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Anthropological Context of Suffering in the Body and Soul

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Abstract: *Suffering in the body and soul is as inescapable as death. It is a difficult problem for human beings regardless of cultures and religions. As difficult a problem as suffering may be, this paper attempts to examine the phenomenon in an approach that could reflect positive purposes flowing from it. Using anthropological and religious approaches, the objective of the paper is to find answers to the questions: what is suffering? How can one get through suffering? What can anyone learn from suffering? Analyzing the answers to the above questions, the paper concludes that suffering and sickness are the inevitable components of human existence on earth.*

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to x-ray suffering in the body in its unity with the soul so that it is related at the level of nature and human perception; and at the level of grace as a salvific value. To give the paper an anthropological and religious approach, the dualistic vision of the human person is intentionally ignored and a dual-unitary vision adopted. In this regard, the paper quickly states that the body and the soul of a person are not two separate elements but distinct elements that together form the unity of the human being.

From the above point of view, the paper anchors on the encyclical letter, "Caritas in Veritate," of Benedict XVI, the current Roman Catholic pontiff.

capacity makes the body capable of a real existential relationship. Hence, disease in the body could sometimes be detected before any clinical manifestations occur. In this way, Bendit correctly notes that, the body is a highly complex system of different energies. Some of these are those of the atoms of which the tissues are made, and the electro-magnetic fields between them.¹⁰

Life depends on interplay between the chemical and the vital energy-fields, each one influencing the other, so that there is an over-all pattern in living organisms while they are alive. In suffering, the harmonious interplay is internally disorganized. In this regard, the roles of medicine and religion become an integration that abhors opposition. This is reflected in all religions where prayers are offered for the sick and the suffering, and certain rituals performed on the bodies of those who are sick. In all these, the body still accommodates the human soul, the operative field in which human consciousness takes place.

The constitutive elements of the human person include the soul. Without the soul the human person is nothing. The human person is continually kept in existence by the soul. Thus, the physical body can be stilled, though the breath, the circulation of blood and many other functions operate even when the whole organism is quiet. But for Bendit, "the soul cannot be stilled without vanishing entirely, just as a flame, however steady, is really in perpetual movements until it goes out and so ceases to exist".¹¹ Having stated that, it is needful to note that the duality of the human person implies that the unity of the soul and the body is so profound that the soul is seen as the form of the body. The union of the body and the soul makes up a single human person. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we are human precisely because we are animated by a soul, and it is the whole person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the spirit.¹²

The term soul, in Christian tradition, refers to human life or the human person as a whole (cf. Acts. 2:4). And it is precisely because of the soul that the human person is particularly the image of God. "Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united."¹³ The foregoing applies analogically to suffering as well; precisely because it is not only the body that suffers but also the soul. In other words, the human person, who suffers, in being a unitary creature does not suffer only in body but also in soul. For this

reason, suffering and pain involve not only the body but also the soul. Therefore, the paper turns attention to the meaning of suffering in religion and in medical field.

What is the Meaning of Suffering?

Suffering is a reality that the human person cannot avoid. As McGinnis puts it, "suffering is the law of human beings."¹⁴ The implication of suffering as the law of human beings reflects the fact that from birth until death, people meet suffering in its different expressions. People suffer from loneliness, disease, depression, sicknesses, alienation, varied forms of weaknesses, and so on. To offer insight to the meaning of suffering, John Paul II says that, the word "suffering" seems to be particularly essential to the nature of man. It is as deep as man himself, precisely because it manifest in its own way that depth which is proper to man, and in its own way surpasses it. Suffering seems to belong to man's transcendence: it is one of those points in which man is in a certain sense destined to go beyond himself, and he is called to this in a mysterious way.¹⁵

In the light of the above, it is clear that suffering and sickness are evidence of human limitations, finitude, and hope for transcendence. Thus, suffering in itself becomes a mystery.

Nowhere is this mystery made more explicit than in the essay: "The Significance and Positive Value of Suffering" written by Teilhard de Chardin.¹⁶ In the essay Teilhard spoke of the spiritual energy, that could be drawn from suffering. He writes that, in suffering the ascending force of the world is concealed in a very intense form. The whole question is how to liberate it and give it a consciousness of its significance and potentialities...

All the sufferers of the earth joining their sufferings so that the world's pain might become a great and unique act of consciousness, elevation and union.¹⁷

This is the meaning of suffering from a spiritual perspective. It is not to condone suffering but to energize the sufferer, to encourage those suffering to see meaning and purpose in their affliction and draw strength from it. Teilhard recommends empowering strategy rather than stigmatizing the sick and the suffering. He was concerned to give meaning to situations that might initially provide window for depression rather than hope.

From the perspective of Darwinian biology, suffering is nothing but an evolutionary adaptation. The ability for suffering increases the fitness of complex organism; it enhances their probability of surviving and reproducing. Darwin himself noted that suffering is "well adapted to make a creature guard against any great or sudden evil".¹⁸ In other words, suffering is adaptive, it warns living beings endowed with nervous systems that they may be in danger. Darwinism could operate as a type of theodicy, since it explains life's capacity for suffering steadily in terms of the notion of evolutionary adaptation.

From what has been said hitherto, it is note worthy that in the field of Medicine, physical suffering of any kind is perceived by the soul and received at the level of the brain. From there, it is defined as having a meaning that is not only immanent, but also connected with the pain of the body. In this process, Zucchi argues that, an osmosis of the relationship between pain and soul is actuated which leads to search for algos (object) which is transformed into pathos (subject) who acquires knowledge of the algos (perception of one's own body), which becomes awareness of the pathos (perception of one's own self by the soul - mind) in a whole in the self-individual.¹⁹

Within this context, suffering and death are understood as essential part of the larger story of creation. Hence, despite formidable technological and scientific advances, humanity cannot rid itself of suffering and death. According to Christian tradition, human suffering is justified because of the sinful acts of human being. "God has set things up in such a way that human suffering is necessary to pay the price for transgression."²⁰ Consequently, Christianity understands Jesus' suffering as completely innocent and adequate payment for human guilt. God's identifying with the suffering of Jesus now entails solidarity with all human suffering. This accounts for the generous attitude of Jesus towards the sick and invalids during His time.

The Anthropology of Being Sick in a Cultural Society

In every cultural society, particularly the Mediterranean culture during the time of Jesus, all sickness reflected societal taboos, and the physically challenged were also seen as social invalids. In such a setting, the sick were marginalized and rejected as refuse. The New Testament refers to the various sicknesses considered as social taboos. They include, "paralysis,

dropsy, piles, blindness, deafness, as well as several others."²¹ These personal diseases threatened the social order. Individuals that manifest deviation from the norm are always segregated to sustain that order.

The connection between pathology and social invalidation needs to be grasped if the dynamics involved in sickness and suffering are to be understood. Highlighting the social relationships related to suffering and sickness, Mary Douglas found that sicknesses such as mentioned earlier, carried with it corporate as well as individual implications. Hence, there was a connection between physical suffering and cultural pathology. In a cultural society as in Jesus time, Crosby declares that, the natural body and the corporate body, the individual and the collective, reproduced and reinforced reciprocal images of one another. The social order was extension of the individual, and on the micro-level, the individual expressed the macro-level of the group.²²

In the light of the above, Douglas succinctly argues that the body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relations afford a source of symbols for other complex structures.²³ Douglas sees the human body as a symbol that could reflect any society. Therefore, that which can be reproduced in a human body could be credited to social structures. In other words, if social structures are reproduced at the micro-level in the human body, the human body reflects the macro-level of the social structure.

Hence, the sick and the suffering cannot be considered apart from the cultural institutions in which their religion was embedded. Consequently, a system or institution that considers itself as "healthy" must have victims to convince itself of its own wholeness and integrity. It follows from the foregoing that in a cultural society, the body is believed to be the dwelling of a spirit.²⁴ God breathes a spirit into the human person, to make him/her live. At death this spirit leaves the body. During a person's life other spirits could also inhabit the body; it could be good spirit, an evil or unclean spirit. This condition would be observable in the person's behaviour, pointing to defects of the body or the internal organs. However, being sick in a cultural setting, was a fertile moment for superstition, and this accounts for the reason why many poor and uneducated people remain decidedly superstitious. They make use of witch doctors to ascertain the sources of bodily afflictions and sufferings.

Such was and is the world of the suffering and the sick in a cultural society. Today, such people and situations are still with us. They exist. But it is important to pay attention to matters of the soul even in the face of suffering and afflictions. In this regard, Okogie confirms what the paper submitted earlier; that the human person "is a composite being made up of body and soul and without that soul, the body is sueless."²⁵ Therefore, the principle of balance is inevitable if people are to find answers to the questions of suffering, sickness, and evil which continue to exist despite so much progress in the fields of Medicine and Religions.

Conclusion

From the discussions in this paper, it is clear that the human person is a composite being made up of the physical and spiritual natures. The dual unitary substances, the body and soul cannot be separated from each other. Therefore, disease, suffering, or sickness detected in the body affects the soul. In this way, when the body suffers the soul is affected and vice versa.

It is also obvious from this paper that suffering and sickness are the hallmark of human existence on earth. Despite significant breakthrough in the areas of Medicine and Religions, human suffering remains a deep mystery. In the face of this mystery, people now turn suffering and sickness to become a process of spiritual growth and a source of redemption. Some other people and cultural settings, associate suffering and sickness with evil that is present in the world.

Therefore, in response to suffering in body and soul, Christianity (through Jesus) uncovered the Cross as the symbol that points to a plentiful joy expressed in the Resurrection. This challenges those passing through suffering to cultivate hopeful vision of life that is fostered by integration of daily experiences to spiritually informed faith. This approach may bring about better understanding of human existence.

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