



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## Reasons to suffer

**I**F Jesus Christ has suffered for us, why are we still suffering? Why did God not wipe away every trace of suffering?

Christopher Hitchens, the late atheist writer, knew he had the cancer that eventually killed him leaving behind a wife and daughter. So he was asked if he felt tempted to search for the meaning of his suffering and wonder, "Why me?" Stoically, he retorted that if he had asked that question, the answer would have been, "And why not?"

Before we attempt to take a last look at the question of suffering, we need to add some paradoxical contribution of our faith to suffering. Jesus in His preaching warned His disciples that His teachings were not going to lead them to a bed of roses: "Do not think I have come to bring peace... but division... If any man would come after me... let him take up his cross daily." (Luke 9:23) Jesus did say that He was "the way" and suffering was certainly part of His way. Consistently walking the same way would entail facing sufferings similar to those of Christ. The reason for this is not some kind of masochism but the fact that the world is not ready for the Kingdom. Both clash and enter into conflict, and anyone who wants to live according to the kingdom in the world will have to suffer as Christ suffered.

St Paul was very familiar with this participation in sufferings of Christ: "I rejoice in my sufferings for you and I complete in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of His body, which is the church." (Colossians 1:24) Does this mean that the sufferings of Christ are incomplete? John Paul II answers to this question: "No. It only means that the Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all love

*This is the last of a three-part series on human suffering. In the first article, Father David Garcia, OP explained that suffering is not punishment from God, but God's respect for our freedom to inflict suffering. In the second article, he showed how God is a compassionate companion in the human journey by taking on the ultimate expression of human suffering in His Son suffering an unjust torture and death on the cross. In this last article, he helps us understand the paradoxical gift of suffering.*

expressed in human suffering... Christ did not bring it to a close. Christ opened Himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so." (Salvifici Doloris 24)

Jesus Christ redeemed us, but He allows us to cooperate in our own redemption. St Augustine put it eloquently: "God who created you without you, will not save you without you." (Sermo 169, 13) In other words, God does not treat us as if we were some helpless victim waiting passively to be rescued. He gives us both the gift of redemption and the capacity to be agents of our own redemption. The cross is then not finished and closed, but perpetually open to our participation.

This is so true that the closer we are to God, the more we are offered this paradoxical gift of suffering. In fact, the mystics, from St John of the Cross to Blessed Mother Theresa, were given to

experience the "dark night of the soul", the experience of the absence of God in their lives: the ultimate sharing in the experience of the suffering of Christ: "Why have you forsaken me?"

Now, if this is the case, who in his right mind would sign up for such a programme? Aren't our sufferings plentiful enough that we have to incorporate an extra load of them for being Christians?

St Paul seemed to be not very troubled about this gruesome prospect. Furthermore, he sees in it an opportunity for a glorious experience: "Far for me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Galatians 2:19)

This specifically Christian suffering is but a reason to be united with Christ, a way of walking the Christian talk. And precisely this union with Christ throws some light into the mystery of human suffering.

Christianity did not give value to human suffering. On the contrary, precisely because suffering is a threat to the dignity of human existence, Christians should be engaged in alleviating it just as the good Samaritan did. But this humanitarian activity is not purely philanthropic but an encounter with God. In providing succour to our

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brother in need, we encounter Christ Himself: if you "did it for one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me". (Matthew 25:40) The church meets the suffering Christ when assisting those who suffer.

We often think of redemption as the solution to our individual problems. Once the problem is fixed, we are fixed. Such a technological approach does not speak of what salvation is really all about: communion of life with God. God did not eliminate suffering for us; but He did open in it a chance to experience an encounter with Him whether we are helping others to alleviate their suffering or we ourselves are the victims of suffering. The most inhumane experience becomes permeated with the possibility of an encounter with God.

Suffering will still be around and will still be scandalous: "almost always the individual enters suffering with a typically human protest and with the question 'Why?' He asks the meaning of his suffering and seeks an answer to this question on the human level. Certainly he often puts this question to God, and to Christ. Furthermore, he cannot help noticing that the one to whom he puts the question is himself suffering and wishes to answer him from the Cross, from the heart of his own suffering.

Nevertheless, it often takes time, even a long time, for this answer to begin to be interiorly perceived. For Christ does not answer directly and he does not answer in the abstract this human questioning about the meaning of suffering. Man hears Christ's saving answer as he himself gradually becomes a sharer in the sufferings of Christ." (Salvifici Doloris 26)

Christopher Hitchens touches on the core of the problem. Without God, not only is suffering meaningless, but the unspeakable suffering of the victims of genocides in history will also remain unanswered. If there is no God, there will be no ultimate justice and all suffering will be absurd. But, there is hope that all our sufferings will be "as nothing, compared to the glory that will be revealed". (Roman 8:18)

In the meantime, our works in Christ will continue to alleviate the suffering brothers and sisters; we will continue to endure the inconveniences of the human condition; we will suffer the consequences of sinful behaviour; and will continue to brave the resistance of the world to the kingdom of God. And in all these sufferings, we are given the opportunity to strengthen our friendship with the Lord, who brings the kingdom one step closer to the fulfilment of our hopes. Suffering exists but meaning persists.

