

“The Cross Our Only Hope’:  
Two Views of Suffering in Christian Tradition”

He had no outward beauty, no distinction,  
We saw nothing in his appearance to attract us,  
So marred was his appearance beyond human semblance,  
His form beyond human likeness.  
He was despised, shunned by people,  
A man who suffered, no stranger to sickness,  
Like one from whom people turn away their gaze.

.....  
He had done no violence,  
And no falsehood was on his tongue.  
But it was the LORD’s good pleasure to crush him.

.....  
Yet he bore the sin of many,  
And interceded for their transgressions (Is. 53.2-3, 10, 12; tr. by J. Blenkinsopp).

No one will doubt the centrality of suffering in Christian tradition. In the Creed, Christians both Eastern and Western profess their belief in “Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, who ... suffered, died and was buried.” Narratives of this suffering lie at the heart of the four canonical Gospels. The Passion narratives, each in their own way, recall and take up the unforgettable image of the suffering servant from the Book of Isaiah, just quoted in the translation by Joseph Blenkinsopp. Pope Benedict’s first encyclical, *God is Love*, takes the form of a contemplation of the equally unforgettable image of the “pierced side of Christ” hanging dead on the Cross (sec. 12, etc.).

As familiar as these biblical images of suffering may be, they seem to pose, rather than to answer, a question about suffering: is suffering, in any way, good? It is true that good issues from the patient endurance of the suffering of the Servant in Isaiah, and of the loving endurance of the suffering of Christ in the Gospels, but this does not necessarily mean that the suffering, *qua* suffering, was, or is, itself something good. And yet the suffering is the occasion of patient, loving endurance, and one might argue that, at least to that degree, it was a good, or at least insofar as it is *his* suffering, Christ’s, or the Servant’s, it was good.

The problem is exacerbated when we turn to the lives of ordinary persons. On the one hand, it seems to be common sense that some suffering is good for you. We tend to regard people who have led lives insulated from suffering as shallow, lacking in empathy, oblivious to other people’s problems. Nor is it just our common sense that finds some good in suffering. “Justice tilts / the scales to ensure that suffering / is the only teacher,” the Chorus tells us in the *Agamemnon*.

It was Zeus who set  
Men on the path to wisdom

When he decreed the fixed  
 Law that suffering  
 Alone shall be their teacher.  
 Even in sleep pain drips  
 Down through the heart as fear,  
 All night, as memory,  
 We learn unwillingly.  
 From the high bench of the gods  
 By violence, it seems, grace comes  
 (287-89, 200-10; tr. by Alan Shapiro and Peter Burian).

On the other hand, the glorification of suffering in certain kinds of Christian spirituality seems to border on, or even cross the border into, masochism. Further, it would be offensive to claim that the Holocaust or any genocide, as a kind of suffering, was in any way a good for the victimized populations. We can recall, in this regard, Simone Weil's description of "affliction": "Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain. ... At the very best, he who is branded by affliction will keep only half his soul. As for those who have been struck by one of those blows that leave a being struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm, they have no words to express what is happening to them" ("The Love of God and Affliction," in *Waiting for God*, 118, 120). It would be hard to say that affliction, so described, is good for anyone. It is also easy to prescribe the so-called good of suffering to any group of people one has a vested interest in repressing.

So we are left with our original dilemma about the value of suffering. I propose to contextualize this dilemma by identifying in Christian tradition two ancient strands of reflection on suffering. The first we could call the model of Maturity through Experience. It is associated generally, but not exclusively, with Eastern Christianity, and, in this paper, with the second century bishop and theologian, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, whose theology was formative for the great theological and spiritual tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy and also to some extent the Churches of the East. The second we could call the model of Re-creation through Healing. This model is associated generally, but not exclusively, with Western Christianity, and, in this paper, with St. Augustine, who died in 429. And we know (in the words of Jaroslav Pelikan of blessed memory) that all of Western theology is nothing more than a series of footnotes to Augustine. These two strands of reflection, or models, are not "pure" in the sense that they never intersect or influence each other. Augustine, for example, until about 418, adhered to the earlier model, and so his legacy is divided, at least for the West. Nevertheless, there really are two quite distinct, if complementary, views of suffering entailed in each of these models. We run into trouble if they are unknowingly confused or when one is "read" with the lens of the other without realizing it.

Irenaeus was a member of a church that had sustained a gruesome persecution in which the bishop, Pothinus, was martyred in 178. Irenaeus succeeded to his position. Irenaeus's theology can be understood in part as a defense of the martyrs and their

suffering against the claims of those whom he refers to as “gnostic” Christians, who denied that the suffering of the martyrs, or indeed martyrdom itself, had any value. Their own position, more or less, was that life in the body was life alienated from its true source in God, and that the body and everything associated with it were an imprisoning illusion with at best the reality of a nightmare, from which one must awaken, and at worst an oppressive and degrading actual reality from which one must escape. In either case, the suffering associated with life in the body was meaningless, of no more significance than any other feature of bodily life. The God responsible for this world of body and embodiment, the Creator, was not himself good, and the object of the world he created was the alienation of divine light and life into the control of himself and his associates, the “archons” or “rulers” of this embodied world. The Gnostic Christian was one who had discovered the truth of his or her own condition as essentially a divine self alienated from the “Fullness” of divinity by the God of Creation. He or she is saved by this “gnosis,” or knowledge, or true acquaintance with him or herself. From the perspective of this acquaintance, one can see that the suffering of the body is irrelevant to salvation. The Christ who comes to reveal this knowledge did not himself suffer, but only appeared to suffer, as a way of demonstrating the illusory character of embodied life. Even the resurrection is not a bodily affair, but rather something each Gnostic Christian already possesses in their awareness of their true nature as divine.

In response, Irenaeus elaborates a theology intended to uphold Apostolic tradition regarding the goodness of creation and to vindicate the witness of his fellow churchmembers who had preferred to suffer gruesome tortures and death rather than to deny their faith. Irenaeus begins by developing and defending the idea of a created good, that is, something that is not divine, not uncreated, but nevertheless good. All that is not God is not necessarily evil. Created goods are different from God in that they were created by God, precisely as something other than God. Creation in this system is pictured as an act of generosity in which God wills there to be other selves (if we can put it that way) besides the divine self. A created self’s perfection would not simply coincide with its existence, as is the case in God. Rather, the perfection of a created good would be a matter of growth and maturation, a kind of journey from an inexperienced infancy to a fully experienced adulthood. Life is a course of training or discipline in which one strives for perfection against the challenges presented by one’s status as a finite being.

In this scheme, freedom is paramount. The very essence of created selfhood is authentic freedom, and all talk of training and discipline and education is meaningful only in connection with the conviction that the self is genuinely free. Behind Irenaeus’s anthropology, more than the narrative in Genesis of creation and fall, is the narrative of the Exodus. God liberates the people of Israel from Egypt in mighty acts of deliverance, so that they are truly and fully free. Yet, when they encounter the hardships of the life of freedom, the people are ready to go back into slavery. You might say that, although they are fully free, they are nevertheless not free; they need to grow into their freedom; to become what they are.

Irenaeus interprets the paradoxes of this narrative as the paradoxes of created freedom. Not even God can remove the element of struggle involved in “growing up,” for that

would mean destroying the very freedom he created, or the physical world in which this freedom is defined. God can't choose for us, or making it so that there are no real choices to be made. God the Creator, desiring there to be free creatures, must impose limitations on himself. Irenaeus likens God to a father, a mother, a teacher, a farmer, etc., someone who uses every means at his disposal to nurture genuine growth in freedom without simply doing it for us, without taking away the struggle that is intrinsic to all advances toward perfection, allowing us to define ourselves by our choices.

And yet God does not abandon us to our choices. In the Exodus narrative, God persuades (and seems open to persuasion in turn), nourishes, gives drink, commands. God does punish, but only to purify and to promote repentance. Irenaeus interprets the fall narrative of Genesis through this lens. The fall of Adam and Eve, while it is a serious sin, is nevertheless a choice made in "infancy," the disobedience of inexperienced, untrained creatures who, precisely as inexperienced and untrained, might be expected to fall. God acts as any good parent would, by punishing his children, yet with a punishment that is meant to be educational, remedial and to move forward the growing process. Even death itself, the main punishment for sin, is a function of God's goodness, imposed so that we are not frozen in a sinful state for all eternity, that is, so that sin does not become immortal and there remains the genuine possibility of change.

In this system, struggle and wrestling for perfection is part of created nature. Anyone who wants to learn to play the piano has to practice, and no one can practice for you, nor can the divine teacher simply program (for example) the Chopin waltzes into our genes, because it is precisely the struggle to learn them that makes them "ours," that provides an interpretation, uniquely our own, that makes it moving to a listener and renders a performance an instance of self-expression. In this system suffering is not simply the result of the Fall or of evil. In the world after the Fall, what we recognize as suffering includes much that would not have been present in the unfallen world, yet the unfallen world would have included struggle, temptation, discipline and training and whatever "suffering," if that is the right word, these naturally entail. While we have no direct access to what that might have 'felt like' in an unfallen world, it is fair to say that in this system, one can imagine an "unfallen" suffering, a suffering that is in some way, in itself, a good.

In Irenaeus's system, the Incarnation would have occurred anyway, without the Fall, as part of God's progressive education of the human race into what true and perfect freedom would be, namely, union with God. In Irenaeus's system, the surprise is not that sin, as a *felix culpa*, calls forth an unexpected Incarnation, but rather that the Incarnation happens anyway, despite sin. God does not abandon his loving plan; if anything, it is even more revealing of God's love that the Word still becomes Incarnate in a world dominated by violence, greed, apostasy. The Word's willingness to enter even this world, live under its conditions, and still never make an unloving choice, shows us both that God's love cannot be gainsaid by evil, and that human freedom cannot be destroyed by evil. We can receive God's love gratefully, and gratefully act with the loving choices that constitute obedience to God the Creator and so even and especially in the face of evil perfect and fulfill our freedom. We can grow into perfection even in the face of sin. The course of

training is more grueling than it might have been before sin, but created life is still essentially a kind of training, in which God acts as a loving parent, nurturer, educator, teacher, to help us achieve perfection without removing the struggle that is its *sine qua non*. Suffering under these conditions is a fallen version of an unfallen good. One must have faith that there is an element of training or salutary discipline, of testing or purification, presented in every evil that may befall us. That is just another way of saying that no evil can utterly destroy human freedom, can finally preclude or obviate a loving choice. Human nature cannot be destroyed by evil. Yet another way of putting this is that our suffering is always something truly and finally ours, it cannot be alienated from us, it always presents itself as a locus of the self and of our freedom. In that qualified sense, it is a good. Irenaeus, a Greek-speaking Christian who came to Lyons from Asia Minor, would understand the sentiments of the chorus in the *Agamemnon*.

If we turn to Augustine now, it will seem at first that we are almost in another world. For Augustine, the starting point is dramatically different. In his interpretation of the Genesis narrative, unfallen humanity is not in a state comparable to infancy, but rather exists in a state of freedom that is unchallenged by any internal or external exigency. The lives of Adam and Eve before the Fall are not characterized by struggle, but by freedom from struggle. Eden is a state of “ease and plenty,” where the human couple “lived in the enjoyment of God, and derived their own goodness from God’s goodness. They lived without any want. ... Food was available to prevent hunger, drink to prevent thirst ... there was no trace of decay in the body, or arising from the body, to bring any distress to any of his senses. There was no risk of disease from within or injury from without. ... There was no sadness at all, nor any frivolous jollity. But true joy flowed perpetually from God ... Between man and wife there was a faithful partnership based on love and mutual respect ... Man was at leisure, and tiredness never wearied him, and sleep never weighed him down against his will” (14.26).

In other words, there was no need that disobedience could meet that was not already met by obedience. God’s commandment not to eat of the fruit of one particular tree was therefore incredibly easy to keep. The disobedience of Adam and Eve was a choice made with a degree of freedom from constraint, passion and need that we can no longer even imagine. Far from being analogous to the mistake of a child, their disobedience was an act of unambiguous malice, a deliberate act of hostility to God, our true Good, undertaken with a freedom so uncompromised and unclouded that it has shaped human freedom ever since into a rejection of life and goodness. Human freedom, abused in this way in its first use, was permanently disabled, disfigured and “tilted” ever since towards the bad, powerless to freely will anything else unless healed by God’s grace. This entailed a disfigurement of human nature in general back towards the nothingness from which we were created. Mortal life as we know it, subject to death, old age, disease and infirmity – in a word, suffering – began. In this scheme, all the suffering of mortal life, that is to say, all suffering, is post-Fall, and Augustine after 418 has no doubt that there is no good in it. Breaking with the whole of the Platonic and Christian Platonic tradition, Augustine proclaims that death is not a good, that the body is part of the human being and so death cannot be conceived of as the liberation of the soul from the body, but rather a disintegration of the human being that cannot possibly be in any way good. It is part of

the vitiated state of human nature after the Fall, and there is no good in this vitiation. Unlike in Irenaeus, the punishment for sin has no remedial intent or effect because it is simply part of the weakening of human nature intended by the first human couple when they tried to opt for something better than God – when there in fact is nothing better than God.

Nevertheless, God does not abandon us, but he must take drastic measures. In the Incarnation of the Word of God, God himself, “empties himself” to live in hidden solidarity with us, under the conditions of fallen human life. The loving choice of the Word of God to live and die in quiet, unprestigious solidarity with us turns God’s Word, one might say, into God’s Rhetoric, God’s moving, beautiful, persuasive speech to us, persuading us to trust and to be formed into the same love and humility exhibited by the Word made flesh. Just as in Irenaeus, the martyrs play a big role in Augustine’s thought. Their faith in Christ, Augustine says, enabled them to put death “to a good use,” that is, to the use of witness to their faith. Augustine is absolutely clear that this does not turn death, or any manifestation of mortality for that matter, into a good, but faith in Christ does enable good to be drawn from these evils which remain evils. It is the true mark of God’s work, to draw good from nothing (and evil is a form of nothing). Death and its attendant suffering cannot be redeemed as goods, and yet the virtues of patient endurance and of charity, which are the expressions of faith in Christ, are good. But the essential good in this system is neither suffering nor even virtue, primarily, but Christ. Faith in Christ permits us to live a life of healing virtue and love in the face of all the sufferings, small and large, which mortal life entails, and in this way human being is re-created, or re-formed, from the near-nothingness to which it had reduced itself in sin.

The two strands of reflection on suffering present not an opposition, but an interesting complementarity. Irenaeus’s system, on the face of it more optimistic, provides some guidance for our instinct that suffering is in some way good for human beings, and that, in the words of Aeschylus, it begets wisdom. The structure of human life is such that growth, development, and the struggle that these always entail, are encoded into human nature as a created good. Struggle brings us into contact with our status as both created and good, and with our being as a gift. As we are progressively able to acquire discipline, self-control, and, in the end, love, we progressively understand how good and noble what we call human being is, and even in the midst of continuing struggle, we are more and more conscious of the great gift we have been given. We come to live in gratitude, more and more to realize our calling as “image and likeness” of God, or, as Irenaeus would say, we become “divinized.” It is precisely in the suffering of the individual that we meet, inalienably, our ability to struggle and to grow. The miracle that Christ provides is that this dynamic is not cancelled by the Fall. We might be inclined to think that Irenaeus was naïve, that he did not really know the extent to which evil can go. Yet we possess eye-witness accounts of the suffering of the martyrs of Lyons. The tortures applied to the Christians in Lyons were the equal of any horror in our contemporary repertoire of terror. Irenaeus’s doctrine does not arise from naïvete, but rather is a doctrine of confidence in the goodness of the Creator: they can harm your body, but they cannot take your soul, and human nature is such that you can encounter it in your pain because that pain, at least, is always and inalienably yours.

However, Irenaeus gets a little fuzzy when it comes to how to regard the evil which causes suffering. If death is in some way a remedial good, is everything associated with death also in some way a remedial good? And if evil is at its origin something analogous to the disobedience of children, can we really regard such events as genocide or even the Roman torture of the martyrs as analogous to the mistakes of children? Here is where the complementary strength of the Augustinian system kicks in. There is no reason at all to regard any of these events as having any benefit, usefulness or any particle of good within them, and they do not seem, as evil, to reflect the mistakes of childlike creatures, but rather to point back to some primordial malice that is purely evil without remainder. We are seeing, as it were, the distant aftershocks, like the faint, cold X-rays of the Big Bang of evil. There is no need to find the “rationale” for this or that evil event in God’s plan: there is none. They are not part of the plan. Yet it is part and parcel of the victory of God in Christ that good can be drawn from these evils without making them in any way good. Faith in Christ permits a patient endurance, or an active resistance, that is a virtue and that is, in fact, good. But where Augustine gets fuzzy is with regard to suffering that does not seem so closely related to evil: athletic endurance, academic and artistic training, etc. He looked back on his own education with loathing because of the disciplinary methods of the teachers, which he regarded (rightly, it would seem) as barbaric and understandable only as a form of evil dependent upon the Fall. True learning would be almost effortless, like the way little children learn to speak without any formal training or discipline whatsoever. Perhaps there is an undeveloped hint here, in Book I of the *Confessions*, of a view of a kind of unfallen suffering.

Problems occur, I would suggest, because both systems do have fuzzy edges, and it is easy to cross these strands at their fuzziest and short circuit both. It is easy to find a text contoured by Augustine’s paradigm of suffering as “not good but able to be put to a good use,” and “hear” it in a “Growth and Maturation” Irenaean framework. *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* picture Francis telling Brother Leo that perfect joy is found in coming home after a long journey and being rejected, thrown out into the cold and mud as imposters and rogues, and yet bearing it patiently. One could “hear” this narrative, which operates in a basic Augustinian framework, as claiming that perfect joy is found in abusive treatment. Perfect joy is found, rather, in the faith in Christ that enables one to put the evil of such treatment to a good use. The other way around is also unhelpful. *The Way of a Pilgrim*, for example, is a nineteenth century Russian novel about a crippled man who has lost everything, his wife, the use of his arm, his home and property, who learns the Jesus prayer of the heart, and decides to make a pilgrimage. This is a story very much written in the “Growth and Maturation” framework. But if it is read with Augustinian eyes, it looks like the author, who admires the literal step by step progress the pilgrim makes, is saying that the sort of thing Augustine calls suffering, unredeemable evil, is good for you in some way. In both cases of crossing the wires, you end up with a masochistic spirituality that seems to promote self-destruction as a good, when that is not the intention of either way of thinking under its own steam.

But this is not the only way for the two strands of reflection to intertwine. For the strengths of each way of thinking can complement and help to fill out the fuzziness that

each also exhibits. One example of the complementary intertwining of the strengths of each strand is in the *Rule* of St. Benedict, drawn as much from Eastern as from Augustinian sources. Benedict has the optimism of Irenaeus and the sense that one can provide, as he says, a “school for the Lord’s service,” the monastic community as an enterprise in which one can learn humility, justice and love. It will involve suffering, and this suffering is a form of training. And yet the *Rule* is equally formed in the Augustinian sense that no suffering of ours is ultimately a good simply as suffering, simply as *ours*, but only as Christ’s, that is, as something which faith in Christ permits one to use but which would carry no utility or benefit apart from this faith. Life in community is lived as a “share in the sufferings of Christ” (*RB* Pref.50), “supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior” (*RB* 72).

One recent intertwining of these two strands is John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris, On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*. John Paul II often called upon Christians to “let the Church breathe with both lungs,” that is, with the complementary insights of Eastern and Western Christianity. I think it is fair to say, though, that in this text, the Irenaean strand dominates. In a profoundly un-Augustinian moment, the encyclical declares that the Book of Job shows that “it is not true that all suffering is a consequence of a fault and has the nature of punishment” (sec. 11), adding, too, that in cases where it does serve as a punishment, it is remedial: “The Old Testament emphasizes ... the educational value of suffering as a punishment,” intended to “lead to conversion, that is, for the rebuilding of goodness in the person” (sec. 12).

Down through the centuries ... [he writes,] it has been seen that in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ, a special grace. ... When this body is gravely ill, totally incapacitated, and the person is almost incapable of living and acting, all the more do interior maturity and spiritual greatness become evident, constituting a touching lesson to those who are healthy and normal (sec. 26).

One recognizes here the “Maturity through Experience” strand of St. Irenaeus. However, we read, just a little later, that,

Suffering is in itself an experience of evil. But Christ had made suffering the firmest basis of the definitive good, namely the good of eternal salvation. By his suffering on the Cross, Christ reached the very roots of evil, of sin and death. He conquered the author of evil, Satan, and his permanent rebellion against the Creator. To the suffering brother or sister Christ discloses and gradually reveals the horizons of the kingdom of God: the horizons of a world converted to the Creator, or a world free from sin, a world being built on the saving power of love. (sec. 26).

We can recognize in this, the interweaving of the Augustinian strand, in which fallen suffering is regarded as an experience, in itself, of evil, not of good. Without turning it into an experience of good in itself, Christ enables it to be put to a good use, as the locus

of a gradual discernment, to faith, of the only saving power there is in the world, that of God's love. And yet this spirituality remains in an "Irenaean" key:

In the cross of Christ not only is the redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has been redeemed. Christ – without any fault of his own – took on himself "the total evil of sin." The experience of this evil determined the incomparable extent of Christ's suffering, which became the price of the redemption. ... Each human being has his own share in the redemption. Each one is also called to share in that suffering through which the redemption was accomplished. ... In bringing about the redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the redemption. Thus each human being in his suffering can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ (sec. 19).

One cannot mistake the characteristic Irenaean clarion call to human freedom. Christ the very human human being won redemption by an unimaginably great exercise of human freedom in enduring "the total evil of sin." It means that our suffering participates in this act of freedom and so is now redemptive. This can extend even to non-Christians:

Suffering is also an invitation to manifest the moral greatness of humanity, his spiritual maturity. ... Christ's resurrection has revealed *the glory of the future age* and at the same time confirmed *the boast of the cross*: the glory that is hidden in the very suffering of Christ and which has been and is often mirrored in human suffering, as an expression of humanity's spiritual greatness. This glory must be acknowledged not only in the martyrs of the faith, but in many others also who, at times even without belief in Christ, suffer and give their lives for the truth and for a just cause. In the sufferings of all of these people the great dignity of humanity is strikingly confirmed (sec. 22).

Still, the "glory" hidden in the suffering of Christ, and in others who are not even believers, is not in this text a glory that can be understood independent of Christ's suffering, as though suffering on its own had any absolute value or as though we could place our hope in human nature on its own. The Cross is still "our only hope." Christ's suffering is redemptive not as suffering *per se* but as an exercise of freedom re-defining human greatness, and so we are called not to suffering or to freedom *per se*, in an unqualified sense, but rather, to take up the Cross. There is a "vocation" to suffering because there is a vocation to freedom and love, but we have no access to this vocation apart from the injunction to "Follow *me!*" (see sec. 26; cf. sec. 23; see also sec. 30 on the "messianic program" of love).

John Paul has here located the natural point of convergence of the two systems. Augustine's system is obviously Christocentric; but Irenaeus's system, for all its faith in human nature even after the Fall, is nevertheless ultimately also Christocentric. Like Aeschylus, Irenaeus believes that suffering can bring wisdom, but unlike Aeschylus, it does so only because Christ has "summed up," or "recapitulated," as he puts it, all of human history, re-living every moment of it as it should have been lived by Adam, opting

for obedience even under the horrific conditions which disobedience has produced, and so, after the Fall, it is Christ who reveals that human nature can still struggle and grow; Christ, in a way, restores the form of human life as the possibility of struggle and growth towards ever greater freedom and love. Irenaeus emphasizes that in Christ this is indeed still a human possibility; Augustine emphasizes that there is no such possibility except in Christ, and the possibility IS Christ.

To conclude by way of complementary contrast, Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, also takes up strands from both of these traditions, but the emphasis is decidedly Augustinian. We can hear the Irenaean strains in passages such as the following:

To suffer with the other and for others; to suffer for the sake of truth and justice; to suffer out of love and in order to become a person who truly loves – these are fundamental elements of humanity, and to abandon them would destroy human being itself (sec. 39).

And yet the Augustinian emphasis on the loving solidarity of the Incarnation, making it possible for us to experience in the evil of suffering something else, something not generated in any way from suffering *per se* is unmistakable:

Human being is worth so much to God that he himself became human in order to *suffer with humans* in an utterly real way – in flesh and blood ... Hence in all human suffering we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering *with us*; hence *con-solatio* is present in all suffering, the consolation of God's compassionate love – and so the star of hope arises" (sec. 39).

The experience of suffering, which remains an evil, is at the same time the experience of God's compassion and love, and that generates hope. Hope does not come from suffering, which, of itself, can produce nothing. "Let us say it once again," Benedict says, re-weaving in the Irenaean strand, "the capacity to suffer for the sake of truth is the measure of humanity," and yet we find that this capacity to suffer "depends on the type and extent of the hope that we bear within us and build upon." In good Augustinian fashion, we build not on suffering, but on hope, which enables us to put suffering, itself essentially sterile, to a good use. Our communion with the suffering Christ is a communion with his suffering as loving solidarity, with his "being for all" as Benedict puts it (sec. 28). The effect of this communion with God's loving solidarity with us in Christ is a healing or "purification" that "opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well" (sec. 33). In the hope that this generates, we are impelled away from an overly individualistic notion of salvation, towards a "community-oriented vision of the 'blessed life'" directed both "beyond the present world," but precisely "as such," towards the "building up of this world" (sec. 15; Benedict invokes Augustine's *Confessions* as a source for this vision [sec. 28]).

In that sense, although he does not use these exact words, the Cross is our only hope:

Humanity's great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God – God who has loved us and who continues to love us “*to the end*” (Jn. 13.1) ... God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us *to the end*, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us. His love alone gives us the possibility of persevering day by day without ceasing to be spurred on by hope in a world which by its very nature is imperfect (secs. 27 and 31).

It is Benedict's skillful use of the Augustinian paradigm that enables him to teach us that when we say “the Cross, our only hope,” we are not saying that suffering, anyone's suffering, even Christ's suffering insofar as it is simply suffering, is, our only hope,” but, rather, “God's love, our only hope.” Thank-you.

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