A Study Guide for the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (Salvifici Doloris)

Have you ever thought that life would be perfect if only there were no wars or natural disasters? Does it ever seem unfair to you that babies die of hunger, that young children suffer from abuse or incurable illnesses, or that millions of men and women live in desperate conditions of destitution and extreme poverty?

Have you ever experienced suffering in your life? Have you cared for a sick or dying child or tended an elderly or dying parent? Have you ever experienced a deep sense of betrayal at the hands of someone you love? Perhaps you have been seriously ill or injured in an accident and consequently been unable to work or to help those who you love. Regardless of the varied circumstances of our lives, it is inevitable that each one of us will be plunged into the world of human suffering at some point on our life’s journey whether as a result of our own personal misfortune or illness, through the hands of others, or due to unforeseen events over which we have no control.

Suffering, when it is endured for love of Jesus Christ, can be a source of innumerable graces and blessings; it can be a powerful means through which we grow in virtue and holiness. However, purposeless suffering can be agonizing and at times overwhelming; it can lead to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and despair. Many people are unable to find meaning in their life when it does not meet their preconceived expectations of happiness or success; their despair is reflected in our soaring suicide rates. According to the World Health Organization, suicide has increased by 60% worldwide in the last 45 years. It is now among the three leading causes of death for those between the ages of 15 and 44; there is one death by suicide every 40 seconds. It is clear that the world that we live in is experiencing a crisis of hope.

It is to this world, a world in search of purpose and hope, that the author of Salvifici Doloris, Pope John Paul II, addressed this letter. Born in Wadowice, Poland, on May 18, 1920, Karol Wojtyla was no stranger to suffering. Having lost his mother at the age of eight and his older brother, Edmund, four years later, the final blow came when the only remaining member of his immediate family, his father, died at the age of 62. Only 20 years old at the time of his father’s death, Karol was left to live out the remaining four years of World War II without the love and emotional support of those closest to him. Later, he recalled that for those who lived through that War, it was a time of

intense hardship and suffering:

Half a century later, individuals, families, and peoples still retain memories of those six terrible years: memories of fear, violence, extreme poverty, death; tragic experiences of painful separation, endured in the absence of all security and freedom; recurring traumas brought about by the incessant bloodshed.2

Despite the fact that his early life had been marked by sorrow and adversity, the Holy Father’s journey of suffering was far from over. Years later, on May 13, 1981, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, Pope John Paul II was shot and nearly killed in St. Peter’s Square by Mehmet Ali Agca. The Pope’s first words to the faithful, while he was still lying in the hospital in critical condition, were words of forgiveness:

“I pray for that brother of ours who shot me, and whom I have sincerely pardoned. United with Christ, Priest and Victim, I offer my sufferings for the Church and for the world. To you, Mary, I repeat: Totus tuus ego sum [I am entirely yours].” 1

Later, he asked about Agca’s welfare and even visited him in the Rebibbia Prison.

The Holy Father suffered greatly as a result of the attack; his health, which had been so robust and strong up until that point, was never the same. We remember his suffering because he did not try to hide it from us; like Christ, he invited us to accompany him on his way of the cross. Who can forget those poignant images of his last days: his physical weakness, his movements marked by visible pain, the trembling associated with the affliction of Parkinson’s disease, his difficulty in walking, and at times his inability to even speak?

From the very beginning of his priestly ministry, John Paul II identified himself with the sick and the suffering, entrusting the important intentions of the Church and the world to their prayers and sacrifice. For him, all human suffering had meaning, value, and purpose, “a great redemptive value capable of enriching the entire community of the Church.”1 It was his great love for us, his desire to share the message of joy and hope in suffering, which inspired the Pope to write his apostolic letter, Salvifici Doloris. It was released on February 11, 1984, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, a date that indicated his great devotion to Our Blessed Mother and which was to continue to be an auspicious date throughout his pontificate. A

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year later, again on February 11th, he created “The Commission for Pastoral Assistance to Health Workers,” an organization whose purpose is to coordinate all of the Catholic institutions, whether religious or lay, that are committed to caring for the sick. Eleven years after that, he declared that February 11th would henceforth be set aside as a special World Day of the Sick, an event which has been observed annually throughout the world since that time.

At all times, the lived example of the Holy Father demonstrated his firm conviction in the indissoluble connection between suffering, salvation, and joy. In his final book, *Memory and Identity*, he wrote:

All human suffering, all pain, all infirmity contains within itself a promise of salvation, a promise of joy: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake,” writes Saint Paul (*Col. 1:24*). This applies to all forms of suffering, called forth by evil. It applies to that enormous social and political evil which divides and torments the world today: the evil of war, the evil of oppression afflicting individuals and peoples, the evil of social injustice, of human dignity trodden underfoot, of racial and religious discrimination, the evil of violence, terrorism, the arms race—all this evil is present in the world partly so as to awaken our love, our self-gift in generous and disinterested service to those visited by suffering. In the love that pours forth from the heart of Christ, we find hope for the future of the world. Christ has redeemed the world: “By his wounds we are healed” (*Is. 53:5*).5

“Be not afraid” are words that we particularly associate with the Holy Father, who encouraged us time and time again to trust in God, our amazing God who loves us so much that He has numbered even the hairs on our heads (see sidebar). He is a personal God, a God who is interested in each one of us as individuals. He is a God who came to us in the Person of His Son, Jesus, freely and innocently entering into the human world of suffering in order to give His life for us in His Passion and Death. It is true that God is greatly concerned with all of the suffering in the world, but it is your personal, daily suffering, caused by sin, whether great or seemingly insignificant, for which Christ died on the Cross and to which the Pope addresses himself in this letter. The good news of suffering is that it does have purpose: all human suffering holds within it a promise of salvation and joy.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of the unique ways in which we as women experience suffering?

2. What is your attitude towards suffering? Do you see it as a normal part of life? Do you try to avoid it at all costs?

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Introduction

The first thing that we notice as we turn to the opening page of *Salvifici Doloris* is that the Holy Father addresses his letter to the “Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,” which is all of the bishops of the Church. His salutation also includes “dear brothers and sisters in Christ,” that is, anyone who is a Christian (see sidebar). He is writing this letter to each one of us; he is writing it to you.

Pope John Paul II opens his meditation on suffering by quoting the words of the Apostle Paul: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (*Colossians* 1:24). These are powerful words, words which affirm from the outset that there is a purpose in suffering.

Furthermore, this purpose is a reason for joy. At first we may imagine that suffering and joy have little in common with each other; they appear to be completely contradictory states. The nature of the relationship that exists between them is clarified by the Holy Father as he highlights the purpose of suffering formulated by St. Paul in this verse, that is, to complete Christ’s afflictions for the sake of the Church.

With these words, Paul establishes an intimate connection between his own sufferings and those of Christ. The purpose of Christ’s suffering was to accomplish our redemption; because Paul completes Christ’s sufferings he, too, shares in this redemptive purpose. He participates in Christ’s salvific work to the degree that he completes Christ’s afflictions in his own bodily sufferings.

As Paul has shared in the suffering of Christ, so he is also given a share in Christ’s joy. This joy is the fruit of self-sacrificing love, a love so infinite that it has the power to overcome evil. It is the joy of a transcendental purpose that has the capacity to transform our earthly suffering from simple resignation or grim endurance into a reason for peace and hope in the glory of eternity. Caryll Houselander, a prolific English author and mystic visionary writes:

> He [Christ] took our humanity, just as it is, with all its wretchedness and ugliness, and gave it back to us just as his humanity is, transfigured by the beauty of his living, filled full of his joy. He came back from the long journey through death, to give us his Risen Life to be our life, so that no matter what suffering we meet, we can meet it with the whole power of the love that has overcome the world. “I have said this to you, so that in me you may find peace. In the world, you will only find tribulation; but take courage, I have overcome the world” (*John* 26:33).6

The salvific nature of Paul’s suffering enabled him to contribute to his own personal redemption as well as to cooperate with Christ in bringing about

the salvation of others. The logical outcome of Paul’s discovery, that there is
meaning in suffering, was his reason for joy; the hope of salvation was for him,
as it is for us, the ultimate joy. “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and
not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has be-
come my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”
(Isaiah 12:2-3). Paul’s joy is not exclusive; it is not just reserved for apostles and
saints. This joy in suffering is a grace that is available to each one of us.

**Discussion Question**

3. What value do you place on salvation? What does it mean to you? Is it a reason for joy in your life?

**(Read Section I, Articles 2, 3 and 4)**

There are several significant reasons that contributed to the Pope’s decision
to promulgate his apostolic letter, *Salvifici Doloris* in the “Holy Year of the
Redemption.” In the first place, the Holy Year of the Redemption was an ex-
traordinary Jubilee of the Church. Jubilee years are periods of time specially
set aside by the Church in order to encourage us to strive for greater holiness
in our lives. Suffering is a particularly efficacious means to holiness; it is an
opportunity to draw closer to Christ and an invitation to share more deeply in
His life.

Love for the Cross produces abundant fruit in the soul. In the first place
it brings us to discover Jesus immediately. He comes out to meet us and
bears on his own shoulders the most burdensome part of any trial we ex-
perience. Our suffering, in union with the Master’s, is no longer an evil
that oppresses us. It becomes a means of union with God.7

The Holy Father notes that suffering is at all times a universal theme, a reality
that is present to man at every point in his life:

The reality of suffering is ever before our eyes and often in the body,
soul, and heart of each of us. Pain has always been a great riddle of hu-
man existence. However, ever since Jesus redeemed the world by His
passion and death, a new perspective has been opened: through suffering
one can grow in self-giving and attain the highest degree of love because
of Him who “loved us and gave himself up for us.”

The Holy Father states that suffering seems to be particularly “essential to the
nature of man,” something that belongs to man’s transcendence and that calls
man to go beyond himself, to find new meaning in his experience outside the

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London, Scepter U.K. Ltd, 1993; reprint London: Scepter U.K. Ltd., 2003), 143-144 (page citations are to
the reprint edition).
realm of the material world. Man's nature is unique in all of creation, for he has been created in the “image and likeness of God.”

Of all visible creatures only man is “able to know and love his creator.” He is “the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake,” and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity.10

In man, both physical matter and spirit are united; however, God has no physical being. Although God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, each of the persons of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are distinct from one another. The Catechism of the Catholic Church writes:

*The divine persons are really distinct from one another.* “God is one but not solitary.” “Father,” “Son,” “Holy Spirit” are not simply names designating modalities of the divine being, for they are really distinct from one another: “He is not the Father who is the Son, nor is the Son he who is the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit he who is the Father or the Son.” They are distinct from one another in their relations of origin: “It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds.” *The divine Unity is Triune.*11

God, then, is Spirit, and it is to the likeness of His Spirit that we were created. It is our *spiritual* nature that allows us to reason, to know God, and to freely choose Him as our ultimate good.

Although man shares some of the superficial manifestations of suffering with the animal world, the depth of our capacity to reflect on our experience and to grow in maturity as a result of that reflection is unique. Animals have a “soul” which animates them and defines them as living beings; however, their souls, unlike those of men, are not “spirits” because they are not created in God’s image and likeness. Animals do suffer and know pain, but they can only react to it; they have no ability to understand it or to learn from it. Animals may become conditioned to avoid certain situations that are unpleasant, but they have no means to understand why they act in this way. Animals cannot choose to sacrifice themselves for the good of another. Man alone was created with the capacity to understand suffering, to learn from it, and to unite himself more fully to God through his patient acceptance of it. Only man was created to know, to love, and to serve God. This, then, is our mysterious calling; this is the vocation to which we have all been born. It is in this sense that we are destined to go beyond ourselves, to rise above ourselves in order to be more closely united to Christ.

The “Holy Year of the Redemption” was a particularly apt period of time in which to reflect on the theme of suffering because of suffering’s indissoluble connection with salvation: our redemption was accomplished by means of Christ’s suffering.

The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the

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putting to death of “the righteous one, my Servant” as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin….In particular Jesus’ redemptive death fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering Servant. Indeed Jesus himself explained the meaning of his life and death in the light of God’s suffering Servant.12

It was the Church who was the first beneficiary of salvation: “Christ won the Church for himself at the price of his own blood and made the Church his co-worker in the salvation of the world. Indeed, Christ dwells within the Church….He carries out his mission through her.”13 It is to the Church that Christ entrusted His work of teaching. It is in her that Christ lives; it is there that we encounter Him in the sacraments. Pope John Paul II writes that…

The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life, with the power of the truth about man and the world that is contained in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption and with the power of the love that is radiated by that truth.14

The Church attempts to meet us in a special way on our path of suffering, adhering to the example set by Jesus, who is the Head of the Church. In His earthly ministry, Jesus at all times identified Himself with the poor and the outcast, taking a particular interest in the concerns of those who were sick and suffering. He, too, was human; He knows intimately the frailty of our human natures. His heart is full of compassion for us; He knows that we are vulnerable and liable to falter. Jesus does not intend that anyone should bear their cross alone; He, too, needed the help of Simon of Cyrene to carry His Cross as He walked towards Calvary. In times of suffering, we see Jesus in the faces of individuals and in the community of the Church. It is through them that He comes out to meet us, to walk with us and to help us carry our burdens, to comfort and to console us, to bring us the light of truth by which we will find meaning and purpose in our trials and afflictions. Followers of Christ…

…are not only given the hands of Christ to work with, and the heart of Christ to love with, but the mind of Christ to illuminate the world with. His plan of love is consistent through and through; through our personal lives we are to give his love to one another, through the sacraments we are to give his life to one another, through his light in us, we are to give his mind to one another.15

Because our redemption was born of his suffering, in Christ “every man becomes the way for the Church.”16 “For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (Ephesians 5:29-30). “But God has so adjusted the body, giving the

12. CCC, 601.
15. Houselander, Caryll, The Risen Christ, 93.
16. SD, 3.
greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, 
but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member 
suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” 
(1 Corinthians 12:24-26). For Christians, our “way” is to love God, a God 
(Christ) who we encounter in every person that we meet: “Truly, I say to 
you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” 
(Matthew 25:40).

Suffering evokes our compassion and respect and moves us to action; at the same 
time it is intimidating. Our human nature shrinks from it; we fear the intense 
grief and pain that often accompany it. Such fear is incompatible with our faith 
that assures us that God is a compassionate God, that He loves each one of us in-
dividually, that He is all-powerful and that He knows the deepest longings of our 
hearts and will never leave us orphaned. Faith that is strong and unshakable is 
the antidote to fear, the answer to all that threatens to overwhelm us.

Through faith, we discover that man only appears to be the protagonist 
in the history of the world; in reality God is the main protagonist. The 
presence of God throughout history affects equally the things that hap-
pen in the realm of politics, society and the economy, as well as in our 
family or in professional matters. He is present everywhere and every-
thing depends on Him. In His hands lay the destinies of all of us as well 
as the destinies of nations and of the world. We come to know all this 
through faith, which brings about inner peace in us. This peace flows 
from faith, which gives us the understanding that He, who is the eternal 
might and eternal love, holds everything in His hands filled with mercy. 
He guides everything with His eternal wisdom and total love. Faith gives 
us the feeling of security and peace, and the confidence that we are always 
immersed in God’s love. Faith is a different way of looking at the world, an-
other way of seeing that which is especially difficult. Faith allows us to come 
to know God in the phenomena of nature, in which we can continually 
discover the traces of His works and the traces of His concern for us and for 
the world that surrounds us. 

The imperative of faith of which the Holy Father speaks, the command that is 
inherent in the baptismal commitment of every person who has been configured 
to Christ by means of this sacrament, is beautifully summed up in Jesus’ last words 
to His disciples before ascending into heaven: “Go therefore and make disciples 
of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the 
Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I 
am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). This is our mis-
sion as individuals; this is the mission of the universal Church: to share our faith, 
to spread the Good News of Salvation and to bring Christ to others so that they, 
too, will experience “…the inflowing of the Spirit of God [that] gives joy to men 
even in the midst of suffering and hardship: peace, patience, fortitude, wisdom, 
understanding, joy itself!”

17. Dajczer, Father Tadeusz, The Gift of Faith, 2d ed. (previously printed as Inquiring Faith; Ventura, CA: 
In the Arms of Mary Foundation, 2001), 26-27.
Discussion Questions

4. How does your faith influence your view of the world?

5. How does the Church attempt to meet us as women on our way of suffering?

Case Study for Reflection:

Adversity and suffering often come upon us unexpectedly. While we can never completely control the events of our life, we do have the freedom to choose how we will respond. For example, two men were crucified next to Jesus and experienced the same suffering, yet one became a saint and the other became a reprobate. Consider this recent event that occurred in the United States...

On the morning of Monday, October 2, 2006, Marie Roberts was leading a prayer group at the Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church in Georgetown, Pennsylvania. She had gathered with a half dozen members of the local “Moms in Touch” chapter to pray for school children in the area. Less than a mile away, her husband, Charlie, was backing a borrowed pickup truck up to the front doors of the West Nickel Mines Amish School, a tiny one-room schoolhouse. Armed with three guns and 600 rounds of ammunition, he marched into the school and took 26 students and four adults hostage. After setting the male students and adults free, he lined up the remaining 10 young girls against a chalkboard. The oldest girl, 13 year old Marian Fisher, appealed to Roberts to shoot her first, hoping that by sacrificing her life she might be able to save the lives of the younger girls. Her younger sister, Barbie, begged him to shoot her next. But by the time Charlie was finished and had turned the gun on himself, five girls between the ages of 7 and 13 were dead and those who had survived were in critical condition.

In the suicide note that he left for his wife, Charlie Roberts spoke of feeling tormented by the loss of his infant daughter, Elise, who had died nine years ago, only 20 minutes after a premature birth. “I haven’t been the same since it affected me in a way I never felt possible,” Roberts wrote. “I am filled with so much hate, hate toward myself hate towards God and unimaginable emptiness [sic] it seems like every time we do something fun I think about how Elise wasn’t here to share it with us and I go right back to anger.”

In contrast, the grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls offered a different response to his experience of suffering: “We must not think evil of this man.”

Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish in Lan–

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caster County explained: “I don’t think there’s anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts.”

Many of the families of the victims attended Charlie Roberts’ funeral, and the Amish community has set up a charitable fund to provide for his family.

Discussion Question

6. Discuss the various responses of those involved in this tragedy. What made it possible for the Amish community to respond to this tragedy with love and forgiveness?

The World of Human Suffering

(Read Section II, Article 5)

Suffering is such a deeply personal experience that it seems to be inexpressible; it transcends all words. It is an experience that is unique to each individual, something that cannot be transferred to others or be experienced by them; it is something that is unrepeatable. The subjective reality of suffering is “my” personal experience; it is my own particular physical and psychological response to the specific circumstance in which I find myself. Through attentive listening and sensitive observation, others may empathize with my suffering and identify with it to a certain extent. However, no outside person is able to enter completely into my own experience of suffering; it belongs exclusively to me.

By contrast, the objective reality of suffering is an explicit problem that challenges us to meditate upon it as a reality, to question its nature and its inevitability, to seek meaningful answers about its significance and purpose. When we think of suffering, we often think of physical pain or illness, yet we have come to realize that suffering goes far beyond this, that we suffer in ways that are much more complex than previously imagined. Much of our suffering is not physical at all, but is deeply rooted in our human natures.

The Holy Father distinguishes two categories of suffering: physical and moral. Physical suffering is the suffering of the body, the pain or discomfort that is caused by an injury or an illness. Moral suffering, on the other hand, is mental anguish; it is pain of the soul, pain of a spiritual nature which can leave invisible wounds deep within our hearts. Moral suffering may be caused by the effects of poverty or by the suffering and death of loved ones. It can be the result of addictions, neuroses, or mental illnesses, or emerge due to the impact of sexual abuse, prostitution, or abortion. It can be the consequence of any sort of suffering of conscience, injustice, or self-esteem. Accompanying all of these

21. Ibid.