

Suffering and Its Spiritual Meaning or What We Need to See beyond Suffering

The year 2024 was declared in the Romanian Patriarchate as the Year of Tribute to the Pastoral Care and Care of the Sick and the Commemorative Year of All the Saints Healers Without Payment, as such this year the Church considers those who suffer, the sick in nursing homes, hospitals or social institutions, but also those in their homes, and as a remedy for those in suffering, it proposes that we look to those who received the gift of healing from God and who in turn became givers, that is, the holy doctors without money. The Church proposes to reflect on the theme of suffering, because in recent times there has been an increase in it in the world, with more and more people going through not only a physical or psychological suffering, but especially an existential, spiritual one, caused by the loss of the meaning of existence.

The religions, cultures and civilizations of the world, throughout time, in their own way, have tried to answer the fundamental questions that have troubled the human mind: why do we exist in the world, where do we come from and where are we going, what is the ultimate purpose of life, why some people experience happiness and others unhappiness, illness and suffering. Depending on its own doctrinal specificity, each religion or philosophical system offers a particular answer to the problem of suffering.

Happiness and suffering are successive states that are part of the heritage of our own life, regardless of its duration, and in general, a greater share of suffering is found in the lives of most of us. There are people who experience the joy of living, seen as a chance, but there are also people who are forced to bear the overwhelming burden of physical, psychological or existential suffering.

From a Christian point of view, the origin of suffering lies in the sin of disobedience of our forefathers Adam and Eve, who brought their unhappiness and, later, of the entire human race, as a result of the ancestral sin entering human nature suffering, illness, pain, corruption and finally death, as the maximum expression of suffering, but also as its boundary and limit.

Suffering can be seen, from a spiritual point of view, as a warning for sins committed, as a punishment for mistakes, as a means of divine pedagogy that tries to stop man from his fall and to place him again on the path that leads to God, on the path of salvation.

But, beyond being seen only as a punishment for sins committed, the illnesses and weaknesses we have are proof of divine Providence, for, as the French thinker Jean-Claude Larchet emphasizes: “in every illness, God speaks to man about his salvation and shows His will to help him achieve it”. In suffering, such a judgment of God is also manifested, for “in illness, emphasize Abba Barsanuphius and Abba John of Gaza, divine pedagogy is manifested”. Therefore, illness and suffering in general represent an important test both for the sufferer and for those in the family, because it can test their faith, hope, love, that is, the great theological virtues, but also other virtues such as patience, humility, etc., in general, the ability to take up one’s cross and follow Christ.

Father Nicoale Achimescu, who compared Christianity and Buddhism from a soteriological perspective, showed that: “Christianity clarified this great existential dilemma by assuming suffering in its fullness by Jesus Christ Himself in history, in the name of man, because the Savior «suffered in history and because of history, but rose against it, overcoming it and canceling its terror and curse»”. Christ was seen, even by the great prophets of Israel, such as Isaiah, as a “man of suffering”, as a “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”, the lamb being the symbol of the innocent sacrifice: “He was despised and the least of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with suffering, one from whom to hide your face; despised and esteemed. But He took upon Himself our sorrows and carried our sufferings. And we considered Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our

iniquities. He was punished for our sins, and by His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53, 3-6).

In the Christian vision, the Savior Jesus Christ gives value to suffering through the power of the Holy Cross, canceling its nonsense and giving man the opportunity to overcome it through the Resurrection. Christ suffered for us, suffered in our place and taught us how to relate to our own suffering, understanding its meaning. The Savior Christ ensured that suffering was freed from nonsense and understood its saving purpose. Therefore, suffering must be overcome, not destroyed or annihilated as in Buddhism, but simply overcome. Such a victory lies in the fact that virtues are acquired from it and through it: “And not only so, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patience; and patience, character; and character, hope; and hope does not disappoint” (Romans 5, 3-5). Here is a chain that from something we would be tempted to evaluate negatively reaches virtues, that is, something positive, but this only after the suffering has acquired a spiritual meaning through the saving suffering of Christ.

Suffering is not limited to a simple unpleasant or painful experience, but to one assumed internally, internalized and lived in the faith and hope that come to us from God. It transforms us, ennobling our souls, becoming more forgiving, wiser and better, that is, starting to work in us the likeness of God. Therefore, suffering makes us wiser, making us think and work “with fear and trembling” for the salvation of the soul. On the other hand, it makes us more sensitive, warns us to be more empathetic to the suffering of others, to get out of our own selfishness, because the man who understands his own suffering and that of the other opens himself spiritually to all, learns to bear the burden of the other, because he knows that only in this way he will fulfill the “Law of Christ”, that is, the new law of love of neighbor.

The problem of suffering is currently all the more acute, as we have recently gone through a pandemic, because we have a devastating war on the border, but also because modern or post-modern man, who has deliberately torn himself away from the relationship with God, no longer understands suffering in a salvific way, has lost its meaning, reaching

the degree of misunderstanding that man had before Christ. The Church constantly proposes to us to understand the salvific purpose of suffering, to charge it with the meaning that the suffering of the Savior on the Cross of Golgotha gave it. That is precisely why, our Church has proposed to us this year to reflect on the problem of suffering and to get more involved in the pastoral care of the sick, of those who suffer, having as a model in this regard the “silverless doctors”.

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