

## A NOTE ON SUFFERING

THE animating principle of the Christian life is love: the Christian life at every stage is shot through with suffering. God is good and omnipotent: physical and moral evil never cease to abound. The least reflective intelligence is apt to be given pause by these conjunctions. To face the attacks of unbelievers and to reduce, if may be, our own perplexities, we do well to draw certain distinctions. God is perfect but the creatures he made could not fail to be imperfect. A greater good is achieved by creating free intelligent beings whose nature involves a real possibility of moral evil than by refraining from communicating his being beyond the confines of the inner life of the Trinity. Crudely, the order we must see things in is: God, angels, satan, man capable of achieving destiny without falling into moral evil, man falling into moral evil with consequent privation of supernatural and preternatural attributes, man restored to the supernatural, i.e., heaven made available, but without the preternatural impassibility, immortality, etc. And that brings us to ourselves. All this is penny catechism matter, but worth having in mind, if we are to avoid asking ourselves questions which have no legitimacy for Christian men.

We shall never begin to understand evil by trying to justify God's ways under the species of Protestant individualist notions of God's dealings with men. Human solidarity in Adam and Catholic solidarity in Christ, so that we are not in his body but *are*, mystically yet really, His body—these are the key conceptions. It is not that God's view is so crude, in virtue of a sort of myopic remoteness, that He sees men as one lump, but man in virtue of his essential nature as unique creature and man as baptized into Christ's death really has a unity transcending not destroying individual differences. So God does not have to provide separate illumination for an agglomerate of precocious individualists, but can give, without loss, of one Catholic thing to all who will take it.

Seeing man thus we can see how his nature, warped and

restored, is likely to be assimilated and conformed to Christ the head and King of our race, and if He is a victim offered by Himself to the Father with a face ugly and twisted with pain, we see perhaps why His people should bear about themselves in their measure the character of suffering. So what is scandal and disgust to many is intelligible so far. But why a suffering Christ? Why in order that we should enjoy the blessed Eucharist—every day if we are wise—had Christ to suffer? Ought not Christ to suffer? Why? We can never too clearly remember that the Incarnation had to occur in the awful horror that it did because of the justice and love of God in face of the infinite malice of human wills. And since it is cosmic as well as temporal fact, we cannot exonerate our culpability from the Passion—a quota of the pangs of Calvary is all our own: *memorare Jesu pie quod sum causa tuae viae*. In the most lovable act of all time the Word wordlessly slipped into the world which despised Him Who made it in its glory knowing how it would treat Him. The Incarnation, in the view of many theologians, could have occurred if Adam had not fallen. Then there would have been no Passion. We should perhaps hesitate to take the *O felix culpa* too uncritically. We know and love God through and in the divine humanity prostrated in agony; we consume a victim glorified, impassible but having suffered. Yet love such as subsists between the Persons of the Trinity involves no suffering.

The Passion can be viewed under three aspects: (1) as satisfaction by means of a human nature hypostatically united to the Eternal Son, (2) as a device for manifesting to man the peril and enormity of sin. "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to myself." Even in the unparalleled dereliction which could elicit *eloi eloi lamma sabacthani* Christ did not cease to show men how to conform to the divine will. (3) Christ suffered spontaneously and inevitably from his supreme human consciousness of the plight of man. Focussed into his own poor body and soul were all the sins and all the sorrows of the world. For him too lest he should in anything fall short of his saints there was the uncertainty of his limited human knowledge of the fate of souls. If *we* agonise and

## BLACKFRIARS

despair over the treason to God of those we love, what are we to suppose was the nature of the burden to him whose love extended individually to every member of the human race?

With that hurried glance at what only advanced states of prayer can dare to gaze at long or begin to understand we may pass on to the consequences or projection of Incarnation to our time. To-day we go on suffering physical and mental pain and we do not cease to cry out with Job against the apparent injustice of God. Rightly enough too, as we have seen, if we do not realize the horizontal component of the fabric of Christ and the Church, the communion of us with each other in Christ. Love is not just. There is no mathematical accuracy of merits and present rewards. We are pensioners of God at best and we cannot justly complain, *yet in His love He invites us to cry out and not only permits but encourages tears and gives them the best use in meditation on the Passion.* And so from contemplation to our co-redemptive action pre-eminently seen in Mary, shared in by us. "By the love, desire, and grief of my servants I lead back to grace those who are out of the way."

There is no alternative to the Cross. We cannot be Christians if we are not at least prepared to help to carry, if not to be immolated on, the tree of Christ's death. Pain has two aspects, (1) as a means to restore the havoc in the human personality caused by original sin, through disciplining of the lower rebellious faculties of concupiscence, and (2) as a help to be accepted with as complete resignation as may be, a gift of an uncomprehended but constant Providence conspiring for our sanctification.

Suffering and its right use are the privilege of Christian men. For, *ego vivo, iam non ego sed vivit in me Christus.* If Christ is to live in me, if I want Him at all then it must be on His conditions, especially since these have been imposed by us. A genial liberal reformer I may want as my familiar but I cannot have him. If I want a bloodless corpse of one who was once beautiful that relic I may carry about with me, but union of contiguity is not enough for Him, whose technique is of fusion, without loss of personal

## A NOTE ON SUFFERING

identity, so that in our prayer and zeal and suffering we see, but *with* rather than *through* the sacred eyes; the priest consecrates the bread and wine, but by the living power of Christ. And this has two consequences: (1) we suffer more in proportion to our progressive incorporation with and of the divine personality which is our sanctification, our assimilation to God and (2) we are irresponsible and happy, like children before the age of reason, since whatever happens, *scio cui credidi*, His truth is our faith, by His suffering to the full the just readjustment necessary for sin, we, without ceasing to have to fill up what is wanting so as to be like Him, to copy Him, yet are absolved from care.

Suffering is the supreme opportunity for love, and they interact and increase so that we suffer in apprehension at least for those we love, and the suffering (if nothing else) of others does excite our charity. Not to suffer is proof positive that we do not love. There is no more far-reachingly vicious error than the modern view of marriage as directed solely to the catechism's secondary end. Hence the cry for immoral and unnatural experiments. As the microcosm of the Church, marriage is sacrificial right through.

For the babes and sucklings of the Church to speak of this, the kernel of our faith and the ground of hope, is absurd if not indecent. But even we, uninitiated to the available fullness we may hope at some later date to obtain, can intuitively glimpse, and grasp by reflection, something of what the saint means by the mysterious and awful paradox with which we are carelessly familiar—*aut pati aut mori*.

There is no better intention for our private prayers and our Masses than that we may enter into knowledge and love of the Passion, so that we may understand, and take our place among the afflicted members of Christ on earth.

W. P. McKECHNIE.