



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Is God quiet when we suffer?

This is the second article drawn from recent talks on human suffering conducted by Father David Garcia, OP and organised by CHARIS. The first article established that the reason for suffering is not punishment from God, but God's respect for our freedom to inflict suffering. Today, we look at why God sometimes appears to look the other way when there is suffering.

common mistake: "Some admit that the world was made by God, but as by a watchmaker who, once he has made a watch, abandons it to itself (Deism)." (CCC 285)

Accordingly, God intervenes continuously in His creation: "With creation, God does not abandon His creatures to themselves. He not only gives them being and existence but also, and at every moment, upholds and sustains them in being, enables them to act and brings them to their final end." (CCC 301) He "holds everything into being" (Colossians 1:17).

The Bible does not say that God created the world and then retired to watch His creation work; it says that God "rested" (Genesis 2:2), only to continue to work with His new partner: the human creature. Creation is an ongoing process that is still unfolding.

We can conclude then that every natural action is an action of God's creating hand: "The truth that God is at work in all the actions of His creatures is inseparable from faith in God the Creator." (CCC 309)

But what about human actions? Is God also a watchmaker of the human will but intervenes only occasionally?

“No mere spectator, God became one of us in His Son. By becoming human, God experienced the suffering and limitations associated with the common human condition. He suffered an unjust torture and death, going beyond what most humans suffer. God then is not a spectator of the human suffering but a compassionate companion in the human journey.”

THE inevitable question is why God seems to allow unspeakable suffering to occur without intervening. The problem of suffering is a well-known ancient argument against the claim that God is both infinitely powerful and infinitely merciful. If God is almighty and allows evil to happen, then He is not benevolent (good). But, if God is good (benevolent), and allows evil to happen, it necessarily means that God is not powerful enough to eliminate suffering. So, God cannot be good and almighty; God is either helpless or merciless.

The apparent cul-de-sac of this conundrum is due to a very common over-simplistic understanding of God as one more entity in the universe as an independent agent apart from nature and man. According to such view, there are natural causes caused by the laws of nature, artificial causes caused by humans and divine interventions when God steps in and pulls the strings of nature according to his designs very much like a puppeteer moves his puppets. But that is not the understanding of God in the Catholic faith.

God is not a watchmaker who has made the universe and then retired, only to intervene occasionally according to his whim. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* helps us to clarify such a

This is exactly what Pelagius, a 4th Century English monk, seems to have claimed. God has given us our freedom and His commandments and that should suffice for us to be faithful Christians and virtuous persons.

His thinking was vigorously rejected by St Augustine and the Catholic Church. Freedom and doctrine are insufficient to be good; we need God's grace, without which we are unable to obey God's commandments. God did not abandon us to our freedom like a watchmaker abandons his watch; nor is God a puppeteer who intervenes on our wills occasionally when He pleases.

In other words, just as creation is a continuous connection with God, so do our wills need a continuous connection with God to do what is right. We call such assistance of God grace. With His creating hand God moves creation; with His grace He moves our wills.

Is this all? Are creation and grace the only actions of God?

God intervened in history by becoming one of us in His Son. By becoming human, God experienced the suffering and limitations associated with the common human condition. Besides, He suffered an unjust torture and death going beyond what most humans suffer. God then is not a spectator of the human suffering but a compassionate companion in the human journey.

There is one more step in this empathy of God with the human suffering: His Son suffered the ultimate suffering: the unspeakable effect of sin: separation from God. When Jesus Christ screams on the Cross: "Why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46) He is expressing the experience of the effects of sin in all its crudeness.

In taking upon Himself the effect of the sin of the world, Christ suffered what sinners should have suffered: separation from God. Thus suffering on their behalf, Christ has spared us from the effects of our sins and in this way His suffering is also suffering for our benefit. God is not only suffering with man; He is suffering for man: in the benefit of man and on man's behalf.

Of course, if all ends in the cross, the last word would be the power of sin over God. The last word is God's verdict in

the resurrection of Christ. The power of sin is swallowed up and assumed by the power of God when He raises His Son from the dead.

A fighter is not only powerful when his blows are mightier; but above all, when he can receive and assume the opponent's blows, and still stand. Enduring power, the power to endure blows, is a mightier power than overpowering power, the violent power to strike and subdue.

Too often people expect God to overpower the sinful human will and the undesired effects of nature. God however surprised everyone on the Easter morning by showing His power to endure the blows of the sin of the world and be able to rise over it. God is, yes, merciful enough to suffer with us and for us in His Son and almighty enough to triumph with His enduring power over the source of the mother of all sufferings: sin itself.

God can afford to allow suffering to happen because from the greatest moral evil (the execution of the Son of God), God "brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption." (CCC 312)

Is God ignoring human suffering? With His creating power, God does good and the concomitant undesired side-effects (earthquakes, sickness, etc); with His grace, God is the partner in our good voluntary actions; with the incarnation, passion and resurrection of Christ, God is with us, for us and on our behalf. God is certainly not quite quiet but mysteriously eloquent.

There is not a simple phrase that solves the theoretical puzzle of human suffering. The whole mystery of faith is an answer to the mystery of suffering: "Only Christian faith as whole constitutes the answer to this question... There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil." (CCC 309)

Yet a burning question remains: if God suffered for us, why are we still suffering? Why did God not simply suffer all our suffering on our behalf so that we would be truly and fully spared from further suffering? That is the topic of our next article. Stay tuned.