

The Presence of Evil and Suffering in the World

John Paul II

General Audience

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Let us take up again the text of the First Letter of Peter to which we referred at the end of the previous catechesis:

Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he who in his great mercy gave us new birth; a birth unto hope which draws its life from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; a birth to an imperishable inheritance, incapable of fading or defilement, which is kept in heaven for you (1 Pet 1:3-4).

The same Apostle has another enlightening and consoling statement:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire... (1 Pet 1:6-7).

From this text one can argue that the revealed truth about the “predestination” in Christ of the created world and especially of the human race (*praedestinatio in Christo*), constitutes the principal and indispensable foundation of the reflections we intend to propose on the theme of the relation between divine Providence and the reality of evil and suffering present under so many forms in human life.

For many this is the principal difficulty in accepting the truth about divine Providence. In some cases this difficulty assumes a radical form when one even accuses God because of the evil and suffering in the world. It can even reach the point of rejecting the truth about God and his existence (that is, atheism). This difficulty is expressed in a less radical, but nonetheless disturbing form, in the numerous critical questions that people ask about God. The doubt, the query or even the contestation arise from the difficulty of reconciling

the truth about divine Providence, of God's pastoral solicitude for the created world, with the reality of evil and suffering experienced by people in different ways.

We can say that the vision of the reality of evil and suffering is present in all its fullness in the pages of Sacred Scripture. The Bible is, above all, a great book about suffering. This enters fully within the scope of the things which God wished to say to humanity, "in varied ways...through the prophets, but in these last days...through his Son" (cf. Heb 1:1). It enters in the context of God's self-revelation and in the context of the Gospel, or the Good News of salvation. For this reason the only adequate method to find a response to the question about evil and suffering in the world is to seek it in the context of the revelation offered by the word of God.

But first of all we must be quite clear about evil and suffering. In itself it is multiform. Generally one distinguishes evil in the physical sense from that in the moral sense. Moral evil is distinguished from physical evil, first of all by the fact that it implies guilt. It depends on free will, and it is always an evil of a spiritual nature. It is distinguished from physical evil, because the latter does not necessarily and directly include man's will, even though this does not mean that it cannot be caused by man or result from his fault. Physical evil caused by him appears in many forms. At times it results from ignorance or lack of prudence, and at other times from neglecting opportune precautions or even by inappropriate and harmful actions. But it must be added that many cases of physical evil in the world happen independently of human causes. Suffice it to mention, for example, natural disasters or calamities, and also all the forms of physical disability or of bodily or psychological diseases for which people are not blameworthy.

Suffering is engendered in human beings by the experience of these multiple forms of evil. In some ways it can also be found in animals inasmuch as they are endowed with senses and a relative sensitivity. But in man, suffering reaches the dimension proper to the spiritual faculties he possesses. It can be said that human suffering is interiorized, intimately known, and experienced in the whole dimension of one's being and capacities of action and reaction, of receptivity and rejection. It is a terrible experience, before which, especially when without guilt, man brings forward those difficult, tormenting, and at times dramatic questions. Sometimes they constitute a complaint, sometimes a challenge, and sometimes a cry of rejection of God and his Providence. They are questions and problems which can be summed up thus: how can evil and suffering be reconciled with that paternal solicitude, full of love, which Jesus Christ attributes to God in the Gospel? How are they to be reconciled with the transcendent wisdom and omnipotence of the Creator? And in a still more dialectical form-in the presence of all the experience of evil in the world, especially when confronted with the suffering of the innocent, can we say that God does not will evil? And if he wills it, how can we believe that "God is love?"-all the more so since this love is omnipotent?

Faced with these questions we too, like Job, feel how difficult it is to give an answer. Let us not seek it in ourselves, but with humility and confidence in the Word of God. Already in the Old Testament we find the striking and significant statement: “against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well” (Wis 7:30; 8:1). The Old Testament already bears witness to the primacy of wisdom and of the goodness of God, and to his divine Providence in the presence of the multiform experience of evil and suffering in the world. The Book of Job outlines and develops this attitude. This book is completely dedicated to the theme of evil and suffering seen as a sometimes tremendous trial for the just, but overcome by the certainty, laboriously acquired, that God is good.

From this text we become aware of the limit and transience of created things. Certain forms of physical “evil” (due to the lack or limitation of the good) belong to the very structure of created beings, which by their nature are contingent and passing, and therefore corruptible. Besides, we know that material beings are in a close relation of interdependence as expressed by the old saying: “the death of one is the life of another” (*corruptio unius est generatio alterius*). So then, in a certain sense death serves life. This law refers also to man inasmuch as he is at the same time an animal and spiritual being, mortal and immortal. In this regard, however, St. Paul's words open up much wider horizons: “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day” (2 Cor 4:17). And again: “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).

Sacred Scripture assures us that: “against wisdom evil does not prevail” (Wis 7:30). This strengthens our conviction that in the Creator's providential plan in regard to the world, in the last analysis evil is subordinated to good. Moreover, in the context of the integral truth about divine Providence, one is helped to better understand the two statements: “God does not will evil as such” and “God permits evil.” In regard to the first it is opportune to recall the words of the Book of Wisdom: “God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things that they may exist” (Wis 1:13-14). As regards the permission of evil in the physical order, e.g., the fact that material beings (among them also the human body) are corruptible and undergo death, it must be said that this belongs to the very structure of the being of these creatures. In the present state of the material world, it would be difficult to think of the unlimited existence of every individual corporeal being. We can therefore understand that, if “God did not make death,” as the Book of Wisdom states, he nonetheless permitted it in view of the overall good of the material cosmos.

In the case of moral evil, however, that is, of sin and guilt in their different forms and consequences also in the physical order, this evil decisively and absolutely is not willed by God. Moral evil is radically contrary to God's will. If in human history this evil is present and at times overwhelming, if in a certain sense it has its own history, it is only permitted by divine Providence because God wills that there should be freedom in the

created world. The existence of created freedom (and therefore the existence of man, and the existence of pure spirits such as the angels, of whom we shall speak later), is indispensable for that fullness of creation which corresponds to God's eternal plan (as we already said in a previous catechesis). By reason of that fullness of good which God wills to be realized in creation, the existence of free beings is for him a more important and fundamental value than the fact that those beings may abuse their freedom against the Creator, and that freedom can therefore lead to moral evil.

Undoubtedly it is a great light we receive from reason and revelation in regard to the mystery of divine Providence which, while not willing the evil, tolerates it in view of a greater good. However, the definitive light can come to us only from the victorious cross of Christ. We shall devote our attention to that in the following catechesis.