*Lentini (Syracuse - Italy), Saturday 12/3/2005*

**DIALOGUE ABOUT SUFFERING**

*by Ermenegilda Alunno Paradisi*

1. **Introduction**

Suffering is not an academic subject on which you can build more or less reasonable talks.

Facing suffering we are often overwhelmed by horror, by fear and by an attitude of reluctance. We feel defenceless and without resources. It cannot be contained, it is like a big deep ocean and every day we risk being submerged by it. How should we behave? Just flee adding excuses? Or humble ourselves showing love and compassion? Thus imitating the famous “good Samaritan” or else the priest who turned to the other side? (Luke 10:30-35)

Suffering is a universal experience that sooner or later we will all be called to face, it is part of our own path. Yet, it also has an autobiographic aspect, because each of us sees it through a particular perspective, never the same as that of another. Hence no generalization is possible and my perspective is a particular one, which reflects the path that I have walked so far, the particular way in which God has come towards me.

The suffering that counts is always the one that touches us in the most direct way, because what is far from us does not awaken our attention. Nowadays we try to remove suffering: advertisements enhance power, youth, beauty and good luck, displayed as conditions to which we are entitled. Suffering is something that scares us and undermines our certainties. Therefore we tend to look for examples that can relate sin to suffering: we must identify the blame to satisfy our need for order and explanations.

However, talking and debating about suffering means raising a deeply personal issue, rooted in our vision of God and of our life.

1. **My experience**

The first time I truly suffered was in 1984, when my father died. Together with him died a part of my life, too, and the pain persisted for many years, even when it seemed forgotten, it bounced back with all its power. Then as time passed by, close relatives and friends died and the geographic map, with all its affective reference points, went through profound transformations.

Suffering is never neutral and indifferent, it tears our hearts apart, breaks our bodies. It turns up suddenly, leaving us stunned, incredulous. Around us only fragments, wreckage, burned lives are left. Sometimes we close ourselves in a dead silence, which has the same deafening and crushing clamour as an earthquake, whose rumble remains inside the bowels of the earth. In other cases there is a revolt, a rejection of pain that comes out, as in the case of Job and other prophets, who show an open, clear, conscious protest. Why does this all happen? Many are the questions bursting out and also in Psalm 22 all this is not minimized, in fact all the bitterness comes out.

In 1989, aged 41, I had a serious accident that made me paraplegic. I spent almost nine months in many hospitals, because of the coma, the operation, the awakening and the rehabilitation. What weird impact to see myself in a wheelchair, I could not believe it! Still, that face reflected by the mirror was actually mine. I was looking at my broken figure, like a rag doll regardless thrown somewhere. However, I was feeling the same as before inside, with my talents, my doubts, my weaknesses.

They clearly told me that my spinal cord was cut and that I would never be able to walk again, but yet it felt like they were talking about someone else. Then little by little I understood what it meant to be paraplegic, being everyday, every moment facing a limit. That was my death, it was as if I were watching a grave being dug for me to be buried alive.

I felt a bit like a hostage in the hands of an enemy that was telling me: «If your father is good, how could he reduce you like this, leaving you in this state?» In Lamentations 3:1-25 something struck me and I will summarize it for you: *«I am the man who has seen affliction… He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness… He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones… He has walled me in so that I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help… I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, ‘My splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD.’… Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him.».*

Everybody is touched by suffering (illnesses, mourning, poverty, injustices, depression, disappointments). Suffering happens daily worldwide: hunger, violence, wars, catastrophes. How can we accept all of this as part of the human condition itself? In some religions (for example Hinduism) suffering is not a problem, while in the Judaic-Christian view the problem is way more than present. Because if we believe in a good God who cares for us, then suffering becomes a radical contradiction.

**3. To endure suffering**

In facing suffering we must also use faith in our natural intelligence, a sort of interior compass that helps us face problems: clear-headedness, courage and compassion seem to be as important as spiritual support. In the fight we are often no longer able to coherently think, because we want to be freed at any cost. We need to understand what is happening to us, to find meaning in order to react wisely, we are not ready, we are helpless and at first we completely do not know how to respond to the shot received.

Recognising our own situation, whatever the reality, is an advantage. However, we have no other choice: we cannot deny what has happened to us! In the meanwhile it is better to start taking care of ourselves, light will come in due time. Meditation and prayer will strengthen our courage, our resistance and patience. The greatest source of help is the Spirit of God, because it is from up high that comes our inner strength.

We can say no to anguish, not denying the reality but looking at it, though it is hard. We can overcome the burden of adversity letting time change it. We are not completely powerless in facing suffering.

Our relationship with God hides a vast number of resources against suffering, against confusion and desperation.

Let’s stay internally free, let’s not support the moves of the enemy, the one who has always tried and will always try to separate us from God, let’s not let our minds be reduced to slavery again. Let’s transform our suffering into awakening. God does not prevent suffering, but he prevents it from becoming a negative force for us.

**4. The attitude of Christ facing suffering**

Questions, questions and more questions we ask God, who often does not provide an evident answer, or at least an answer fitting into our mental schemes. However, God never considers our questions as indiscreet, he considers our questioning about suffering to be right. He offers us examples in Scripture of the way in which we can even ask daring questions, without compromising our relationship with Him in doing that. God does not want to abolish our emotions and our feelings, he wants to give us the ability to convey these energies in a new direction, that is not silent subordination, but is active cooperation with Him.

What the Jews call *shekinah* (the splendour of God) has been blurred by the breaking between creation and creator, between the man and his kind, between the man and his language, between words and the meaning they hide.

The examples and the approach that we find in the Bible represent a way of living in faith and at the same time practising the innocence of a child. With time the meaning will emerge, we will be able to give meaning to what happens to us.

There are never right words to speak about other’s pain and even more our own . There is a long way to go to try to penetrate deeply in the complexity of the human condition. Christ himself did not give an explanation when facing suffering to what happens to us. He invites us to express our pain in all its brutality, he listens to us and he knows that in those moments we feel abandoned. He himself said in Gethsemane and on the cross: «Father why have you forsaken me? You can take this cup from me! Yet not what I will, but what you will». Despite this, Jesus could see beyond his suffering.

Suffering and death are a scandal, but Jesus has come to defeat them. He was not just watching, but he lit a light in the midst of that darkness. He operated, he bowed down with compassion, he held out his hand to heal and resuscitate. He rehabilitated the miserable, the ill and the disabled both socially and physically. He declared the victory of love over the power of evil, showing the concrete signs of that: «And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age» (Mt 28:20).

The cross, wanted by men, had been woven by God in the tapestry of the redemption of the world.

**5. Looking beyond**

When we feel alone and abandoned, we know God is there and he gives us strength to face the trial. God calls us to look beyond. The figure of Christ nailed to the cross made all the weakness, the limit and the suffering of the body understandable. Insulted and mocked («You want to save others, save yourself») abandoned by his own friends gripped by fear. But that tortured body showed evidence of the extreme act of God’s love: death finally won, despite the appearance.

When we see ill people, transfigured, almost unrecognisable because of all the illnesses, mutilated, in a wheelchair, people with various disabilities who are unable to defend themselves, in those moments let’s remember that we Christians are called to look beyond, like the thief hung to the cross who did not only see a dying Jesus, but perceived the splendour of the holiness of the son of God. We do not have to fear others, because even though their bodies and their spirits are suffering, they are the same as us in front of God since they are also made after God’s image.

My experience is that even if God does not appear evidently, even if he seems mute and indifferent to our cry, he stays there and he does not abandon us. He moves his own people, even those we think do not belong to him. God sustains us using the arms, the legs and the heart of the people, because the kingdom of God is not far: it is within us and it only has to show itself.

The parable of the friends that lift the ill friend’s bed to be able to lower it from the roof and present him to Jesus, is a beautiful example of what we can do for others. God can do wonderful things through people who show us faith, love and compassion. I have had some of these friends: my husband, some brothers and sisters from Geneva, a schoolmate, a former student, some friends that never abandoned me and that are not ashamed of me. I see God in these friends.

Suffering was not part of the order created by God, it is an intruder. God could certainly have prevented the first sin and all the following others, but the moment he would have stopped intervening we would have found the same situation. If God is a God of love, he must let man have freedom of deciding, of choosing. A world constantly corrected by divine intervention would have become a world in which nothing would have depended on human choice and his responsibility. It would have been a meaningless life, without importance.

However, even this explanation is not enough and it may come easy to ask ourselves: why does God let John the Baptist die in gaol? Why is Stephen killed, a young Christian full of Holy Spirit who would have well been able to serve? Why does the Church, ransomed by the blood of Christ, often behave in an inconvenient way? Why does evil show itself even where only light should be? Why does weed always pollute wheat? These are questions to which it is difficult to give a fully satisfactory answer.

**6. The attitude of the church**

I must say that we Christians are often unprepared: we remain shaken up, displaced when in front of people with disability or other difficulties. However, it is necessary to face the problem, not to give up on a walk of solidarity, of sharing of pain.

We are all part of a disabled humanity that needs to be transfigured by Christ. Everyone has some difficulties, in front of which we are tempted to stand back; not facing the obstacle, we renounce to overcome it. It is a challenge, a call to which we are invited to answer in order to root our faith on the example of Christ: «Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me».

Avoid rejection and indifference, as well as pietism, which is a form of more humiliating contempt than rejection. Avoid marginalization and promote a participatory integration of people. Do not have stereotypes, but let ourselves be surprised also by the gifts and the abilities that even the weaker people can express. Facing disability helps to abandon dreams of omnipotence and control of every situation. Realising fragility coincides with the capacity of seeing ourselves as we are. It invites the authenticity of gestures and feelings: with disabled people it is more difficult to cheat, because they are more sensitive than others to body language, therefore gestures must be in tune with the words, otherwise the relationship is compromised.

The one who accepts the person with a disability accepts to consider his own fragility, which he sees as if it were reflected by a mirror. In this relationship he finds himself without any support of usual conventions, he then appears naked, vulnerable.

The fear of death is nailed to the heart of man. Closer and more banal is the fear of getting old, of depending on others, of not being able to manage things by ourselves. One of the facts of man is the limit and the presence of a person with a disability continually reminds it. We need to go beyond and not to fear. A quote from a well-known book, *The Little Prince*: «One sees well only with the heart, the essential is invisible to the eyes».

**7. Conclusion**

The Lord made many resources available to us, he gave us talents according to our abilities (Matthew 25:14). We are called to take action today, not just for selfish purposes, but finding a balance between love for ourselves and love for those around us. Even the Church must invest in human resources, doing anything possible so that each member gives the best in everything he does. I like recalling the words of Martin Luther King, Baptist pastor killed because of his involvement in his fight against segregation. In the book *Strength to Love* he reasserts that every person has got some talents, none of which is useless or of little importance. Then he quotes a meaningful statement by Douglas Mallock, which I think fits well both to disabled people and to “normal” people: *« If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill, be a scrub in the valley- but be the best little scrub by the side of the rill; be a bush if you can't be a tree. If you can't be a highway then just be a trail, if you can't be the sun be a star; it isn't by size that you win or you fail- be the best of whatever you are».*

It is true that a beautiful body full of energy, good-looking and vigorous is important for one’s physical well-being and it represents a pass that makes social acceptance easier. Still, I do not think that having a perfect appearance is the most important thing. There are people exhausted in their bodies who do not let hope fade, but fight and have courage to deal honestly with their own broken dreams, they try to transform their loss into a gain in every possible way.

We are more than just our bodies.