

NOTE

THOMAS AQUINAS, HUMAN SUFFERING, AND THE UNCHANGING GOD OF LOVE

Of the many questions that may arise when one tries to speak of God in the face of human suffering, there is one that not only plumbs the depths of our theology, but also touches the heart of our human experience. That question is posed in all its starkness by Elie Wiesel in his account of the hanging of two men and a young boy in a Nazi concentration camp which he and all the other prisoners were forced to witness:

All eyes were on the child. . . . "Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked. . . . The two adults were no longer alive. . . . But the third rope was still moving: being so light, the child was still alive. . . . For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. . . . Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?"¹

Where is God in relation to human suffering? How close is God to us in our suffering? How close is our suffering to God?

Even to ask the question is to step into a realm beyond our human comprehension. We believe in a God who is light and love, strength and joy and peace. Yet each day in so many places in our world, in so many ways in our lives, we witness the reality of human suffering. To speak of the God of power and love in the face of suffering is inevitably to speak of a mystery. God is mystery: the mystery of infinite being, of infinite life, the eternal triune dance of wisdom and love. And suffering is also mystery: the mystery of lack of being, privation of goodness, the surd of nothingness in the bounty of creation.²

The task of the theologian in the face of these mysteries is to speak, as Charles Journet tells us, without diminishing the mystery.³ The temptation of the theologian, however, is to reduce the mystery, to make it understandable by making God less good, less powerful, less divine or less present to us than God has revealed himself to be.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1986) 61-62.

² "Leiden ist ja gerade die Erfahrung des Sinnlosen" (R. Spaemann, "Die christliche Sicht des Leidens," in Willi Oelmüller, ed., *Leiden* [Munich: F. Schöningh, 1986] 105); "After the Gospel as before, suffering is still one of the great irrational factors in human life" (John L. McKenzie, "The Son of Man Must Suffer," in M. Taylor, ed., *The Mystery of Suffering and Death* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday: 1974] 57).

³ "The aim of the theologian dealing with a mystery is to do away with phrases which diminish the mystery" (Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Evil* [New York: J. P. Kennedy, 1963] 14).

A number of contemporary theologians, probing the question of God and suffering, have rediscovered Thomas Aquinas as a teacher who knew how to speak without diminishing the mystery. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez begins his book *On Job* by affirming that "God is mystery" and quoting Thomas on our limited knowledge of the mystery: "We cannot know what God is but only what God is not."⁴ In *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, Edward Schillebeeckx calls upon Thomas, almost as one to be invoked when all else fails: "I think at this point it would be good to resort to Thomas Aquinas. True, in reality he is seldom understood and little studied. . . . However, he does seem to me one of the few people who can give us some reasonably satisfactory viewpoints which at the same time leave all the darkness in its incomprehensibility."⁵

The present study will try to show how the thought of this thirteenth-century theologian may still be of value to us today, as, faced with present human suffering, we are forced to ask again: "Where is God now?" Looking first at a currently popular response to this question, we may find that, for all its popularity, it remains inherently incompatible with the self-revelation of the triune God of Christian faith. We will then turn to the thought of Aquinas to discover an alternative, and perhaps more adequate, answer. We will conclude by offering a few reflections on the pastoral significance of that answer.

DIVINE LOVE AND DIVINE SUFFERING

A currently popular answer to the question of God's relation to human suffering is that God, as God, suffers with us. Alfred North Whitehead describes God as the "fellow sufferer who understands."⁶ Ulrich Eibach maintains that "a God who cannot suffer cannot be close to the suffering creature."⁷ Jürgen Moltmann argues that "the one who cannot suffer cannot love either,"⁸ and John Macquarrie concludes that "a God of love is inevitably vulnerable, for there is no love that does not suffer."⁹ Most of us, given the choice between a "fellow sufferer who understands" and a sort of "apathetic alien who could care less," would tend to choose the

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) xi, quoting Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 3, Preface. (I have corrected the mistake in the reference in Gutiérrez's footnote.)

⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 728.

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition* (New York: Free Press, 1978) 351.

⁷ Ulrich Eibach, "Die Sprache leidender Menschen und der Wandel des Gottesbildes," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 40 (1984) 57-58.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) 222.

⁹ John Macquarrie, *The Humility of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 69.

fellow sufferer. Before we make this choice, however, we might first ask whether it is possible for a fellow sufferer to be a truly loving God and whether a God who merely suffers *with* us is not already too remote from us to be the revealed God of the Christian tradition.

We usually consider love directed toward the good of another as more truly love than love directed toward oneself. C. S. Lewis calls the first "gift love" and the second "need love."¹⁰ Classically, they might be known as *agapē* and *erōs*.¹¹ In Thomas' terminology they are "love of friendship" and "love of concupiscence."¹² Love of concupiscence is an "imperfect love," in which one seeks the beloved for one's own advantage or pleasure. Love of friendship is "perfect love," which seeks the good of the beloved beyond thought of self.¹³

Now a fellow-suffering God turns out to be a rather imperfect lover since his concern is inevitably centered not on others but on himself. The ultimate aim of Whitehead's suffering God is, in Whitehead's own words, "depth of satisfaction [for each immediate occasion] as an intermediate step toward the fulfillment of his own being."¹⁴ Moltmann's suffering God is also preoccupied with himself. He creates the world out of need for an "other" and then, through the world, finds deliverance from his own suffering:

The creation of the world and human beings for freedom and fellowship is always bound up with the process of God's deliverance from the sufferings of his love. . . .

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960) 11.

¹¹ The theme of God's love as *erōs* and *agapē* has been developed in William Hill, O.P., "Two Gods of Love: Aquinas and Whitehead," *Listening* 14 (1979) 249-65; and "Does Divine Love Entail Suffering in God?" in B. L. Clarke and E. T. Long, eds., *God and Temporality* (New York: Paragon, 1984) 55-69.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST], (Rome: Editiones Paulinae, 1962) 1-2, q. 26, a. 4. English translations of this work are from *Summa theologica* (New York: Benziger, 1946), with occasional amendments. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the other works of Aquinas are my translations of the Latin texts as found in S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Opera omnia ut sunt in indice thomistico*, ed. R. Busa (Stuttgart; Frommann-Holzboog, 1980).

¹³ "Love of something is imperfect when someone loves it not as willing good to it in itself, but as willing its good for himself or herself. And some call this love "concupiscence," as for instance . . . when we love a person for our own utility or pleasure. Perfect love, however, is different from this. In such love, the good of a person is loved in itself, as when, in loving someone, I will that he or she may have some good, even if nothing accrues to me from this. This is said to be the love of friendship, by which someone is loved for himself or herself" (Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de virtutibus* q. 4, a. 3, c [line 52 c]). "One sort of love is perfect; another is imperfect. Perfect love is that by which a person is loved for himself or herself, as when someone wills good to a person for the person's own sake. In this way, one loves a friend. Imperfect love is that by which someone loves something not for its own sake, but so that he or she may attain that good for himself or herself. Thus one loves what one desires" (ST 2-2, q. 17, a. 8, c).

¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process* 105.

The deliverance or redemption of the world is bound up with the self-deliverance of God from his sufferings. In this sense, not only does God suffer with and for the world; liberated men and women suffer with God and for him.¹⁵

It is not really surprising that a suffering God is less than perfect in love. Every imperfect being seeks through its actions to achieve the perfection it lacks. Whether it be a serious student looking for knowledge or an amorous aardvark looking for love, each limited being seeks to overcome its deficiencies through its actions. A suffering God, as an ontologically imperfect being, can be no exception to this rule. Such a God will inevitably seek his own perfection and try to overcome his own deficiency. Only an entirely perfect being, subject to no defect and lacking in nothing, is able to love with a fully gratuitous love. Only the God who does not act out of desire to attain his own perfection can freely will, without thought of return, to share his boundless goodness with creatures and so love them with a completely unconditional love. As Aquinas puts it, it does not belong to God "to act for the acquisition of some end; God intends only to communicate his perfection, which is his goodness; while every creature intends to acquire its own perfection."¹⁶

If we say that God as God suffers with us, we inevitably imply that God's love is self-seeking and thus less than perfect. If, on the other hand, we say that God does not suffer with us, we may seem to imply that God is indifferent or lacking in love altogether. How then are we to speak of God's relationship to the suffering? Perhaps we best learn to speak of God's relation to human suffering by considering first the triune event of the suffering and death of God's Son.

Divine Identity with the Suffering Christ

The suffering and death of the Son manifest the unconditional love of God: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). The Father sent his Son, not to redeem himself, but as a gratuitous gift of love to redeem the world in the power of the Spirit: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Where is this God of unconditional love in relation to the suffering

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann. *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 60. Furthermore: "The inner-trinitarian love is therefore the love of like for like, not the love for one who is essentially different. . . . Like is not enough for like. . . . Creation exists because the eternal love communicates himself creatively to his Other. It exists because the eternal love seeks fellowship and desires response in freedom" (58–59).

¹⁶ *ST* 1, q. 44, a. 4, c. "In dispelling our affliction through his favors, God does not ordain this to his advantage but to ours." (*Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* [*Sent*] 4, d. 46, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 1, c). See also; *ST* 1, q. 60, a. 3, c; *Summa contra gentiles* [*SCG*] 1, c. 93, no. 7. English translations of *SCG* are from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955).

of the man, Jesus of Nazareth? We certainly don't want to say or imply that God is indifferent to Jesus' suffering. Should we then say that God "suffers with" Jesus, that the human suffering of Jesus causes a kind of reaction of "divine" suffering in God, or should we say something more than just that? While a fellow-suffering God may be, in Whitehead's phrase, a "great companion,"¹⁷ such a God can be no more than a companion and as such can be merely present "with" or "alongside" of Jesus on the cross. Is it possible to affirm that God is infinitely closer, more involved, and more completely present than just that? Is it possible to confess not just that God "suffers with" Jesus but that Jesus' suffering is itself the very suffering of God—that the human suffering of Jesus is itself the suffering of the Logos, the suffering of the Son of God, the suffering of the second person of the Trinity, and so the suffering of the divinity?

In the thought of Thomas Aquinas, this affirmation is not only possible but necessary. Since Jesus himself is God, the eternal Son of the Father, we must say that in him "the impassible God suffers and dies."¹⁸ And what we say is not a mere matter of words, but of fact and reality. Because of the unity of divine and human natures in the single person, Jesus of Nazareth, what belongs to the human nature of Jesus belongs truly to God, and what belongs to his divine nature belongs truly to a human.¹⁹ For this reason we speak properly of Jesus even when we make strange-sounding statements, such as "God is human" and "a human is God."²⁰ If we take the Incarnation seriously and so recognize that this human, Jesus of Nazareth, is God, we will not be inclined to postulate some suffering of the divine nature as belonging more really to God, or being more really God's own, than is the human suffering of Jesus. Instead, we will recognize that there is no suffering closer to God or more really God's own than the suffering of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. In speaking of Jesus, we will not predicate of God some hypothetical sort of "divine suffering," itself alien to our human nature and experience.²¹ We will rather predicate of God a human suffering like our own, since "Jesus was made a participant of *our* affliction."²² The one who is like us "in all

¹⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process* 351.

¹⁸ "... impassibilis Deus patitur et moritur. ..." *Super 1 ad Corinthios* c. 15, lect. 1, (line 174 c).

¹⁹ *ST* 3, q. 16, a. 4, c; 3, q. 46, a. 12, c.

²⁰ *ST* 3, q. 16, aa. 2-3.

²¹ It is the fact that Jesus suffers as we do which makes his suffering meaningful to us: "Unless the sufferings of Jesus are something like our own, I do not see how his experience of suffering can be meaningful to us" (John L. McKenzie, "The Son" 52).

²² "Christus autem factus est particeps miseriae nostrae . . ." (*In psalmos Davidis expositio* 40, no. 7 [line 5c]).

things but sin"²³ suffers *as we do*, as human; and yet that human suffering is the suffering of God. It is truly "the Author of life" (Acts 3:15) who is put to death on the cross, but the Author of life dies a human death like our own.

Divine Identity with Suffering Humans

If we can and must say that the human suffering of Jesus is the very suffering of God, what can we say about our own human suffering? Recognizing that the introduction of suffering into the divinity inevitably implies that God is less than truly loving, we will not want to say that our suffering causes a reaction of "divine suffering" in God. And we certainly will not want to suggest in any way that God might be distant from or indifferent to us in our suffering. Would we dare say, however, that our suffering, like that of Jesus of Nazareth, is itself the very suffering of God? While we might hesitate to say this, it is precisely this which Christ, the Son of God, has said to us:

I was hungry and you gave me food.
 I was thirsty and you gave me drink.
 I was a stranger . . .
 I was naked . . .
 I was sick . . .
 I was in prison . . .
 As you did it to one of the least of these . . .
 you did it to me.²⁴

St. Paul, recounting the story of his conversion, witnesses to that same solidarity of Christ with his suffering people: "I heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' . . . 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.'"²⁵

²³ Eucharistic Prayer IV, *The Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Co., 1985) 557. Cf. Hebrews 4:15, DS 301.

²⁴ Matthew 25:35-36, 40. (Scripture quotations are from the *Common Bible: RSV Ecumenical Edition* [New York, 1973]). The daring form of these statements causes some exegetes to attribute them directly to Jesus. According to John Donahue, S.J., "the primary thrust of the text is the disclosure of the King/Son of Man as hidden in the least. . . ." ("The Parable of the Sheep and Goats," *TS* 47 [1986] 17). Daniel Marguerat finds that "the apocalyptic, universal, and judicial framework of Matthew 25:31-46 develops . . . an idea which is perfectly original: the Christ takes the part of people deprived of all social dignity, stripped of all other title except their frailty" (*Le jugement dans l'Évangile de Matthieu* [Genève: Labor et Fides, 1981] 510).

²⁵ Acts 22:6-8. As R. J. Dillon explains, "in his disciples, the Lord himself is persecuted. . . ." ("Acts of the Apostles," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* ed. R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, and R. Murphy. [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990] 744). There are also instances of God's identity with the poor and suffering in the Old Testament: "He who

Note that in each case, Jesus does not refer to a pain or grief in himself caused by the suffering of his people, but rather identifies himself with them, speaking of their pain, their hunger, their thirst as his own. He does not say "You were hungry, and I felt for you; you were thirsty and I grieved for you," but "I was hungry . . . , I was thirsty." Here we are faced with the mystery of God, the wholly other, speaking as one not only intimately present, but somehow identified, somehow *one* with his suffering people.

At this point we do well to cease attempting our own formulations of where God is in relation to the suffering and listen instead to what God says not just about his relationship but about his identity with the suffering. It is at this point also, I think, that we might turn to Thomas Aquinas to teach us again to speak without diminishing the mystery.

IDENTITY AND COMPASSION

Because Jesus is God, we can say that Jesus' suffering is God's own. But how is it that God can say that our suffering is also his own? Whatever else we may know or not know, we do know that we are not God. Recognizing with C. S. Lewis that in our time there is "no danger of Deism but much of an immoral, naive and sentimental pantheism,"²⁶ we will certainly not want to blur, but rather affirm and proclaim, that radical distinction between the divine and the human, between God and creature, which, as David Burrell has shown, has always been integral to the best, not only of the Christian, but also of the Jewish and Islamic traditions.²⁷ How then shall we understand God's word that our sufferings are God's own?

If the key to understanding the suffering of Jesus as God's own lies in the unity of personal identity (in the union of the human and divine natures in the single person, Jesus of Nazareth), the key to understanding our suffering as God's own lies in the unity of love. Even in the love of concupiscence there is a kind of unity. There the lover is united to the

is kind to the poor lends to the Lord" (Proverbs 19:17); "He who oppresses a poor man insults his maker but he who is kind to the needy honors him" (Proverbs 14:31); "He who mocks the poor insults his Maker" (Proverbs 17:4). Aquinas is aware of such passages and in one place averts to the similar themes of Matthew 25:45 ("As long as you did not do it to one of these. . . ."), Luke 10:16 ("The one who rejects you rejects me. . . ."), and Zechariah 2:8 ("He who touches you touches the apple of [God's] eye. . ."). See *Super evangelium Matthaei* c. 25, lect. 3, (line 565 c).

²⁶ C. S. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittinger," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 181. See also Pius XII, "The Mystical Body of Christ," no. 86, in *Four Encyclicals of Pope Pius XII* (New York: Paulist, 1961) 39.

²⁷ David B. Burrell, C.S.C., *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame; Univ. of Notre Dame, 1986) 17-18 and passim.

thing loved "as to something belonging to himself or herself (*ut ad aliquid sui*)."²⁸ A more profound unity is found in the love of friendship. There "the lover is related to the beloved . . . as to his or her very self (*ut ad seipsum*),"²⁹ and sees the beloved "as another self (*ut alterum se*)."³⁰ Thus friendship "makes two persons one in love."³¹

Through the unity of friendship the lover shares the joys and sorrows of the beloved. "Afflicted with sorrow at the distress of another as though it were his or her own," the lover "seeks to dispel the other's distress as if it were his or her own."³² This twofold response of both sharing the suffering of another and seeking to overcome it is called "compassion."³³ But compassion, insofar as it suggests a reaction of sorrow in ourselves distinct from the suffering of the other, does not imply the deepest sort of love or the most intimate kind of union between persons. There is a love which is still deeper than this. When we are fully united in love with another, there is not so much a reaction of compassionate suffering in us at the other's distress as an identity of ourselves with the other in their own distress:

Just as, properly speaking, it is not "compassion" but "suffering" that describes our condition when we ourselves experience some cruel treatment, so also, if there are some persons so united to us as to be, in a way, something of ourselves (*quasi aliquid nostri*), such as children or parents, we do not have compassion at their distress but rather we suffer as in our own wounds.³⁴

Between human beings and God there is the most perfect sort of love, the most intimate kind of unity. We call this love "friendship."³⁵ Since friendship implies compassion, the God of love is a compassionate God

²⁸ *ST* 1-2, q. 28, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁹ "... amans se habet ad amatum, in amorem quidem amicitiae, ut ad seipsum; . . ." (*ST* 1-2, q. 28, a. 1, ad 2. Cf. 1-2, q. 20, a. 1, ad 3).

³⁰ *ST* 1-2, q. 28, a. 1, c.

³¹ *SCG* 3 c. 158, no. 7. "... Through love, the lover is made one with the beloved . . ." (*Sent* 3, d. 27, q. 1, a. 1, c). "... The power of love . . . makes one consider one's friend the same as oneself . . ." (*ST* 1-2, q. 32, a. 5, c. Cf. *ST* 1-2, q. 25, a. 2, ad 2; q. 28, a. 1, c; *SCG* 1, c. 91, nos. 4-7).

³² *ST* 1, q. 21, a. 3, c. Cf. *ST* 2-2, q. 30, a. 2, c; *Sent* 4, d. 46, q. 2, a. 1, qc 2, c.

³³ *ST* 1, q. 21, a. 3, c; 2-2, q. 30, a. 1, ad 2.

³⁴ "... quia misericordia est compassio miseriae alterius, proprie misericordia est ad alterum: non autem ad seipsum . . . Sicut ergo misericordia non est proprie ad seipsum, sed dolor, puta cum patimur aliquid crudele in nobis; ita etiam, si sint aliquae personae ita nobis coniunctae ut sint quasi aliquid nostri, puta filii aut parentes, in eorum malis non miseremur, sed dolemus, sicut in vulneribus propriis" (*ST* 2-2, q. 30, a. 1, ad 2).

³⁵ "It is thus evident that friendship is the most perfect of those things which pertain to love. . . For this reason, charity is to be put in this category for it is a certain friendship of the human for God through which the human loves God and God loves the human (*Sent* 3, d. 27, q. 2, a. 1, c. Cf. *ST* 2-2, q. 23, a. 1, c).

who calls us also to compassion: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Compassion belongs properly to God³⁶ and is the source of all God's works.³⁷

How are we to characterize this divine compassion? If we follow the suggestion of Aquinas, we will understand it, not as implying a reaction of sorrow in God, but as indicating God's beneficent action on behalf of his creatures, an action which has its source in love: "It is commonly said that in [God] there is not compassion according to passion, but according to effect. Nevertheless, the effect (*effectus*) proceeds from the affection (*affectus*) of the will, which is not a passion but a simple act of will."³⁸ This simple act of will is, of course, that one simple act of love which is one with the divine being: the act by which God loves himself and all things.³⁹ Thus God may be called compassionate on account of his effective action, but "God does not have compassion except on account of love."⁴⁰

This account of divine compassion denies any reaction of suffering in God distinct from the suffering of God's creatures, but does not for that

³⁶ "Thus having compassion is also accepted as proper to God" (*ST* 2-2, q. 30, a. 4, c); "... having compassion is proper to the Father" (*Super 2 ad Corinthios* c. 1, lect. 2 (line 60 c)). "Compassion is to be attributed to God in the highest degree" (*ST* 1, q. 23, a. 3, c). "Compassion is most proper to God . . ." (*Super evangelium Matthaei* c. 15, lect. 3 (line 131 c)). Cf. *Super Iob* c. 40, lines 395-97; *ST* 2-2, q. 21, a. 2, c; *De veritate* q. 28, a. 3, ad 15.

³⁷ "The effect of divine compassion is the foundation of all divine works" (*ST* 1, q. 25, a. 3, ad 3). "Thus compassion appears in every work of God as its primary source." (*ST* 1, q. 21, a. 4, c).

³⁸ "Et propter hoc communiter dicitur quod non est in eo misericordia secundum passionem, sed secundum effectum, qui tamen effectus ex affectu voluntatis procedit; qui non est passio, sed simplex voluntatis actus" (*Sent* 4, d. 46, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 1, c). "Compassion is to be attributed to God in the highest degree, not, however, as an affection of passion but according to effect" (*ST* 1, q. 21, a. 3). "And [the affliction] that one reckons as one's own, one should dispel as one's own. Thus insofar as the Lord dispels affliction, he is called compassionate" (*Super evangelium Matthaei* c. 15, lect. 3 [line 131 c]). "Compassion in God does not signify passion, but goodness in dispelling affliction" (*In psalmos* 50, no. 1 [line 130 c]). Cf. *In psalmos* 24, no. 8 (line 71 c).

³⁹ "... by the same love, however, God loves both himself and others on account of his goodness. . . ." (*SCG* 4, c. 23, no. 11). Cf. *Sent* 3, d. 32, q. 1, a. 1, c; *ST* 1, q. 19, a. 5, c; q. 37, a. 2, c and ad 3; *In librum beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus expositio* 4, lect. 9, no. 409 (Rome: Marietti, 1950). Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M.Cap., argues that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit love us most intimately in that they do not love us "by an action different from the love that they have for themselves." Loving us with the very love they have for themselves, the divine persons are able to draw us into relationship with them as they are in themselves. We humans, on the contrary, can enter into relation with one another not as we are in ourselves, but only through some "changeable mediating action of our nature" (*Does God Change? The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* [Still River, Mass.; St. Bede, 1985] 184-5).

⁴⁰ "Deus non miseretur nisi propter amorem . . ." (*ST* 2-2, q. 30, a. 2, ad 1).

reason imply any lessening of God's love.⁴¹ We have already seen that it is not the denial of such suffering in God but its attribution to God that would diminish God's love by making it less than purely gratuitous. We will now suggest that the absence of such suffering points not to a deficiency but rather to the perfection of divine love.

Even in human love, at its deepest level, there is not so much a reaction of suffering in the lover distinct from the suffering of the beloved as an identity of the lover with the beloved in his or her own suffering. To put it another way, the most profound human love is characterized not by an awareness of one's own sadness at the affliction of another, but by a simple identity of oneself with the other in their distress. One suffers not so much "with" the other through a kind of sympathetic response as "in" the other by a sort of empathetic union. To illustrate this, we might consider the difference between the reaction of an audience to a sad movie and that of a loving mother to the suffering of her child. While the audience is aware of and identifies with the plight of the tragic victim in the film, its members are also acutely conscious of their own particular feelings of sadness throughout the course of the show. The mother, on the other hand, may be hardly at all aware of her own feeling of sadness, being conscious only of her child's pain, which she somehow experiences as her own. Here the lack of any reaction of sadness or suffering in her, distinct from the suffering of her child, points not to apathy, but to the profundity of her love.

If human love can imply such an identity of lover and beloved, how much more will divine love? If, as C. S. Lewis says, "the intimacy between God and even the meanest creature is closer than any that creatures can attain with one another,"⁴² how complete will be the intimacy between God and those creatures God names as friends (John 15:15). When we love someone most deeply—when we love a person not as a mere possession (love of concupiscence), nor even as another self (love of friendship), but as part of our very selves (*quasi aliquid nostri*)—we are not said to experience a suffering in ourselves distinct from the suffering of that person. Rather, we so identify ourselves with that person in their suffering as to suffer in them "as in our own wounds."⁴³ In a similar way,

⁴¹ *Sent* 2, d. 11, q. 1, a. 5, c, and ad 2. "*Impassibilitas*" (absence of passions) is often taken to imply lack of love when it is confused with "*insensibilitas*" (the moral fault of apathy in human beings). See Michael J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1986) 416, n. 24.

⁴² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Collier, 1962) 41. The phrase echoes the thought of Aquinas in *ST* 1, q. 8, a. 1.

⁴³ *ST* 2-2, q. 30, a. 1, ad 2. "To be compassionate is to have a heart afflicted by the affliction of others. We have compassion regarding the affliction of others when we view it as our own. We suffer, however, from our own affliction and we seek to drive it away. Thus

God in his love for us “does not have compassion on us except on account of love, insofar as he loves us as something of himself (*tanquam aliquid sui*).”⁴⁴ Just as we, seeing those whom we love most deeply “as something of ourselves,” are identified with them in their suffering, so God, seeing us “as something of himself,” makes us one with him in love and so calls our suffering his own.

Identity in Suffering and the Body of Christ

The theme of God’s oneness with God’s people is developed in the New Testament through the image of the Body of Christ.⁴⁵ The image is in one sense a metaphor since we, unlike the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, are not hypostatically united to the Logos. In another sense, however, it is more than a metaphor, since we are truly united with Christ and made truly one in the Spirit.⁴⁶

If love is able to “make two persons one,”⁴⁷ Christ’s love for us can make us somehow one person with him: “As a natural body is one, though made up of various members, so the whole Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is reckoned as one person with its head, who is Christ.”⁴⁸

you are truly compassionate when you seek to drive away the affliction of others (*Super evangelium Matthaei* c. 5, lect. 2 [line 543 c]. Cf. *Sent* 4, d. 42, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 1, c).

⁴⁴ “Deus non miseretur nisi propter amorem, in quantum amat nos tanquam aliquid sui” (*ST* 2-2, q. 30, a. 2, ad 1). “And [the affliction] he views as his own, he ought to drive away as his own. Thus, God is called compassionate insofar as he drives away affliction” (*Super evangelium Matthaei* c. 15, lect. 3 [line 141 c]). Thomas explains elsewhere that the human being is “something of God (*aliquid Dei*),” as God’s “creature and image (*creatura et imago*)” (*ST* 2-2, q. 59, a. 3, ad 2).

⁴⁵ Ephesians 1:23; 4:12; 5:29-32; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:18, 24.

⁴⁶ On these themes, see “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” no. 7-8, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery, O.P. (New York: Pillar, 1975) 354-58, and Pius XII, “The Mystical Body of Christ,” nos. 60-63, 86, in *Four Encyclicals of Pope Pius XII* (New York: Paulist, 1961) 29-30, 39. Aquinas sees the metaphorical nature of the image, but does not lose sight of the reality it expresses. (See *De veritate* q. 29, a. 4, c; *ST* 3, q. 8, a. 1, ad 1). The unity of Christ and the Church is so complete that the term “Christ” can sometimes be used to stand for the Church: “In another way, Origen says ‘Christ and the Church are as the head and the body, because as the head and the body are, as it were, one person, so are Christ and the Church.’ But Christ is sometimes taken as a figure of the Church . . . Thus, when it is said that Christ does not know [the day and the hour], it is understood that the Church does not know” (*Super evangelium Matthaei* c. 24, lect. 3, [line 760 c]).

⁴⁷ *SCG* 3, c. 158, no. 7.

⁴⁸ “Sicut enim naturale corpus est unum, ex membrorum diversitate consistens, ita tota ecclesia, quae est mysticum corpus Christi, computatur quasi una persona cum suo capite, quod est Christus” (*ST* 3, q. 49, a. 1, c). “The head and the members are as one mystical person” (*ST* 3, q. 48, a. 2 ad 1). “. . . it is said according as the head and the members are one person” (*Sent* d. 22, q. 3, a. 3, qc. 3, exp, line 21 c).

Because we are one body with Christ, Christ loves us "as something of himself (*sicut aliquid sui*)."⁴⁹ In this union of love, our sufferings are in some way Christ's own. It is in this sense, as Thomas explains, that Christ suffers in us: " 'I make up those things which are lacking from the suffering of Christ' that is, [from the suffering] of the whole Church whose head is Christ. . . . For this was lacking, that as Christ suffered in his own body, so he would suffer in Paul, his member, and similarly in others."⁵⁰

The sufferings of Paul were the sufferings of Christ, since Paul was a member of Christ. Our sufferings are also Christ's own, since we are members of Christ. In his love for us Christ sees us "as something of himself (*sicut aliquid sui*),"⁵¹ and so identifies himself with us in our suffering. It is in this way that Thomas explains how Jesus calls our suffering his own: " 'Hence whatever you do to one of these least of my brothers you do to me.' . . . because the head and the members are one body."⁵² Since Jesus is God, it is God himself who is identified with us in our suffering. It is God himself who has compassion on us "on account of love, insofar as he loves us as something of himself."⁵³

DIVINE SUFFERING AND PASTORAL PRACTICE

This self-identification of God with his suffering people is rich in pastoral implications. A source of comfort and courage to the suffering, this truth can also be used to indict their oppressors, to guide those who would minister to them, and to open a way into the mystery of God, whose compassion exceeds all our powers of knowing.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ "Whence he shows that it is necessary that a man love his wife, and he does this by example. Thus he says, 'as Christ [loves] the Church.' He loves it, namely, as something of himself, because we are members of [his] body." (*Super ad Ephesios* 5, lect. 9 [line 105 c]).

⁵⁰ " 'Adimpleo ea quae desunt passionum Christi,' id est totius ecclesiae, cuius caput est Christus. 'Adimpleo,' id est, addo mensuram meam. Et hoc 'in carne,' id est ego ipse patiens . . . Hoc enim deerat, quod sicut Christus passus erat in corpore suo, ita pateretur in Paulo membro suo, et similiter in aliis" (*Super ad Colossenses* 1, lect. 6 [line 56 c]). Of course it is also in this union that Christ's sufferings are ours and so have redemptive value for us: "Through baptism a person is incorporated into Christ, and is made a member of him; and therefore the pain which Christ underwent is reputed to the person as satisfaction: 'because if one member suffers, all the others suffer with that one, as it is said in *1 Corinthians* [12:26]" (*Sent* 4, d. 4, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 2, ad 1); cf. *ST* 3, q. 49, a. 1 c). On these themes, see Leo Scheffczyk, "Gott und das Leid," in *Glaube als Lebensinspiration* (Einsiedeln, Johannes, 1980) 205.

⁵¹ *Super ad Ephesios* 5, lect. 9 (line 105 c).

⁵² "Unde quamdiu fecistis uni de his fratribus meis minimis, mihi fecistis . . . quia caput et membra sunt unum corpus" (*Super evangelium Matthaei* 25, lect. 3 (line 450 c)).

⁵³ *ST* 2-2, q. 30, a. 2, ad 1.

⁵⁴ " . . . these riches are truly undiscoverable, because his compassion is so great that it cannot be known or found out" (*Super ad Ephesios* 3, lect. 2 (line 122 c)).

More than four centuries ago, Bartolomé de las Casas invoked this truth to condemn the oppressors of the indigenous peoples of Central America, oppressors who had "abandoned Jesus Christ, our God, scourging and grieving and striking and crucifying him not once but thousands of times."⁵⁵ In our own century, Archbishop Oscar Romero used this same truth to bring comfort and courage to the people of El Salvador: "How perfectly Christ identifies with the suffering of our people! Like Christ, slum dwellers, prisoners, those hungry for justice and for peace cry out: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'"⁵⁶ On the other side of the globe, Desmond Tutu continues to speak this truth to the suffering people of South Africa: "[Jesus] goes on to say that to do these things to the least, the despised ones, is to do them to himself. Here he identifies God firmly with the downtrodden, the oppressed, the marginalized ones."⁵⁷

Those who would minister to the suffering, the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed can be guided by this same truth. If Christ has identified himself with the poor and the suffering, then the first work of the Church is not so much to bring Christ to the poor, but rather to find him there. And Christ is found first of all not in speech, but in the silence of contemplative prayer and compassionate action. Gustavo Gutiérrez explains that "contemplation and practice feed each other; the two together make up the stage of silence before God. . . . Silence, the time of quiet, is the first act and the necessary mediation for the time of speaking about the Lord."⁵⁸

We who would speak about the Lord as theologians must allow our experience of Christ in our prayer and action to animate our words. As Charles Journet explains: "[T]he most orthodox doctrine, if repeated without being plunged back into the flame where it was wrought or vivified by some secret power of the Gospel, will mislead and may turn to poison."⁵⁹ Our role as theologians is not to give easy answers to

⁵⁵ Bartolomé de Las Casas, "Historia de las Indias," in *Obras escogidas* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1957) 2:511, cited in G. Gutiérrez, *On Job* xvi.

⁵⁶ Oscar Romero, Homily, November 11, 1979, in *La voz de los sin voz: la palabra viva de Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero* (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA, 1980) 367, translation by Margaret Swedish from the pamphlet, *Prophet to a Martyred Nation* (Washington, D.C.: Religious Task Force on Central America, 1990) 3.

⁵⁷ Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 176. Tutu also recognizes that it is in the "Body of Christ of which we are members" that we find our solidarity (156).

⁵⁸ G. Gutiérrez, *On Job* xiii-xiv. Gutiérrez points out also that the contemplative dimension is not to be swallowed up in action: "Emphasis on the practice of justice and solidarity with the poor must never become an obsession and prevent our seeing that this commitment reveals its value and ultimate meaning only within the vast and mysterious horizon of God's gratuitous love" (ibid. 96).

⁵⁹ C. Journet, *The Meaning of Suffering* 20.

difficult questions or provide others with a ready-made language for speaking of God. It is rather to lead them into the mystery of God and so help them learn to speak of God for themselves, in their own language, from the depths of their own experience of suffering, prayer, and action.

We who would serve as preachers must be concerned first of all not with speaking, as if we possessed some privileged insight into the mystery of God, but with listening. We must take our place on the side of those who hear the Word of God and listen in silence to those little ones in whom Christ himself is speaking to us. Only in this way will we come to discover the mystery revealed in ever new, surprising, and unpredictable ways.

The silence of contemplation and action opens a way for us into the mystery of God. Edward Schillebeeckx has said that "real redemption or salvation always passes over into mysticism: only here can the tension between action and contemplation be sustained."⁶⁰ In the silence of prayer and compassionate action, we come to recognize Christ present in the suffering. We discover, as Pope John Paul II writes, that Christ "has become in a certain sense a sharer in all human sufferings," and that he "to whom we put the question [of suffering] is himself suffering and wishes to answer us from the cross, from the heart of his suffering."⁶¹ United with Christ in his suffering, we find, as Oscar Romero once reminded his people, that we are also united with him in his victory over suffering, sin, and death:

Do you see how life recovers all its meaning? And suffering then becomes a communion with Christ, the Christ that suffers, and death is a communion with the death that redeemed the world? Who can feel worthless before this treasure that one finds in Christ, that gives meaning to sickness, to pain, to oppression, to torture, to marginalization? No one is conquered, no one; even though they put you under the boot of oppression and of repression, whoever believes in Christ knows that he is a victor and that the definitive victory will be that of truth and justice.⁶²

One with Christ in the power of his love, we are led into the mystery of God: the wholly transcendent God who is completely immanent in his people; the omnipotent God whose strength is made manifest in weakness; the impassible God who "suffers and dies";⁶³ the unchanging God

⁶⁰ E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ* 838.

⁶¹ John Paul II, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (Salvifici doloris)*, an Apostolic Letter, February 11, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1984) nos. 20, 26; pp. 22, 32-33.

⁶² Oscar Romero, "A Pastor's Last Homily" (excerpts of the homily delivered in San Salvador on March 23, 1980) in *Sojourners* 9/5 (May 1980) 16.

⁶³ *Super 1 ad Corinthios* c. 15, lect. 1 (line 174 c).

who identifies himself with each of his suffering people, making their suffering truly his own in love:

"Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked. . . . "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows."⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1986) 61–62.

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