

Fr. Perozich comments —

Every clergyman and many laity have heard the comment, “How can a merciful God allow suffering?” The article below by Dr. Edward Feser gives some answers.

- The pervasiveness of suffering, if anything, actually confirms rather than falsifies Christianity. And bafflement at suffering is more a consequence of modern unbelief than a cause of it.
- It is precisely as modern medicine, technology, and relative social and political stability have made life *easier* and greatly *mitigated* suffering that religious belief has declined.
- Indeed, the very idea is contrary to Christian doctrine, which teaches that much suffering is precisely what we should expect in human life.
- it offers true light and consolation rather than the mawkish counterfeits of **those who prefer to emote rather than to understand**. And it simply reflects what the Catholic faith has always taught about suffering, the forgetting of which misleads many today falsely to suppose that suffering somehow casts doubt on the existence of God.
- God could not have made us any different without making something that wasn't *us*.
- we are also subject to various cognitive and moral disorders. Limited information, excessive emotion, damage to sense organs, neural malfunction, and the like will lead us into various errors. Excess or deficiency in our passions will also weaken the will in its capacity to opt for, and keep us attentive to, what the intellect tells us is good. [like the errors of Jesuit James Martin]
- Once these injuries and errors occur they are also bound to snowball and ramify, especially because we are also *social* animals. We lead *others* into error and moral failure, so that societies no less than individuals become disordered in various ways.
- What God *could* do, though, would be to *supplement* our nature. He could take special action to prevent us from falling into cognitive and moral error and otherwise suffering the damages we are prone to. And he could

also offer us a *higher* end than our nature by itself suits us for – the *beatific vision*, an intimate communion with him that vastly outstrips the knowledge of God that the exercise of our natural rational powers makes possible.

- Because this special assistance and higher end are *supernatural* – that is to say, something *above* and *beyond* our nature – they are not in any sense *owed* to us.
- For us to suffer the effects of original sin is thus not a matter of God positively inflicting some harm on us, ... It is instead a matter of our reaping the inevitable consequences of our first parents' disobedience – which includes all the suffering our unaided nature is subject to, as well as the additional pain of knowing that it could have been avoided.
- we all have *ourselves* committed many sins, and must inevitably face their consequences, which snowball and ramify no less than does the sin of our first parents.
- To be sure, here too God offers, through grace, the possibility of repentance and redemption. But it is quite ridiculous to expect him to remove *all* the effects of actual sin, any more than he removes all the effects of original sin
- True, if we genuinely repent, God will preserve us from the eternal damnation we have merited. But we are not entirely “off the hook.” There is *temporal* punishment that must be paid for every single sin we commit, and our debt gets *very* high over the course of a lifetime.
- if I accept the suffering in a penitential spirit, I can contribute to paying off my debt of temporal punishment.
- Moreover, even when I am innocent of wrongdoing, I can emulate Christ by accepting undeserved suffering, in a penitential spirit, for the sake of *others*.
- accept suffering in a penitential spirit, out of sorrow for sin and love of God, and in union with Christ's suffering on the Cross

- For punishment is a matter of inflicting *deserved suffering*. Because modern Western society is affluent, it is soft and cannot abide suffering. And because it is egalitarian, it cannot abide the idea that some of the ways of living that people choose are bad, and thus *deserving* of suffering. Thus does Christian teaching become incomprehensible to modern secularized Westerners. They either reject it altogether, or they massively distort it by praising its notions of mercy and forgiveness while ignoring its complementary teaching about repentance and penance.
- Many will be damned who would have repented had they been warned; and many will suffer agony in Purgatory who would have avoided it had they been urged to adopt a more penitential spirit during this life.
- As the madness and evil into which the secular world has sunk have permeated ever more deeply into the Church, even some very conservative Catholics **have allowed themselves to be tempted** to despair and to abandon her – as if Christ and the apostles had never warned of great persecutions, heresies, and apostasies to come, and as if the Church had not **always acknowledged** that even popes are sometimes capable of error and of causing great harm when not speaking *ex cathedra*. Christ promises only that the Church will not be destroyed. He does not deny that the human element of the Church will also suffer the effects of original and actual sin.

The “first world problem” of evil

The pervasiveness of suffering, if anything, actually confirms rather than falsifies Christianity. And bafflement at suffering is more a consequence of modern unbelief than a cause of it.

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Print



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Suffering, atheists frequently assure us, is not what we would expect if God exists. You might suppose, then, that where there is greater suffering, there will be fewer believers in God, and where there is less suffering there will be more believers in God. But that appears to be the reverse of the truth. As a friend pointed out to me recently, it is a remarkable fact that though life was, for most human beings for most of human history, much, much harder than it is for modern Westerners, they were also far more likely to be religious than modern Westerners are. It is precisely as modern medicine, technology, and relative social and political stability have made life *easier* and greatly *mitigated* suffering that religious belief has declined.

The atheist is likely to respond that suffering people are more likely to believe in God because they hope that he

will rescue them from, or at least reward them for, their suffering. But that doesn't sit well with the atheist's other claim, i.e. that if God exists we should expect him to be willing and able to eliminate suffering. When human leaders show indifference or incompetence, does that tend to make people *more* inclined to trust and hope in them? Quite the opposite. So, if people of earlier generations assumed, like the atheist does, that a good and omnipotent God would eliminate all suffering, wouldn't the persistence of suffering have caused them to *doubt* God, rather than to believe more fervently?

The fact is that earlier generations did *not* suppose that a good and omnipotent God would eliminate all suffering. Indeed, the very idea is contrary to Christian doctrine, which teaches that much suffering is precisely what we should expect in human life. *The pervasiveness of suffering, if anything, actually confirms rather than falsifies Christianity. And bafflement at suffering is more a consequence of modern unbelief than a cause of it.*

To understand how this is so, consider the approach to these matters reflected in a book like Fr. Francis J. Remler's *Why Must I Suffer? A Book of Light and Consolation*. First published almost a century ago, it is not a work of academic theology, but rather of down-to-earth spiritual guidance. And despite what a modern reader might expect from its subtitle, it is the opposite of sentimental or touchy-feely – so much so that many today would no doubt find it insensitive. Yet precisely for that reason it offers true light and consolation rather than the mawkish counterfeits of **those who prefer to emote**

rather than to understand. And it simply reflects what the Catholic faith has always taught about suffering, the forgetting of which misleads many today falsely to suppose that suffering somehow casts doubt on the existence of God.

Original sin

The first and most fundamental point Remler emphasizes is that *suffering is the inevitable consequence of original sin*. Now, this is easily misunderstood. The theologically uninformed often suppose that it means that God takes special action arbitrarily to inflict a punishment on us for something somebody else did – which, of course, sounds unjust or even crazy. But that is *not* what it means.

Rather, the idea is this. We are by nature rational animals, and that nature is, as far as it goes, good. But it is severely limited. Because we are flesh and blood, we are subject to all sorts of bodily harms – deprivation of food, water, and oxygen, broken bones, lacerations, infections, diseases, and so on. Because the exercise of our rationality is dependent on bodily organs, we are also subject to various cognitive and moral disorders. Limited information, excessive emotion, damage to sense organs, neural malfunction, and the like will lead us into various errors. Excess or deficiency in our passions will also weaken the will in its capacity to opt for, and keep us attentive to, what the intellect tells us is good. And so on. Once these injuries and errors occur they are also bound to snowball and ramify, especially because we are also *social* animals. We lead *others* into error and moral

failure, so that societies no less than individuals become disordered in various ways.

For these reasons, human beings in their natural state inevitably depreciate, as it were, the moment they're "driven off the lot." God could not have made us any different without making something that wasn't *us*. Having the limitations we have is simply a consequence of our very nature, part of the package of being a human being. What God *could* do, though, would be to *supplement* our nature. He could take special action to prevent us from falling into cognitive and moral error and otherwise suffering the damages we are prone to. And he could also offer us a *higher* end than our nature by itself suits us for – the *beatific vision*, an intimate communion with him that vastly outstrips the knowledge of God that the exercise of our natural rational powers makes possible.

Because this special assistance and higher end are *supernatural* – that is to say, something *above* and *beyond* our nature – they are not in any sense *owed* to us. We would still have been complete creations without them, albeit immeasurably inferior to what we would be with them. To offer them to us is a matter of *grace* rather than justice. God would have done us no wrong had he not offered them.

He *did* offer them to us, though, by way of offering them to our first parents, in a manner analogous to how a benefactor might offer to a father some good that would, if accepted, benefit his progeny. Suppose a rich man decided out of kindness to offer you a valuable piece of real estate, or a million dollars to invest. This would benefit not only

you, but also all those who would come to inherit the land after it is developed, or reap the dividends of the invested money. The rich benefactor doesn't owe any of this to you or your descendants, and thus would have done no wrong to you or to them if he never made the offer. Nor would he be doing any wrong to you or to them if he put conditions on the offer.

Now, suppose that the rich man makes this conditional offer and that you refuse it, or refuse to abide by the conditions. There is a sense in which you and your descendants *have* now suffered harm. For you and they have now *lost* the opportunity for this benefit, and are in that sense in a worse off condition than you were before the offer was made. But the rich man himself is in no way at fault for this harm. Rather, *you* are at fault, and you and your progeny thus have no one to blame for your condition but you.

This is the sort of state we are in as a result of the failure of our first parents to fulfill the conditions God set on the supernatural gifts he offered them. It is *their* fault, not God's, that we lost those gifts. For us to suffer the effects of original sin is thus not a matter of God positively inflicting some harm on us, any more than the rich man in my scenario would be positively inflicting some harm on your progeny by refraining from giving you the million dollars. It is instead a matter of our reaping the inevitable consequences of our first parents' disobedience – which includes all the suffering our unaided nature is subject to, as well as the additional pain of knowing that it could have been avoided.

To be sure, it is also part of Christian teaching that God has, through Christ, restored the possibility of attaining the beatific vision, and provided the grace needed for repentance. But that does not entail removing all the effects of original sin. To do that would be like pretending it never happened, and would blind us to the severe limitations of our nature, to how very grave are the consequences of sin, and to how badly we need grace. Grace does not smother nature but builds on it, and that entails removing only the worst effects of original sin. The remainder of those effects are still with us – and thus, we cannot fail to suffer.

Actual sin

Then there is the fact that the sin of our first parents is very far from being the only source of suffering. As Remler rightly emphasizes, there is also the circumstance that we all have *ourselves* committed many sins, and must inevitably face their consequences, which snowball and ramify no less than does the sin of our first parents. If I am a liar, I may come to be distrusted by others, might lose friends as a result, and may encourage others to lie by my example. If I am a drug abuser, I may come to be addicted, may lose my job as a result, and may lead others to use drugs. If I am an adulterer, I may end up causing the breakup of my marriage and that of the person with whom I commit adultery, and will thereby harm any children involved. And so on and on. As millions upon millions of human beings commit these and many other sins, their effects inevitably multiply throughout the social

order, so that the human race as a whole becomes miserable.

To be sure, here too God offers, through grace, the possibility of repentance and redemption. But it is quite ridiculous to expect him to remove *all* the effects of actual sin, any more than he removes all the effects of original sin – to suppose, for example, that after I repent of lying, he should immediately restore my reputation by causing everyone to forget what I have done; that after I repent of abusing drugs, he should immediately remove all the craving for the drugs that I have habituated myself into feeling; that after I repent of adultery, he should immediately cause my spouse entirely to forgive and forget my infidelity; and so on. Were he to do so, we would lose all understanding of the gravity of sin, and of our desperate need for grace.

Moreover, and as Remler discusses at length, we *deserve* to suffer for our sins. And this leads us to a further reason why there must be suffering in human life, which is that it serves as a *punishment* for sin. True, if we genuinely repent, God will preserve us from the eternal damnation we have merited. But we are not entirely “off the hook.” There is *temporal* punishment that must be paid for every single sin we commit, and our debt gets *very* high over the course of a lifetime.

But we can pay some of that debt every time we accept some particular bit of suffering that we did not cause ourselves. Suppose, for example, that I am an adulterer but that my wife does forgive and forget. I am very fortunate, but I nevertheless certainly *deserve* the anger

and hostility she might have shown me. Suppose also that I am unjustly accused of embezzling at work, and only after a long and painful investigation is my reputation restored. Though I didn't deserve that *particular* bit of suffering, I did deserve comparable suffering as a result of my adultery. And if I accept the suffering in a penitential spirit, I can contribute to paying off my debt of temporal punishment.

Moreover, even when I am innocent of wrongdoing, I can emulate Christ by accepting undeserved suffering, in a penitential spirit, for the sake of *others*. Suppose I am not an adulterer, but that I have a friend who is and whose marriage has been destroyed as a result. Suppose he is very sorry for what he has done and is trying, with difficulty, to restore some order to his life. If I undergo some undeserved suffering myself (as in the scenario involving an unjust accusation of embezzling) I might offer that suffering up to God for the sake of my friend, as Christ offered up his undeserved suffering for us. By becoming, to that extent, Christ-like, I not only help my friend but contribute to the perfection of my own character.

In these ways, every instance of suffering we undergo, undeserved suffering included, can have a greater good drawn out of it, if only we let it. That is by no means easy, but the graces to do so are also among those God offers us.

Suffering as punishment

Moreover, it is *far* preferable that we accept the miseries of this life in a penitential spirit than that we suffer those of the next – which includes those

of *Purgatory*, let alone Hell. This is another theme developed by Remler. If you think things are bad now, just wait. As Remler writes:

[T]he smallest measure of suffering in Purgatory is far more intense than the severest pains on earth. The saints tell us that the intensity of the pain caused by the fire of Purgatory is the same as that which is caused by the fire of Hell. The only difference is this: That the souls in Purgatory are consoled by the knowledge that their torment will end sooner or later, whereas the damned in Hell are tortured by despair at the knowledge that their punishment will last forever. (pp. 33-34)

At the same time, “the advantages of present sufferings over future ones are great beyond measure,” for “in this life you can accomplish vastly more in a few hours than you could in Purgatory perhaps in ever so many years,” provided that you accept suffering in a penitential spirit, out of sorrow for sin and love of God, and in union with Christ’s suffering on the Cross (p. 34).

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this connection between suffering and punishment for sin. And from the Fall of Man to the Passion of the Christ to the Last Judgment, the theme of suffering as punishment absolutely permeates Christianity. That is precisely why, though people in earlier eras of Western civilization suffered far more than we do, they were also more devout. It was no mystery to them why God would allow suffering; on the contrary, they saw that suffering is precisely what we should expect and accept as punishment for human sinfulness.

But modern Western society is affluent and egalitarian, and for those reasons it is extremely uncomfortable with the idea of punishment. For punishment is a matter of inflicting *deserved suffering*. Because modern Western society is affluent, it is soft and cannot abide suffering. And because it is egalitarian, it cannot abide the idea that some of the ways of living that people choose are bad, and thus *deserving* of suffering. Thus does Christian teaching become incomprehensible to modern secularized Westerners. They either reject it altogether, or they massively distort it by praising its notions of mercy and forgiveness while ignoring its complementary teaching about repentance and penance.

And thus is their bafflement at suffering more a *consequence* than a *cause* of their apostasy. It's not that they don't understand why God would allow suffering, and for that reason give up Christian teaching. It's that they have given up Christian teaching, and for that reason don't understand why God would allow suffering. You might say that the "problem of evil" **as contemporary atheists understand it** is, in that sense, a "first world problem." Of course, I don't mean by that to imply that the suffering to which such atheists appeal when arguing against the existence of God is in any way trivial. What I mean is that a "first world" mentality – that of the modern affluent, egalitarian, secularized Westerner – deeply informs their understanding of the significance of that suffering.

In fairness, though, it isn't just atheists who exhibit this mentality. It has deeply permeated the more liberal and moderate sectors of Christianity. It is manifest, for example, in those who only ever preach about mercy and forgiveness, but never about the repentance and penance that are the necessary preconditions of mercy and forgiveness, and without which only damnation awaits; who deny or downplay the doctrine of Hell, and would rather reassure us that all or most are saved than warn us that some or even many are lost; who remain silent even about Purgatory, or who treat entry into it only as a relief rather than as something frightful and to be avoided if at all possible; who claim that capital punishment or even life imprisonment are *per se* contrary to human dignity; and so on. All of this evinces deep discomfort with the very idea of punishment as deserved suffering.

It thereby plays into the hands of the atheist, who can reasonably ask: "If making *even the most wicked* suffer for their sins is bad, then why would a good God allow any suffering at all?" And it does grave damage to souls, ensuring that there will be vastly *more* suffering rather than less. For people who are constantly told about God's mercy and never about the conditions he places on it are less likely to repent, or to do penance when they do repent. Many will be damned who would have repented had they been warned; and many will suffer agony in Purgatory who would have avoided it had they been urged to adopt a more penitential spirit during this life. Those who only ever talk of God's mercy and never about damnation and penance are like a doctor who gently

reassures those with lung cancer that many such patients survive, while never warning them to stop smoking nor prescribing chemotherapy or any other treatment.

Yet it isn't just theological liberals and moderates who have been infected. As the madness and evil into which the secular world has sunk have permeated ever more deeply into the Church, even some very conservative Catholics **have allowed themselves to be tempted** to despair and to abandon her – as if Christ and the apostles had never warned of great persecutions, heresies, and apostasies to come, and as if the Church had not **always acknowledged** that even popes are sometimes capable of error and of causing great harm when not speaking *ex cathedra*. Christ promises only that the Church will not be destroyed. He does not deny that the human element of the Church will also suffer the effects of original and actual sin.

We would not be true sons of Holy Mother Church if we were not deeply pained by what is being done to her. But is our pain greater than that of the martyrs who have over the centuries suffered unimaginable tortures and death at the hands of pagans, heretics, jihadists, and communists? Is it greater than Christ's suffering on the cross? Has the softness we deplore in modern therapeutic Western society and **“candy-ass” brands of Christianity** not corrupted our own souls too? Let us beware lest our zeal be the fair-weather kind of Peter, to whom Christ issued a stern reminder of the costs of true discipleship:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:21-25)

*(Editor's note: This essay originally appeared on **the author's blog** in a slightly different form and is reprinted here with his kind permission.)*