

and formed another within their hearts where in faith and love they could remould the world, 'nearer to the heart's desire.'

29. He understands as no one else can possibly understand. He is our friend and we can find no better friend. He is the friend of the world and he is our friend because he is above us and reaches to the height of God, nothing lacking in him, no moment when he will fail us—he will not let us down whose arms are everlasting and will not weary as they carry us across the desert of life.

30. Fear! Fear creates so many evils, panic has been the cause of so much wrong; so many outrages in time of war and peace are done in panic, so many spiritual depths are never sounded and so many spiritual heights are never climbed because men have not faith. Almost, perhaps, the deepest need is to know that he is there, to be content that he is there to ask him for nothing so doing how can we be afraid!

31. If we have a heart empty he takes possession. 'Having nothing, yet possessing all things.'



## SUFFERING AND HOLINESS

BY

DOM OSWALD SUMNER



ONE day at Segovia a picture of Christ spoke to St John of the Cross. "Brother John, ask me for what you wish, and I will give it you for the service you have done me". And I said to him: "Lord, what I wish you to give me are sufferings to be borne for your sake, and that I may be despised and regarded as worthless".

This little incident taken from the life of the Doctor of Mystical Prayer is a suitable approach to the question of suffering and holiness. We see at once that at the top of the ladder of holiness there are degrees where the one desire is to suffer and be despised, to be so torn to pieces by the tongues of others, by the bodily injuries they inflict on one, or by the ravages of disease, that the saint has reproduced in himself something of the sufferings of Christ. His suffering contains no element of egotistic self-pity but is lovingly embraced as the most perfect expression of his compassion and love for Christ.

All sufferings are the result of original sin which has brought about a disintegration of man in his spirit by the loss of supernatural grace, in his psyche, as we may call the higher functions of man that depend on his bodily organism, by the upsetting of his psychic functions,

and in his body by its becoming subject to physical disintegration by suffering, illness, and by death. We could say that in Adam health and holiness (wholeness) were one thing, for he was a fully integrated personality and every part of his being worked in harmony and in order with its own proper hierarchy of functions descending from the spiritual to the material aspects of his nature—the result being perfect holiness and perfect healthiness, i.e., perfect wholeness of body and spirit.

For the saint, i.e., for the man who has regained the perfect state of Paradise, the suffering of bodily or psychological evil does no harm—far from it; such suffering is used as a means to express the perfect charity that reigns in the now completely ordered and integrated spirit. We can learn from St John of the Cross the stages of the ascent that the saint passes through on the long road from the beginning of a spiritual life to its final perfection in the state of transforming union; and we can also learn from him something of the usefulness of sufferings at the different stages of the ascent.

For the beginner only the gross and palpable sufferings of the body are noticed, so that the terrible sufferings caused by sin, by the darkness of the understanding, by one's distance from the light of God are not and cannot be experienced and are only theoretically known; they are taken on faith. This is because he has not yet had his sensible nature put in order, purified and refined in the night of the senses. When that has taken place the whole being will be raised to a higher plane and light will flood in on these matters. St John tells us: 'All the delights and pleasures of the will in all the things of the world, in comparison with all those delights which are God, are supremely affliction, torment and bitterness'. 'All the wealth and glory of all creatures, in comparison with the wealth which is God, is supreme poverty and wretchedness'. Yet the beginner has to accept this on faith, for he does not in the least experience the affliction, torment, bitterness, supreme poverty and wretchedness St John speaks of. What he *does* notice is that he suffers from bodily pains and that these cause him afflictions.

Physical pains can indeed be, and frequently have been, the cause of the beginning of the spiritual life, as we see in such instances as the physical sufferings that accompanied the conversion of St Ignatius Loyola. Why is this? Because they lead the egocentric man to reflect—to enter himself, to consider living facts that have been utterly neglected before—the meaning of life, its purpose, how to fulfil that purpose—so to God and what he has done to help us attain that goal—the need of realisation, of energy, of thought, being poured out on this end—the real relationships of man with his neighbour, his

obligations to him as a member of society. By means of this reflection the suffering man discovers the meaning of things: and so, in the case of St Ignatius, he is enabled to use and adapt to his own use the spiritual exercises of the beginner that he found to his hand and by their means to enter a true spiritual life that was to lead in the course of many years to the heights of holiness.

St John of the Cross shows in the clearest terms the gradual refining process through suffering that takes place as the whole man passes through that night of the senses whose special characteristic is suffering in both the physical and psychical life. All things connected with God and divine things are turned into bitterness and darkness: revolts of the instinctive and sense life and at times a complete overthrowing of all sense of judgment and direction. Later a far more terrible period of suffering is endured as the soul passes through the night of the spirit. Bodily sufferings will without doubt accompany both these stages and aid in the purifying process.

It is not difficult to understand that for the holy man sufferings have a spiritual work to perform. Our real problem concerns those who are unable to make good use of sufferings, whether the physical sufferings or those psychic diseases we call neuroses, as an entry on a true spiritual. These diseases can be suffered for long years and in spite of his good will the patient seems unable to advance at all in the spiritual life. These sufferings can so interfere with the life of prayer that true prayer may become well-nigh impossible, not because the soul is passing through mystical nights, but because the disintegration of the being is so great that it seems impossible to tune in to spiritual things at all. It would be a dangerous delusion to assure such persons that they are being led through high spiritual experiences. They are in fact almost incapable of using their sufferings for a spiritual purpose, owing to their immature and infantile condition, until something has been done to set their psychic life in reasonable order. They are not yet capable of becoming 'beginners' in the sense of St John of the Cross; or, in the language of St Teresa, they remain with the beasts outside the Interior Castle.

Perhaps a word of warning is needed here. When discussing the state of the soul or the life of the psyche one is often reduced to speaking as though it was a life set out in a map or scheme, a lifeless, cold, fixed, schematic thing, whereas in real life there is an infinite number of degrees of wholeness and integration and one can be partly in one stage of the spiritual life and partly in another. So also we must not take what is called 'integration' as being a sort of fixed goal which when once attained is attained for ever; but rather as a state of life in which the psychic functions are working

in reasonably good order, which order can go on increasing to an indefinite extent.

How are we to begin with the process of re-integration of the natural man that is necessary before sufferings can be profitably borne? To explain this matter adequately a whole psychological treatise would have to be written, and here we can do no more than give a pointer to the kind of process we are referring to. As a result perhaps of some psychic wound of childhood, e.g., a shock given by parents or others, or even through a too 'maternal' possessive attitude of the mother, a person may have his whole psychic functioning disorientated. The man who is extraverted by nature may be forced to live as though he were an introvert. The man whose leading function should be sensation is forced to live the life of a thinker, and so on. In such a personality there can be no spontaneity; all is solemn and stiff and rigid owing to the mis-functioning. All life is lived with friction and difficulty and so much energy is expended in overcoming this friction that little is left over for the spiritual and cultural purposes of life. As a result of this natural disorder the spiritual life will be very greatly hampered, for grace builds on nature, and where nature is thoroughly disordered some natural order must be regained before the spiritual life can become properly established.

Such disintegrated people suffer greatly and their sufferings are large due to the tremendous effort they have to make to live any sort of externally normal life. Yet it would seem that their sufferings result in no re-ordering of nature and this will not take place without a miracle, unless some fresh psychic process begins to take place by which the mould of the emotional life is loosened and the psyche allowed to flow into its natural form once more and there be re-set. This is a difficult and painful task requiring great perseverance and endurance on the part of the sufferer. It is a major psychic operation and is the special task of the psychologist.

The existence of this *natural* disorder in many people gives the clue to the problem why it is that so often a vast expenditure of time and energy leads to no real spiritual growth at all. These people are not yet even spiritual 'beginners'. St John tells us of directors who 'know no more than how to deal with these (beginners)—please God they may know even so much!—and refuse to allow souls to go beyond these rudimentary acts of meditation and imagination, even though God is seeking to lead them farther, so that they never *exceed* or depart from their *natural capacity*'. (Italics ours. *Living Flame*. Stanza 111, par. 31): Here he is speaking of beginners who in all their spiritual exercises (and sufferings) never exceed their natural capacity and so never set foot on the path he is going to speak of

at all. Therefore the immature personality cannot even become a beginner for he has so far never reached anything like his *natural capacity*. For such people the sufferings of life may even have a traumatic effect and produce a further psychic crippling rather than any real growth.

These thoughts now allow us to deal with the question of self-inflicted sufferings such as come under the head of mortification, e.g., fasting, hair shirts, disciplines, spiked chains, and suchlike penances. For the person whose natural psychic functioning is in complete disorder no amount of use of such things will produce any spiritual benefit or have the effect of righting the sick psyche. They will do further harm, as all these things will be used merely to increase the already existing disorder owing to the natural myopia. Yet these will be the very people who will tend to misjudge the whole matter owing to their own interior disorder. They will tend to take all the advice on such matters that they meet in spiritual books as though it was primarily meant for people in their disordered condition, when in fact only those whose natural capacity is in good order will be able to make profitable use of such advice and give a positive note to the mortifications that the disintegrated man cannot but take in a negative manner.

Suffering has always been a chief note of the Christian life. So our Lord tells us that unless we take up our cross daily we cannot be his disciples.



## THE GOAL

BY

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**R**ENEWED interest in the problem of God's vocation has recently been awakened by the autobiographical sketch of a woman who lived as a nun but 'without a vocation' for twenty-eight years before metaphorically 'leaping over the wall' to return to the world<sup>1</sup>. Many individuals have experienced the problem for themselves in trying to find out what it is that God wants them to do. 'What is my vocation?' a young man or woman will ask, and he will spend many months investigating avenues which may be according to the divine plan which is so very difficult to discern. The difficulty is often based on a false interpretation of a true doctrine. God created every individual soul and creates

<sup>1</sup> *Leap Over the Wall*. By Monica Baldwin.