SESSION 1.7 – The Suffering Self

Objectives:

- To give the participants a better understanding of suffering
- To explain the Christian meaning of suffering
- To give meaning to personal sufferings
- To help the participants respond to their own personal sufferings

Introduction:

Suffering surrounds us. Mental and physical illness, poverty and starvation, wars and violence of all kinds overwhelm individuals, communities, entire nations. We ourselves experience suffering. It might be broken relationships and alienated families, accidents and disease, failed dreams or boring jobs, in dying and death. How many people suffer from addictions, abuse and other forms of violence!

A terrible image of suffering now burns in the memories of so many of us: planes burying themselves into the World Trade Center and erupting in giant fireballs. Shock and horror led to grief and lament, heroism and vengeance—and to questions about God. "How could God allow this to happen?" "Where is God in all this suffering?" Those directly involved in suffering often ask, "Why did this happen to me?" and sometimes even "What did I do wrong to be punished in this way?"

Humans have long asked these questions. The whole Book of Job in the Bible is about the question of suffering. Christians have tried to discover meaning for suffering in studying and praying about the suffering and death of Jesus told in the Gospels. Some of the more violent biblical perspectives, however, fail to satisfy fully. Hearts and minds long for the God of compassion revealed by Jesus.

What is Suffering?

Suffering is a fact of life and neither proves nor disproves the existence of God. Suffering is both universal and personal. Though suffering is universal in the sense that it is common to all, when large populations experience flood, famine war and disease, this is often perceived as different than the suffering that occurs to us personally.

If God is to allow His creation the right of free choice, He must allow suffering. If He intervened in the matter of suffering, He would have to intervene in the matter of sin. It would be illogical for God to allow us to sin without consequences for our actions.

Since things that are good, pleasant and fair are defined in comparison with things that are bad, hurtful and unfair, mankind *must* experience the latter in order to know the former. This is especially true seeing that God's eternal promises, whether for peace or pain, relate to the after-life, in which we hope to be delivered from the vanities of the present life.

The understanding of suffering does not necessarily ease the pain, but it tends

to shorten it, because we see our lives in a different and broader perspective. Personal suffering as a microcosm of universal suffering. Much as a "school" is made up of individuals, so "universal" suffering is the result of much "personal" suffering. The point is: We perceive *personal* suffering to be different than suffering in general. We rarely consider that our own hardships are part of the whole. This failure of proper perspective causes us to see ourselves in a less-than-realistic way. Either we think more highly of ourselves than we should, or we think less of ourselves than we should.

When suffering afflicts us personally, we often ask, "Why me?" When we ask this, we display a lack of understanding for at least a part of the purpose of life. What do we mean by this? Are we saying, "Yes, suffering can happen to others, but I am special," or do we think that we did something wrong and God is punishing us for it? The first response has no merit whatsoever, for we are not equipped to judge ourselves as more or less valuable than another in the scheme of time and life. Although God can and does intervene in the matter of personal suffering, even when such intervention is according to His infinite knowledge and purpose, *He is not obliged to do so!* The second response (suffering because of something "done wrong") has some validity, but not as much as most people suspect. Personal suffering comes in two categories: Those things which are the result of our own doings, and those things that are beyond our control.

The Bible is realistic in its approach to suffering

The Bible gives a good deal of attention to the reality of suffering. It does not regard it as an illusion as some religions and sects do, nor deal with it superficially. One of the larger books of the Bible, the book of Job, is given solely to this question. The books of Jeremiah and Habakkuk have much to say about it. About one third of the Psalms, the prayers of the Old Testament, are cries that arise out of doubt, disappointment, or pain.

The New Testament also has some very significant passages about suffering. When we come to the New Testament, however, there are no longer any of the questions we find in the Old Testament such as "Does God care? Has he forgotten to be merciful?" There is joy, confidence and hope here that even the greatest suffering cannot overwhelm. Something has made a dramatic difference. In the New Testament, God has a face. He has made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ.

Love and freewill

The Bible declares that we were created with certain God-like qualities. We have a dignity, abilities and spiritual qualities that put us on an altogether different level of being from the animal world. Above all, we were created to exist in a loving relationship both with God and with other humans. However, love cannot exist where there is not the freedom to choose. When I wanted to marry the woman who is my wife, I did not take her by the throat and say, "You will love me...or else!" Whether we like it or not, love doesn't work that way. In creating us, God loved us enough to give us the freedom to reject that love.

The problem is that we messed things up. People turned away from God and we have all misused this gift of freewill. We choose alternatives to God. The Bible declares, **"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way"** (Isaiah 53:6). We are not only free to turn away from God, we are free to stay away. That is why hell has been called the greatest monument to human freedom and dignity.

The link between suffering and evil

The freedom to choose leads on to another problem - the problem of evil. Who is responsible for the suffering in what was Yugoslavia, or in Somalia, or Rwanda, or Sudan, or Angola? Again, who is responsible for the ecological rape of our planet, the pollution of the oceans and the atmosphere, and the destruction of the forests? Not all suffering is caused by human action, but the greater percentage of it is.

Religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age and Christian Science tend to blur the distinction between good and evil; but not the Bible. We are responsible beings and when we choose evil instead of good, selfishness instead of love, wilfulness instead of God, then we, and others, suffer the consequences. The Bible emphasises strongly the link between suffering and evil. We are members of a fallen and corrupted race, and though still capable of much good, we somehow spoil whatever we put our hand to.

Although we may consider ourselves a little superior to others in the moral realm, we are all part of the problem. It is for this reason that God has not yet intervened to put an end to evil once and for all, as the Bible declares that one day he will. In his mercy he gives us the opportunity to change our ways and turn to him. It is because of this inseparable link between suffering and evil that God could not deal with one without taking care of the other. The wonder of it all is that God has already acted to deal with the problem of evil through Jesus Christ. In doing so he has ultimately guaranteed the removal of suffering.

In some remarkable way, when Jesus hung on the cross he was taking on his own shoulders the consequences of the evil of the human race. This is the amazing centre piece of the gospel story. The God who gave us the dignity of freedom of choice, now takes upon himself the consequences for our wrong choices. **"Christ died once for our sins. An innocent person died for those who are guilty. Christ did this to bring you to God"** (1 Peter 3:18). God suffered at the point of our greatest need. And that, for him, meant the greatest possible suffering.

Where true love exists, and where there is suffering, then love must suffer. The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word "love". For the Christian a true understanding of love must always begin at the cross of Jesus.

The transformation of suffering

Because of his death for our sins and his resurrection, Jesus is now able to offer us forgiveness and reconciliation to God. If we turn to him in trust and submission, he comes by the Holy Spirit to live within us. His purpose is to transform us into the kind of people he wants us to be and to fit us for God's service. Often he will use suffering in our lives to achieve this purpose. He can set us free from bitterness, rebellion, a sense of hopelessness or uselessness, and other negative attitudes that often come with suffering. He can bring good out of the worst experiences. He is able to teach us the truth of Paul's word, **"in all things God works for the good of those who love him"** (Romans 8:28).

The Bible indicates that suffering can at times be the direct result of our sins. However, it is unique in teaching how God uses suffering for his own glory and ultimately for ours too. This is where the emphasis lies in the New Testament. It is interesting to note the number of occasions when suffering and glory are mentioned together. True happiness results from being a certain kind of person, not from being in a certain set of circumstances. God loves us enough to persist in moulding our character, often through trials, and even when we would rather remain in our immaturity. The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that we might not suffer, but that our suffering might be like his. God may not remove our suffering, but he can transform it into something that will bring benefit to us and glory to him - if that is what we desire, and if we will trust him to do so.

Suffering and Meaning

Shortly before the Winter Olympics several years ago, the figure skater Nancy Kerrigan was attacked by a large man with an iron bar who beat her about the knees. Her immediate reaction was to cry out repeatedly, “Why me?” She was in great physical pain. She did not know her attacker. She imagined that the injury would put her out of the Olympics. It looked like all those years of hard work and discipline would be wasted. And she wanted to know why. (It turned out that her attacker was in the service of one her skating rivals.)

Why me? This question arises spontaneously when we suffer, whether the occasion is trivial (a paper cut) or serious (a cancer diagnosis or damage from a flood). There is a deep desire in humans to find a reason for their suffering and to discover some meaning in it.

The Bible provides several answers to the question “why me?” Suffering may be just punishment for foolish or sinful behavior. Suffering may be a discipline, an experience from which we can learn and become better persons. Suffering may be for the benefit of others. Or suffering may be mysterious at best or meaningless at worst. For those in the midst of suffering and searching for meaning, the Bible’s lament psalms can be a precious resource in building a community of sufferers.

Just Punishment

The question “why me?” is often accompanied by another question, “What did I do wrong?” Deep in the human psyche is the notion that suffering is

the result of foolish or sinful behavior. And it often is! How many persons have been killed while driving drunk? How many have shortened their own lives by excessive smoking?

People get what they deserve in life—so says the law of retribution. The principle that the just are rewarded and the wicked are punished is all over the Bible. For example, "the integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them" (Proverbs 11:3). In Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Moses places before Israel a choice. To choose life means to obey God's commandments and so to enjoy happiness and prosperity, whereas turning from God will lead to suffering and death. The narrative about Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 suggests that the suffering and death that all humans experience are the consequences of the "original sin."

But the law of retribution does not always apply. The sage known as Ecclesiastes expresses a skepticism founded on his wide experience: "there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing" (Eccl 7:15). And on several occasions, Jesus denies that sin is the only explanation for suffering (see Luke 13:1-5 and John 9:3).

Divine Discipline

Overcoming adversity is an element in many success stories: the champion runner who had polio as a child (Wilma Rudolph), stutterers who became great public speakers (Winston Churchill and James Earl Jones), or the celebrated writer who toiled in obscurity for many years (J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books). Such persons often look back on their sufferings and interpret them as learning experiences that gave them extraordinary desire and focus.

The theme of suffering as a discipline from God is prominent in late Old Testament writings. The wisdom teacher Ben Sira warns his prospective students: "My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing" (Sir 2:1). He makes willingness to accept discipline into a condition for making progress in pursuing wisdom: "If you are willing, my child, you can be disciplined, and if you apply yourself you will become clever" (6:32). The author of 2 Maccabees explains the suffering endured by faithful Jews in the second century b.c. as a sign of God's mercy and care for them: "Although he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people" (6:16).

The letter to the Hebrews is a long meditation on the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death "for us." Its exhortation in chapter 12 about suffering as a discipline from God takes as its starting point the sufferings of Jesus "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2) who endured a shameful death on the cross and so entered into glory at God's right hand. A quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12 ("the Lord disciplines those whom he loves") leads into a reflection on the discipline that loving parents impose upon their children. If we respect and love our parents for having disciplined us as children, so we should respect and love our heavenly Father when "he disciplines us for our own good, in order that we may share his holiness" (12:10). The author of

Hebrews assumes that the suffering will be temporary and will make us better persons, and that this kind of suffering can have an educative value in testing our character and helping us to understand better the ways of God. And sometimes it does.

Benefit for Others

When athletes sacrifice themselves and their own glory for the good of their team, they are praised and admired. When firefighters risk their lives to save others, they are hailed as heroes and those who perish are said to "have not died in vain." When Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed for proclaiming the gospel of justice and freedom, his witness had (and has) significance for all Americans. At least in certain circumstances we can understand the redemptive value of suffering; that is, the idea that the suffering of one person (or group) may benefit many others.

The most important Old Testament figure who suffers for others is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40—55. Whoever the Servant may have been in the sixth century b.c., he is portrayed in Isaiah 52:13—53:12 as someone whose suffering had a purpose and a positive effect. As a consequence of the Servant's suffering the sins of God's people were wiped away so that they could return from exile in Babylon. His suffering is described as a sacrifice for sins: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (53:5). The Servant in turn becomes the model for the suffering righteous person of Wisdom 2—3, the Maccabean martyrs (2 Macc 6—7), and Jesus the Servant of God.

Mark's Gospel, which is sometimes called the Gospel of Suffering, interprets Jesus' life and death in terms of service and vicarious suffering: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). During his ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee, Jesus attracts misunderstanding and opposition from Pharisees and Herodians (3:6), the people of Nazareth (6:1-6), and his own disciples (8:14-21). On the way to Jerusalem he predicts his death and resurrection three times (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), and each time he is misunderstood by his disciples. In Jerusalem the chief priests, scribes and elders conspire to hand him over for execution to Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect. Jesus' identity as Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man becomes clear only at moment when he is sentenced to suffer and die (14:61-62).

The earliest confessions of Christian faith (1 Cor 11:24; 15:3; Rom 3:25-26) proclaimed Jesus' suffering and death as "for us" and "for our sins," thus echoing Isaiah 53. Paul himself often uses similar formulas (Rom 5:6; 14:15; 2 Cor 5:14, 21; Gal 1:4; 3:13). These credal summaries affirm that Jesus suffered and died as God's Servant on our behalf, and so made available to all peoples a new relationship with God. His suffering is full of meaning.

According to Paul, believers can participate in Jesus' suffering and death as well as his resurrection: "that I may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10-11; see 2 Cor 1:3-7; 4:10).

What about Colossians 1:24? There Paul says: "Now I rejoice in suffering on your behalf, and I fill up what is lacking the tribulations of Christ." This cannot mean that there is something deficient in the reconciliation brought about by Christ (see Col 1:19-20). Rather, the idea seems to be that Paul's sufferings (and ours too) on behalf of other Christians may shorten the time before God's kingdom comes in its fullness (see Mark 13:20).

Mystery

When Cardinal Basil Hume was visiting a refugee camp in Ethiopia during a terrible famine, a reporter asked him why God allowed this catastrophe to happen. He replied: "I have no idea." There are many cases of human suffering where the usual answers—just punishment, divine discipline, or benefit for others—do not work. The case of Job is one.

Job is introduced as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1). When first deprived of his possessions and health, Job remained patient and trusting in God (1:21; 2:10). However, in chapter 3 Job lets out a howl and bewails his fate: "Why did I not die at birth?" (3:11).

So begins a long conversation (Job 4—37) between Job and his "friends" about the law of retribution and theodicy (God's justice). Three propositions are debated endlessly: God is all powerful; God is just; and the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. Job's friends reason that since he is suffering, he must have sinned, because God is both omniponent and just. Job, however, complains that God is not just. They all confront the mystery of innocent suffering (as Jesus does in Gethsemane) and do not know how to resolve it.

God's speeches from the whirlwind (Job 38—41) provide a change of perspective rather than an answer. God invites Job (and us) to view creation from God's perspective and to recognize how limited our human perspective is. There are areas that we cannot see or know, much less control. God's "answer" is that sometimes (as in Job's case) suffering is a mystery beyond human comprehension and what is needed is humility and acceptance in the face of mystery (see 42:1-5).

The mystery of suffering is the background for apocalypses like Daniel and Revelation and for much New Testament theology. Apocalyptic is crisis literature, generally emanating from suffering people. It defers the resolution of the mystery of innocent suffering to the Last Judgment. Then all creation will acknowledge the omnipotence and justice of God, and the righteous will be vindicated and the wicked punished. Christians believe that with Jesus' resurrection the endtime has already begun and God's kingdom is among us. And yet evil and death are at work in our world. Until the Last Judgment we experience the mystery of innocent suffering in our lives and try to confront it with hope and patient endurance.

A Community of Sufferers

Suffering is a universal human experience. Yet when we suffer, we often feel

isolated and alienated. The Old Testament lament psalms can help suffering persons to break out of their loneliness.

Psalm 3 is a good example of a lament. It begins with an address to God: "O Lord." Next there is a complaint: "Many are rising against me..." (vv. 1-2). Then in vv. 3-6 there is a confession of faith in God ("you, O Lord, are a shield around me...") and a profession of trust ("I lie down and sleep... I am not afraid"). Next there is a petition: "Rise up, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God" (v. 7). Finally there is a kind of thanksgiving: "Deliverance belongs to the Lord; may your blessing be on your people" (v. 8).

According to Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46, Jesus' last words were from a lament psalm (22): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" To get the full meaning of Jesus' words it is necessary to read the whole psalm, which ends on a note of vindication and celebration.

The biblical laments can help sufferers to recognize that they are not alone but stand in a long tradition of suffering people. These psalms allow sufferers to address God directly, to shake off their personal and religious inhibitions, and to express their feelings of pain, fear and confusion. Also, they can help sufferers to articulate the questions that their suffering raises: Why am I suffering? Does it have any meaning? Where is God?

The lament psalms are part of our biblical heritage. Once used in liturgical celebrations at the Jerusalem Temple, they are now embedded in a tradition that links millions of people all over the world. They remind us that those who suffer are honored members of our community of faith. The laments may be the Bible's most important contribution to the issue of suffering and meaning.

Jesus and suffering

From the Gospels we learn three important points about Jesus and suffering.

1. Jesus resisted and eliminated suffering. Many Gospel stories tell of Jesus healing the blind and sick. Matthew's Gospel summarizes this way: "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness" (9:35).

2. Jesus rejected suffering as punishment for sin. Deeply embedded in the Hebrew tradition is the conviction that suffering is punishment for sin, called the "Law of Retribution." The people in exile in Babylon, for example, interpreted their exile as God's punishment for their failure to follow the covenant faithfully. This conviction appears in many religions and cultures. Jesus, however, rejected it. Matthew's Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount describes God as beyond all that: "for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:45).

Similarly, John's Jesus heals the blind man and explicitly rejects the idea that suffering is punishment for sin. Jesus tells those listening, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible

through him" (see Jn 9:1-41, especially 2-5).

Finally, consider Luke 13:4-5, a question about people who died in the tragic collapse of the tower of Siloam. Jesus indicates that the victims were not killed due to some sin or guilt on their part. Everyone, he says, needs to repent, to turn towards God.

3. Jesus trusted a compassionate, present God. The Gospels reveal Jesus' intimate, loving relationship with God. Jesus' surprising use of the word *Abba* ("Daddy") to describe God conveys a sense of simplicity, familiarity and trust. The parables also give us a glimpse of Jesus' sense of God. The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) tells us a lot about the father: He allows his son freedom even to waste the inheritance; he watches for his return; he forgives the son without any bitterness, throwing a party to celebrate; he goes out to console the angry older brother. Abba is a loving, forgiving, gentle parent. Even as he faced suffering and death, Jesus remained faithful to his call, always trusting God. In the Resurrection, God confirms Jesus' faithfulness.

Interpreting a terrible death

The life and teaching of Jesus highlighted the healing presence of a God of love and life. In the end, however, Jesus suffered a horrible execution. The mystery of suffering and death—first Jesus' and later others'—led the early Christian communities to search for light and meaning. They looked to their own culture and their Hebrew Scriptures for possible interpretations. These insights found their way into their preaching and eventually into the New Testament.

From Jewish culture they knew about ransom. From their Jewish practices they also experienced sacrifice and atonement. From their Wisdom literature (the Book of Wisdom is an example) they were familiar with the theme of the vindication of the Innocent Sufferer. From the prophet Isaiah (chapters 42, 49, 50, 52-53) Jesus' followers creatively used the songs of the Suffering Servant to interpret Jesus' suffering and death. The Messiah, of course, was not expected to be a suffering messiah.

The facts of crucifixion and death jarred Jesus' followers into searching the Hebrew Scriptures for insight. A good example of this whole process is the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews. Here we read of the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus (see Chapters 3-10).

Scholars tell us that what the Bible understands by terms such as *sacrifice* and *atonement* may be quite different from the understandings that many of us have. For example, for Hebrew people, the blood of the sacrificed animal symbolized the life of the person or community. Pouring the blood on the altar was a symbolic gesture reuniting life with God. The sacrifices were an expression of the people's desire for reconciliation and union with God. The ritual, of course, still included violence and the death of the victim.

Throughout the centuries Christians have reflected on and developed these different interpretations, leading to a variety of theologies and popular pieties, some of them quite distant from the Scriptures and even farther

from the vision of Jesus.

In the fourth century, St. Augustine spoke of satisfaction for sin in legal terms of debts and justice. A key development took place in the 12th century when the theologian St. Anselm developed St. Augustine's ideas to describe atonement for sin. Anselm, reflecting the medieval culture of his day, understood sin to be something like a peasant insulting a king. Reconciliation would require satisfaction for this insult to the king's honor. Sin, however, is an infinite offense against God that demands adequate atonement. While humanity was obliged to atone, no human could pay this infinite debt. Only God could do so adequately.

According to this 12th-century view, that is exactly what Jesus, the God-Man, accomplished by his suffering and death. It was actually later theologians and preachers who added to Anselm's position by emphasizing blood and pain as the satisfaction that placated God's anger. Many Catholics still grow up with such an understanding.

This image of God—angry, demanding, even bloodthirsty—often appears in sermons, songs and popular pieties today, although the focus is usually placed on Jesus' willingness to bear the suffering. Many people are uneasy with this view of God, even if they do not know exactly why. This image of God is very different from the one expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus is not Plan B

There is an alternative interpretation of the life and death of Jesus, also expressed in the Scriptures and throughout the tradition. This view, perhaps only on the margins of many people's religious understanding and devotion, is completely orthodox and is solidly rooted in the Christian tradition. Indeed, it offers perspectives much closer to Jesus' own experience and vision.

What, briefly, is the heart of this alternative interpretation? It holds that the whole purpose of creation is for the Incarnation, God's sharing of life and love in a unique and definitive way. God becoming human is not an afterthought, an event to make up for Original Sin and human sinfulness. Incarnation is God's first thought, the original design for all creation. The purpose of Jesus' life is the fulfillment of the whole creative process, of God's eternal longing to become human. Theologians call this the "primacy of the Incarnation."

For many of us who have lived a lifetime with the atonement view, it may be hard at first to hear this alternative, "incarnational" view. Yet it may offer some wonderful surprises for our relationship with God. God is not an angry or vindictive God, demanding the suffering and death of Jesus as payment for past sin. God is, instead, a gracious God, sharing divine life and love in creation and in the Incarnation. Such a view can dramatically change our image of God, our approach to suffering, our day-to-day prayer. This approach finds its strongest scriptural expression in John's Gospel and in the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians.

Throughout the centuries great Christian theologians have contributed to this positive perspective on God and Jesus. From the groundbreaking Cappadocian Fathers in the fourth century (St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nazianzus) to Franciscan John Duns Scotus in the 13th century to Jesuit Karl Rahner in the 20th century, God's gracious love and the primacy of the Incarnation have been proclaimed.

In the late 20th century, theologian Catherine LaCugna pulled together many of these themes in her book *God For Us*. She uses and expands the Cappadocians' wonderful image of the Trinity as divine dance to include all persons. Borrowing themes of intimacy and communion from John's Gospel and Ephesians, she affirms that humanity has been made a partner in the divine dance not through our own merit but through God's election from all eternity. She writes: "The God who does not need nor care for the creature, or who is immune to our suffering, does not exist....The God who keeps a ledger of our sins and failings, the divine policeman, does not exist. These are all false gods....What we believe about God must match what is revealed of God in Scripture: God watches over the widow and the poor, God makes the rains fall on just and unjust alike, God welcomes the stranger and embraces the enemy."

The emphasis on Jesus as God's first thought can free us from the idea that God is violent. It allows us to focus on God's overflowing love. This love is the very life of the Trinity and spills over into creation, Incarnation and the promise of fulfillment of all creation. What a difference this makes for our relationship with God! Life and love, not suffering and death, become the core of our spirituality and morality.

The abyss of suffering

But what about the "dark abyss" (Psalm 88) of suffering? The alternative approach with its emphasis on God's overflowing love leads us beyond our natural question of "Why?" and suggests four elements of a response to suffering:

1. Acknowledge suffering. Being truthful means avoiding denial and admitting the pain and horror of the suffering, whatever the cause. We must never glorify suffering. Yes, it can lead us to deeper maturity and wisdom, but suffering can also crush the human spirit. Following the lead of the Psalmist (see Psalms 22, 44, 53, 77, 88, 109 and many others), we can express our pain in lament. The first step to grief and healing is to move from overwhelmed silence to the bold speech of lament. The psalms show us how to speak out against suffering and oppression, even to complain against God. Such crying out allows us both to grieve and to grow into a mature covenant partner with God.

2. Trust in God. Lament renews our relationship with God. Trusting in God, of course, is especially challenging in the dark times of suffering. Our usual response is initially just the opposite. We question how God could cause this suffering or at least allow it. We ask why. We may complain to God or even begin to doubt God's existence. That is exactly why the lament psalms can be so helpful, matching our experience and emotions. The

lament allows us to stay in conversation with God, gradually moving to a new trust.

Jesus, of course, is a marvelous example of trust in God. His deep, trusting relationship with Abba grounded his life and teaching. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt 10:29-31).

3. Act. Trust in God both allows and inspires our response to suffering in our action. We acknowledge that at times our choices have caused personal and social suffering, so one form of action is moving toward repentance and a change of heart. We also suffer from sickness and many other personal challenges. In this suffering we need to reach out to others, to ask for help, to receive what they offer, to allow them to accompany us in "the dark abyss." As we reach out to people, so too we move toward God, who may seem very distant. Lament, praise, gratitude—all of these are forms of worship.

Following the life and ministry of Jesus, we work as individuals and as communities to overcome and end suffering. Our actions include remaining with others in their suffering. We can also directly express our compassion by preparing meals, running errands, providing transportation and praying with those who suffer.

Awareness of the world's suffering leads us to action concerning political and economic issues. The needs are so great and the issues so complex—what can one person do? We can search in solidarity with others for courageous ways to overcome suffering and its causes in our world. We cannot do everything, but we can at least do one thing. We can, for example, tutor in an inner-city school or organize parish groups that promote the consistent ethic of life.

4. Stand in awe. We know that it is a human reaction to ask "Why?", to search for meaning and reasons for our suffering. Yet suffering remains a mystery, not a problem to be solved. We stand with Job at the end of his bold contest with God: "What can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth" (40:4).

The emphasis on creation-for-Incarnation, culminating in the Resurrection, also gives us great hope. God does not desire suffering but works to overcome it. God did not demand Jesus' suffering and does not want ours. Thus, we lament and act to overcome suffering, even as we acknowledge its incomprehensibility. We marvel at God's remarkable respect of human freedom. We know that the suffering of injustice and terrorism results from peoples' evil choices. Yet we also know that the suffering of incurable disease or natural disasters simply happens in a world that is not yet fulfilled.

Finally, however, suffering is not fully understandable. Rather than "why?" perhaps we should be asking, "How can I respond? What can we do now?" A profound trust in a compassionate God allows us to ask these questions and then to act, with surprising peace and hope.

SUMMARY

- Suffering demands our attention. 'Suffering' involves more than just pain; it includes both physical suffering and 'moral suffering'. Grief, loss, injustice, loneliness and powerlessness to alleviate the sufferings of others are all examples of 'moral suffering'. Although all animals suffer, the human capacity for suffering is greater — other animals largely or entirely lack the capacity for moral suffering.

- There is a 'world' of human suffering, in which we all have a part. We are called to communion and solidarity with one another partly through our shared experience of suffering. We suffer when we experience any kind of evil.

- The significance of suffering is not as a punishment for evil. But suffering does call us to a recognition of evil, in so far as it is intrinsically connected with evil, and so it calls us to a conversion, to turn away from evil.

- But it has a deeper meaning that this. To see this meaning, we must open ourselves to the ultimate source of the meaning of everything, which is love. It is Christ who enables us to enter into the mystery of love, and to grasp the meaning of suffering.

- Christ is God's gift of his Son to us, so that we "should not perish, but have everlasting life". The opposite of this Redemption is not only temporal suffering, but the definitive suffering, the loss of eternal life. The mission of Jesus is to conquer suffering; to strike at the roots of suffering, sin and death. So Christ's work of proclaiming liberty to captives, healing the sick, comforting the afflicted and raising the dead is not simply a series of signs to call attention to his teachings, but an intrinsic part of our Redemption.

- Christ took human suffering upon himself, not only in participating, as we all do, in experiences like fatigue, homelessness, and so forth but also in his Passion. Christ accepts this suffering out of love for the Father and for us. Just as our suffering exceeds that of animals, so the Incarnate Son has a still deeper capacity to suffer. His suffering has human dimensions, but it also has unique depth and intensity because the person who suffers is the Son of God. The suffering of the Cross embraces the total measure of evil contained in the world of sin. It is given meaning by the love which leads Christ to embrace it. Good is drawn from suffering, just as the supreme good of Redemption is drawn from the supreme suffering of the Cross. This leads us to view the question of the meaning of suffering in a new light.

- In bringing about human Redemption through suffering, Christ has raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. As we all share in the Redemption, we can all share — through our participation in the world of suffering, and our membership of the Body of Christ — in the suffering which secured Redemption.

- This does not mean that the Redemption worked by Christ is incomplete, and must or can be completed by further suffering on our

part. It means that the Redemption, accomplished through suffering in love, remains always open to all love expressed in human suffering. The Redemption is at once fully accomplished (in the historical sense), and constantly being accomplished (in the transcendent sense) and the suffering of the Body of Christ is involved in Redemption just as the suffering of the historic Christ was involved in Redemption.

- Thus, in Christ, our suffering is not only human but also supernatural. It is human because, in suffering, we discover ourselves, our own humanity, dignity and mission. It is supernatural because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption of the world.