

The Christian response to suffering, and the significance of the model of the Church as Body of Christ

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In this paper I would like to examine one of the most difficult topics in systematic theology: the problem of suffering.¹ It is, of course, quite inappropriate to give a theoretical answer to the problem of suffering lest we end up justifying it. My aim in this article is therefore not to give an intellectually plausible "solution" to the problem of suffering but I would rather allow some representatives of the Christian tradition to speak for themselves, to witness, so to speak, of how they construct a possible practical response to the sufferings we face. I do not claim that the authors I selected are representative of the *whole* Christian tradition; nor do I claim that their views should be taken as a model to be imposed upon others.²

Although my main aim is to expound how Christian theologians in the past have suggested how we can deal with affliction I also hope to raise a more critical issue: in my view the shift from understanding the Church as Mystical Body of Christ to understanding the Church in terms of the People of God (a shift that occurred during Vatican II) may have obscured the organic unity between the life and suffering of Christ, the Eucharist, and our participation in the suffering of Christ as members of the Christian Church, thereby rendering opaque an important part of the Christian (and more specifically Roman-Catholic) way of how to face afflictions.

In order to unpack the Christian response to suffering, I will examine two specifically Christian doctrines: creation out of nothing and the significance of the suffering of Christ for our redemption.³

¹ In this paper I will mainly speak of suffering due to natural causes, and which we cannot remedy. Although this kind of suffering cannot always be separated from suffering due to human sin, the latter problem (which also involves issues of justice) is not the topic of this contribution. The best book I have come across on the topic of Christian suffering is by T. WEINANDY, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). I should also mention the beautiful encyclical *Salvifici Doloris* (1984) – a text that has acquired a new and poignant dimension in the light of the recent ailments of its author, Pope John Paul.

² It is not up to *outsiders* to inform those who suffer how they should be dealing with it, for this is both patronising and insensitive. I do think, however, that some of us might perhaps recognise something in the writings of these witnesses of the past, and perhaps draw some degree of meaning from it – from *within* so to speak.

³ I will only examine the specifically Christian answer. In the OT we encounter a number of different (and sometimes mutually exclusive) models: suffering as related to collective sin (Ex 34:7; Ho

1. Suffering and creation out of nothing

a) Creation: good but not God

Christians believe that God made the world out of nothing. Strictly speaking, this doctrine is not to be found – at least not in an explicit manner – in the book of Genesis.⁴ The Christian understanding of creation out of nothing will lead to a specific way of relating to the world, and this way of relating to the world has, in turn, implications for the way we deal with suffering. On the one hand, the goodness of the world, created and wanted by God, is affirmed; on the other hand, we should not lose ourselves in this world. There is a well-known and beautiful passage in the *Confessions* where Augustine in his search for the God he loves interrogates the created world:

And what is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said: 'It is not I.' I asked all that is in it. They made the same confession (Job 28:12). I asked the sea, the deeps, the living creatures that creep, and they responded: 'We are not your God, look beyond us.' (...) I asked heaven, sun, moon and stars; they said: 'Nor are we the God whom you seek.' And I said to all these things in my external environment: 'Tell me of my God who you are not, tell me something about him.' And with a great voice they cried out: 'He made us' (Ps. 99:3) My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty.⁵

In a Christian understanding, God creates the world out of nothing out of his own free will. This has some important implications for our valuation of the created world: the world, which for its very existence is utterly dependent upon God, is undoubtedly valuable and "beautiful" (as Augustine puts it) – for it is the result of God's free creative act and its goodness is affirmed; but at the same time the world is not God: God and world do not coincide: "Look beyond us." The fact that the world is both a pointer towards God and yet does not coincide with God calls for a specific way of relating to the world: one of *detachment* – but this detachment (*Gelassenheit*, indifference, renunciation) also implies involvement.⁶

5:5); suffering because of personal sin (Ezk 18:20); suffering as chastisement (2 M 12-17); suffering as putting the faithful to the test (Gn 22:1-19; Job); suffering as having redemptive value (Is 53:2-5); and the apocalyptic vision (1 Enoch 102:6-11 and 103:1). For an overview of these, see E. SCHILLE-BECKX, *Christ, the Christian Experience in the Modern World* (London: SCM: 1980), 675-82.

⁴ As a matter of fact, the text is perfectly compatible with the view that God made the world out of a primeval chaos; and some early Christian Fathers taught this (e.g. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 59); others, such as Tatian (*Or.* 5) and Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.*, II, 10.2) affirmed that God created the world out of nothing, drawing on 2 M 7: 28.

⁵ *Confessions* X, vi (9). Translation by H. Chadwick in *Saint Augustine. Confessions* (Oxford: OUP, 1992).

⁶ Before we examine this in more detail we need to ask: how can Christians argue that the world is good? And perhaps more pressing: how can Christians claim that God is good, given the terrible

b) Detachment and involvement

Detachment refers to the notion of distancing yourself from creation – because creation is not God – but this renunciation will go hand in hand with a renewed involvement.⁷ Thus, on the one hand, we have to let go of the things of this world because they are not God. “Letting go” of things means not losing yourself in things; it means dispossessing, renouncing things – because they are not God. On the other hand, we can only renounce things by renouncing ourselves, by dying to possessiveness and self-centredness. When we do this, we will relate to the world in a much more mature manner, allowing things “to be” – rather than wanting to possess them.⁸

Here then we have a beautiful paradox, deeply scriptural in inspiration: we must renounce this world in order to gain it; we must be detached from this world in order to be involved with it in a proper and respectful manner. This is why Augustine can

amount of suffering and evil in the world? If God – supposedly a good God – creates the world out of nothing, then why is there evil? Following Augustine (who in turn was inspired by Plotinus) Christian theology has argued that evil is an absence of goodness. God creates a world in which imperfections and evil occur but he does not *directly* cause or create these imperfections. [See *Confessions*, III, vii (12)]. Blindness is an absence of sight, and this absence itself is not created by God. Saying that evil is an absence of goodness does not mean that evil does not exist; just as saying that blindness is an absence of sight does not mean that blindness is not real. After Augustine this became standard teaching in the Latin West. Thomas Aquinas adopts this teaching and pushes it further. Faced with the question: “If God exists, why then is there evil?” Aquinas responds: “If evil exists, God exists!” – the reason being that evil is dependent on goodness to exist and can therefore be seen to be a pointer towards Goodness (ScG III. 71.10). Meister Eckhart too states (in *The Book of Divine Consolation*) that there is no harm that is totally negative. See the translation by O. Davies in *Meister Eckhart. Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), 60. Evil as absence of goodness implies two things: first, God does not *directly* create evil. God creates a world in which things can (and do) go wrong but he does not directly create the wrongness. Secondly, it implies that an all-pervasive evil cannot exist. Evil needs goodness to exist. In order to bring out the significance of this view some scholars have attempted to illuminate it by referring to Schillebeeckx’ notion of “negative contrast experiences.” What Schillebeeckx means is fairly recognisable: in the midst of the suffering we have to endure, we have an all-pervasive sense: “This is not how things should be!” If there were no goodness in this world, revolt or even despair would be meaningless. When we cry out in revolt or in utter desolation, we do so because we are at least *implicitly* aware of the goodness that *should* be there. In the tears we shed we at least implicitly bless this world. [For the link between *privatio boni* and Schillebeeckx’ notion of “negative contrast experiences,” see the contribution by K. McManus, “Suffering in the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx,” in *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 476-91, especially 481-84.]

⁷ I have developed this theme elsewhere by drawing on St John of the Cross and Simone Weil. See “The Religious and Aesthetic Attitude” in *Literature and Theology* (2004) 18/2: 160-172, especially p. 165-68.

⁸ It was Oscar Wilde who said (and I quote him out of context): “Each man destroys the thing he loves.” Why is this? Because we usually love things or other people with a love that is tainted by selfishness and possessiveness. And in our desire to possess we do not allow the other “to be” – and thus we end up destroying the other. For an illuminating description of the notion of detachment in Meister Eckhart, see D. TURNER, *The Darkness of God. A Study in Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 168-85.

write: "Pour out, so that you may be filled. Learn not to love in order that you may learn to love."⁹ Or as John of the Cross puts it: detached people

obtain more joy and recreation in creatures through the dispossession of them. They cannot rejoice in them if they behold them with possessiveness, for this is a care that, like a trap, holds the spirit to earth and does not allow wideness of heart. In detachment from things they acquire a clearer knowledge of them and a better understanding of both natural and supernatural truths concerning them. Their joy, consequently, in these temporal goods is far different from the joy of one who is attached to them, and they receive great benefits and advantages from their joy. (...) Those, then, whose joy is unpossessive of things, rejoice in them all as though they possessed them all; those others, beholding them with a possessive mind, lose all delight of them in general.¹⁰

Whether or not we attained a state (or disposition) of detachment will impact on how we deal with suffering. The detached person is not free from suffering but the way he relates to his suffering, and therefore the nature of his suffering, is different. Thus, the way we relate to our suffering has to do with the way we relate to ourselves – as self-less or otherwise.¹¹ A crucial aspect of relating to ourselves is accepting that we are finite.

⁹ Quoted by Meister Eckhart in *The Book of Divine Consolation*, 69. Thus, by renouncing things – which, again, is effectively a renunciation of self – we receive things. Referring to Mt 19:29 Eckhart states (p.66) that "whoever leaves their father and mother, brother and sister or whatever it may be, for the sake of God and goodness, will receive a hundredfold in two ways. The first is that their father, mother, brother, and sister will become a hundred times dearer to them than they are now, and the second is that not only a hundred people but everyone will become incomparably more precious to them than either their father, mother, brother and sister are precious to them at present on account of the family bond."

¹⁰ *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, III, 20, 2-3 from K. KAVANAUGH AND O. RODRIGUEZ, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS, 1991).

¹¹ Perhaps a homely analogy might clarify this idea. Two people stand before a beautiful painting. One of them is an art-dealer. He wants to possess the painting and is calculating how much it might cost to purchase it and how much he might gain from it when selling it. The other person cannot buy the painting; he just wants to contemplate it, allow its beauty to speak to his soul. Clearly, the person who does not want to possess it – the person who is detached from all possessiveness and concern for personal profit – will be enjoying the beauty of the painting much more than the art-dealer who is not so much concerned with the painting but rather with his personal gain. What is the significance of all of this for the way we deal with suffering? Let's assume that the painting gets destroyed by fire. I suspect that both the art-dealer and the art-lover grieve its loss – but their grief will be of a different nature. Indeed, the art dealer will be grieving *his* loss – in a sense he will be grieving over himself; the other person, the art lover, will grieve over the loss of a thing of beauty.

c) Accepting our created finitude

The doctrine of creation out of nothing also implies the belief that we have received our existence, or being, out of the hands from God. We are not God, and therefore our existence is fragile and temporal. All the good things we have received are from God, and we have them only "on loan," as Eckhart puts it in a beautiful phrase. They are not really ours, or at least we should acknowledge that we have received them as a gift. What Eckhart and others are hinting at here is the need to accept our finitude: "since all that is good, consoling or existent in time is only on loan to us, what right do we have to complain if he who lent it to us, wishes to take it back again? We should thank God that he has lent it to us for such a long time."¹²

Accepting that we are not in control of things can be difficult. The refusal to accept this can, when faced with affliction, even result in despair or defiance. Kierkegaard explains this in a beautiful text entitled: "The joy of it: that the weaker you become the stronger God becomes in you."¹³ Kierkegaard acknowledges that we want to be in control of things, we want to be self-sufficient, independent and strong, and if that's the approach we take, God will allow himself to be "weak" in us – but of course this kind of strength is, in reality, an illusion, and therefore actually a weakness. However, if we completely surrender ourselves to God, if we acknowledge that we are not in control but that God is, then we are perhaps "weak" in the eyes of the world, but God is strong in us. Acknowledging your dependence on God and approving of it is an act of *worship*. If we choose not to surrender to God and if we are desperately trying to remain in control, to be independent, we are in danger of becoming *defiant*.

In order to explain how crucially important our way of relating to God is, Kierkegaard draws an original and illuminating comparison with *admiration* and *envy*. When we encounter somebody or something which totally outclasses us, we may feel a moment of pain, of weakness. Take the following instance: you are a painter and you come across a painting made by a friend of yours – and the work of your friend is clearly superior to your own. At first, you will be taken aback because you realise that the work of the other is utterly superior to your own. At that very moment there are two possible ways of reacting: either we fully acknowledge the superiority of the other, and this leads to admiration, which is a positive feeling, it is "a happy relation to the superiority that confronts us, and therefore it is a blessed feeling." Whereas at first we felt weakness and pain we now yield to the superiority (the way in the end Job yielded to God) and this creates a blessed feeling, freed from every pressure of superiority. We lose ourselves in the other through admiration. There is, however, the possibility of another way of reacting: when we experience the weakness in our

¹² *Book of Divine Consolation*, 74.

¹³ S. KIERKEGAARD, *Christian Discourses* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 124-33.

confrontation with something superior we then refuse to acknowledge its superiority. This leads to *envy*: envy is a kind of self-torture because it does not want to be what it basically is, *admiration*. When we are envious we are aware that the other is superior and yet we do not want to know it. Similarly, in our relation with God we can either acknowledge his superiority and acknowledge our finite, created status, and this is called *worship* (in the broadest sense of the word); if we do not acknowledge God's superiority and our weakness and finitude, then we become *defiant*: "Defiance is in relation to worship what envy is in relation to admiration. Defiance is weakness and feebleness, which makes itself unhappy by not willing to be weakness and feebleness, [it] is the unhappy relation of weakness and feebleness to superiority, just as envy tortures itself because it does not will to be what it basically is, admiration."¹⁴

So what is required of us, as admirers or worshippers, is that we lose ourselves in God: "If he does that with his whole heart, with all his strength, and with all his mind, then he is in a happy relationship with God as the strong one, then he worships."¹⁵ Kierkegaard concludes: "Therefore there is nothing to fear in the world, nothing that can take all your own power away from you and make you utterly weak, that can shatter all your self-confidence and make you utterly weak, that can completely subdue your earthly courage and make you utterly weak – because the weaker you become, the stronger God becomes in you."¹⁶ Accepting our finitude, accepting that we are not always in control, may also help us in accepting afflictions: it may keep us from despairing.

Accepting our finite, created nature already suggest a way of relating to the world and its afflictions. From a Christian perspective, however, the most profound answer to the problem of suffering can only be given in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. To this we now turn.

2. Suffering and the Cross of Christ

I now would like to draw on a tradition that probably has gone out of fashion somewhat to clarify how Christians can attempt to deal with suffering in the light of Christ's Cross. Consider the following quotation from the writings of Edith Stein, a Jewish Christian who was killed by the Nazis in Auschwitz in 1942:

Everyone who, in the course of time, has borne an onerous destiny in remembrance of the suffering Saviour or who has freely taken up the works of expiation has by doing so cancelled some of the mighty load of human sin and has helped the Lord carry

¹⁴ *Christian Discourses*, 131.

¹⁵ *Christian Discourses*, 131-32.

¹⁶ *Christian Discourses*, 133.

his burden. Or rather, Christ the head effects expiation in these members of his Mystical Body who put themselves, body and soul, at his disposal for carrying out his work of salvation.¹⁷

There are at least two major presuppositions at work here: *first*, the suffering of Christ has salvific value; and *second*, as members of his Mystical Body we can share in this salvific activity. In order to explain this, I will therefore first briefly deal with the salvific nature of the cross. Once we have dealt with this, we can then begin to see how our sufferings can be seen as a participation in this salvific work of Christ. I will mainly draw on the work of St Augustine to clarify these issues.

a) The Cross as redemptive event

With the exception of von Balthasar major Catholic theologians of the 20th century have expressed reservations about attributing salvific meaning to the Cross of Christ. It was felt that instead of focusing on the Cross we should pay more heed to the life of Christ, his emancipatory and liberating message, and that we should refrain from glorifying the suffering of an innocent man. It is in this light that Schillebeeckx says that we have been saved "despite the Cross."¹⁸

Downplaying the significance of the Cross of Christ leads to a number of difficulties; but for our purposes it also makes one of the traditional responses to the reality of suffering (like that one of E. Stein) utterly incomprehensible.¹⁹ So let us first briefly unpack the salvific meaning of the Cross of Christ. I will do this by drawing on Book X of Augustine's *The City of God*.

Sin is a freely chosen estrangement from God; it is the breaking up of a loving relationship. The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is the divine instrument by which humanity is allowed to restore this broken relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Augustine, when discussing the notion of sacrifice makes two points that are relevant for our discussion.²⁰

¹⁷ E. STEIN, *The Hidden Life: Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts* (Washington: ICS, 1992), 92, quoted by G. Weinandy, *Does God suffer?*, 284.

¹⁸ E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ, 729*: "Therefore, first of all, we have to say that we are not redeemed *thanks* to the death of Jesus but *despite* it." For a critique of this approach in the light of "traditional" soteriology, see R. VAN NIEUWENHOVE, "St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas on 'Satisfaction': or how Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Cross differ" in *Angelicum* 80 (2003): 159-76.

¹⁹ Schillebeeckx' view is clearly highly unscriptural (which is odd, given his engagement with scriptures throughout his later works). For instance, the Gospel according to Mark displays a hurried rush towards the Cross – which is clearly the climax of the story. Similarly, in the gospel according to John Christ's glorification happens when he is put on the Cross, for in his death he will bring new life (John 12:23-24: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.").

²⁰ For a more in-depth discussion, see R. VAN NIEUWENHOVE, "St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas on Satisfaction," *Angelicum* 80 (2003): 159-76, especially 170-71.

The first one is that it is *we* who benefit from the offerings we make, not God. In this context Augustine refers to Psalm 16:2: "You are my God, for you have no need of my possessions." This also applies to the sacrifice of Christ: it changes *us*, it does not change God: God had no need for the sacrifice of his Son.

The second point is even more important: "the visible sacrifice is the sacrament, the sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice." Quoting Psalm 51:18 ("If you had wished for sacrifice, I would certainly have given it: but you will not delight in holocausts. The sacrifice offered to God is a broken spirit; God will not despise a heart that is broken and humbled") Augustine argues that what matters is the intention with which we make an offering; it is this that bestows value upon the external sacrifice. Ultimately, every deed can be an external manifestation of the invisible sacrifice, which is our gift of self to God: in offering our sacrifices "we shall be aware that the visible sacrifice must be offered only to him, to whom we ourselves ought to be an invisible sacrifice in our hearts." Again, this also applies to the Cross of Christ: the actual suffering of Christ on the Cross (i.e., the external, visible sacrifice) only has meaning in the light of the humility and obedience of Christ (i.e., the inner, invisible sacrifice). It is important to remember this: our own sufferings do not have any value *as such* but they can perhaps acquire some meaning in the light of the attitude or disposition we adopt in relation to them.

Augustine clearly has a very broad understanding of sacrifice. Every external act, every aspect of our life, can become an occasion for manifesting and signifying the invisible sacrifice of cleaving to God and seeking the good of our neighbour.²¹ Our bodies and soul can become sacrifices to God when we freely surrender them to God. The notion of sacrifice can refer to any act performed for the sake of God, every act in which we freely give ourselves away, thereby mirroring the self-gift of Christ on the Cross. Nevertheless, the Eucharist as a re-enactment of the salvific sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, occupies a special role in assisting the Christian community in becoming a living sacrifice to God. This brings me to a following point: how we can participate in the sacrifice of Christ.

b) **The sacrifice of Christ and the Body of Christ**

Augustine, like other patristic and medieval theologians, uses the notion of "the Body of Christ" in three senses: it can, of course, refer to the body of the historical man Jesus of Nazareth; it can refer to the **Body and Blood** of Christ offered in the Eucharist; and, thirdly, it can refer to the Church, the community of the believers who are one body vivified by the Spirit.

²¹ *The City of God* Bk X, ch.6: "the true sacrifice is offered in every act which is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship, every act, that is, which is directed to that final Good which makes possible our true felicity." Translation by H. Bettenson in *St Augustine. The City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), 379.

Describing the Church as the Body of Christ – as distinct, for instance, from describing it as the People of God – has become somewhat unfashionable after Vatican II, and this may be another reason why the quotation from E. Stein has become hard to relate to. After all, describing the Church as the Body of Christ – rather than as the People of God or the community of the believers (and Augustine uses these names too) – makes the link with the Eucharistic body of Christ much clearer.

Of course, Vatican II's decision to adopt the biblical notion of the Church as "People of God" was a very welcome move, insofar as it emphasised that the Church is not to be identified with the clerical hierarchy; on the contrary, the Church is now understood in a more inclusive sense as the community of the believers. This is a healthy corrective against understanding the Church in terms of a mere institution. It was also considered to be more earthed than speaking of the Church in terms of "Mystical Body." Although Vatican II speaks of the Church both in terms of "People of God" and "Mystical Body of Christ" these two images "stand in conflict with each other in contemporary theological debates."²² It is felt by some that understanding the Church in terms of Body of Christ seems to deify the Church, renders it immune from critique, and turn it into something exclusivist and otherworldly.

These criticisms do not necessarily hold. Indeed, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8, draws an analogy between the visible, institutional Church and the invisible, mystical Body of Christ on the one hand, and the human and divine natures of Christ: "the society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element. For this reason, the Church is compared, in a powerful analogy, to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature, inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a somewhat similar way, does the social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (cf. Eph. 4:15)." This Chalcedonian logic obviously implies a critique of those who would want to identify the visible, institutional Church with the invisible, mystical Body: as the human and divine natures in Christ co-exist without confusion or change, without division or separation, so too the invisible and institutional Church exist in unity with one another without becoming identified.

The ecclesial model of the People of God, on the other hand, seems less Christo-centric and fails to establish a crucial link between the historical Jesus, the Eucharist, and the Church – a link that is very close in the notion of the Body of Christ: so close indeed that, as suggested earlier, these three elements have all been traditionally called the Body of Christ. When we are called to the Eucharist, remem-

²² See D. DOYLE, *The Church emerging from Vatican II* (CI: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002) 29.

bering and re-enacting the sacrifice of Christ, united in faith and charity, we become the Body of Christ. As Augustine puts it in a memorable phrase: "Be then what you see and receive what you are."²³

So the Eucharist is pivotal: through partaking in the body and blood of Christ, we ourselves become the one body of Christ. It is through the Eucharist that the body of Christ and his salvific deeds become universally present. In his *Commentary on John*, Thomas Aquinas, inspired by Augustine, states: "because this sacrament is that of the Passion of our Lord, it contains within itself the suffering of Christ; therefore, all the beneficiary effects of the Passion of our Lord reside plentifully in this sacrament. This sacrament is nothing else but the Passion of our Lord that is communicated to us. (...) The destruction of death that Christ has effected by his death and the renewal of life that he effected through his resurrection are also the effects of this sacrament."²⁴

When we share in the body and blood of Christ – the suffering Christ – in faith and love, we become Christ-like. Quoting Augustine, Thomas Aquinas states that this food is not transformed or changed into us but we are transformed or changed into it: through it we become Christ-like, and this is the reason why the Church can be called the body of Christ.²⁵

Perhaps an image can clarify these issues. In the cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp there hangs a beautiful painting by Rubens, namely *The Deposition of Christ*. But the place where the painting hangs is of major importance: it hangs above an altar. Thus, Christ does not descend into a tomb but into an altar.²⁶ In the Eucharist the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection become universally available. Indeed, by sharing in Christ's body and blood through the Eucharist the believing community becomes one body of Christ.

c) Suffering and the Body of Christ

In the quotation from E. Stein it was suggested that there is a sense in which Christ still suffers in his members for the sake of the salvation of the Church. Augus-

²³ *Sermon 272*, quoted by H. de Lubac in *Catholicism. Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 92: "The Body of Christ', you are told, and you answer 'Amen'. Be members then of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true. Why is this mystery accomplished with bread? We shall say nothing of our own about it, rather let us hear the Apostle, who speaking of this sacrament says: "We being many are one body, one bread." Understand and rejoice. Unity, devotion, charity! One bread: and what is this one bread? One body made up of many. Consider that the bread is not made of one grain alone, but of many. During the time of exorcism, you were, so to say, in the mill. At baptism, you were wetted with water. Then the Holy Spirit came into you like the fire which bakes the dough. Be then what you see and receive what you are."

²⁴ *Comm. on John*, no. 963 (numbering from Marietti edition, Rome, 1952)

²⁵ *Comm. on John*, no. 972-73. Just as the man Jesus Christ received his spiritual life through his union with God, we too receive our spiritual life through sharing in the Eucharist.

²⁶ See NEIL MACGREGOR AND E. LANGMUIR, *Seeing Salvation. Images of Christ in Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 181-85.

tine makes the same claim: our sufferings are participations in the suffering of Christ, or rather: the risen Christ still continues to suffer in his members. The idea of sharing in the suffering of Christ goes back to a letter inspired (if not written) by Paul: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church." (Col. 1:24).²⁷ Inspired by this Pauline idea, Augustine argues that because of the unity of Christ and his Church, the Head and his Body, it follows that there is an exchange of suffering between Christ and his faithful:

If he is the head, we are the limbs. The whole Church, spread abroad everywhere, is his body, and of that body he is the head. (...) Accordingly, when we hear his voice, we must hearken to it as coming from both head and body; for whatever he suffered, we too suffered in him, and whatever we suffer, he too suffers in us. Think of an analogy: if your head suffers some injury, can your hand be unaffected? Or if your hand is hurt, can your head be free from pain? (...) When any one of our members suffers, all the other members hasten to help the one that is in pain. This solidarity meant that when Christ suffered, we suffered in him; and it follows that now that he has ascended into heaven, and is seated at the Father's right hand, he still undergoes in the person of his Church whatever it may suffer amid the troubles of this world, whether temptations, or hardship, or oppression (for all these are the necessary means of our instruction, and through them the Church is purified, as gold is by fire).²⁸

²⁷ Some doubt whether this passage goes back to Paul himself. Even so the passage seems clearly Pauline in inspiration: see for instance Phil. 3:10-11: "to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, if somehow I might attain to the resurrection of the dead."

²⁸ *Emerationes in Psalmos*, 62, 2, trans. by Maria Boulding, OSB, as *Exposition of the Psalms*. Vol. 3 (New York: New City Press, 2001), 230-31. Other authors made a similar point: Adelman of Brescia, for instance, wrote: "Christ suffered in Paul and was crucified in Peter, both Peter and Paul being in Christ citizens from heaven; 'our fatherland is in heaven', says St Paul. And elsewhere he shows his hope even more clearly: 'He hath quickened us together in Christ... and hath made us to sit together in heavenly places.' We may well be surprised: he was still being buffeted on earth by an angel of Satan, and yet he gloried in that he was, in Christ, risen and sitting in heaven. Now he could say this because of the union which obtains between all the members dependent on one another, as he explains more clearly in another passage: 'If one member suffer anything, all the members suffer with it; or if one member glory, all the members rejoice with it.'" Quoted by H. de Lubac in *Catholicism*, 405. Similarly, Paulinus of Nola, contemporaneous with Augustine, wrote: "From the beginning of time Christ has been suffering in his followers. He is, in fact, the beginning and end, veiled in the Old Law, revealed in the Gospel, the Lord ever wonderful, suffering and triumphing in his saints: in Abel, slain by his brother; in Noah, mocked by his son; exiled from his land, in Abraham; in Isaac, offered as a victim; made a slave, in Jacob; in Joseph, sold; ... In the

What does this mean? Why do Paul and the tradition after him claim that the risen Christ still suffers in his members?

The reason is that we still live in-between times.²⁹ We have witnessed the Cross and the resurrection of Christ, but sin, death and suffering are still with us: they will only be done away with at the time of the parousia, the glorious return of Christ at the end of times. Yes, we have seen the Cross and the resurrection; but we still struggle, we are still in the flesh, having to deal with the consequences of sin. In one sense we have already attained salvation in Christ; in another sense we are still awaiting it.

The fact that we live in in-between times has profound implications for our understanding of suffering.

1. *Suffering as a participation in Christ's continuous redemptive activity*

First, just like the way Christ bore his sufferings had redemptive value, so it is with us: *the way we deal with* suffering can have redemptive value. Or rather: it is Christ who suffers in us, as we learn from the NT and the theological reflection upon it. Christ did not save us from sufferings – they are still with us – but rather: *he allows us, as members of his Body, to see our suffering as a participation in his on-going redemptive activity*. The notion that our sufferings are Christ's sufferings may help us to come to terms what is excessively devoid of meaning: we can attempt to see them as "offerings" rather than as absurd, meaningless calamities ("punishments").³⁰ Perhaps Paul had something like this in mind when he wrote (in 2 Cor. 7:10): "To suffer in God's way means changing for the better and leaves no regrets, but to suffer as the world knows suffering brings death."

Apostles, afflicted by land and sea and slain time and again in the manifold tortures of the Martyrs. It is always he, as in the past so in the present, who bears our afflictions and carries our griefs; always is he, the Man covered with wounds for us, bearing that infirmity which we, without him, could never bear, even if we knew how to. He, I say, at this very moment, for us and in us, endures the malice of the world, that endurance may have the victory and power be made perfect in infirmity. He, in you, suffers contumely, and it is he in you who is hated by the world." *Letter 38*, no. 3, quoted in *Catholicism*, 417.

²⁹ See H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Truth is Symphonic. Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 168.

³⁰ Indeed, Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of evils: *malum poenae* (or evil of pain, i.e. evil suffered against or will) and *malum culpae* (evil of guilt, or sin). Now he argues that *malum poenae*, if we freely espouse it freely, can lose its penal character. Using language that Anselm used before him, he calls it "making satisfaction." This means that our sufferings can acquire a measure of meaning if we willingly submit ourselves to that which we cannot change anyhow. Seeing our afflictions as a means of participating in the sufferings of Christ allows us to grow in conformity with Christ: "just as Christ bore many sufferings, and thus arrived at the glory of immortality, it was also becoming to his faithful to undergo sufferings and so to arrive at immortality, bearing in themselves, so to say, the marks of the passion of Christ (*quasi portantes in seipsis insignia passionis Christi*), in order to achieve a likeness to his glory." *ScG*, IV, 55.28 For a discussion of these texts, see R. VAN NIEUWENHOVE, "'Bearing the marks of Christ's Passion' – Aquinas' Soteriology" in R. VAN NIEUWENHOVE AND J. WAWRYKOW, eds., *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 291.

2. *Resurrection and suffering*

But if it is Christ who continues to suffer then clearly this must be the *risen* Christ. In the midst of our sufferings we can therefore also experience the resurrection power of Christ. Christian salvation in this world does not mean that suffering is done away with; rather, it means that we can experience *salvation in the midst of our sufferings and tribulations*. In order to be conformed to Christ's resurrection we must first be conformed to his suffering on the Cross. Therefore, what we said earlier about detachment and involvement acquires a deeper and more Christocentric meaning in this context: by identifying with the Cross of Christ, by surrendering ourselves in the way that Christ surrendered himself, we will attain a new life here and now. Salvation is not escaping from the tensions, tribulations and sufferings of the life that we lead in the in-between times; rather, salvation is to be found in the very struggle, in the tensions that are at the heart of the Christian existence.³¹ As the Cross illustrates, God's power shows itself in weakness; and it is in the midst of our weakness and tribulations that we encounter the power of Christ. In a Christian understanding, death inaugurates life, and life is pregnant with redeeming death.

3. *Losing and gaining your life, detachment and involvement*

Perhaps a poet can explain this dialectic better than I can. In *The Journey of the Magi*, T.S. Eliot³² describes how one of the three wise men recalls their search for the Saviour:

*'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'*

³¹ J. D.G. DUNN, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 495-96: "Precisely because believers are still in some sense in the flesh, still not fully free precisely as flesh from the power of sin and death, they can enjoy the power of Christ's resurrection only as power in weakness, only as a sharing in Christ's sufferings, as life in and through death. (...) The presence of conflict between flesh and Spirit is a sign that the Spirit is having effect in shaping the character. The absence of conflict could indicate the absence of the Spirit." Again, as Dunn puts it (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 487): the process of sanctification "does not consist in an initial dying with Christ followed in the course of that process by an experience of Christ's resurrection power. Paul's doctrine of salvation is quite different. The resurrection power of Christ manifests itself, and inseparably so, as also a sharing in Christ's sufferings. The process of salvation is a process of growing conformity to Christ's death. (...) Only when believers are fully one with Christ in his death will it be possible for them to be fully one with Christ in his resurrection."

³² *The Journey of the Magi* was published in 1927 in *Ariel Poems*. I quote from M. Roberts ed., *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), 104-105.

In their search for the new-born Christ they encounter many difficulties:

*Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it*

But finally they find the place ("it was (you may say) satisfactory") and this is how the poem concludes:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

Why is it that the Birth of Christ was "hard and bitter agony" for the Magus? Why did he experience the Birth of Christ as death, his own death?

Surrendering ourselves to Christ implies the death of the self-centredness that usually characterises our dealings with people and things; it is a letting-go, a giving away of ourselves, like Christ gives himself away on the Cross and becomes scattered in the eucharistic Bread and Wine, for us to share. Dying to our attachments can be painful. For dying to the world ultimately means dying to self-centredness, our desire to possess, to be in control; but this kind of death is not negative: it harbours a renewed life: just like the self-gift of Christ on the Cross (in which we, as Christians, are called to participate) leads to resurrection and new life: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mk 8:34-35)³³

³³ It is perhaps because the Magus has not yet witnessed the resurrection of Christ that he sounds so subdued, finding the place of birth merely "satisfactory"; it is in this light too that we must understand the last line of the poem ("I should be glad of another death").

I do not think that the meaning of this text is exhausted by understanding it literally (i.e., that we have to die the death of a martyr for Christ's sake in order to gain eternal life in heaven). This text rather points to our present status: here and now we can already, in the midst of our afflictions and weaknesses, experience something of the power of the new life in Christ. The Christian lives in this world but he has also already caught a glimpse of eternity in the heart of this world – and perhaps this is the reason why Eliot has the Magus saying that he “no longer feels at ease here, in the old dispensation.” As one theologian puts it: “The earthly man already lives in eternity. The true state of affairs is not that this fleeting, temporal existence with all its decisions is a pure here-and-now, followed by reward or punishment of an eternal beyond as a second existence. Rather, the two are one; one is the reverse side of the other: time is concealed eternity, and eternity is revealed time.”³⁴

I reiterate that this should not be construed as world-denial: detachment also implies involvement: by dying to self and the world, we gain our life and the world. When we are faced with afflictions we cannot remedy, we should attempt to see them in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ, and this may assist us to overcome our grief, and spare us from despair – perhaps.

But what if we have suffered so much that we feel forsaken by both God and men? What is there to say in that case? We can only remind ourselves of Christ's cry on the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1; Mk. 15:34). Sharing in the Cross of Christ may at times mean: sharing in the forsakenness that Christ himself experienced through his radical identification with sinful humanity. If only we can hold on to this thought in the middle of our darkness and abandonment, at that very moment, we will hopefully begin to experience the power of the resurrection in the midst of our cross, and hopefully transform the deadening absurdities into renewed life.

³⁴ See H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Grain of Wheat. Aphorisms* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 126-27.