



The suffering people in the Teaching of the Church

don Janusz Malski

When I was informed that it would be me giving a talk, I immediately thought about discussing the teaching of John Paul II and the physical and spiritual contribution that this great Pope gave us, and the whole Church.

In order to look deeply more at teachings of John Paul II, I think it's worthwhile reflecting on how he tried to transmit his own personal experiences and his experience as a pastor of souls through theological contributions of invaluable worth.

Some of you will have seen the film "Karol" which speaks about the life of John Paul II; we see that from the beginning, from his childhood, this was a life marked by suffering: the loss of his mother and the war left a deep mark on the life of the young student and then priest.

In the film, it was also possible to see the effects of the sad and painful period of the Communist oppression in Poland and the sufferings inflicted on the population from which he came, who were clearly denied the value of freedom. Then, I think about the experience of suffering and the suffering of the Pope which sprung from the attack on 13th May 1981 and from many periods of hospitalisation which took place after that sad date (in fact, someone counted that the Holy Father spent more than a year in hospital in total).

Pope John Paul as teacher and proof

The homily given by the Holy Father during the Jubilee of the Sick on 11th February 2000 includes a very important piece for us and for our life choices. I quote John Paul II himself when I say *"Pain and illness are part of the mystery of man on earth. Of course, it is right to fight against illness because health is God's gift, but it is also important to be able to know how to read God's plan when suffering knocks at our door. The key to such a reading is constituted by the Crucifixion of Christ... the incarnate Word has met our weakness, taking it inside itself in the mystery of the Crucifixion..."*. This point holds great importance for me and I will develop it in due course. The Holy Father says again: *"From then on, every form of suffering acquired the opportunity for meaning, making it uniquely precious: for two thousand years, from the day of the Passion, the Crucifixion shines as the complete demonstration of*

the love that God has for us. He, who knows how to welcome it into his life, has the experience of pain illuminated by faith and becomes a source of hope and salvation".

I think that those people who recognise the spirituality of the Volunteers of Suffering Centre fully recognise themselves in this text.

Here however, I don't want to dwell on this specific apostolic activity of the Centre, but I would like to focus our attention on the mystery of suffering, as John Paul II did. Firstly, before returning to the text quoted previously, I think it's well worth having a brief period of reflection.

During the celebration of the 50th anniversary of our founding on 6th September 1997, the Holy Father said: *"On the occasion of the Holy Year of Redemption, I myself wanted to offer the Church a meditation on the salvation value of human suffering with the apostolic letter Salvifici Doloris".*

The Pope continues with some very important words for us: *"I am grateful to you because you have contributed to spreading this message beyond words, with the silent proof of your existence".*

As we know, there are hundreds, thousands of associations which work in the field of disability and illnesses. But the debate on suffering and its meaning is a difficult debate to promote; difficult for us after two thousand years, but also difficult for Peter to understand when he heard the first announcement of Jesus' Passion. It was impossible for him to understand "the meaning" of suffering that the Teacher had had to bear.

It is also difficult to accept the impenetrable mystery of pain which is in the Church today, in which it is easy to come across movements which glorify life and the resurrection, denying however, the meaning of suffering.

In *Salvifici Doloris*, number 18, the Holy Father writes:

"Human suffering reached its height in the passion of Christ. And at the same times it has entered a completely new dimension and a new order: it has been linked to love, to that love which Christ spoke about to Nicodemus, to that love which creates good, also drawing it from evil, drawing it via suffering, like the supreme good of the redemption of the world was taken from the Crucifixion of Christ and constantly starts from there".

Further on, in number 19, we can read: *"In the crucifixion of Christ, not only was redemption accomplished through suffering, but also, human suffering itself was redeemed. Christ, without any guilt of his own, took the guilt "of the total evil of sin".*

The experience of this evil determined the incomparable measure of Christ's suffering, which became the price of redemption".

I think that this is the key point, fundamental to our spirituality, not only our own, but that of the entire Church.

The Pope says: *"Every form of suffering"* and the face of this experience (suffering not only of the ill, but also of the disabled), but also in the face of moral suffering, spiritual suffering, he asserts that *"every form of human suffering has been redeemed"*. From this point of view, every man has the chance, along the path of suffering, to be saved, During the audience of 1994 when the Pope catechised the Church, in point 6, he said: *" Christ's disciples had the privilege of understanding the Gospel of suffering which had a salvational value which is implicit throughout the ages because through the centuries and the generations, it has been ascertained that in suffering, a special strength is hidden which brings man internally closer to Christ, a special mercy"*.

The Pope tells us that in every form of suffering, there is, in some way mercy; this is one aspect which could shock people as it is difficult to understand. And *again* *"whoever follows Christ, whoever accepts the theology of pain by Saint Paul, knows that suffering is linked to a special type of mercy, a divine favour, even if it deals with a form of mercy which remains a mystery to us because it hides itself under the appearance of a painful destiny"*. Certainly says the Pope- *"it is not easy to discover an authentic divine love in suffering, which through accepted suffering, lifts human life to the level of the salvational love of Christ"*.

This is a great challenge for us, difficult to accept ourselves, let alone teach others. John Paul II was particularly careful about the subject of the crucifixion; already as a priest, but as a bishop and Pope; not only during Lent, but every Friday, he celebrated *Via Crucis*.

While he showed us the chapel where you can find the bishop's residence in Krakow, Sister Tobiana (who belongs to the Holy Father's nuns), told me that as cardinal, Karol Wojtyla often used to lie down, adopting the position of the crucifixion, offering his life for the Church.

These are small signs from a man who believed in the mystery of the crucifixion and salvation.

Personally, I am convinced that it is from here that the date when the letter given to us *Salvifici Doloris*, was sprung; in 1984, year of redemption, the year in which the Church remembered this gesture that Christ had carried out for all humanity.

As far as certain events which can, in some way, alter and condition the existence of man are concerned (for example, illnesses), the Pope said *"in the light of death and the resurrection of Christ, illness and disease don't only appear as an exclusively negative events, they are seen rather as a visit from God, an opportunity to release love in order to give birth to works of love towards one's neighbour and transform all civilisation into a civilisation of love"* (World Day of the Sick, 1992, point 3).

Let's have a look at the significance of this thought.

In the modern day world, where the mystery of suffering and death are also de-humanised, it is now more than ever that we need to return to John Paul II as proof, who in his illness and in the event of his death, gave us great catechesis on the meaning of suffering and dying.

John Paul II declared that the meaning of suffering was linked to the salvational work of love; we cannot forget that the Pope said to us, Volunteers of Suffering, on the occasion of the 40th Apostolate: *"Suffering is a vocation to love more"* and at the same time, he pointed out to us an itinerary asserting that suffering has a value: *"remember that your suffering is evangelising; remember that your suffering is sanctifying; lastly, remember that your suffering is redeeming"*.

We are now at point of transit. Firstly, we asserted what the Pope told us in his teachings, but these are only in brief. I believe that the fundamental point however, is the meaning that the Pope gave to suffering as something intimately linked to a person.

Let's remember that the Holy Father began his pontificate, by unofficially going to visit his dear friend Mons. Deskur at the "Poloclinico Gemelli" Hospital. This visit represented a great suffering for the Pope because he counted a great deal on this friend of his who was in Rome. He accompanied him to the bronze door of his conclave and when he became Pope, he learnt of his illness.

How inexplicable God's plans are! And, it was right there at "Policlinico Gemelli" Hospital, that John Paul II entrusted his pontificate, his teaching to the sick and disabled.

"Your sufferings are welcomed and supported by an incredible faith, united by those of Christ, gaining an extraordinary value for the life of the Church and for the sake of humanity".

This is how the Pope expressed himself on the first World Day of the Sick, point number 5.

I would like to finish my speech here, but I still want to underline some of the themes linked to our apostolate. For example, the World Day of the Sick, as we know, was proclaimed on 13th May 1992, the day which we remember the apparitions at Fatima.

The day however, was fixed for the 11th February.

I am convinced that all of us feel that which our founder Mons. Luigi Novarese sensed for years, for decades, giving life to our apostolate, depending on our prophetic places, represented by Lourdes and Fatima, as also reported in the Statute of the Volunteers of Suffering Centre. We are not a devotional association which there are many of; it is therefore necessary, on our part, to enter with full rights into the pastoral dynamics of the world of suffering. When John Paul II went to Poland for the first time, he met up with some friends of his and among these friends were thousands of sick and disabled people who normally met him during the summer in the Krakow area, organising so-called "holidays with God", an experience of sharing, which lasted ten days. Such an experience sees its origins in the 1960's and has a strong spiritual element. On 9th June 1979, the Pope told them: *"my strength comes from you, united with Christ"*.

During this speech he proved and underlined that sick people, were offering their lives, their suffering, participating in the salvation of the world, in the conversion of sinners. And also in 2000 in the homily already quoted previously: *"the third millennium needs witnesses of the Gospel of suffering"*.

I think that everybody still has in front them, of the image of twelve stations of Good Friday when the Pope almost adopted the crucifixion and adhered to the *Via Crucis*.

This great author, this great charmer wanted to say something to humanity during his blessing *Urbi et Orbi*; when he could no longer speak, as some RAI journalists said, the biggest speech was that of this crucifixion, which he maintained with his last grip on humanity, saying the most important thing to humanity, Some, like Cardinal Sodano, later said that his final hours had been like the agony of Christ.

All of us know that during the last *Via Crucis*, Cardinal Ratzinger jerked consciences by speaking about the Church as being on a boat in a stormy sea and at that moment, like many others a few months previously, he speculated on the fact that the Pope

should leave, retire. I am convinced that all that suffering was given for the benefit of the Church, as a great gift.

And now, I would like to prove that what we saw in Poland (but I also think in other nations), that his agony and his death was the greatest catechesis that humanity could witness. From this weakness and this death, new strength was born.

Don Armando said that I should speak again about a very important document for us, a document which was created after the Synod of the Bishops on the Lay: *The Christifideles laici*.

I was still in Rome and I remember the great contribution which the Centre gave to the creation of this document. Archbishop Scotte was then secretary.

This document emphasises the pastoral action of the sick and sufferers; a sick person, a handicapped person and a sufferer should not be considered as simply terminals of love and service of the Church, but as active subjects, responsible for evangelisation and salvation (number 54). And so, what other memories transmitted to us by our founder can we still mention? Are we aware that even today that spiritual and apostolic capacity is contained in our charisma?

One of the tasks of the International Confederation can therefore be, in our parish communities and dioceses, alongside pastors and the people of God, to help raise an awareness of being active instruments, that suffering has a value and the sufferer, united with Christ becomes a collaborator in the work of salvation.

And let's not forget the role of Mary in promoting our apostolate: the Pope spoke to us about the role of the Mother of Christ in number 26 of *Salvifici Doloris*, confirming that her heart becomes in a special way, a place, her maternal protection in leading disabled people, sick people and sufferers to Christ. In this case we can also see how the charismatic intuition of Mons. Novarese was proved to be confirmed by Church documents and through the lives of those who have lived this charisma, becoming sowers of salvation.

Translated by
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