

Living Sacrifice: Is there a Non-pathological Way of Living Suffering as Sacrifice?¹

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I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom. 12:1)

Introduction

The aim of this speculative chapter is to sketch a theological position rather than develop a full argument: to open up some lines of thought which are incomplete but, I hope, suggestive, perhaps even provocative. In some respects it might be likened to a kind of Pascalian or Teilhardian meditation.² It is aimed at encouraging us to think differently about something familiar. More specifically, it is aimed at unsettling what I, along with many others, regard as a damaging constellation of ideas about God's salvific work and the place of suffering in that work. It seeks to do this by showing such ideas to be unnecessary.

¹ Here 'pathological' is meant in its primary medical sense of that which is damaging to the body – in this case, the ecclesial body of Christ – rather than its subsequent extended use as a term of societal and even ethical disapproval. Behind this lies a particular understanding of the systematic theological task, versions of which recur throughout my writings, as consisting in something like the attentive analysis of Christian life and the questions and problems which arise there, with the aim of offering constructive repair and thereby enhancing the quality of Christian life. This is systematic theology understood as an intentional ministry of healing to the stresses and strains in contemporary ecclesial reality and the pathologies, paralyses, and wounds which disfigure the living ecclesial body of Christ. It represents a praxis-inflected version of St Anselm's far more elegant *fides quaerens intellectum*.

² See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, A. J. Krailsheimer (trans.), (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Pensées', in his *Hymn of the Universe*, Gerald Vann, O.P. (trans.), (London and New York: Collins and Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 69-141.

Prompting this meditation was a conversation I had with Karen Kilby during the course of the Love and Suffering project on which she was engaged with the Sisters of La Retraite. Karen mentioned a reflection of one of the sisters, that whereas previous generations had been helped to find and express the meaning of their suffering in the language of “offering it up with Christ” and of “looking at Christ on the cross”, this does not seem right to us.³ But nor, the sister had further reflected, have we found any replacement. For her own part, the sister was not passing judgment on previous generations; more simply both noting that whilst the notion of “offering it up” had worked for them, helping to carry them through, it does not seem to do so for many of us today, and regretting the apparent lack of an alternative mode of proceeding.

I draw two things from reflecting on this. First, that the theology and spirituality of “offering it up” no longer works for us. Second, that the lack of an alternative ready means of transmuting the endurance of suffering into a prayerful act of faith and of seeking to live suffering as an act of love is indeed a serious lack in much contemporary Christian theology and spirituality. Indeed, I wish to press this contrast somewhat more sharply than the sister herself was doing. For my own part, I do in fact consider the constellation of ideas which tends to lie behind the spirituality of “offering our suffering up” to be unhealthy and damaging, distorted and distorting. I also, however, hold – both on account of its inescapable role in human life and on account of its central relationship with the Christian tradition – that we urgently need to find an alternative, non-pathological, and convincing way of positively

³ Typically feeding into the once-standard Catholic spirituality of “offering up” one’s sufferings as a participation in the redemptive work of Christ was a specific constellation of ideas and influences, in particular: i) the assumption, from Anselmian satisfaction theory, that for the infinite offence of sin to God’s dignity to be satisfied, there must either be an infinite debt of honour rendered or an infinite debt of punishment endured, ii) the assumption, from Col. 1:24 [‘I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church’], that we are called not only to be taken into the movement of Christ’s redemptive work but to emulate and extend it in some way in order to help make good on the aforementioned debt and iii) that this can be done through the intentional endurance – the “offering up” – of such things as suffering, self-denial, and penance as privileged means of sharing in this manner in the redemptive work of Christ.

and actively integrating suffering into our spiritual lives, in a manner which flows from the heart of the tradition.

My key assumption is that in Christian spirituality it is uncontentious to think of prayer as a means of sharing in the one act of God's trinitarian love, which act is always creative and transformative in this order. In turn, my core constructive suggestion is that we can choose to live unavoidable suffering as a space of bodily prayer, akin to fasting, which can similarly be a channel for the movement of this creative-transforming act of love, both in our own lives and in the lives of others.

The meditation is in four movements. First, a number of other principles are identified which are woven into my constructive proposal. At this point, little by way of supporting arguments or evidence is provided for these. In any full treatment of the proposal this lack would clearly need to be rectified. Second, brief indication is made of the family of ideas which, despite their strong pedigree in Christian spirituality and theology – particularly Western Christian spirituality and theology – is here rejected as profoundly problematic. Third, a somewhat different constellation of ideas is traced, with different presuppositions. Finally, it is suggested that this different way of thinking provides a way of re-appropriating the practice of living unavoidable suffering as sacrifice but as a non-pathological loving, *life-giving*, *self-giving* rather than as a self-emptying, self-renouncing, offering-up as part of the price of redemption.⁴ So, in T. S. Eliot-style, we come back to where we started but, hopefully, now seen afresh.⁵

⁴ Although quite independently developed and here distinctly focussed on the question of how we might seek to live unavoidable suffering positively as an act of love, in relation to the underlying critique and re-appropriation of the understanding of sacrifice in Christian tradition there are some points of resonance with the recent interesting argument of Asle Eikrem, *God as Sacrificial Love: A Systematic Exploration of a Controversial Notion* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2018), particularly Chapter 6, pp. 119-74. One of the distinctive points in the present proposal, however, is the central place given, as will emerge, to this original core concept of 'life-giving, self-giving' love as a felicitous means for thinking of the fundamental divine dynamic at work in the being-in-act of the Trinity and, by analogy, so much else.

⁵ See 'We shall not cease from exploration

1. *Assumed principles*

§1 *About God, the Trinity:* Christian tradition understands God as the fully actualised eternal act of joyous love, in which there is no lack, no un-actualised potential, and no possibility of diminishment. As such, Christian tradition maintains that the life of the Trinity is unchanging – because already absolutely fully actualised – and without need, risk or suffering.⁶

§2 *About creation:* Christian tradition understands creation as an utterly gratuitous, contingent act held within the one eternal fully actualised act of the Trinity. In accordance with this, Catholic Christian tradition understands creation, in each and every part and in its totality, as only existing through participation in and orientation towards this one, absolutely fulfilled act of joyous love, in which creation's destiny lies.⁷

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.'

T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding' (1942), 'Four Quartets', in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 191-8 (p. 197).

⁶ In assuming this principle, of understanding the Trinity as the fully actualised act of being, I am aligning myself with the classical Augustinian-Thomistic Catholic tradition. In emphasising this one eternal act of love as 'joyous' love, I am aligning myself more specifically with this tradition as drawn upon and freshly voiced by Julian of Norwich in the 14th century, see id., *Revelations of Divine Love*, Clifton Wolters (trans.), (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966). As Karen Kilby explores, adherence to this principle distinguishes the line assumed and developed here from the approach adopted by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who views the demands of love to be such as to introduce suffering and risk into the very trinitarian life of God and not simply as a matter of God's identification with us and bearing with us in Christ and the Spirit. See Karen E. Kilby, 'Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the Status of Suffering in Christian Theology', *New Blackfriars*, 99 (2018), pp. 298-311.

⁷ See '(v) God who made everything because of love, by the same love sustains it in being, now and for ever, (vi) God is all that is good, as I see it, and is the goodness of all good things.' Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, §8, p. 74, adapted to gender-neutral; also 'God showed me all this to my great happiness, as if God were saying, "Look, I am God. I am in all. I do everything! I never cease upholding my work, and I never will. I

§3 *About created action:* as brought into and held in being by nothing other than the one eternal act of the Trinity, all created action is made possible by, dependent upon, and situated within this one act. With Julian of Norwich, ‘... everything that is done is well done, for it is our Lord God who does it. How God functions in creatures was showed me at this time; not how they function in themselves. God is the focal point of everything and does it all.’⁸

§4 *About relative created freedom:* moreover, as brought into and held in being by nothing other than the absolutely free being-in-act of the Trinity with a view to sharing variously in this one being-in-act and as, therefore, variously reflecting something of God’s trinitarian being, creation necessarily has a relative freedom about it and is a sphere in which relative freedom is necessarily possible.⁹ If this is variously true of all creation, it is true in a particular way of embodied, self-conscious human creation, which in Judaeo-Christian tradition is understood as being created in the ‘image of God’ (Gen. 1:26). As situated within and orientated to the absolutely free being-in-act of the Trinity, it follows that the fulfilment of relative creaturely freedom consists in freely-

am guiding everything toward the end I ordained for it from the first, by the same might, wisdom, and love with which I made it.’ Ibid., §11, pp. 80-1, adapted.

⁸ Ibid., §11, p. 80, adapted. In this Augustinian-Thomistic understanding of the concurrence of divine and created action and in contrast to the central premise of free-will defence theodicies, the realm of creaturely action does not strictly stand over against and in absolute distinction from the realm of divine action but is always situated within the latter as the ground of its possibility.

⁹ This is also to reject another standard premise in free-will defence theodicies: that God had a real choice to make between a created order with relative freedom and a deterministic created order without any such freedom. By contrast, the assumed position here – although I am not claiming that this particular assumption is generally made explicit within standard articulations of the Augustinian-Thomistic classical tradition – is that the only real choice open to God was between either creation with relative freedom, and all that could be anticipated in detail as following from that, or no creation at all. Given that creation only exists within and so reflects something of the one being-in-act of the Trinity, and given that freedom is an essential attribute of the Trinity, then creation – if it is to exist at all – must, I am suggesting, have something of a relative freedom about it.

willed alignment with this free being-in-act of the Trinity. Divine freedom and creaturely freedom are not locked into a zero-sum relationship.

- §5 *About sinful creaturely action:* as both held in being by and granted a relative freedom within the one absolutely free and fulfilled act of the Trinity, it is possible, if incomprehensible, for creaturely action to resist and contradict the joyous loving orientation of the one eternal act on which such creaturely action depends for its very possibility and consummation.¹⁰
- §6 *About God's presence to and in creation:* given that creation only exists as contingent participation in the one eternal act of the Trinity, in Catholic Christian tradition God in Christ and the Spirit is closer, more intimate, to each created thing than created things are to themselves.¹¹ As present to and within each experience as the one act of existing, God in Christ and the Spirit knows each experience from within. This is true in a unique way of the Word incarnate in the Spirit in the human nature of Jesus. By analogy, however, it is also more generally true of the most intimate presence of the Spirit to and within each created thing. As St Paul writes, '... the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains ...' longing to '... obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom. 8:21-22).

¹⁰ Again this is in line with the Augustinian-Thomistic understanding of sin and evil as a privation of the good and, as such, a lived lie and self-frustrating self-contradiction. In Julian's terms, 'From this I gathered that sin is not a thing that we do, not a deed, for in all that was *done*, there was no sin shown.' *Revelations of Divine Love*, §11, p. 80; also 'All this was shown in a flash ... But I did not see *sin*. I believe it has no substance or real existence. It can only be known by the pain it causes.' *Ibid.*, §27, p. 104.

¹¹ See 'God is nearer to us than our own soul, for God is the ground in which it stands, and God is the means by which substance and sensuality are so held together that they can never separate. Our soul reposes in God its true rest, and stands in God, its true strength, and is fundamentally rooted in God, its eternal love.' *Ibid.*, §56, p. 161, adapted.

§7 *About the human vocation:* with creation understood as originating from, existing within, and being oriented to the Trinity's one fully actualised act of joyous love as source, sustainer, and consummation, the classical Christian tradition views embodied, self-conscious, communicating humanity as the place where this comes to conscious recognition, articulation, and response. In the *imago Dei* tradition this suggests an understanding of humanity – every human – as priest of creation, called both to voice creation's praise and pain and to enact and embody the creator's loving purpose. As will be developed here, this might also include voicing and embodying the creator's rejection, through embrace and transformation, of the pain and suffering which creation entails. In this understanding, life in the Spirit, the life of grace, consists in becoming sensitive, attuned, and fluent in this participation; and contemplative prayer and living similarly consists in learning to be within this one act in the particular circumstances of our lives. Again with St Paul, '... we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption ...' (Rom. 8:23).

§8 *About physical pain:* physical pain is a consequence of finitude, material bodiliness, sentience, and creaturely frailty in a relatively free created order capable of producing and sustaining relatively free sentient beings. The potential for physical pain is the inevitable consequence of created material existence.¹² This is not to say that any specific event of pain is inevitable, for each specific event is always contingent on myriad contingent factors. Indeed, even though all such contingent factors and specific events might be "anticipated" and known from all eternity in God's omniscience, that still does not necessarily make any such specific event inevitable. What is inevitable in

¹² This is a contested presupposition. For its sustained rejection in favour of a theological apophysis which declines any answer to 'Why suffering?' whilst both maintaining that God does not do death or deathliness in any way and resisting any resort to providential explanation, see John E. Thiel, *God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 2002).

a relatively free material creation with sentient beings is both the basic potential for pain and that some such pain will be experienced by all sentient beings, even though its specific realisation will be contingent on all sorts of factors.

§9 *About emotional pain:* emotional pain is the more specific consequence of our being interdependent creatures made for joyous love who have to tread this path in a frail and finite world marked by sinful failures in love. Taken together, pain in all its forms is the consequence of our being created for joyous love in a relatively free sentient material order marked by sin.

§10 *About God's permitting of the possibilities of pain, suffering, sin, and evil:* the account I am tracing here – of the capacity for pain and suffering being consequential upon a sentient material creation and the possibility of sin being incomprehensibly consequential upon the necessary relative freedom of creation – requires us to say that at some level the trinitarian God of inexhaustible love has said yes to a world such as this existing in which pain and suffering is foreseeable; and perhaps even foreseeable in specific detail and not just as a general possibility. That, however, does not *ipso facto* equate with the dangerous and damaging claim that any specific event of pain or suffering is ever specifically positively given as a deliberate means of achieving some good or other. That particular idea is here rejected. We can say that 'From all eternity God might anticipate how various non-compensatory goods of redemption and consummation might ultimately be drawn from the various specific ills which can be anticipated as being undesirably consequential upon creation' without having to say that 'Such ills are to be understood as having been specifically and deliberately given for such purposes'. The first statement neither requires nor should lead us to think the

second statement. By contrast, in the line of thought being explored here, such ills are the divinely foreseeable undesired surd of creation which are only permitted in the knowledge that they will be redeemed. Again with Julian of Norwich, ‘... all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’¹³

§11 *About resisting suffering*: whenever we are able to resist, alleviate, or overcome suffering without infringing integrity or causing further harm to others, we have the responsibility so to do.¹⁴ Pain and suffering can never properly be seen as goods in their own right.

§12 *About resisting the legitimization of suffering*: any way of thinking, Christian, pagan, or secular, which diminishes resistance to suffering is to be rejected: e.g. fatalism, the maximisation of profit, claims that the suffering of non-human animals is irrelevant, convictions about the necessity of suffering for God’s redemptive activity, or claims for its irrelevance when compared with the joy of eternity.

2. *A dangerous family of ideas*

¹³ Or in Wolters’ rather more prosaic translation, ‘... it is all going to be all right; it is all going to be all right; everything is going to be all right.’ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, §27, pp. 103-4.

¹⁴ The caveat about not infringing integrity includes the integrity of personal vocation and mission. On the one hand, the gospels both record a number of occasions on which Jesus either gave his opponents the slip or avoided going up to Jerusalem, thus showing that crisis and suffering do not need deliberately to be sought out when they are otherwise avoidable. On the other hand, all four gospels bear consistent witness to Jesus’ resoluteness once it was clear that the integrity of his vocation could not be satisfied except by embracing and making central act of the passion which was the unavoidable consequence of his life and message. The political and liberationist theologians have done a great service in enabling us to understand more clearly something of the ways in which Jesus’ death was consequential upon the life he lived and the options he made. For a thoughtful mediation of such thinking to a broad-base English-language readership, see Thomas Cullinan, *The Passion of Political Love*, 2nd edn, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1987). It is notable that Eikrem, again independently, also adopts a consequential approach to the death of Jesus, see *God as Sacrificial Love*, pp. 108-111.

At work in many theologies and spiritualities of suffering, sacrifice, self-renunciation, desolation, and dereliction is a problematic assumption which is frequently also at work in the notion of “offering up one’s sufferings” as a share in the redemptive activity of Christ. It is the assumption that human suffering – or some of it at least – is a necessary and directly divinely willed means both of our disciplining in the way of holiness and of God’s pardoning and freeing us from sin.¹⁵ As such, far from being resisted on the occasions when it is avoidable, suffering is to be embraced, even deliberately sought out, as a core mode of Christian living.

As already noted, the reception of St Anselm’s satisfaction theory of the atonement has exerted immense influence here.¹⁶ Of course, in the context of then contemporary feudal dignity codes, Anselm’s theory was intended as an account of God’s gracious, loving determination to overcome the problem caused by sin. That accepted, Anselm nevertheless straightforwardly shares the standard feudal assumption that offence to a superior’s dignity can justly only be satisfied either by the rendering of an otherwise un-owed honour in proportion to the offence committed and in excess of what is otherwise already owed to the superior party or by the undergoing of appropriate punishment as payment of penalty.¹⁷ So, for Anselm, if God is to be able, as God wills, to forgive humanity for the infinite offence

¹⁵ As identified in conversation with Walter Moberly, a full development of this argument would have to show how it configures with the recurrent scriptural tradition of testing through adversity. Distinctions would here need to be drawn between being exposed to diabolic testing (e.g. the temptation narratives, Mk 1:12-13 and parallels), being subjected to testing by a “counsel for the prosecution” within the heavenly council (e.g. Job 1:9-11), and being tested directly by God (e.g. Gen. 22:1-18, of Abraham, and Deut 8:2, of Israel in the wilderness). In keeping with the principles articulated in 1.§10 here, my inclination is to suggest that whilst life is indeed testing in ways which we can imagine as having been foreseen in specific detail within the omniscience of God, we are not required to think of such occurrences as having been positively willed within God’s loving providence. Moreover, even though we can experience ourselves as sustained by God’s love in such situations and, possibly, as growing in love through them, we are not required to think of them, and are best advised not to think of them, as having been specifically and purposefully given for this.

¹⁶ See St Anselm, ‘Cur Deus Homo’, in *St Anselm Basic Writings*, 2nd edn, S. N. Deane (trans.), (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), pp. 191-302; also n.2 in this essay.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, Bk 1, §24, pp. 247-51.

caused by sin then either an infinite un-owed act of honouring must be performed or an infinite debt of punishment must be undergone which God in Christ does on our behalf. In turn, we can then share in this by identifying our sufferings with the redemptive sufferings of Christ. Something of this is expressed in H. A. Williams' comment on suffering that 'The more of a dead-end it feels the more is it an invitation to join in Christ's sufferings.'¹⁸

It is this set of assumptions which, in one form or another, subsequently dominated the Western Christian soteriological imaginary for over a thousand years, with Protestant penal substitutionary accounts representing both a development and a narrowing of it. But there have always been counter-narratives, whether Abelard's sketching of an exemplarist approach in the 12th century¹⁹ or Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor* in the 20th century.²⁰ Further, although satisfaction and substitutionary accounts can draw support from certain strands in the New Testament, the New Testament witness is far more plural than that, utilising many different, even conflicting, images for God's salvific work in Christ and the Spirit.

I concur, then, with those who judge the dominant Western approaches to be both unnecessary and damaging beyond redemption, on account both of their valorisation of suffering and the permanent tension they can leave us with in the Trinity, between one who is

¹⁸ H. A. Williams, *Some Day I'll Find You*, (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1982), p. 177 [cited in Esther de Waal, *Lost in Wonder: Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentiveness* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 109].

¹⁹ See Peter Abailard, 'Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans (An Excerpt from the Second Book)', Gerald E. Moffatt (trans.), in *The Library of Christian Classics. Vol. X. A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, Eugene R. Fairweather (ed.), (London: SCM, 1956), pp. 276-87, particularly p. 283: 'Now it seems to us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ and reconciled to God in this way: through this unique act of grace manifested to us – in that his Son has taken upon himself our nature and persevered therein in teaching us by word and example even unto death – he has more fully bound us to himself by love; with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him.'

²⁰ See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, A.G. Hebert (trans.), (London: SPCK, 1931).

bound by justice, even wrapped in wrath, and another who, moved by mercy, endures the price of assuaging this.²¹

Let me seek to clarify what I am and am not maintaining here for, as I have indicated, I am minded to accept that all that occurs in time is “anticipated”, permitted, and ultimately transformed in the one fulfilled act of Trinitarian love from all eternity. With this, I am also minded to trust that from eternity it has been anticipated how some non-compensatory goods might be drawn from some specific ills. As St Paul, ‘We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose’ (Rom 8:28).

However, whilst being minded to think in these ways I nevertheless reject the notion that suffering is ever intentionally given to us as a lesson, or as a punishment, or as a test by God. We may indeed learn things through suffering, suffering may indeed be consequential upon our sin and folly, and the endurance of suffering may indeed test our resources. But the God of Jesus Christ is not capricious, nor vengeful, nor manipulative but faithful, trustworthy, and endlessly abundant in love, regardless of what the experienced frustrations of love might at times appear to be suggesting to the contrary:

If God is for us, who is against us? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ...

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,

²¹ For a recent critical discussion which resonates with the line of argument here, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, ‘Book I: Wrestling with Anselm’, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), pp. 1-30. By contrast, for a body of writings arguing that when correctly understood satisfaction-based approaches, and penal substitution in particular, do not in fact fall foul of the criticisms which are levied against them and actually perform ethically useful functions, see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Wondrous Cross: Atonement and Penal Substitution in the Bible and History* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007); also id., ‘Of Babies and Bathwater? Recent Evangelical Critiques of Penal Substitution in the Light of Early Modern Debates Concerning Justification’, *European Journal of Theology*, 16/2 (2007), 93-105; id., ‘Can Punishment Bring Peace? A Reconsideration of Penal Substitution’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 58/1 (2005), pp. 104-23; and id., ‘The Upholding of Beauty: A Reading of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54/2 (2001), 189-203. Also of significance specifically in relation to Anselm is Fleming Rutledge, ‘Anselm Reconsidered for Our Time’, in her *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 146-66. It is particularly to be noted that Anselm explicitly seeks to guard against the charge of their being any intra-trinitarian tension, see ‘*Cur Deus Homo*’, Bk1, §9 and Bk2, §18, pp. 206-11 & 287-93.

nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31, 35, 38-9)

3. *Thinking differently about suffering*

Turning to my central constructive idea, it might be worth pausing briefly in order to identify some other helpful ways of thinking in situations of suffering which resonate with points made earlier:

- suffering is not divine punishment or affliction but the consequence of our being finite, sentient, material beings in a relatively-free created order marked by sin;
- when we are suffering we know that those who love us seek to do so in specific ways in order to help sustain us – well given we are told that ‘the Spirit helps us in our weakness’ (Rom. 8:26), we can trust that when we are suffering, the three-fold God of love is also loving us and sustaining us in quite specific ways, even when the precise mode and character of this bread daily-given as viaticum is not transparently clear to us;
- suffering is not a state of God-forsakenness but, as revealed in Jesus and known in the Spirit, a place of God’s intimate presence who, in Word and Spirit, bears with and knows our suffering and the cost of creation from the inside – as Gerald Vann writes, ‘We know that love cannot but be involved in the suffering of what it loves; but God is love; therefore God cannot but be involved in the suffering of what God loves; but God loves all God’s creatures; therefore God cannot but be involved in the sufferings of all God’s creatures’;²²

²² Gerald Vann, O.P., *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God* (London: Blackfriars, 1947), p. 63, here adapted to gender-neutral. I am grateful to Sr Ann Swailes, O.P., of Fisher House, Cambridge, for drawing my attention to this work.

- being faithful in the context of suffering means not allowing our understanding of God to be distorted by what our suffering might be falsely suggesting to us and maintaining steady gaze on what we truly see of God in Christ and the Spirit, such that the appropriate question is not ‘Why is God doing this to me?’ but ‘How is God specifically loving and sustaining me in this situation?’;²³
- we should not be resigned to avoidable suffering but should protest and resist it – not only in relation to ourselves but also on behalf of others and, indeed, on behalf of the whole of creation – and so, as priests of creation, give voice and witness to the protest and resistance of the Spirit of Christ at work in the world;²⁴
- with this, in relation to unavoidable suffering, on behalf of creation and in the Spirit of Christ we can voice lament for the costly, consequential surd of creation – a lament which might even cry forth as reproach against God but in the course of which we might also come to understand ourselves as actually voicing the Spirit’s own lament and assurance (e.g. see Mk 15:34 cf. Ps 22);
- an experience of suffering can be of varying intensity, like the British weather, and sometimes we just need to hunker-down and endure with fortitude until a particular pulse of intensity subsides;²⁵

²³ Remembering, again with St Paul, that ‘hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5).

²⁴ This is to take Edward Schillebeeckx’s recognition of the protest which ‘negative contrast experiences’ of suffering evoke and to read this in explicitly pneumatological vein as an aspect of the movement and acting of the Holy Spirit in creation. For Schillebeeckx on ‘negative contrast experiences’, see ‘Church, Magisterium and Politics’, in Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, N. D. Smith and Theodore Westow (trans.), (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), pp. 141–66 (pp. 153–6); also id., *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism*, N. D. Smith (trans.), (New York: Seabury, 1974), pp. 91–5; id., *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, John Bowden (trans.), (New York: Seabury, 1980), pp. 817–9; and id., *Church: The Human Story of God*, John Bowden (trans.), (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 5–6 & 28–9. For drawing the pneumatological freight of this more clearly into view, I am grateful to Ross Jesmont.

²⁵ As St Paul also tells us, ‘suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope’ (Rom. 5:3–4).

- in looking for and waiting upon the possibility of transformation we need to follow scripture's exhortation to 'be patient in suffering' (Rom. 12:12), for it generally appears that the imperceptible normal mode of God's action in our lives is pebble-smoothing slow rather than wave-crash quick;²⁶
- in Catholic understanding, part of the explanation for the normality of the pebble-smoothing slow character of grace in our lives is that whilst this is throughout – from start to finish and all between – properly God's achievement in Christ and the Spirit and not ours, the story of salvation must nevertheless come to real and not just notional effect in the details of our lives such that it genuinely becomes our story: the intensity of the exceptional – the occasional impact of wave-crash quick effect – is in service of this ordinary integration of our personal narratives of desire, will, and act, not in place of it;
- whilst in situations of enduring suffering we should still seek actively to attend to and to take solace and joy in tokens of love and beauty, even in small things for in such small things something of the infinite goodness and glory of God can assuredly be revealed to us;²⁷
- without denying or diminishing the fact of current suffering, we need to keep our hearts and minds focussed on being created for a joyous love which ultimately will not be thwarted, even if transformation is not possible in this order: 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers ... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our

²⁶ Of course, these apparently different modes of action – pebble-smooth slow and wave-crash quick – are more closely related than might at first appear. It is a matter of perspective: the action of pebble-smoothing slow is in fact the cumulative effect of zillions of wave-crash quick movements over time; and observing the intensity of wave-crash quick is but to feel and to recognise in a moment the drama of the ordinary. Transformation can be happening in the imperceptible.

²⁷ Gerald Vann, O.P., expresses this well: 'What the great lovers of God tell us again and again is this: that we must not despise the *small* things, the small events of everyday. On the contrary it is through them that we can learn to share God's life because it is out of them that goodness is made.' *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God*, p. 11, also *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

Lord’ (Rom. 8:38-9) and ‘the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us’ (Rom. 8:18);

- in the context of unavoidable suffering, it can be helpful also to ask what we can learn there – *in medias res* – of the way of love and how we might even live such suffering in and as prayer, enfolded in the one act of God’s love, and assured that although ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought ... [the] ... Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words’ (Rom. 8:26).²⁸

That last point brings me to the key constructive idea at work in this meditation on living sacrifice. I offer once again a series of thoughts and summary claims without, at this point, attempting anything approaching adequate justification.

4. *Living suffering as loving, life-giving, self-giving – or living sacrifice differently*

§1 We can identify a divine dynamic of life-giving, self-giving at the heart alike of the Spirit-impelled life and ministry of Jesus unto death and resurrection and – as revealed and understood in Christ and the Spirit – of the eternal Trinitarian life of God. This is the inexhaustible eternal act of creative-transformative perfect joyous love, the unified

²⁸ The ‘it can be helpful’ references an important distinction which Karen Kilby draws between what is variously appropriate and inappropriate in first-person, second-person, and third-person forms of speaking in relation to suffering, see Kilby, ‘Eschatology, Suffering and the Limits of Theology’, in *Game over? Reconsidering Eschatology*, Christophe Chalamet, Andreas Dettwiler, Mariel Mazzocco, and Ghislain Waterlot (eds), (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), pp. 279-92. Accordingly, I recognise that whilst the approach I trace here to living suffering as prayerful act can potentially be found helpful and can be witnessed to as such (first-person) and even offered, on occasion, in general second and third-person fashions as a potentially constructive resource for and within the tradition, it cannot appropriately be presented as either a necessary solution to or as a requirement for second and third-parties who are enduring – and perhaps being utterly broken by – specific instances of suffering. This pertains particularly but not exclusively to instances of what Marilyn McCord Adams refers to as ‘horrendous evils’, see McCord Adams, ‘Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God’, in *The Problem of Evil*, Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merihew Adams (eds), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 209-21 (p. 211). I am grateful to Karen Kilby and Timothy J. Murray for discussion of this point.

unfathomable three-fold being-in-act of the Trinity, in which we are situated, exist, and participate.

§2 This notion of there being a divine dynamic of life-giving, self-giving love enables us to speak of a wide number of related things in their interrelationship. For example, it enables us to speak of the movement of the divine relations and life in the Trinity, of the movement of divine act *ad extra* in grace/the Holy Spirit and the incarnation of the Word, of the central movement disclosed in the life unto death and resurrection of Jesus, of the creative, saving, and sanctifying act of God in Christ and the Spirit, of the movement of sacrifice and eucharist, of the life of prayer, and of the core Christian ethic of self-giving love.²⁹ The same movement recurs throughout not because it keeps being duplicated and repeated but because it is quite literally the one movement, the one life-giving, self-giving act, of the trinitarian life of God in which all things live, and move, and have their being (Acts 17:28). In creation the trinitarian God of life-giving, self-giving love opens space within the life of the Trinity for that which is not God to be in God; in redemption this same act of life-giving, self-giving love overcomes and transforms the bonds of sin and death and liberates creation ‘from its bondage to decay’ and for ‘the freedom and glory of the children of God’ (Rom 8:21).

§3 Given that the Trinity is the fully actualised act of joyous love, in which there is no lack, no un-actualised potential, and no possibility of diminishment, this divine dynamic of life-giving, self-giving should not be understood as a self-emptying but as always being

²⁹ This central integrating notion of there being a fundamental divine dynamic of life-giving, self-giving love is in some ways analogous to Karl Rahner’s notion of the unfathomable proximity of the ‘self-communication of God’ which similarly recurs throughout his theology and across many loci, most notably Trinity, incarnation, and grace. Whilst recognising that Rahner did not intend ‘self-communication’ in a merely cognitive or data-transmission sense, I find ‘life-giving, self-giving’ more readily suggestive of action, practice, life, love, and relation; and more suggestive too of the inextricable interwovenness of the pneumatic and the Christic.

from fullness unto fullness in the one eternal act of God's trinitarian love. It genuinely is "the gift which keeps on giving" and without any diminishment in the process. On the contrary, as the life-giving, self-giving that is the inexhaustibly abundant joyous love of divine life, it is always generative, whether in the Trinity, in creation, in redemption, or in consummation.

§4 However, when transposed into the conditions of finitude, materiality, temporality, and a sin-strewn world, this dynamic of life-giving, self-giving love does bring inevitable risk, likely resistance, and the potential for suffering in its wake – as seen in the life of Jesus – whilst also still always being ultimately creative and transformative, as definitively shown in the resurrection. If in the created order as it actually exists, the life of love is a locus for suffering, we see in Jesus that such consequential and unavoidable suffering can also become an intensified place of living this one act of life-giving, self-giving love and so, in turn, can become a locus for love's transforming effects.

§5 My proposal, with some intentional resonance with St Thérèse of Lisieux's 'little way', is that we are called to enter into and to live out of this divine dynamic of life-giving, self-giving – this one eternal act of joyous love – in and through the details and circumstances of our lives and to become there living prayers and effective channels of God's sustaining and transforming being-with creation and the cost it entails.³⁰ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin expressed something similar in his own 'Pensées':

³⁰ See especially her emphatic realization, in the context of meditating on 1 Cor. 12-13, 'I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES ... INA WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love ... my *vocation*, at last I have found it ... MY VOCATION IS LOVE!' St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, John Clarke (trans.), (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1976), p. 194. I am grateful to David F. Ford for reminding me of this striking passage in his *The Drama of Living: Becoming Wise in the Spirit* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014), p. 125.

It was a joy to me, Lord, in the midst of my struggles, to feel that in growing to my own fulfilment I was increasing your hold on me; it was a joy to me, beneath the inward burgeoning of life and amidst the unfolding of events that favoured me, to surrender myself to your providence.³¹

This learning to become living prayers and effective channels of the Trinity's sustaining, transforming being-with creation is the fundamental schooling for eternity – 'each person's core purpose in life' – which is taking place in every moment of our lives.³² In its regard we are remarkably recalcitrant slow-learners relative to the infinite patience and mercy of the God of Jesus Christ, who *is* the perfect being-in-act of life-giving, self-giving love.

§6 We can draw from this that one possible sign of the authenticity, or otherwise, of Christian prayer might be as to whether it leads to a greater sensitivity to the suffering of others and an increased ability to stay with such suffering, to attend to it, and to bear with it rather than serving as protection and flight from it. As the poet Micheal O'Siadhail reminds us, after Coleridge, '... he prayeth best, who loveth best.'³³

³¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Pensées' §30, *Hymn of the Universe*, p. 94. I am grateful to Elizabeth Johnson for reminding me of this and other passages in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's 'Pensées' and of drawing my attention to their part resonance with what I am suggesting here. Surprisingly, however, Teilhard makes little or no mention of the role of the Spirit. Indeed, his Christocentric cosmology is so total that Christ is spoken of as both the 'divine energy' and as the form, or expression, of that energy, see 'Pensées' §30, *Hymn of the Universe*, p. 95. I prefer to think of the inextricable association of energy and form as the inextricable interweaving of Spirit and Christ respectively.

³² As Ford writes, 'I think it is important to see vocation as embracing everyone. It is about each person's core purpose in life, to be carried out by him or her in their own unique way.' *The Drama of Living*.

³³ Micheal O'Siadhail, '1. Making, Canto 5: *Abundance*, vii', in *The Five Quintets* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), p. 51, citing Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.

§7 In turn, the more specific proposal here is that we can sometimes learn even to live unavoidable suffering as just such a conscious act and lived prayer of sharing-in and being conformed to this loving, life-giving, self-giving of the Trinity and God's bearing-with the cost of creation in Christ and the Spirit; moreover, that we can do this in the conviction that any such costly sharing in the Trinity's boundlessly generative love will ultimately be transformative for ourselves and others in the, generally, pebble-smoothing action of grace. The conviction is that in Christ and the Spirit the three-fold God of love can take us in our suffering into the life-giving, self-giving movement of God's life and so transform our suffering into a place of redemption.³⁴ Again with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

And now that I have discovered the joy of turning every increase into a way of making – or allowing – your presence to grow within me, I beg of you: bring me to a serene acceptance of that final phase of communion with you in which I shall attain to possession of you by diminishing within you.³⁵

§7 Alternatively stated, the conviction here of faith is that when we are able to choose to live unavoidable suffering as an embodied act of love – as we can similarly seek to live prayer and fasting as acts of bodily love – it can become a transformative means of the Trinity's life-giving, self-giving being at work in the world.

§8 Embodied acts of prayer, such as fasting, are useful as they can be operating in background mode whilst other programmes (e.g. domestic duties, running a meeting,

³⁴ The simplest expression of the basic idea proposed here might be: 'finding ourselves sustained by the creative-transforming love of God in situations of suffering and, in such situations, actively orienting ourselves on our real sharing in that love'.

³⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Pensées' §30, *Hymn of the Universe*.

teaching, reading etc.) are running front of screen. Further, background-mode embodied acts of prayer will keep breaking through to front of screen, frontal lobe consciousness – e.g. when fasting, we keep becoming aware of our hunger – serving as a recurrent opportunity to orientate intention and desire explicitly towards living in accordance with the life-giving, self-giving act of divine love. So also, the constructive proposal here is that we can similarly sometimes choose to live the experience of unavoidable suffering as a recurring opportunity to orientate ourselves towards the movement of trinitarian love and to ask that we be taken more deeply into its dynamic in a way that will be sustaining and, ultimately, transformative for ourselves and others.

§9 Indeed, the act of fasting – and, similarly, the decision to seek to live suffering as an act of prayer and love – is not merely instrumental, a useful training ground for conforming and attuning us more closely into the future with the movement of trinitarian love. Such acts, such decisions, are themselves already really held within, drawn, and prompted by – indeed only possible on account of – this movement. As such, in some small way they not only provide opportunity to be more deeply conformed to the movement of life-giving, self-giving love. Before this they are to be understood as already actually embodying and enacting this very movement in the specific circumstances of our lives; and in as much as they instantiate it and do not simply articulate towards it, then we can trust that they will indeed be generative and transformative, even if in imperceptible, pebble-smooth slow ways.

§10 The suggestion here, then, is that perhaps our priestly calling is not only to voice creation's praise and pain but also to be places, living sites, living temples, where the transformative life-giving, self-giving bearing-with of Christ and the Spirit is given

contemporary form, expression, and actuality. It is not that we add anything to the sufferings of Christ. It is not even that we join our sufferings to those of Christ. It is that in our unavoidable suffering, when intentionally lived as act of love and prayer, we can be more deeply taken into and become effective channels of the one movement of God's creative-transformative, life-giving, self-giving love. This is at once the one movement of the Triune life; the one movement of the Trinity's acts *ad extra* in creation, incarnation, grace, and redemption; the one movement of Jesus' life; the one movement of his passion; the one movement of the Eucharist; and the one movement of Christian life.³⁶

§11 None of this, however, means that our consciously seeking to live unavoidable suffering as embodied prayer, as an intentional means of sharing in the one movement of the Trinity's life-giving, self-giving love, can become a technique which we can manipulate for making things better in our own preferred timescale. It simply means that we can ask that in our bodies and in our bodily circumstances we be taken more deeply into the divine dynamic of self-giving, life-giving love, that we become more closely conformed to living in accordance with it, and that our living and effective channelling of it be generative for ourselves and others.

§12 With this altered and reclaimed perspective on the living of suffering as sacrifice in view, we can give the last word to Karl Barth, who commenting on Rom 5:3-5 said:

³⁶ Again something of this is suggested by Gerald Vann, 'Christ did not die merely for the sins that were then being committed or had been committed in the past, it was the total evil of the world, past, present and future, that was responsible for Calvary. And as with the sin, so with the suffering that is the effect of sin: wherever you find it, there is the Cross, sharing it in order to redeem it, to bring good out of it.' *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God*, p. 65.

Thus our tribulation, without ceasing to be tribulation or to be felt to be tribulation, is transformed. We must suffer, as we suffered before. But our suffering is no longer a passive, dangerous, poisonous, destructive tribulation and perplexity ... but is transformed into a tribulation and perplexity which are creative, fruitful, powerful, promising ... By tribulation we are braced to patience ... The road, which is impassable, has been made known to us in the crucified and risen Christ ...³⁷

³⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edn, Edwyn C. Hoskins (trans.), (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 156-7.