicts the situation. God chose to take flesh in a very simple family. Joseph, a carpenter and Mary, a simple housewife were the two chosen to take care of the Son of God. Furthermore the first people to discover the Child Jesus were the shepherds(Lk 2:8-20), another group of simple people.

To crown it all, Jesus and his family were persecuted by Herod. In front of such a massacre of all the male babies, they were obliged to flee to Egypt(Mt 2, 13-18). In other words, the Son of God had the experience of a *refugee* when he was still a baby. Why this? God chose the hard and extreme way to be one of us and to show us that suffering is as old as Man himself. The bible scholars said that the manger symbolizes the fact that Jesus is food for all. On the point of view of suffering, we can also say that God tasted suffering right from the time he became one of us in Jesus.

If we proceed, Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians(2:6-11) goes further by saying that though He was God He emptied himself(2:8)so that the Father exalt him on high and give him the Name that is above every other name. In other words, Jesus, though the only Son of God, took the condition of the least of us (a street child if we were to use the terms of today) so that he be exalted and we together with him. Suffering conceived as *kenosis* has a redemptive value. Jesus gave us a plausible example of the positive meaning of suffering. Who would accept the condition of a criminal though innocent? None of us! Yet Jesus did in order to reconcile us with the Father.

3.1.2. The Cross

Christianity's response to suffering is an ongoing narrative of God's redemption of creation through the cross and resurrection of Christ.²⁰ In Christ, on the cross, God is our suffering companion. In the suffering Christ, God shares deeply in human suffering. Whenever someone suffers, Jesus is again and again saying: *My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (Ps 22)*. God's face is the face of the retarded; God's body is the body of the retarded; God's being is that of the retarded. Hauerwas' God is not the all-powerful, immutable and absolutely independent God. God is characterized by self-giving, love, by freely accepted interdependence. For unlike us, God is not separated from himself for us by his suffering; his suffering makes it possible for him to share our life and for us to share his.

The God that we Christians worship, is the God of sacrifice, the God of weakness and suffering, who draws us to his table not by coercive but by sacrificial love. In other words, Christian life is not a picnic; it is a life of challenges and self-giving. The freely accepted weakness of God is made manifest first in the incarnation and then in the death on the cross. God provides for us in the Crucified Jesus "a saviour who teaches how to be weak without regret."²¹ The Cross challenges any attempt at making effectiveness the goal of Christian life. It is not that the cross is simply a sign of the Christian's quiet, suffering submission to the exciting powers; for the "cross stands as God's (and our) eternal *no* to the powers of death, and God's eternal *yes* to humanity, God's remarkable

²⁰. Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the silences*, op. cit., p.58

²¹. Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, op. Cit. P.138

determination not to leave us to our own devices. The suffering of Christ becomes for the Christians the way to deal with their own suffering. He did not explain suffering, He suffered himself. There lies the redemptive value of his suffering.

3.1.3 God's victory and power

The affirmation that God does truly suffer poses a basic question about the nature of God's power and human power. If we say that God suffers with us, is this the last word about God? If suffering is projected in God's eternity, what hope remains of eliminating suffering in the world? Is our God impotent? If not, what is the nature of God's power? God's power consists in his capacity of lowering himself to save the whole human person. His power is based on his commitment to love beyond all limits. Yet such a free love does not suppress human freedom. God became Man in order to raise us from our poor condition of sin.

The *shameful* death of Jesus was vindicated by God the Father. Jesus' victory over death is important to us Christians. The resurrection of Jesus is a clear proof of God's victory over the Prince of this world, the Evil one. The Risen Lord gives suffering a different dimension which is beyond both Job and the Gurunsi understanding: suffering has a redemptive value. In Jesus' resurrection, God's love was made complete. God indeed loved us to the end.

From the darkness of death came the light of life eternal. God has shown us that He is the fire of love itself, the Healer of tears. God is henceforth the giver and taker. He is the loving Creator.

In actual fact, my aim in this paper is not to prove that God is powerful and that he can and does eradicate suffering. My vision here is how to help people find God and still believe in Him in their difficult moments and situations. What then is the meaning of suffering today?

3.1.4 The meaning of suffering today

3.1.4.1. Spirituality

Suffering helps us to grow in patience and generosity. We learn how to live through suffering in patience which is a waiting, a waiting upon the Lord. Suffering can lead to contemplation. It teaches us to trust in the Lord.

Present suffering builds on our past suffering so that reflection on how we got through any previous suffering reminds us that God is always present. This strengthens our faith. We then see that suffering is redemptive. "If God is with us, who can be against us?" We develop a certainty of faith.

Suffering teaches us how to be thoughtful and sensitive toward ourselves and others. Although each suffering is a personal, unique experience, we can better empathize with others who have a similar suffering. Suffering calls forth our creative imagination either in ourselves or from others. It calls forth our compassion which is a sense of shared suffering.

Our God is weak and powerless in the world. He took our sicknesses and carried our diseases for us. Thus it is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us but by his

weakness and suffering. Christ chose the way of weakness as the way to be with us, because it is the human condition.

Religious education has for many years given people answers to questions they are asking. Nowadays, people do not accept blindly answers which are not relevant to their own daily lives.

3.1.4.2. Meaning of suffering

The deep meaning of suffering is that we are not isolated beings. We need companionship; we need human support and compassion. We need others to talk with about our feelings, fears and anxieties, our hopes and our dreams.

Through suffering we learn that life is precious; that we ought not to waste it but make it worthwhile. We cannot become truly holy without suffering. No matter what our sufferings are, physical, mental or spiritual, they are the raw material for holiness.²² Our sufferings are the experience of the desert, but even the desert is not totally barren. There are living creatures and desert flowers. To have an oasis, we need a desert.

Anyone who has suffered will have asked the question, "*why me?*" *Why have I been chosen to bear this suffering?* Not all of us will formulate the question so clearly. Some will deny it. Some may be so disturbed in confronting this question that they experience more confusion and disorientation. Suffering touches the very root of existence. People will tell you, when they see the suffering you are in, that *God loves you very much. He chastises those He loves.* When I hear this I say to myself, *I wish he would not love me*

²² Richard, J., Gilmartin (Ed.), *Suffering*, op.cit . p.92

so much. However, suffering makes us re-evaluate our lives with a reorientation toward deeper values.

If we face the question *why me?* it can lead to a deep learning experience though in general, *why* questions in human affairs are unanswerable. The better questions to ask are: what can I become? What can I do, and how will I do it now that I am in this suffering state? Suffering people do not really expect answers. But through thought and action, they may find their personal meaning for the reason they suffer. We ought not view suffering as a problem to be solved, but a state to be experienced. It is a mystery. It is a human experience about which we can do something sometimes, and at other times nothing, just be in the suffering.

In his apostolic letter entitled *Salvifici Doloris*²³ Pope John Paul II gives us a reflection on the Christian meaning of human suffering. He quotes Saint Paul who says that *in his flesh he completes what is lacking in Christ's affliction for the sake of his body, that is, the Church* (Cf. Col 1:24). He goes on to say that suffering is as deep as man himself.

Suffering belongs to man's transcendence. Redemption is accomplished through the Cross of Christ. Good Friday was necessary for Easter to take place! Suffering is almost inseparable from man's earthly existence. The Church has to try to meet man in a special way on the path of his suffering. Man in his suffering remains an intangible mystery. Yet our Christian vocation is to help each other find hope in God. We ought to help and heal one another. Even though we have in one way or another

²³.J ohn Paul II, *The Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, op. cit. pp. 1-13

been touched by suffering, the Spirit of Christ living in us gives us the strength to support and encourage others. Anyway, we cannot give what we do not have.

It is hard for most of us to understand the Scriptures concerning suffering because we have not yet as such experienced a difficult situation and yet most of us come from a situation of poverty, oppression, enslavement, or marginalization, which is the “privileged school” for understanding suffering. Also most of us lived and are still living in a situation of comfort and tranquillity so much so that we hardly try to think of those who are suffering out there. Do we ever realize that the Gospel is heard in a certain way when one’s stomach is empty and in a different way when one is satisfied?

The Gospel was first heard by people who were longing and thirsty, who were poor and oppressed in one way or another. They knew their needs and their emptiness.

It is otiose to pray: “*Lord, put me in a situation of oppression.*” We must go inside and find the rejected and fearful parts within each one of us and try to live there when life has not yet put us there. That should allow us a deeper communion with the oppressed of the world, who are by far the majority of the human race. We are the minority, the exception, the slow-learners.

If we wish to enter more deeply into this mystery of redemptive suffering, which also means somehow entering more deeply into the heart of God, we have to ask the Lord to allow us to feel, not just to know. To feel what it means to be empty, abandoned, uncared for. Not only for five minutes and not only like missing the bus, but rather, an entire life’s stance, a standing-under so that we can “understand.” This change

of position is what we mean by "conversion," *metanoia*. *Metanoia* means turning around. It is quite different from mere education.

All this is to say that unless we are able to suffer ourselves and are capable of assuming and understanding such pains in the light of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, it would be very difficult for us to understand and help others who are suffering to find God in their situation. In my present condition, I now understand that the betrayal of Jesus by one of his best friends is a deep reality. We cannot give what we do not have. Unless we find hope and life in our own situation and are able to be healed from the inner wounds of injustice and hatred, it would be very difficult for us to help others sincerely.

3.1.4.3.Suffering today

Appreciation

Many people are living the situation of Job. I can guess what is going on in their minds. They are the "Jobs" of our time. There are so many people who are failing to find a meaning to their life situation. Were they born to suffer? Why them? Will they persevere like Job?

A first group of *Jobs* would be all the refugees left by the war in the Great Lakes region who are going day by day asking themselves whether it was worthwhile for them to be born. They keep on asking themselves: "Why us?" "Do we deserve this?" "Is God so blind not to see our situation?" "Are we the worst sinners God could find in this world?" These are some of the many questions put to God by these suffering people driven away from their homes.

Another group of *Jobs* are the street kids. One day I heard them singing that: "If I tell you why I keep to the streets you will hold your breath; if you knew that I am the fruit of your selfishness you would be ashamed; but God why me?" Let us for a while think that we are lying in the freezing streets of Nairobi at night having nowhere to go. It must be terrible out there! Then, why me? you would say. What a terrible experience!

Indeed these kids have a lot of things to teach us. They are the ones who can bring the book of Job into reality. If we say that some refugees deserve their situation, what about these innocent kids? Or are they paying for their parents' sins? In Nairobi West where I stay at the moment, there are many of them staying at the shopping center and reflect all one could think of misery. Yet they can afford a laughter among themselves. Why so?

A third group of *Jobs* would be the slum dwellers. I have so many friends among them and they always amaze me with their joyful faces. Whenever I pay them a visit they make me forget my own difficulties and hardships.

A fourth group of *Jobs* would be the Gurunsi who day after day struggle in trying to find the meaning of their existence especially when death or another calamity strikes the community.

A fifth group of *Jobs* would be the victims of AIDS. Let us think of the wife dying such a painful death because her husband has been unfaithful. Is it right? No.

I could go on with the list of *Jobs* but the length of this paper does not allow it. We notice that all these people need to cope with their situation. They need to live with the hope of Christ Crucified and Risen. Who will give them that hope and comfort?

3.2 Pastoral and Missionary approach

3.2.1 What to do as Pastors?

We believe that in baptism we die with Christ and rise with Him, therefore we live with Him. Also we know that Christ has overcome evil through his painful death on the cross. Through the cross, humankind has been made anew. A new creation has begun. We believe and hope that in Christ nothing can separate us from the infinite love of God. We also learnt that faith brings acceptance; acceptance brings hope and hope will never deceive us because the love of God and the Spirit of the Risen Lord live in us. At the same time, it is the Spirit that sends us out to proclaim that infinite love of God to all and more especially to the *Jobs* of our times.

The only solution that liberates us would be *the song of the servant of Yahweh* with its redemptive value of the suffering of the just (Wis 2-5; Dt- Is52-53.). The suffering of the just is justified by its expiatory value, which is transformed into an eternal beatitude meanwhile the prosperity of the wicked will lead to eternal condemnation.

We need to be listeners to one another. We need to share one another's strength. At least Job's friends did listen to him, even though afterwards they gave him all kinds of reasons and advices for his sufferings that caused him more suffering.

For us Christians, we have found the meaning of suffering in the shameful death of Christ. We hope that He who experienced our situation is in better position to intercede for us. Christ who is the *Suffering Servant* accepted such a painful way in

order to redeem us from all that could enslave us: even suffering. Christ got rid of suffering!

The message we are called to share with those suffering aimlessly is a message of comfort and love. It is not a matter of preaching; it is a matter of feeling with; it is a question of *being with* more important than *doing for*; our apostolate to the suffering ones should be an *apostolate of presence*. To be there with them is more than anything else.

Another Christian attitude towards such a category of people would be that of listening to the “Jobs” of our times. How many of us would just give a shilling to a street kid without even looking at his face; the excuse would be that time does not allow us to do so. Yet we forget that listening to such people is in itself an authentic prayer. God is where suffering his. In Jesus Christ God made himself our fellow sufferer.

3.2.2 Is it a missionary task?

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*²⁴

²⁴.Cf. Lk 4: 18-19, *The New International Version*.

This is the core of the Christian call that we have all received. Our faith propels us to action. The apostolate to the poor and the needy is a must not an option. Christ gave us the mandate to alleviate suffering through our words and actions. We have to show our faith through our daily actions. Preaching is no longer enough. It is no more a question of salvation of souls but salvation of the human person as a whole. If there were only one missionary vocation it would be the one to the poor and needy.

The missionary tasks are becoming more and more challenging because poverty and misery are becoming more visible everywhere. The rich are growing richer and the poor poorer. The missionary task today would be to call everyone to a real conversion of heart: help people turn from a selfish world to a more sharing world. Then, the miracle of the loaves would be a reality.

For centuries we have put up with direct disobedience to Jesus in the church and have been incapable of recognizing it as sin. Indeed we have promoted people in the church for being agents of some of these evils. Ambition, for example; greed, power, vanity, and idolatry are commonly lived by the clergy and laity without our feeling the need to rationalize. These are not subject to legislation, like sexual acts, but only to discernment and prayer.

In religious life people are repeatedly warned about going to bed with women; then why do people not warn each other when they go to bed with ambition, power, money? It is simply because these are not seen as demons. That is a pure lack of discernment. For centuries the Church has failed to recognize the poor Christ. Moral

teaching seems to be much more a matter of control and cultural sanction than the teaching and emphasis of Jesus.

Our missionary task should be to help people see with their own eyes and not by “hearsay”(just like Job). To see and be seen. That is all people desire. Sufferings need some eyes to go through them and understand what is going on in them. They need people who can see their nakedness and not say that they are ugly or foolish.

Job has been seen and acknowledged, so he no longer needs answers: *I retract all that I have said, God, and in dust and ashes I repent.* Job’s answer is a total self-giving to God from whom all came and to whom all returns. As disciples of Christ we should as well be able to lead suffering people to such an answer to God. We should help people be their own heroes in their sufferings. We should help them understand that God loves us so perfectly that He always allows us to be the heroes in whichever situation we are. People should understand that to us goes glory precisely when we give God the glory. When we try to let go and give our life to God, God gives it back to us in its fullness. That is what love is all about. When we are deeply in love, we give all our life to the other.

3.2.3 .I am always with you

Sometimes we are afraid to take the risk and mix with the less fortunate because we think that they might take away everything that we have and are. Jesus is always assuring us of his presence and his strength. *Do not be afraid* he says(Mt 28, 10). *Anyone who is ashamed of me in front of men, I will so of him in front of my*

Father in heaven(Lk 12,9). Jesus is always present to the poor and the marginalized.

He is one of them. He who is sending us will always give us the strength to carry out his mission!

CONCLUSION.

Such a reflection shows us that the problem of suffering is here to stay. Suffering is our companion. A world freed from suffering would be an utopia. Both Job and the Gurunsi struggled with it and at the end came to a certain attitude : acknowledgement, thanksgiving and real wisdom.

Though the Gurunsi viewed suffering as being sometimes a punishment, they did not fail to see that it teaches us how to cope in this world.

The perfect attitude is given by Christ who shared in our suffering to show us that the desire of God is for us all to be saved body and soul(1Tim 2:4). God did not create us to suffer. He gave us an attitude to imitate. As Christians, we are invited to follow in the steps of Christ who by His cross, death and resurrection has given us a higher dimension of suffering: its redemptive value.

We forget that all we are and have is a gift from God therefore, the only attitude required of us is constant thanksgiving. We had even lost God's grace. He again sent us his only Son to show us the way. He came to show us that God is Love and Forgiveness. He called us to share all the gifts received from Him. What are we doing?

It is a pity that most of us live according to the philosophy of the survival of the fittest. We are only preoccupied by our personal interest and that leads us to violence and killing of innocent people, the Jobs of our times. Who is responsible for such evils? God is surely not. We are.

Selfishness and greed seem to take over. Who is to be blamed? In Africa, many people are dying of hunger while others are swimming in plenty. Many are victims of wars and conflicts and this in order to protect the interests of a minority. A typical example would be the clashes which have resumed in Kenya. People are killing each other in the name of God, in the name tribal belonging. Is it the desire of God? No.

As pastors and missionaries, our task is to work for a just world. We are called to be signs of hope for the hopeless, lifegiving for those who are psychologically dead, joy and consolation for those who mourn, heralds of liberation for those who are unjustly oppressed. We are mandated to help people and lead them to the real light Jesus-Christ who came so that we may die to selfishness and violence and live a life worthy of the children of God that we are. As Saint Irenaeus of Lyon said: *The glory of God is Man fully alive*. Then, the only miracle we can perform when all is gone is to give hope. Are we ready?

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